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PENSACOLA PROGRESSIVE: JOHN MORENO COE AND THE CAMPAIGN OF 1948

by SARAH HART BROWN

IN 1951, John Moreno Coe, native of Pensacola, Florida, participated as an advocate for the defense in the celebrated case of Willie McGee, a black man tried and convicted three times by Mississippi juries for the rape of a Laurel, Mississippi, housewife. As with most of his clients, Coe passionately believed in McGee's innocence; further, he believed that McGee had been systematically denied due process by Mississippi courts.¹ In his home town, almost no one except Coe's family supported him in this crusade; his actions were perverse and strange in the eyes of most Pensacolians.² Yet following McGee's execution, Coe was praised by an unusual colleague, a member of the McGee defense team who would one day be nationally prominent, as John Moreno Coe himself would never be. Bella Abzug wrote to him from her New York law office. "You must know that your ability, courage, and strength can only be likened to an oasis in a desert. Everything that you are in view of your whole background, of the relationship of forces with whom you are daily in contact, stands out as a might[y] example and symbol of

Sarah H. Brown is a doctoral student at Georgia State University. The author wishes to express her appreciation to Professor John Matthews of Georgia State University and to Dr. Linda Matthews and her staff in the Special Collections Department, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University. This paper received the Florida Historical Society's President's Prize for best graduate student essay in 1989.

1. Interview with Aurelia Bell, by author, February 14, 1988. Mrs. Bell, Coe's legal secretary in the 1950s and 1960s, says that Coe always convinced himself of his clients' innocence. Briefs filed with the Mississippi and United States Supreme Courts and correspondence in the McGee files also indicate the depth of Mr. Coe's feeling about the injustice done to McGee. Unnumbered Folder titled "4361, 'State of Mississippi' v. Willie McGee," box 41, John Moreno Coe Papers, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia. Taped interviews in possession of author.
2. Interview with James Mansfield Coe and Evalyn Coe Grubbs, by author, February 13, 1988. Coe, when asked if his father had any allies in Pensacola, said, "No. It was a lonesome place."

[1]

truth and honesty at a time when so little of that kind of thing prevails in either North or South, East or West. For me as a young person, comparatively inexperienced both in the ways of the law and in the ways of the world, my contact with you was a rich thing from which I gained much inspiration and courage."³

The mind and heart of John Moreno Coe, so well formed and resolute when he met Willie McGee, were made from strange stuff for his time and place. In view of his "whole background," he was indeed an unusual man. A hard working and financially successful attorney by 1951,⁴ he nevertheless was well known in Pensacola's black community as "Lawyer Coe," an ally against the establishment, and in most of the white community as a political radical, perhaps even a communist sympathizer.⁵

One of the youngest men ever admitted to the bar in Florida, Coe was twenty when he began practicing law in 1917. He had educated himself for the bar by reading law in the office of a distant cousin. According to his daughter, he worked during the day for another cousin in the sawmill and building business and read law at night, often aloud to his adoring mother who was "quite a southern woman." It was said that she "filled him with ideas that a man . . . stood up for his country and his ideas and that was that."⁶

Coe could claim an illustrious local ancestry, a fact that stood him in good stead as he established himself as an attorney. Throughout his life he reaffirmed his affection for his past. "My people," he said, were slaveholders on both sides of the family and fought for the Confederacy. His paternal great-grandfather had fought with Andrew Jackson at New Orleans, and his maternal great-grandfather was appointed by John

3. Bella S. Abzug to John M. Coe, June 20, 1951. "Mississippi v. McGee." box 41, Coe Papers.

4. Interview with E. Dixie Beggs, by author, February 14, 1988. One of Pensacola's leading attorneys for fifty years, Beggs was asked how Mr. Coe made a living when he had so many clients who could not pay. "Because," he said, "he had so many clients who *did* pay."

5. Coe-Grubbs interview. Coe's children and many others remember a Pensacola *News Journal* headline run in the early 1960s: "Is Coe Communist?" The headline accompanied a picture of Mr. and Mrs. Coe returning from a trip to Castro's Cuba with a group of liberals who had been invited to view the revolution firsthand soon after Castro came to power.

6. Coe-Grubbs interview.



John Moreno Coe, ca. 1966. *Courtesy of Evalyn Coe Crubbs, Pensacola.*

Quincy Adams as marshal of West Florida. Several of his Dorr ancestors had served in the American Revolution.⁷ The name Coe is well known in west Florida—Coe's landing on the Apalachicola River is near the site of a cotton plantation owned by John Moreno Coe's grandfather— and Moreno, a name from his mother's family, is evidence of descent from Don Francisco Moreno, an early Spanish diplomat. His aunt, Angela Moreno, was married to United States Senator and Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen R. Mallory.

7. John Coe to Ralph E. Shikes, July 5, 1948, folder 54, box 1, Coe Papers.

The year after he passed the bar exam, Coe enlisted in the United States Army and served as a noncommissioned officer (sergeant) in the field artillery. He was attending Officer's Candidate School when World War I ended, and he returned to Pensacola to take up his law practice.⁸ By the early 1920s he was an active participant in the community's business life and was supporting a growing family. Yet even as a young attorney, he had a penchant for accepting clients unpopular with the local conservative establishment. One of his colleagues remembered his energy and industry as one of Pensacola's earliest "plaintiff's lawyers." When the attorneys gathered in front of the courthouse at the beginning of each term waiting to file their cases, Coe always had many more than any other lawyer— mostly damage suits.⁹

In 1924, Coe was appointed to fill the state senate term of John P. Stokes who, soon after his election, decided to migrate to booming Miami. Whether this appointment repaid political debts for help in the 1924 gubernatorial campaign is not known, but Coe and newly elected Governor John W. Martin were friends and remained allies after Coe left office. Martin had campaigned as a progressive, which in the parlance of the time meant "Businessman's Politician," a label which comes close to describing Coe in 1924.¹⁰ Martin's first priority was road building, while Coe entered the legislature most interested in a bill to help Escambia County collect back taxes, a judicial reform measure, and a conservation bill designed to help Pensacola's commercial fishing industry. Early evidence of civil libertarianism, however, could be detected in Coe's handling of two other issues. He opposed both a "Bible bill," which would have required that the King James Version of the Bible be read in Florida classrooms each day, and a "search and seizure" bill, a measure which would have given great latitude to police enforcers of prohibition statutes. Neither measure passed, but Coe's opposition fueled his opponent's campaign in 1926.¹¹

8. Coe-Grubbs interview.

9. E. Dixie Beggs interview.

10. Victoria H. McDonnell, "Rise of the 'Businessman's Politician': The 1924 Florida Gubernatorial Race," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 52 (July 1973), 39-51.

11. Folders 2 through 28, box 1, Coe Papers, contain bills, correspondence, and other papers relating to Coe's senate term.

Coe lost his bid for reelection, and although he was bitter about the defeat, he became, in the 1930s and early 1940s, a very successful small-town lawyer.¹² He was a meticulous, unremitting advocate in court, seldom losing cases. Reportedly, one large Pensacola business kept him on retainer just so he would refrain from suing them, although another firm handled their legal affairs.¹³ Nevertheless, after his senate term, Coe's law practice began to take on a new quality. Describing it in 1948, he said: "In my law practice since 1929, I have been particularly interested in defending cases of Negroes [sic] who were subject to discrimination and oppression. I handled at trial and in the Supreme Court the Chavis and Cromwell cases, which resulted in permitting Negroes [sic] to register and vote in the Democratic primary. I defended Will Lewis in the recent case in which indictment for rape was quashed because his race was systematically excluded from the grand jury."¹⁴

Although they disagree on exact dates, Coe's children have memories of other civil liberties and criminal cases handled by their father. He represented clients in cases involving peonage in Pineapple, Alabama, and Franklin County, Florida, turpentine camps; segregation on Pensacola city buses; a Jim Crow ordinance requiring black citizens to defer to whites on city sidewalks; and many instances of negotiation between members of Pensacola's black community and the city police.¹⁵

These are not the kinds of cases most prospering southern lawyers would have been moved to accept during the Roosevelt years, regardless of the changes occurring in Washington. One wonders why a person of Coe's background and ability took such risks, involving himself and his family in controversy, and subjecting himself to ridicule and scorn. It is difficult to determine what propelled Senator John M. Coe, progressive southern Democrat, toward "Lawyer Coe," defender of the Pensacola Improvement Association, member of the American Civil Liber-

12. W. A. Russell to John Coe, June 24, 1926; John Coe to Russell, June 2, 1926, folder 26; undated newspaper clipping, "To My Friends," folder 28, box 1, Coe Papers.

13. E. Dixie Beggs interview.

14. John Coe to Louis Touby, September 30, 1948, folder 56, box 1, Coe Papers. Further comment on the Lewis case is found in John Coe to Marian Mix, August 31, 1948, folder 49, *ibid.*

15. Coe-Grubbs interview.

ties Union, president (in the 1950s) of the National Lawyers Guild, and state chairman of Henry Wallace's Progressive party. Unfortunately for those interested in Coe's life and work, his files for the years between 1928 and 1948, including files on the Chavis, Cromwell, Lewis, and Pensacola Transit Company cases, are lost or misplaced. Even more crucial than the case files, Coe's notes and correspondence could reveal his political relationships in the 1930s and early 1940s. During these years his political ideas underwent deep and permanent changes. He was a progressive state senator in the 1920s a dedicated mainstream Roosevelt liberal in the 1930s and by the end of the 1940s, by local standards at least, radical Progressive: integrationist, defender of accused communists, and opponent of the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, the Atlantic Alliance, and Chiang Kai-shek.

Pensacola was a typical city of the deep South in the mid-1940s. Pensacolians envisioned themselves as progressive Southerners, but the city was probably much like Montgomery, Alabama, some 150 miles to the north. Biographer John Salmond describes liberal New Dealer Aubrey Williams's return to the "Cradle of the Confederacy" after his years of service in Washington, noting his disappointment with the lack of progress made there during the New Deal and war years. Like Pensacola, Montgomery had become "nationalized" by 1945, primarily because the city had been host to a large and fairly sophisticated military population, although "war and the social change that it engendered had not altered Montgomery's living patterns."¹⁶ Like Montgomery, Pensacola prospered, growing to a population of about 80,000 by 1945 because of the huge expansion of the Naval Air Station's facilities and personnel.¹⁷ "The Cradle of Naval Aviation" trained fliers from all over the world in the 1940s (members of Christ Episcopal Church sang "God Save the Queen" as often as "The Star Spangled Banner" in those years), but the result was not a general liberalization of local customs. Of all her social groups, Pensacola's black popula-

16. John Salmond, *A Southern Rebel: The Life and Times of Aubrey Willis Williams, 1890-1965* (Chapel Hill, 1983), 198-99.

17. James R. McGovern, *The Emergence of a City in the Modern South: Pensacola, 1900-1945* (DeLeon Springs, FL, 1976), 175.

tion benefited least from the “relentless incursion of urbanizing and nationalizing pressures before and after World War II.”¹⁸

Nevertheless, the war and its attendant cosmopolitanism awakened Pensacola’s established black community to the possibilities inherent in equal citizenship, and, like blacks elsewhere in the country, they began to organize. For the Pensacola Improvement Association, founded in 1942 to work for black voting rights, allies were few in the white community. In cases like those of Chavis, Cromwell, and Lewis, Coe resisted social pressure and agreed to take up their cause. One can certainly imagine “Lawyer Coe” cheering as Eleanor Roosevelt addressed an audience at all-black Washington High School in 1942. By 1943, black names had been placed on the county’s jury roles and 1,066 blacks were registered to vote.¹⁹

The registration drives of the early 1940s were undoubtedly assisted by the abolition of the Florida poll tax in 1937 and expanded further as a result of the 1944 Supreme Court decision, *Smith v. Alwright*, outlawing the all-white primary. In 1946, an attempt was made in the Florida legislature to reinstitute white primaries by passing the Matthews bill, a measure which would have given control of primary elections to the parties, thus making them “private” affairs. Miami lawyer Leo Sheiner, who served on the executive committee of the Florida Progressive party during most of Coe’s tenure as chairman, called a meeting of liberal organizations under the auspices of the Fourth District Committee of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare to oppose this bill.²⁰ While there is no evidence that Coe attended this meeting, two years later, when trying to recruit Pensacola blacks for the Progressive party, he was sensi-

18. *Ibid.*, 165.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Thomas A. Krueger, *And Promises to Keep: The Southern Conference for Human Welfare, 1938-1948* (Nashville, 1967), 163. Leo Sheiner was one of those called to testify, along with Virginia Durr, Aubrey Williams, Myles Horton, James Dombrowski, and others, before Senator James O. Eastland’s Senate Internal Security Subcommittee hearings in New Orleans in 1954. He denied that he was a Communist party member, but refused to answer any other questions. See also Salmond, *Aubrey Williams*, 232-36; F. Hollinger Barnard, ed., *Outside the Magic Circle: the Autobiography of Virginia Durr* (University, AL, 1985), 258-59; and Anthony P. Dunbar, *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets, 1929-1959* (Charlottesville, 1981), 234-40.

tive to their fear of “throwing away” the recently won franchise by giving up Democratic party registration.²¹

Although his files for the FDR years are missing, it is known that Coe participated in Florida Democratic party affairs at least until the time of Roosevelt’s death in 1945. He had made many political friends during his brief career as a state senator, and he remained active in the party, although his loss of that office in 1926 was followed by the defeat of several of his Tallahassee colleagues. Most notably his mentor, Governor John W. Martin, lost a race for the United States Senate to Park Trammell in 1928, and a second run for the governorship in a very close race against David Sholtz in 1932. Also, Coe’s good friend Senator William Hodges of Tallahassee lost the governor’s race to Fred P. Cone in 1936.²²

Coe had surely been encouraged, however, by the fact that Claude Pepper was appointed to the United States Senate upon the death of Duncan U. Fletcher, then elected in 1936 and reelected in 1938 and 1944. Coe and Pepper had become acquainted during the years that Pepper practiced law in Tallahassee, and both were active in state affairs of the Kiwanis Club and the Democratic party in the 1930s. Pepper was a member of the State Democratic Central Committee beginning in 1932, and he headed the state’s delegation to the National Democratic Convention in 1940 and 1944. Coe was a delegate from the third congressional district to all four Roosevelt conventions, and was twice a member of the party’s platform committee.²³ Both men had served one term in the Florida legislature. Pepper’s assertion in his biography that his vote against a resolution condemning Mrs. Hoover for inviting the wife of a black Congressman to tea at the White House “contributed substantially” to his loss in a 1930 reelection attempt is reminiscent of Coe’s trouble with Bible and search and seizure bills in 1926.²⁴ In a biographical

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21. John Coe to Nathaniel Baker, January 13, 1948, folder 42, box 1, Coe Papers.
 22. Allen Morris, *The Florida Handbook, 1949-1950* (Tallahassee, 1949), 13, 224-28.
 23. John Coe to Touby, April 30, 1948, folder 56, box 1, Coe Papers. See also Claude Denson Pepper with Hays Corey, *Pepper: Eyewitness to a Century* (New York, 1987), 44, 47, 93, 135.
 24. *Ibid.*, 41-42.

sketch Pepper wrote for *The Florida Handbook, 1949-1950*, he declared his belief that government should guarantee citizens' "opportunity, personal security, health, safety, well-being" and said he was "very liberal" on questions involving the extension of federal power to ensure economic equity but "strict" in matters involving civil liberties or constitutional rights of individuals.²⁵ In innumerable letters and speeches, Coe echoed these beliefs.

Coe, like Senator Pepper, supported Roosevelt's war policy as ardently as he had supported the New Deal. Neither was able to fight; Pepper was forty years old in 1940, Coe forty-four. Pepper was "the first to offer legislation in the Congress which later became Lend-Lease," and he attempted, beginning in the summer of 1940, "to arouse the country to an awareness of the danger of dictatorship."²⁶ Coe tried to register for the army but was refused. He gloried in letters from a friend that told about the campaign in Italy, often reading them to his family at dinner.²⁷

Nonetheless, as the jubilation of victory subsided in 1946 and 1947, the prevailing sense of accomplishment was accompanied, for some reformers at least, by a feeling of disappointment in the domestic situation. Many southern liberals, especially old New Dealers such as Williams, Pepper, Virginia Durr, Clark Foreman, and C. B. Baldwin, saw clearly the evil of European fascism and equated it with the oppression of blacks and political dissidents in the United States. In common with many other Americans, they feared the growing anticommunism of the Truman administration in the mid-1940s.²⁸ Always a logical thinker, Coe, too, hated the inconsistency of American involvement in the fight against racism and totalitarianism in Europe and Asia while reform was stymied at home, especially in the South, by a recalcitrant establishment. Since victory brought a return to normalcy, rather than liberation from old conservative

25. Morris, *Florida Handbook, 1949-1950*, 133-34.

26. Ibid.

27. Coe-Grubbs interview.

28. Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 148-60. See also Durr, *Autobiography*, 190-93; Salmond, *Aubrey Williams*, 202; Krueger, *Promises to Keep*, 149-51; and Patricia Sullivan, "Gideon's Southern Soldiers: New Deal Politics and Civil Rights Reform" (Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1985), 192-93.

cultural patterns, liberal idealists became disillusioned with established institutions and politics.

Claude Pepper was a leader of the convention struggle to keep Henry Wallace on the Democratic ticket in 1944, and Coe was a committed member of his team.²⁹ In 1945, Pepper was the lone southern supporter of Wallace in Senate confirmation hearings held to debate his appointment as secretary of commerce.³⁰ In January 1947, Senator Pepper agreed with Wallace's stand against the Truman Doctrine and joined other liberals in signing a "scroll of greeting" intended to introduce private citizen Wallace to British progressives as an ambassador who embodied "the spirit of faith and democratic tradition of our two countries." The following May, Pepper was approached indirectly by Wallace's friends about the possibility of a third party formation.³¹ But Pepper remained a loyal Democrat and a leader of the party's left wing. Coe veered further left and followed other defecting Democrats into Wallace's Progressive party.

Coe never became reconciled to Truman's leadership and seems to have discarded his allegiance to the Democratic party soon after Roosevelt's death, but certainly after Truman's dismissal of Wallace from the cabinet in 1947. By the beginning of 1948 he was on the Wallace bandwagon as vice-president of the newly formed People's Progressive Party of Florida for the third congressional district. On April 17, he was elected state chairman of the party, a position he would hold for four years.³²

For the Progressive party of Florida, the most important order of business was getting their candidates' names on the ballot. Florida's election law made it nearly impossible to form a viable new party. In order to appear on the ballot, it was necessary for the party to register 35,000 citizens (5 percent of Florida's registered voters) as members of the Progressive party before March 15, 1948. Florida was "the only state in the union with an election law that prohibits the circulation of petitions,"

29. Coe-Grubbs interview. See also Sullivan, *Gideon's Southern Soldiers*, 169, and Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 135-36.

30. George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1915-1945* (Baton Rouge, 1967), 729. See also Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 149-50.

31. Alonzo L. Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism* (New York, 1973), 176, 192, 197-99.

32. Minutes of the State Executive Committee, Peoples Progressive Party of Florida, April 17 and 18, 1948, folder 53, box 1, Coe Papers.

according to a February 1948 news release, and the national party considered the twenty-day whirlwind registration campaign undertaken by the state party a lost cause. Nevertheless, with direction coming from the Florida party's diligent Miami headquarters staff, the task was undertaken with optimism and determination.³³

During the registration drive, district vice-president Coe attempted to organize a group of Wallace backers in Pensacola, and by mail he encouraged others in the third district who had shown interest in the cause to find voters in their counties who would register or re-register as Progressives. The results in the west Florida counties can only be described as pitiful. The "quota" assigned to the third district by party leaders was 6,550 registrations.³⁴ Coe's "results," reported to campaign manager Louis Touby of Miami on March 11, indicate a total of sixteen registered Progressives in Escambia, Santa Rosa, Leon, Gulf, Washington, Gadsden, and Holmes counties, with the other counties in the district not reporting. Thirteen of these registrations were in Escambia County, and three across Pensacola Bay in adjoining Santa Rosa County where Coe, his wife, and his one son of voting age resided. This hearty band had been hard at work, meeting every Tuesday night in Coe's offices. Coe reported to Touby: "We have carried some seven separate advertisements in local daily papers which have substantial coverage not only in Pensacola, but throughout the western half of the District. These ads carried tear sheets providing for change of registration. We have printed and distributed by our group principally to the outgoing shifts of local industrial plants some 4,000 circulars, as well as those sent to us from headquarters. We have circularized 5,000 Pensacola residents with printed post cards carrying information and arguments about the Party and instructions for registration and change thereof. We have put on three 15 minute radio addresses one by me, one by Rev. Edward T. Maxted, a retired Episcopal minister and member of our group and a very able speaker, and one by a housewife, Mrs. S. D. Teller. We have collected and spent locally some three hundred dollars, and we have gotten numberless expres-

33. News release, Peoples Progressive Party of Florida, February 21, 1948, folder 56, *ibid.*

34. Touby to John Coe, February 12, 1948, *ibid.*

sions of sympathy and good wishes, and *THIRTEEN* registrations; and *THREE* in Santa Rosa County. . . . I have always admitted that I am not an experienced organizer, but I am not that bad! We have done earnest work, and good work, but the soil though ploughed and fertilized just won't bring forth fruit yet. I think it may in the future."³⁵

Statewide the totals, although insufficient to gain a place on the ballot, were more encouraging. Eight thousand Progressives registered in Florida between February 15 and March 15, about a quarter of the number needed. This period, however, heightened awareness of the party's existence all over the state, engendering publicity and controversy. Although the registrations were obviously in parts of Florida other than Coe's territory, which lay north of Gaineville and west of Tallahassee, an excerpt from one of his third district flyers demonstrates the general tenor of the party's propaganda:

If you love *democracy* better than *privilege*,
If you love *honesty* better than *double dealing*,
If you love *tolerance* better than *hatred*,
If you love *peace* better than *causeless war*,

Then support HENRY A. WALLACE and register before March 15, as a member of the PEOPLES PROGRESSIVE PARTY.³⁶

If nothing else, the registration drive affirmed the party's legitimacy as part of a valid national movement and established its leadership group. At the April meeting in Jacksonville at which he was unanimously elected chairman (replacing G. Bradford Williams of Lakeland who died in February), Coe assessed the party's mandate for the presidential campaign of 1948. The Florida organization, he told the executive committee, should educate the public on the issues, give financial help to the party in states where it was on the ballot, and organize in Florida a write-in campaign for Wallace and vice-presidential nominee

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35. John Coe to Touby, March 11, 1948, *ibid.* March 15 letters from the registrars of Leon and Calhoun counties listed three Progressive party registrations in Leon (Tallahassee) and eleven in Calhoun (Blountstown). Calhoun County had a little over 8,000 residents, according to the 1945 state census, only about 1,100 of them Negro. See folders 54 and 56, box 1, *ibid.* and Morris, *Florida Handbook, 1949-1950*, 245-46.
36. "Why We Believe in HENRY A. WALLACE FOR PRESIDENT," folder 43, box 1, Coe Papers.

Glenn Taylor.³⁷ He had little faith, however, that the write-in campaign or fund-raising activities would amount to much. In June, when Coe was asked if he thought a state convention of the party would be a good idea, he replied with a quote from Hitler, “a horrible authority” who nevertheless understood that “to set up a political organization without plenty of easily comprehended work to do is the surest way to have it go stale and kill off enthusiasm.” He would call a convention when it was necessary, but for the present “we want to keep alive the faith, keep the faithful interested, and wait the day of action, which will be 1950 or 1952.”³⁸

The Florida Progressives that Coe addressed were a diverse group. Socially, most were outsiders: Coe and a sprinkling of other white Protestant professionals by nature and belief, others because of race, creed, ethnicity, or union connections. The original impetus for the Wallace movement in Florida came from an organization begun by Theresa Kanter, Louis Touby, Leo Sheiner, Molka Reich, Harold Tannen, and a few other Jewish citizens of Miami. Early on Coe commented on finding allies within Pensacola’s Greek community, but his most sympathetic friends in Pensacola were Jews—Bennie Bear and his son Max and Rabbi and Mrs. J. A. Leibert. Most Florida unions stayed with the Democratic party, but the cigar workers of Ybor City and a few other union groups in Hillsborough and Pinellas counties provided the largest pocket of Progressives. As a result, the party’s headquarters was moved from Miami to Tampa soon after Coe took office. Frank Pina, the president of the Cigar Workers Union, was an articulate member of the executive committee. Black support came mostly from black teachers and college professors and their students, although there was usually a sizable group of Duval County blacks at committee meetings, presumably some of them representing churches or labor organizations. The first black Florida elector was Mrs. Maxine Bell, a Progressive stalwart from Jacksonville. An unofficial alliance existed with the NAACP in the Tampa/St. Petersburg area, and although the two groups worked together on local issues, no joint communiqués or appeals were issued. There

37. Minutes of the State Executive Committee, April 17, 1948, folder 53, *ibid.*

38. John Coe to Marjorie Haynes, June 10, 1948, folder 47, *ibid.*

were organized white student groups supporting Wallace at the University of Florida in Gainesville and in Tampa and Miami.³⁹

With notable exceptions, party officers were first- or second-generation northern transplants living south of Gainesville. Although they considered themselves representative of oppressed people, the Florida party's executive committee, especially those who remained loyal over the long haul, can be characterized as an educated white minority group. All of the Florida Progressive party officers had been ardent supporters of the New Deal and considered themselves egalitarian liberals. Like their leader, Henry Wallace, they represented the remnant of 1930s liberalism. Survivors of the era of the Popular Front, although not members of the Communist party, they supported the party's right to exist in the United States and favored rapprochement with the Soviet Union. A few of them were zealots, but most, including Coe, Leo Sheiner (finance committee chairman), Harold Tannen (legal committee chairman), and Louis Touby (campaign manager, later treasurer) were realists who had few illusions about the outcome of the election in 1948. They were motivated by patriotism as well as liberalism, believing that the nation was turning disastrously toward the right and that world peace and constitutional principles were at risk.

In the end, it was conservatives who put Henry Wallace's name on the ballot in Florida and changed Coe's election year strategy. Because the Dixiecrats were unable to win control of the state Democratic Executive Committee from the Claude Pepper faction, the names of electors supporting Governor Strom Thurmond of South Carolina were also excluded from the ballot. A special session of the legislature was called in September, and Florida law was changed to provide that all candidates' elector lists could be included on the ballot. Although the Progressive party organized a campaign in support of the bill, and Coe personally lobbied for its passage, it is doubtful that it

39. Ibid. See also news release, February 21, 1948; John Coe to Touby, February 18, 1948, folder 56; minutes of meeting of State Executive Committee, Tampa, Florida, June 27, 1948, folder 49; John Coe to Bennie Bear, February 9, 1948, Max Bear to John Coe, April 26, 1948, and John Coe to Max Bear, April 30, 1948, folder 42; John Coe to Haynes, April 30, 1948, folder 47; Mix to John Coe, May 5, 1948, folder 50; *The Pinellas Progressive*, St. Petersburg, folder 53, box 1, Coe Papers. Also Coe-Grubbs interview and Sullivan, "Gideon's Southern Soldiers," 246.

would have had a chance without support from the state's powerful northern district legislators who were the core of the Dixiecrat faction in Florida.⁴⁰ Throughout the summer of 1948, Florida Progressives (especially in Hillsborough County) had been preoccupied with designing and distributing a "paster" elector list that could be taken into the voting booth and attached to the ballot. They wasted valuable time and money on this effort to expedite a write-in campaign.⁴¹

At the April Florida executive committee meeting, several members reported on a recent meeting of the national Wallace for President Committee in Chicago and gave glowing accounts of talks by C. B. Baldwin, Elmer Benson, Rexford Tugwell, Paul Robeson, and others. Nine Florida university students attended the convention of the youth division at Chicago, and they returned enthusiastically backing the party's opposition to universal military training, conscription, and "Jim-Crow in education." During the convention, the students had joined packing house workers on a Chicago picket line. They commented on the charismatic leadership of the minority sections of the party: Robeson as head of the party's black division, a Mrs. Gonzales who headed the Mexican-American division, and Albert Fitzgerald of the Union of Electrical Workers and leader of the labor division.⁴²

Coe reported on congressional races in states in which Progressive candidates were on the ballot, predicting that although Wallace might not win in November, "a powerful group of liberal congressmen will be elected throughout the nation" because the party had two important sources of power—the labor movement and the nation's 14,000,000 blacks. "The machinery to carry the movement forward," Coe stated, "is being put together so that we can go forward to victory." He discussed the first national convention of the Progressive party, to be held in Philadelphia in July, at which sixteen Floridians would vote as

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40. V. O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in States and Nation* (Knoxville, 1949), 337-38. See also John Coe to Phillip D. Beall, Jr., Bob Merritt, and Harry Botts, September 11, 1949, folder 42; John Coe to Haynes, September 13, 22, 1948, folder 47; and John J. Abt to John Coe, September 15, 1948, folder 41, box 1, Coe Papers.
 41. Minutes of State Executive Committee, June 27, 1948, folder 49; John Coe to Touby, March 11, 1948, folder 49, *ibid.*
 42. Minutes of the State Executive Committee, April 17, 1948, folder 53, *ibid.*

national committeemen, and he encouraged the district chairmen to identify delegates from each district by June 15. Since the nominee of the party was a foregone conclusion, the chief duty of the convention would be to write a party platform for 1948.⁴³

Coe traveled to St. Petersburg to deliver a speech at Williams Park on June 26. After he was introduced by John Wallace, the candidate's brother and a St. Petersburg realtor, he spoke of Henry Wallace as "the hope of the common man."⁴⁴ The speech was stirring and romantic, very typical of his campaign speeches. "The people are on the march," he said, "there are more common people than there are the rich and privileged; . . . more that love liberty than would willingly submit to servitude; . . . more who . . . would wish to deal fairly with their brethren than would wish to ride on their necks. United my friends we are a resistless force, and the sovereign power of the nation is ours for the nation's good—unity is long overdue—opportunity does not wait forever—unite with us in November and the light of American liberty will shine down the years to point the way to a nobler future, and in those years to come it will be our proudest thought that we bore the standard and lighted the torch when it took integrity and courage to do so."⁴⁵

At the Philadelphia convention Mr. and Mrs. Coe were exposed to a great deal of similar rhetoric. Charles P. Howard, the keynote speaker, characterized party members as "laborers, small businessmen, housewives, stenographers, preachers, teachers, factory workers and farmers" who formed the vanguard against monopoly, the Ku Klux Klan, and the political machine. "They," he said, "have never once relinquished the idea of slavery," but have simply replaced it with "Jim Crow and ghettos."⁴⁶

Coe served the convention as secretary of the rules committee and as a member of the platform committee. The party's platform, "Peace, Freedom and Abundance," exemplified the unbridled hope and humanitarianism that was a constant in

43. Ibid.

44. St. Petersburg *Times*, June 27, 1948, part 2, 11, folder 43, *ibid*.

45. Undated rough draft of speech, begins "My friends and fellow citizens," folder 52, *ibid*.

46. Keynote address, Progressive Party Founding Convention, July 23, 1948, *ibid*.

early Progressive literature. The world was seen standing at a crossroads. The way of the old parties could only lead to war and the end of civil liberty, but the Progressive way would bring peace, freedom, and abundance to all Americans. The platform called for ending aid to China, Greece, and Turkey, the Marshall Plan, universal military training, the poll tax, segregation, admission of immigrants based on race or national origin quotas, the administration's loyalty program, the House Un-American Activities Committee, the Mundt bill, the Taft-Hartley Act, and the Vatican embassy. On the positive side, Progressives insisted on broadening the power of the United Nations, immediate recognition of the state of Israel, independence for Puerto Rico, and self-determination for colonial peoples in Africa and Asia. Probably the most controversial provisions of the platform dealt with "abundance." The party called for public ownership of "the basic areas of the economy," beginning with "the largest banks, the railroads, the electric power and gas industry, and industries primarily dependent on government funds or government purchases." It also wanted an end to discriminatory freight rates and the use of tidelands oil by private companies. Farm price supports and loans to help share-croppers become farm-owners were approved, as well as insurance of major crops against hazards of nature. The party also proposed "old-age pensions of \$100 a month for all persons over the age of 60, disability and sickness benefits, increased unemployment benefits, maternity benefits for working mothers for 13 weeks before and after childbirth, . . . children's allowances for families with children under 18," and national health insurance. It argued that taxes should be used as a "flexible instrument" to promote full employment and "economic stability."⁴⁷

Coe's enthusiasm ran high in the immediate aftermath of the convention. Along with a general feeling that much of value had been accomplished in Philadelphia, he was proud of Wallace's stand against the arrest of twelve communists in New York and of his own leadership in the fight to back up Wallace's desires in the platform committee.⁴⁸ In a press release written

47. Draft platform, "Peace, Freedom and Abundance," folder 51, *ibid.*

48. John Coe to Mix, July 31, 1948, folder 49, *ibid.*

for Florida papers soon after returning to the state, Coe said that the appeal of Wallace for support of civil liberties for those accused of being communist was “fully backed up by the platform committee,” although opposition arguments were heard in committee meetings and on the floor of the convention. The convention, he said, had clearly identified the “true threat to the liberties of our country . . . monopoly capital and profascist reaction.”⁴⁹

Even before the convention, the national party had asked all state organizations to lobby against the Mundt (later Mundt-Nixon) bill which called for registration of Communist party members. Coe wrote impassioned letters to Representative John McCormick and Senator Spessard Holland pleading with them to oppose the bill. He saw the bill as designed to suppress political opinion rather than action against the government, a “sword of Damocles over the head of the liberal wing of labor and of other non-conformists amongst whom I count myself.”⁵⁰ Except for Senator Pepper, Florida’s legislators favored the Mundt bill. As the year and the presidential campaign progressed, the issue of communist influence became increasingly important. Progressives bristled at Walter Reuther’s description of Wallace as a “lost soul” whose ideas originated in Moscow and attacked the administration’s loyalty program as an abrogation of the Bill of Rights.⁵¹ At home Coe experienced little success in fighting the prevailing anticommunist fever. When he contacted the Pensacola Ministerial Association “with a view to getting protests against Truman’s War Program,” he found its president, the Reverend Mr. Partridge, to be “a red baiter of the most vicious type.”⁵² The issue of domestic communism was naturally tied to the president’s foreign policy initiatives, and the characterization by Progressives of assistance to the Greek government in its fight against civil insurgency as “Truman’s War Program” and the Marshall Plan as “a blueprint for war” controlled by

49. Press release, attached to letter, Touby to John Coe, February 12, 1948, folder 56, *ibid.*

50. C. B. Baldwin to All National Wallace Committee Members, May 11, 1948; John Coe to John W. McCormick, May 18, 1948, folder 49; John Coe to Spessard L. Holland, May 28, 1948, folder 47, box 1, *ibid.*

51. Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal*, 170-73, 197, 207.

52. John Coe to Touby, April 6, 1948, folder 56, box 1, Coe Papers.

monopolies separated the party from mainstream liberals who might agree with it on other issues.⁵³

Sometime during March or April 1948, as he was beginning his job as party chairman, Coe had agreed to defend Leah Adler Benemovsky, a Miami woman who was jailed for contempt when she refused in Dade County's Circuit Court to answer questions about Communist party membership. Her bond had been set at \$100,000, but Coe convinced the Florida Supreme Court to reduce it to \$500 in April. The case, which was not settled until Coe won in arguments before the Supreme Court in December, took a great deal of Coe's time, but it made him a hero in Progressive party circles.⁵⁴ As far as can be ascertained from Coe's files, this is the earliest case in which his name was publicly connected with a person alleged to be a communist.

For southern Progressives, however, the most important issue was race. On the national level many prominent blacks joined the party, and neither Wallace nor Taylor held segregated meetings, even in the South. Large mixed crowds cheered Wallace in Tampa, Atlanta, and New Orleans, and Sheriff Bull Connor's men arrested Taylor in Birmingham for entering an auditorium by a door marked "Colored." An article in *The Crisis* praised Wallace for his stands in favor of an antilynching law and a permanent FEPC and for "dramatizing" his platform by insisting on integrated audiences.⁵⁵ One of the most popular pieces of campaign literature was "Ten Extra Years," a reprint of a speech made by Wallace to the national convention of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity in Tulsa in which he called for an end to discrimination in education and employment. He decried "the fact that a Negro child born this day has a life expectancy ten years less than that of a white child born a few miles away.

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53. Pamphlet, "The Wallace Plan vs. The Marshall Plan" (contains testimony of Henry Wallace before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, February 24, 1948), folder 48, *ibid.* See also Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal*, 202-04.
 54. Sid Teller to John Coe, April 20, 1948, folder 56; John Coe to Haynes, April 30, 1948, folder 47, box 1; undated newspaper clipping (probably early 1949), "Contempt Case Reversal Won by John M. Coe," folder 2, box 2, Coe Papers.
 55. Undated newsprint tabloid (campaign literature), "Wallace Shows It Can Be Done," folder 48, box 1, Coe Papers. The article from *The Crisis* is the subject of a story on page 2 of this publication, under a picture of Paul Robeson, co-chairman of the National Wallace for President Committee.

I say those ten years— those ten extra years for millions of Americans are what we are fighting for. I say that those who stand in the way of the health, education, housing and social security programs which would erase that gap commit murder. I say that those who perpetuate Jim Crow are criminals. I pledge you that I will fight them with every thing I have."⁵⁶

Many national leaders of the Progressive party— C. B. Baldwin, Clark Foreman, Palmer Weber, Virginia Durr— were Southerners who had long worked for these aims. For the faithful at the state level as well, the stands taken by their leaders were inspiring. Sadly, Wallace was to a large extent “preaching to the choir”; it is doubtful that many additional southern white votes were gained, and the drive to enlist blacks in the campaign was thwarted by the fact that many were jealously guarding their registration as Democrats and by the lure of the civil rights plank in the 1948 Democratic party platform. Blacks, especially, feared that voting for Wallace would put Dewey in the White House. In addition, from the party’s point of view there simply was not a sufficient supply of black voters in Florida to make them the best key to election strategy in the state.⁵⁷

Coe realized that the party’s first goal in the campaign was to garner votes, and as election day approached he feared that the Progressives had become a one-issue party. After an October speaking trip across the state he became discouraged about the direction the party was taking. One problem was that the only unsegregated meeting places open to the Progressives were black churches or public outdoor areas, and in Ocala the local sheriff had refused the party the use of the courthouse lawn. There had been successful meetings in Tampa and St. Petersburg, and Coe had only reluctantly given up plans to visit Miami because of a hurricane, but the meetings held in Jacksonville, Daytona, Orlando, and Gainesville were “flops.” After making a radio speech in Gainesville, Coe attended a rally with “some 8 or 10 of our people there [and] some 8 or 10 negroes . . . with the exception of a like number of Republican stalwarts, chiefly preachers and members of the negro bourgeoisie.” Frustrated, he wrote to the party’s campaign manager. “I . . . think

56. Pamphlet, “Ten Extra Years,” reprint of speech delivered December 28, 1947, folder 48, *ibid.*

57. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, 339.

without prejudice . . . that we are devoting our work too wholly to the negro. . . . [A]fter all, the negro is a minority, however important a one, and we hope to be a majority party. If there are thinking people of our own race in St. Petersburg and Miami, there must be some elsewhere, too. . . . [O]ur white Democracy is not wholly bankrupt of both intelligence and integrity, and we must cultivate it as well as other sources of power, if we would achieve the ends in view."⁵⁸

The successful Tampa meeting attended by Coe during his tour of the state had featured Paul Robeson and Clark Foreman as principal speakers. In the aftermath of this visit, John Kovace, the white St. Petersburg businessman and party executive committee member who entertained Robeson and Foreman as his houseguests, was attacked by the St. Petersburg *Evening Independent*. Kovace was subjected to harassment which ended in the loss of his position as vice-president of the local Kaiser-Fraser dealership and his wife's removal as president of the Norwood School PTA.⁵⁹ About the same time, Coe and his family began to be threatened by phone calls and anonymous letters, and a cross was burned on their lawn. James Coe remembers that his father carried a revolver under the front seat of the car, and one morning he was tempted to use it when a group of rowdies cut him off almost causing him to wreck his car as he traveled down Baylen Street on his way to work.⁶⁰ An outdoor speech by Glenn Taylor to a mixed audience in Jacksonville on October 20 nearly ended in a riot when a mob began lobbing eggs at the speaker and those around him, including Coe.⁶¹ If the race issue was not winning votes from the Progressive party's friends, it certainly was mobilizing its enemies.

Florida Progressives of 1948 found themselves opposing regular Democrats and "straight out" Dixiecrats whose program was so distinct from that of the Progressive party that no campaign effort could win them over. It was loyal Democrats that

58. John Coe to Haynes, October 10, 1948; Haynes to John Coe, October 11, 1948, folder 47, box 1, Coe Papers.

59. John Kovace to Mix, October 16, 1948; John Coe to Kovace, October 18, 1948, folder 48, *ibid.* The *Evening Independent* differed sharply from the *St. Petersburg Times* which was generally sympathetic to Progressive aims.

60. *Ibid.*; Coe-Grubbs interview.

61. *Ibid.*; Mix to John Coe, October 28, 1948; John Coe to Mix, October 29, 1948, folder 49, box 1, Coe Papers.

Progressives wished to attract. Claude Pepper's supporters, a shrinking group by 1948, were an obvious target of the Florida Progressive campaign. But Truman's civil rights stand and his support for repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act undercut the Progressive bid for votes. Black Floridians did not flock to Henry Wallace in sufficient numbers, and union labor was, according to a Coe analysis of the third district, mostly "A.F.L. and . . . reactionary," meaning closely tied to the Democratic party.⁶² The Florida unions that publicly supported Wallace were the Cuban Cigar Workers in Tampa and several small CIO groups in central and south Florida. Most white liberals who might have followed Pepper into a third party objected to the Progressive position on domestic communism, as well as its stand against the European Recovery Plan, and were relieved to stay in the old party with their senator. Even conservative Democrats refused to bolt the party in great numbers, perhaps out of fear of growing Republican strength in Florida.⁶³ The Progressives were marooned in left field.

The election results in Florida were no victory for Wallace, but compared with the rest of the South, Coe and his compatriots had accomplished almost a miracle: 11,620 Floridians voted for the Progressive ticket.⁶⁴ In North Carolina only 3,165 voters chose the Progressive ticket, and less than 2,000 voted for Wallace in Georgia. In the rest of the South, Wallace's totals were even lower.⁶⁵ Truman won in Florida with 281,988 votes, followed by Dewey with 194,780, and Thurmond with 89,750.⁶⁶ Perhaps the votes from Coe's home county, Escambia, were more representative of the South: Truman, 10,331; Thurmond, 3,396; Dewey, 2,188; Wallace, ninety three. Dejected, Coe wrote to campaign manager Marjorie Haynes that obviously Wallace's true liberalism was ahead of its time because people had flocked to the "phoney liberalism" of Truman instead. It was his belief that if the party decided to remain organized, "there will be so little support as to make it almost impossible. . . . Just as it was the argument of wasted votes that did us the most harm, so the

62. John Coe to Bennie Bear, January 9, 1948, folder 42, *ibid.*

63. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, 338.

64. Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, 1971), 426.

65. Sullivan, "Gideon's Southern Soldiers," 358.

66. Tebeau, *History of Florida*, 426.

argument of wasted time and money will meet us now.”⁶⁷ In another letter, Coe described to Louis Touby his disappointment with the black vote in Pensacola which after all his hard work was “solidly for Truman.”⁶⁸

Just ten days after the general election, the National Executive Committee of the Progressive party held a meeting in Chicago to discuss the future of the party. Coe agreed to go to Chicago, even though he felt that the situation in the South was hopeless, out of respect for the party’s leaders and the dedication of party members in Florida. “I shall go to Chicago and listen with an open mind, and a still very warm heart for the consensus of my fellows. . . . To make a long story short, my heart prompts me one way, and my intelligence another; but the promptings of the mind are feeble things, in conflict with the promptings of the heart.”⁶⁹

As was his usual practice, Coe wrote a long and thoughtful analysis of this meeting. The party would continue, he told the faithful at a state conference of the Progressive party of Florida held November 20 and 21, to “educate the people for future political action.” The party’s agenda would be legislative, and political pressure would be exerted at state and national levels to accomplish the party’s goals.⁷⁰ In Florida, party apparatus was rearranged so that Progressives became dues-paying members of clubs which would support a full-time state organizer to coordinate party activities and lobby in Tallahassee.⁷¹

The party survived in Florida until late 1952, although its state office in Tampa was closed in 1951. Coe attended four more Progressive conventions. There were numerous blows to the Progressive movement after the election of 1948, most important among them the defection of Wallace over the Korean War issue and the defeat of Claude Pepper in 1950. Pepper’s campaign for the United States Senate presented an especially difficult dilemma for Florida Progressives.

67. John Coe to Haynes, November 3, 1948, folder 47, box 1, Coe Papers.

68. John Coe to Touby, November 11, 1948, folder 56, *ibid.*

69. John Coe to Haynes, November 8, 1948, folder 47, *ibid.*

70. “Analysis of Party Tasks and Responsibilities,” folder 53; “Minutes of the Meeting of the State Conference Held Saturday and Sunday, November 21 and 22, 1948,” folder 52, *ibid.*

71. *Ibid.*

Pepper's opponent in the primary election was Congressman George Smathers, the conservative Miami Democrat who had the support of the state Democratic machine. Returning from the 1950 party convention in Chicago, Coe wrote a friendly letter to Pepper asking him if "there is anything we can do in your interest." He assumed, probably correctly, that "an out and out endorsement would just give the red-baiters another chance to make unfounded statements."⁷² In order to vote in the primary against Smathers, Progressives would be forced to re-register as Democrats, a move which would have been tantamount to party suicide. After long and difficult discussions, the Progressive party issued a statement which amounted to support for Pepper's candidacy, although it drew the line at encouraging party members to become Democrats. Progressives asked registered Democrats to vote for Pepper because his positions were closest to theirs.⁷³ Several party executive committee members, including Frank Pina, John Kovace, and Frederick Miller (long-time party head in Tampa/St. Petersburg), bitter over Pepper's support of Truman's foreign policy, left the Progressive party because of this communiqué.⁷⁴ Stetson Kennedy, a liberal writer and social activist from Jacksonville, ran against Smathers as an independent write-in candidate in the general election, and although the party never officially endorsed him, many Progressives supported his campaign. He was a registered Democrat, but Kennedy's views on most substantive issues mirrored those of the Progressive party.⁷⁵

The Progressive party took up less of Coe's time after 1950, but at mid-century he was at the peak of his professional career. Personally and professionally, he became more radicalized, committed, and involved in social action as the 1950s progressed. The Progressive party files document his involvement with the Southern Conference Educational Fund, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Committee for the Bill of Rights, the Civil

72. John Coe to Claude Pepper, February 27, 1950, folder 26, *ibid.*

73. "Statement of Policy in Re: Primary Contest of Penner vs. Smathers," February 4, 1950, *ibid.*

74. Ruel Stanfield to John Coe, March 17, 1950; Kovace to Rebecca Stanfield, March 20, 1950, folder 29, *ibid.*

75. Undated news release, "Stetson Kennedy," folder 8; John Coe to Stetson Kennedy, August 24, 1950; Coe to Rebecca Stanfield, August 25, 1950, folder 27, box 2, *ibid.*

Rights Congress, and the National Lawyers Guild. In addition to active participation in the design of Progressive bills for presentation to the Florida legislature (a ballot bill, FEPC, anti-Klan legislation, unemployment compensation), he handled important cases both privately and as a civil liberties advocate. In 1949 alone, besides caring for his general practice in Pensacola, Coe was involved in supporting black applicants to the graduate schools at the University of Florida,⁷⁶ the defense of Frederick Miller and others as a part of the state investigation of alleged communists at the University of Tampa,⁷⁷ and a long and successful battle for the reinstatement of a black supervisor who had been fired “capriciously” by the Escambia County Board of Education.⁷⁸ His participation in similar cases in both state and federal courts increased in 1950 and 1951 as he became part of a national network of defense attorneys who agreed to handle unpopular or politically risky cases.

In August 1950, Coe’s “distinguished brethren of the Kiwanis Club of Pensacola . . . tried me for impure thoughts and expelled me therefrom.” This must have hurt him because he had belonged to the local club for twenty-five years and had been a state officer in the organization. The immediate issue seems to have been Coe’s opposition to the Korean War. “We had a hell of a trial,” he said, “I plead with the boys . . . for an intelligent understanding of things democratic, and American and free.”⁷⁹ Claude Pepper suffered a similar fate when he was refused membership in the Downtown Kiwanis Club of Miami when he moved to that community. He also had been a Kiwanian for over twenty-five years, and a state officer.⁸⁰ Within a few years Coe would go through a similar ordeal challenging his loyal membership in the American Legion from which he resigned with some bitterness.⁸¹ He was an easy target in a no-win situation in Pensacola, and he understood this, but it was not an

76. Paul Cootner and James T. Crown to John Coe, March 21, 1949; Crown to John Coe, undated; John Coe to Crown, May 18, 1949; John Coe to the Committee for Equal Education, March 23, 1949, folder 3, *ibid.*

77. Frederick Miller to John Coe, May 29, 1949; John Coe to Miller, May 23, 1949, folder 9, *ibid.*

78. John Coe to Haynes, August 2, 1949, folder 7, *ibid.*

79. John Coe to E. B. Collette, August 8, 1950, folder 19, *ibid.*

80. Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 222 n.

81. Coe-Grubbs interview.

easy life. Whether they judged John Moreno Coe to be a crank, a “nigger lover,” or a communist, people who had known him since childhood often found him incomprehensible. He was a man without honor at home; he did not fit in.

Always true to his convictions, Coe mellowed very little over the years. To a young man who wrote to him in 1950 asking about his life as a “poor man’s lawyer,” he answered that law is a “powerful instrument” in the hands of intelligent men, with power to do good or evil. A lawyer who wants to help the oppressed, he said, must be a fighter “affiliated with no clique” who will serve his client and his principles alone. “To be such a lawyer presupposes a deep devotion to your profession. They say that happiness if sought directly is often elusive, but it comes unsought to those who live fruitful, kindly and well ordered lives; a comparable condition exists in the practice of law: if one makes up his mind to do it superlatively well, to win if he can with all the legitimate weapons in his arsenal, . . . he will find himself in a position in the local esteem that will enable him to do what he thinks is right in law and politics. . . . Also, along the way, he will get a tremendous lot of satisfaction over success in combat. . . . There is . . . a broad field [for such work] here in the South, and well tilled it will bring much reward, material and spiritual.”⁸²

Above all, Coe was such a lawyer. Whatever else he may have been—stubborn, headstrong, nonconforming, eccentric—he was, nevertheless, a careful and dedicated defense attorney. While he may have been outside the political mainstream for his time and place, he was not unbalanced or disloyal. He saw contemporary American government as becoming daily more conservative and repressive, and as a “poor man’s lawyer” he hated repression of any kind. John Moreno Coe was an advocate, a partisan; his politics were an extension of his advocacy. In his view, the Progressive party was the only place for a patriotic American lawyer who espoused “Jeffersonian” principles in 1948.

82. John Coe to Jim Wray, June 3, 1950, folder 34, box 2, Coe Papers.