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Ernest Vandiver Jr. Dies; Led Ga. During Integration

BYLINE: Joe Holley, Washington Post Staff Writer

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S. Ernest Vandiver Jr., 86, a former Georgia governor whose political career could not survive the passions that roiled his state over public school desegregation in the 1950s and 1960s, died Feb. 21 at his home in Lavonia, Ga. His death followed a long illness, the family said through Gov. Sonny Perdue's office.

Gov. Vandiver, a Democrat at a time when the party controlled the state, was elected lieutenant governor in 1954. A member of the political organization headed by Gene and Herman Talmadge that had dominated state politics since the 1930s, he proclaimed during a successful campaign for governor in 1958 that "no, not one" black child would ever sit in a Georgia classroom with white children. He called the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court a "judicial monstrosity."

Once in office, however, he had to confront a series of federal court rulings requiring the integration of Atlanta's public schools and the University of Georgia. Realizing the schools would be closed because of a 1955 statute requiring state funds to be cut off to any white school or college that admitted a black student, the governor appointed a commission chaired by Atlanta banker John Sibley that held public hearings and forced white Georgians to face the inevitability of desegregation.

The commission recommended that voters in each district decide whether their schools would remain open. In fall 1961, 10 black students were admitted to four previously all-white Atlanta high schools.

Earlier that year, a federal judge ordered the University of Georgia to admit two black students, Hamilton Holmes Jr. and Charlayne Hunter-Gault. (Among their escorts through the main gate of the Athens campus was Howard University Law School graduate Vernon Jordan.)

Obeying state law, Gov. Vandiver initially ordered the university to close, but with violence flaring on campus, he quietly convened a top-level meeting at the governor's mansion. While most of his advisers counseled resistance to the court order, the governor decided that public schools had to remain open.

Ten days later, he called a special session of the Georgia legislature and urged lawmakers to repeal anti-desegregation laws and to adopt the recommendations of the Sibley Commission. With only a few dissenting votes, the governor's package passed.

That was "my political suicide," he recalled later.

Former Georgia governor Roy Barnes said Gov. Vandiver's stance made him one of the state's unsung heroes.

"His decision in the early 1960s to keep the University of Georgia open -- when overwhelming public sentiment was to close it because of integration -- was an act of courage. And it set the stage for Georgia's reputation as a progressive state," Barnes told the Associated Press.

Samuel Ernest Vandiver was born in Canon, in rural east Georgia, and received his undergraduate degree in 1940 and his law degree in 1942, both from the University of Georgia. During World War II, he served in the Army Air Forces as a prosecutor and defense counsel in courts-martial.

He was elected mayor of Lavonia in 1946 and two years later was named state adjutant general after managing Herman Talmadge's gubernatorial campaign.

After leaving the governor's office in 1963, he was a banker and cattleman in Lavonia. He never again held public office.

He ran unsuccessfully for a U.S. Senate seat in 1972 and blamed his "No, not one" statement for his defeat.

"I don't think blacks ever got over the statement I made in the 1958 gubernatorial race," he said in an interview.

Survivors include his wife of 57 years, Betty Russell Vandiver of Lavonia; three children, S. Ernest "Chip" Vandiver and Elizabeth Vandiver, both of Lavonia, and Jane Kidd of Athens, Ga.; and four grandchildren.

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