

# Using Humor as a Persuasive Device: A Case Study of Rep. James Thomas Heflin G. Allan Yeomans

During the twentieth century's infancy there emerged from Alabama's Fifth Congressional District a flamboyant demagogue whose repertoire of humorous anecdotes, manner of speaking, and mode of dress combined to intrigue reporters for more than a quarter of a century. James Thomas Heflin's "cream colored double-breasted waistcoat, along with a Byronic cravat, and a long coat with flowing skirts that suggested a combination of a morning coat, an old-fashioned Prince Albert and a dressing gown"<sup>1</sup> earned him a reputation as "the best dressed man on the floor of the House,"<sup>2</sup> and the "most gorgeously dressed man in Congress."<sup>3</sup> House Speaker Uncle Joe Cannon called Heflin "an Albanian sunset. . . a string of big, red, fat firecrackers all going off at the same time."<sup>4</sup> The Alabamian's dress, dialect stories, and explosive style of speaking arrested the attention of editors around the country. Such magazines as *American Mercury*, *Commonweal*, *Collier's*, *Newsweek*, *The North American Review*, *Outlook*, *Time*, and *The Literary Digest* characterized Heflin with such epithets as "Don Tom," "Tom-Tom," "Tom Quixote," and "Cotton Tom." While Heflin lent his colorful personality and oratorical skills to a variety of causes and groups during the twenty-six years of service in both Houses, the Alabamian's most important advocacy was that which he employed in favor of improving the cotton economy of the South.

John W. Owens wrote in the *American Mercury*, that Heflin's speeches on cotton and rural credits were "sharp, clear and concise," and "achieved really lucid presentations of a highly complex business."<sup>5</sup> Writing in *Outlook*, Duncan Aikman called Tom the "down-and-out cotton farmer's champion."<sup>6</sup> Harvie Jordan, President of the United States Cotton Association, implored Speaker of the House Cannon to appoint Heflin to the House Committee on Agriculture, in 1909. Jordan wrote to Cannon: "Mr. Heflin has always taken great interest, in all matters pertaining to the development of our agricultural interests, and I feel assured that his appointment would meet the hearty indorsement of the people of this entire section."<sup>7</sup> Ben Cameron, President of the Farmers' National Congress, called Heflin "one of Cotton's ablest advocates."<sup>8</sup> In 1914, southern representatives and senators in Congress chose Heflin to tour all the important cotton growing states to make a series of speeches urging planters to reduce their cotton acreage.<sup>9</sup> There can be little doubt but that Heflin was one of the cotton belt's chief advocates and that he helped to focus national attention on the cotton economy of the South from 1904 to 1930.

Of particular importance among the rhetorical weapons which comprised the Alabama cotton advocate's arsenal of persuasive devices was his use of humor. As a story-teller, Heflin stood in a class by himself. In fact, the stories which he told in the House and Senate chambers and cloakrooms earned him the title of "Champion Storyteller" of Congress.<sup>10</sup> *The Indianapolis Star* called Heflin "a story teller who has no superiors."<sup>11</sup> *The Buffalo Commercial* thought that he was "without equal in Washington as a teller of Negro dialect stories."<sup>12</sup> While Heflin was serving in the Senate, a correspondent for the *New York Evening Times* commented: "Heflin. . . holds preeminent rank among the tellers of dialect stories throughout all Congress. There never arose an occasion, critical or otherwise, in the course of the Congressional session that Heflin couldn't produce a story to fit."<sup>13</sup>

In the light of Heflin's image as a Congressional showpiece, his reputation as an extraordinary story-teller, and his importance as one of the cotton belt's chief advocates, this paper investigates Heflin's use of humor as a persuasive device, particularly in his cotton advocacy.

The theme recurrent in Heflin's cotton speeches was that the federal government should improve the cotton economy of the South. Underlying this theme were four basic premises: (1) the federal government should protect the people from economic injustice; (2) agriculture is the cornerstone of the national economy; (3) cotton is agriculture's most important product; and (4) regulation which encourages the cotton economy is a symptom of genuine progress.

From these basic premises Heflin developed a proposition supported by four major contentions. Virtually all of his cotton speeches, in some manner, developed, related to, or extended this overall argument. The proposition, as stated earlier, was that the federal government should improve the cotton economy of the South.

In support of this thesis was the Alabamian's first major contention that the cotton economy is oppressed. Much of the blame for that oppression Heflin laid at the doorstep of the Republican party and the Payne-Aldrich tariff. In a speech in the House, March 5, 1914, Heflin thundered at his Republican opponents on the other side of the House:

These are some of the fruits of protection for the farmer. Why see him as he goes out to work. Under the Payne-Aldrich law you taxed his plow and his plow stock; you taxed the single-tree and the iron upon it; you taxed the trace chain, the back-band and its buckle; you taxed the hames and collar, the bridle, and the plow lines. But you did not stop there. When he took his horse out to hitch him to his one-horse wagon you had taxed the bridle that he puts on his horse and the leather in his harness. You taxed the brads in the harness, and the buckles, and even the thread with which the harness was sewed together; and you also taxed the tires on the wagon. You taxed every rod and bar in that wagon; you taxed the wood taken from the forest where God Almighty intended trees to grow to furnish lumber for man's use and benefit and to build houses to shelter him. That is what you did. Now, you are the pretended friend of the farmer, and you boast of prosperity that you have given him.<sup>14</sup>

Thus did Heflin castigate the Republicans for suffocating his cotton constituent with an endless array of taxes. The plight of this hapless Payne-Aldrich victim reminded the Alabamian of rheumatic old Uncle Jake:

Because of rheumatism Uncle Jake couldn't get around, so he stayed home. Finally a peddler came along and told him that if he'd put bees on his legs and let them sting him, it would cure him. He tried that remedy. They put bees on his legs, and the old fellow ranted and yelled and said he was worse off than ever. One day a friend came and said, "Uncle Jake, John Jones is coming here to preach and you must come and hear him; you used to know him in the old days." Jake said, "I would like to hear John Jones, but, to tell you the fact, I am a miserable man and I do not like to go anywhere at all and talk and be talked to." Well, finally they got him to agree to go, and he went and took a seat back in the rear, where he would not be disturbed. The preacher began by saying: "It has been a long time since I was here. I see a lot of people that I know. Providence must have been exceedingly good to you all. I want to ask you," speaking to a merchant there, "I knew you in the years gone by. What has Providence done for you?" The merchant stood up and said: "Well, Providence has been exceedingly good to me. I have sold a lot of goods this year. I have got a good line of customers, and they all pay me well," and he sat down. "Good," said the preacher. "Doctor," he said, "What has Providence done for you?" "Well, I have a good line of patients who pay me well, and Providence has been good to me." "Good," said the preacher. "Now," he said to the lawyer, "what has Providence done for you?" The lawyer said: "Providence has been very good to me. I have had a good many cases, and have been very successful in them." "Yes," said the preacher, "that's good." The he said, pointing to the old farmer sitting back: "You old fellow, sitting back there all humped up, what has Providence done for you?" The old fellow, gritting his teeth, struggled to his feet and said: "Parson, he's durn nigh ruint me!" That is what you've done for the farmers of this country.<sup>15</sup>

Heflin contended that the Republicans had been so successful in their continued ruination of the farmer that they wanted still another crack at him. Chided Tom, "Oh, you fleeced (the farmer) so long and so successfully you want to get hold of him one more time. If you could get in again (in control of Congress) you would fleece him again." The Alabamian continued, "A wounded Indian at the battle of the Horseshoe Bend said to the surgeon who was trying to save his life: 'Cure Indian and kill him again.'"<sup>16</sup>

Another of Heflin's favorite targets was the New York Cotton Exchange. He argued that one of the most oppressing factors to the cotton economy was the bear gambler speculating in the exchange and depressing the prices of cotton. The bear gambler reminded Heflin of the two fellows walking across the prairie. He continued:

They heard a noise, looked around, and saw that a buffalo bull was coming upon them. They ran for their lives. One went up in the shell of an old tree and the other one went into a hole in the ground. The buffalo looked at him and passed on. Then he looked back and saw him standing by the hole and turned and charged at him again. Again he went into the hole, and when he came out the buffalo went at him again. The fellow in the tree said, "Why don't you get in the hole and stay in there?" But in and out he went until the buffalo bull wore himself out and went bellowing across the field. Then the fellow in the tree came down and said to his friend, "John, why in thunder didn't you get in the hole and stay in there?" And John replied, "I knowed you didn't understand the situation. There was a bear in that hole a durn sight bigger than the buffalo on the outside!" So, my friend, there is a bear speculator in the New York Cotton Exchange doing more devilment and injuring the cotton producer more than all the cold cotton facts extant in the cotton world.<sup>17</sup>

In an effort to explain to the House exactly how the Cotton Exchange was able to manipulate and depress cotton prices, Heflin reviewed the number of bales of cotton actually handled on the exchange in a single year, contrasting these figures with those indicating actual cotton production. Stormed Heflin, "The gentleman from Mississippi (Mr. Dickson) has shown you that the New York Exchange in one year, in 1895 or 1896, when they were required to keep a record, received 23,000 bales, sold 90,000,000 bales, and had 169,000 bales left out of a crop of 10,000,000 bales." Sardonicly the Congressman explained:

I cannot account for that cotton miracle except upon the reverse of the process employed by the bees in packing honey in the bee gum of old Jake Thornton in my district. He said: "I had a five-gallon bee gum and we robbed it the other day and got seven gallons of honey and two and a half gallons of honeycomb." Flue Busbee said, "Uncle Jake, you just said that it was a five-gallon gum," and he replied, "by gosh, bees

are the out-packinest things you ever seen in this world!" So, Mr. Speaker, we have these slick-fingered artists of the exchange treating us to a genuine cotton miracle. Nobody but an exchange member could sell 90 million bales of cotton out of a 10 million crop. It takes the cotton producer of the South 12 months to make a cotton crop of 12 million bales, but these gentlemen on the exchange can, in a few nights with a few chalk marks, make 500 million bales <sup>18</sup>

What was the solution to the problem of the depression of cotton prices by exchange manipulators? Regulate the exchange. But, when forced to a choice between two proposals to regulate, Heflin hedged that neither of the measures were entirely to his liking. Said Heflin:

The late lamented Cushman, from Washington, told a story here once about a man in the West who stole a horse. A dozen men had him out and were about to execute him. Six of them discussed the proposition of hanging him and five preferred to shoot him. One of them stood guard, and the unfortunate fellow heard all the debate, nervously listening, and finally one of them said, "Old fellow, have you any preference as to the plan of disposing of you?" He said, "To tell you the truth, I can't enthuse over either plan." So, Mr. Speaker, there are some features in both propositions that I would like to change <sup>19</sup>

The Alabamian thus triggered a prolonged discussion of the comparative advantages of the two proposals before the House.

Heflin also contended that the cotton economy had been oppressed because of an inadequate system of rural credit and because the world war had wrought an injurious effect on cotton producers. He proposed that federal banks should therefore make loans to the cotton farmers. Cried Tom: "If Congress can not or will not do something that will relieve the situation, I am in favor of the legislatures of every cotton-growing State passing a stay law, suspending the payment of all debts for a reasonable length of time." The Congressman explained:

This would keep the speculators from taking this cotton crop at destructive prices and place all parties interested in the cotton industry upon the same footing. It would make somebody else share with the producer some of the hardships caused by present (wartime) conditions. If, under present conditions, the banker calls upon the merchant, and the merchant forces the producer to sell his cotton at the present price, some fellow may feel like Artemas Ward did when his friend said to him, "Artemas, you owe me a hundred dollars, and I am going to knock off half that amount;" whereupon Artemus said, "I never let anybody outdo me in generosity; you knock off half of it, and I will knock off the other half." <sup>20</sup>

Heflin concluded that "when the cotton business of the South is good the prosperity that it enjoys is shared by the people in every other section."

Therefore, those same other sections should join hands with the South and "grant relief to the people now suffering under conditions created by war." <sup>21</sup>

Cotton Tom further contended that the federal government should improve the cotton economy of the South because such improvement would benefit both the South and the nation. He alleged that an improved cotton economy would improve the South's credit, her working capital, and her standard of living. He urged that it would benefit the nation by fostering a greater sense of sectional unity, improving national economy, and by enhancing our national war effort. Exclaimed Heflin:

Why cotton is as good collateral or security as there is in the world. . . Corn and wheat in bulk may be injured by climatic conditions or destroyed by the weevil, but a bale of cotton stored in a bonded warehouse is as good security as silver bullion stored in the vaults of the United States Treasury. Climatic conditions do not affect it, no insect pest can harm it, and no tooth of time can destroy it <sup>22</sup>

In view of cotton's importance to the national economy, the federal government should therefore improve cotton's economy by granting relief to cotton producers through the availability of government loans, the regulation of the cotton exchanges, and the stabilization of cotton prices and abolition of speculation in cotton futures. In pressing for the latter measure Heflin was particularly vociferous. He likened the hated cotton futures to the saloon sandwiches that were once in his town:

It was against the law to sell whisky on Sunday unless something to eat was served with it. Fifteen cents a drink on Sunday with a sandwich thrown in. Do you know what the bartender did? He had some sandwiches made of wood and painted so as to resemble brown bread, and in the middle something that resembled a slice of meat, and when a man came in and asked for a drink of whisky on Sunday they would put a wooden sandwich with the drink on the table. The man took his drink and they took his 15 cents, and then they put the dummy sandwich back and sold it over and over again to a thousand men; and they called that complying with the law, but they never called on the baker or butcher for bread or meat. That is what is going on today in the New York Cotton Exchange and probably in some of the others. They do not deliver real cotton, but they keep a certain grade of dummy cotton to serve on contracts; but this cotton remains in New York, and like the saloon sandwich, is served over and over again to thousands and thousands of men, but they do not call on the producer for cotton. . . what we want to do is fix it so that whoever deals in cotton will have to call on the farmer some time for cotton with which to fill the contracts <sup>23</sup>

Supposing the Congress refused to regulate the speculating on the cotton exchanges. Was there anything else that might be done? Yes, if the farmers could borrow money on their cotton, and avoid being stampeded into selling for prices too low, they might wait until the market was better for a decent price. Heflin cried:

It was hard to get our farmers to stand together in the holding movement. They were stampeded during the early fall, but at last they have started to holding cotton, and if you will go through Mississippi, Alabama, and Texas you will see that this holding movement is on in earnest, and it is on in such a way that even the Attorney General of the United States can not disturb them in their efforts to obtain a reasonable price for their cotton. . . I am reminded of the story of old Uncle Johnny. His friend said, "Uncle Johnny, they are going to build a railroad through this settlement," and Uncle Johnny said, "My judgment is they will never build it." But his friend said, "They are surveying now just a few miles from here." Uncle Johnny observed: "There is a sight of difference between road surveying and road building!" "Well," said his friend, "they are digging dirt over on the hill now," and Uncle Johnny replied, "Dirt digging and road completing are two powerful different propositions." Finally his friend said, "Uncle Johnny, they have got the road done; they have completed the track and the train has arrived; the engine is out there on the track now; go and look at it." Uncle Johnny went out and looked at it, cold and lifeless, the engine stood; and when asked, "What do you think of it now, Uncle Johnny?" He said, "They'll never budge 'er. Why," he says, "I don't see any traces or singletrees, and besides that, it ain't a fit track for mules, no how." "Why," his friend said, "they are going to run it with steam. They will unite the forces of wood and water and fire and send it down the track pulsing like a thing of life." Uncle Johnny said, "They'll never budge her." Finally, when they warmed her up, she went down the track whistle blowing and sparks a'flying. "Well, Uncle Johnny," said the man, "What do you say now?" And he replied, "By golly they'll never stop her!" So, Mr. Speaker, there were those who did not believe that the farmers should be induced to hold their cotton. They said you can never get them started to holding. But at last they have started, and as long as low prices obtain they will never stop them <sup>24</sup>

When twenty members of the New York Cotton Exchange admitted that some problems existed in the Exchange and requested that there be a revision of cotton grades and a change of rules, the stormy advocate from Alabama was not to be appeased. "These new converts," screamed Heflin, "remind me of the fellow who runs a blind tiger in the community until just before the grand jury meets, pretends to get religion, escapes prosecution, and when court adjourns, lo! The haunts that knew him once claim him and hold him as of yore."<sup>25</sup>

On one occasion during a House debate on the comparative effects of the boll weevil, the potato bug, and the gypsy moth, Heflin's sensitivity for King Cotton was ruffled no little bit when one House member dared to suggest that there were other threats to other agricultural products which were as serious if not more so than was the threat of boll weevils to cotton. Heflin was on his feet at once. "One thing is certain," stormed Cotton Tom, "You gentlemen on that side (the Republicans) are not acquainted with the destructive power of this insignificant looking insect." After predicting the infinite destruction threatened by an even larger weevil than the one then extant, Tom waxed with this limerick:

If the chigger were bigger,  
As big as a cow,  
And his digger  
Had vigor,  
Like a subsoil plow,  
Can you 'figger'  
Picknicker,  
Where you'd be now? <sup>26</sup>

At another time Heflin was giving his attention to the labor problems caused when too much of the cotton crop ripened all at one time. He was lamenting the fact that when cotton opened all at once it posed a serious labor question, in that cotton pickers could pick the cotton only when about one-fourth of the crop opened at a time. Heflin remembered that one of his northern friends had been down in Mississippi talking to a cotton farmer. The northerner quipped:

"Why don't you people teach the monkeys to pick cotton; the little nimble-fingered fellows would run around the stalks and pick out the fluffy stuff and throw it in the baskets." "Yes," said the farmer, "that's right; but we wouldn't more than get 'em organized before you darn Yankees would come down here and free 'em." So, Mr. Speaker, gathering the cotton crop has been a serious and expensive problem with us this year. <sup>27</sup>

As we have observed from the various illustrations of Heflin's use of humor, the characteristics of his storytelling included the use of familiar names, the incongruous, surprise endings, satire, mimicry, and appropriateness. Heflin's assortment of characters such as Uncle Jake, Uncle Johnny, Old Josh, Rastus, and others soon became familiar to newspaper writers and audiences at Capitol Hill. His satire was generally

employed at the expense of the Republicans, the bear speculators on the cotton exchanges, or an unsympathetic presidency prior to 1912. Unfortunately, his mimicry was more often than not a caricature of an exaggerated Negro dialect and was too frequently employed in a manner degrading to the black man. Appropriateness was consistently a characteristic of his humor. With his tales about Uncle Jake, Uncle Johnny and others, the Alabamian aptly illustrated his own views on cotton economy and the plight of the cotton farmer.

Heflin's stories and humor often helped him establish his credibility which was always an important element in his persuasion. More frequently, however, they served as audience stimulants. Always they were linked to his recurrent theme throughout all of his cotton messages that the federal government should improve the cotton economy of the South.

James Thomas Heflin, Washington's sandwich board man for the cotton kingdom, regarded the value of humor as a persuasive device with the same enthusiasm as was employed by a later Capitol Hill attraction, Everett McKinley Dirksen. The Democratic Tom-Tom and the gravel-voiced Mr. Republican both believed that "a good story with a genuine biological effect" was the best stimulant to make an audience's blood surge.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The New York Times, October 30, 1930.

<sup>2</sup>In Scrapbook 23, James Thomas Heflin Papers, University of Alabama, are clippings from more than a dozen newspapers, all with a Washington, D.C., June 14, 1909, dateline. Each is headlined "Heflin is Best Dressed Man on Floor of House."

<sup>3</sup>The New York Evening Post, July 25, 1911.

<sup>4</sup>Ray T. Tucker, "Don Tom of Alabam," *The North American Review*, CCXXVI (August, 1928), p. 129.

<sup>5</sup>John W. Owens, "Tom Heflin," *The American Mercury*, XII (September - December, 1927), p. 275.

<sup>6</sup>Duncan Aikman, "Tawm's Holt," *Outlook*, CXLIX (May, 1928), p. 76.

<sup>7</sup>Jordan to Cannon, June 8, 1909, James Thomas Heflin Papers, University of Alabama.

<sup>8</sup>Cameron to Heflin, December 7, 1907. Heflin Papers.

<sup>9</sup>The Baltimore Sun, October 3, 1914.

<sup>10</sup>The Nashville Tennessean, December 21, 1924.

<sup>11</sup>The Indianapolis Star, April 9, 1912.

<sup>12</sup>The Buffalo Commercial, January 2, 1913.

<sup>13</sup>The New York Evening Times, November 13, 1921.

<sup>14</sup>Congressional Record, Volume 51, Part 5, p. 4366.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Congressional Record, Volume 51, Part 5, p. 4364.

<sup>17</sup>Congressional Record, Volume 48, Part 1, p. 380.

<sup>18</sup>Congressional Record, Volume 48, Part 9, p. 9143.

<sup>19</sup>Congressional Record, Volume 50, Part 6, p. 5261.

<sup>20</sup>Congressional Record, Volume 51, Part 16, p. 16751.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Congressional Record, Volume 51, Part 16, p. 16749.

<sup>23</sup>Congressional Record, Volume 48, Part 3, p. 2622.

<sup>24</sup>Congressional Record, Volume 48, Part 1, pp. 379, 380.

<sup>25</sup>Congressional Record, Volume 42, Part 4, p. 3545.

<sup>26</sup>Congressional Record, Volume 45, Part 2, p. 1302.

<sup>27</sup>Congressional Record, Volume 48, Part 1, p. 379.