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Concerning Letter from John D. Langston, Stating His Intent to Support the States' Rights Democratic Ticket in the 1948 Presidential Election

Strom Thurmond

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John D. Langston, distinguished attorney of Goldsboro, North Carolina, widely known for his work with the national Selective Service System during World Wars I and II, has written Governor J. Strom Thurmond to say that he will support the States’ Rights Democratic ticket because "to do otherwise would be a departure from and denial of the greatest of all the principles of democracy — local self-government."

In a long letter, the prominent North Carolinian said, in part:

I shall support with my vote the States’ Rights Democratic National Ticket, having the conviction that to do otherwise, would be a departure from and denial of the greatest of all the principles of Democracy, Local Self Government.

I have been very much concerned in recent years about the gradual surrender by states and individuals of the rights our fathers gained for us. I blame no one for it. We got caught in two great emergencies coming too closely together. First was the depression in which we were willing to regiment and be regimented to prevent starvation and disease; and then, the War emergency. I began to see, even in the early stages of the war, that we were in grave danger of throwing overboard some vital principles of democracy. I called attention to this trend in an address to the North Carolina State Bar at its annual meeting, October 23, 1942.

My fears were not groundless. War training in the swiftness and emergency effectiveness of centralized government has blinded the eyes of millions and in consequence, local self-government is being gradually swept away through one excuse or another. If the trend continues through opening wedges like the proposed Federalizing of the so called Civil Right program, we may expect to see it quickly followed by Federal supervision and control of education, health, commerce, business, and an eventual wiping out of state and county lines as being
undesirable relics of an inefficient civilization. That is no exaggeration. I've heard it seriously advocated by men now in public life.

So far as the merit of a large part of the Civil Rights program is concerned, I confess that I am in considerable sympathy with it. I have no racial prejudices.

But, those are matters entirely for the separate states and while exact justice may be delayed in some cases, I have no doubt that in the aggregate justice will be better served if majorities in states are not having unwelcome programs rammed down their throats with the inevitable sequence of bitterness and hatred towards minorities.

If I were of a minority group, I would prefer the American way of development through the States' Rights principle. In all the nations where centralization of Government is completely effected, it is the minority groups which have suffered by such centralization. There they do not even have the havens of refuge through residence in the areas giving them the most just treatment.

I doubt that the negro scientist, Carver, ever thought about social equality. He was too busy trying to improve both races. I doubt if Robert E. Lee gave any conscious thought to the question. He also was similarly too busy. So also with other great men in both races. I think if we all could keep busy improving the common lot, all such trivialities would naturally fall into their proper setting.

Getting back to the subject of the present political campaign; one of my friends asked me if I thought the States' Rights ticket had a chance, and if I did not think I was throwing my vote away if I voted for you. I told him that I thought a vote for a principle was never thrown away where the principle is a paramount one. I think the idea of voting only for a winner is vicious. But, for the States' Rights issue, I would vote for Truman, because I believe in the two party system, and also believe that through the Democratic party, the masses make more progress than through the Repubulican leadership which is dominated and
controlled by ruthless big business. I am willing to gamble however on the outcome of the present campaign, rather than vote for a candidate who is willing to destroy States' Rights, and set up a strong centralization of Government which in my opinion will inevitably destroy our democracy and bring about eventual totalitarian controls.

Another of my friends voiced the opinion that I need not fear that Truman would really try to put through his program. I could not agree to that, because to do so would imply that Truman is not honest. I think he is. It is therefore a case of fearing the result of his honesty of purpose. If I thought he was dishonest, I wouldn't vote for him anyway. If, as has been charged, he and Dewey are simply promising the Negroes something they do not believe in just to get the bloc negro votes, then they are perpetrating a cruel fraud upon the negroes, and would be unworthy of the vote of either negro or white.

I regret that any serious division has come within our Democratic ranks, that may impair even temporarily the Democratic effectiveness to keep in check the purpose of world exploiters under Republican guidance. The issue of States' Rights is however too important. The preservation of our traditional way of life must be assured. It is not a case of fighting the Civil War over again. The States' Rights issue was never decided by the Civil War. We have lived 83 years since the Civil War in full recognition and approval of those rights, except for the attempts of those to whom the constitution means nothing to gradually break down their preservative values.

I therefore hope that Democrats will not let their differences over this one vital question develop into such a breach that it will affect the orderly government which the Democratic party has given in all our Southern states, or encourage any invasion into the strength of our Congressional and Senatorial tickets.

With assurance of my high esteem, I am

Sincerely yours,

John D. Langston
Goldsboro, North Carolina