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Authors	Grehl, Michael
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Awry Leadership Leads To Chamber's Retreat

By MICHAEL GREHL

Editor

AINFUL as the decision was, officers of the Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce had no choice but to trim organization's operations, lean it down and abandon community leadership in favor of a single objective.

Nevertheless it is dismaying and ironic that the oldest and most prestigious organization of business leadership is so lacking in concern for the overall community and so sundered by bickering and territorial imperatives that is on the verge of bankruptcy and must admit that it is no leader at all.

Nationally, chambers of commerce have grown with the times. They have managed to broaden their operations so that they influence every aspect of life. The good ones, the truly successful ones, have thus provided a more abundant life for every resident — even those who have no sympathy for "big business" or corporate ownership.

They have been able to convince their members and private citizens that business has a commitment to and a legitimate effect upon improving what has become known as the "quality of life." Unhappily, in Memphis that has not been the case.

Nothing is served here in trying to place blame on specific individuals or superficial, ill-conceived promotional schemes that went awry. But it is worth noting the failure of the chamber to survive — and that is what has happened — and the fact that many in its leadership seriously considered closing up shop altogether. That would have given our city a distinction it can well do without, however unique it may have been.

THERE IS CONSIDERABLE evidence the chamber failed because of pervasive complacency, resistance to change, a mistaken notion it could and should compete under somebody else's ground rules, years of pedestrian management and most lately a swollen expense budget.

Most importantly, it failed because people of influence at both ends of the economic scale not only were

content with the status quo — even in the face of dramatic evidence of the city's decline — but even enjoyed the lack of inspiration.

At one end of the scale are the entrepreneurs who, enjoying national markets and traditionally cheaper labor costs here, are uneasy over the prospect of a burgeoning local economy that would increase those costs as well as make it tougher to run a closely held operation.

At the other end of the scale are those who fear growth and change because of its racial implications and who are too easily satisfied. They have made themselves victim of the philosophy that is destroying England: "I'm all right, Jack." They are influential because they are most numerous.

Thus, the failure of the chamber is in fact an indictment of us all.

BUSINESSMEN HAVE a perfect right, indeed, an obligation, to involve themselves in everything that impinges upon life in their community. There is nothing sinister about the profit motive. The only problem is that in today's world profits are tied inexorably to a healthy, vigorous city led by men and women who recognize their own best interests are served by taking a long range view of the total city rather than a short range view of this quarter's financial statement.

In Memphis there are a good many men who enjoy wealth and security without any real fear that their personal fortunes will be affected by citywide unemployment, low wages, factionalism and refusal to deal with racial divisions. They, too, "Are all right, Jack."

There are courageous men with vision such as Sam Hollis and Jim McGehee who must recognize all these obstacles. Hence, they have decided the chamber should forego many of its other efforts and concentrate on securing more new jobs here. If they had to pick a single project, they have chosen correctly.

Jobs, particularly for blacks, can make the differ-

ence. Getting them is going to take more than slick ads in Business Week and flying trips to extol the virtues of our water, climate, friendly citizenry, proximity to good fishing holes and low taxes.

There has been much talk about our abundant labor pool. Has it been accurate? Do we have trained, or trainable workers, or simply a lot of people out of work? Can those without education be educated and can they be trained in even the modest skills required by an automated society; a society that demands more and more service workers?

CAN THE PRESENT chamber membership, which means the businessmen large and small, forget their gut reactions to organized labor and invite union representatives into their councils? Can those union leaders look beyond their own political ambitions and work in tandem with their traditional adversaries?

Can employers now skimping by on wages geared to enormous unemployment put aside their fears of new industries that may offer pay not tied to the minimum wage?

Can the chamber get out of the business of improving race relations if its announced mission is to find 75,000 new jobs in five years when the unemployment rate among blacks is staggering? Without blacks on its industry hunting teams, can the chamber persuade companies from other parts of the nation who have commitments to minority employment they should open operations here?

Can blacks who say they speak with authority enthusiastically join such efforts if it means they may not always be able to play to the galleries? Will they demand excellence in education and job training as well as excellence performing in the factories and offices since that is what any prospective employer is interested in?

These are but a few of the compelling questions that must be answered in the affirmative if the chamber, and the city itself, is to salvage anything from a deteriorating spirit.

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