

Honorable John M. Patterson (Class 27-42)

John Malcolm Patterson (born September 27, 1921) is a retired American politician who was the 44th Governor of the U.S. state of Alabama, having served a single term from 1959 to 1963. Previously, from 1955 to 1959, he was his state's attorney general.

Patterson was born in Goldville in Tallapoosa County in east central Alabama. He joined the United States Army in 1939 and served in the North African, Sicilian, Italian, Southern France, and German campaigns of World War II. In 1945, he left the Army as a major, and obtained an LL.B. degree from the University of Alabama School of Law at Tuscaloosa. He was recalled to active duty in the Army from 1951 to 1953 in the Korean War. After his military service, Patterson joined the law practice of his father, Albert Patterson.

In 1954, Patterson's father was nominated for state attorney general on a platform promising to eliminate crime but was shot to death in June of that year. John Patterson replaced his father on the Democratic ticket in a special election and was elected to the post of Attorney General.

As attorney general, Patterson worked against organized crime and the civil rights movement. He banned the NAACP from operating in the state of Alabama and blocked boycotts by the African American community in Tuskegee and the capital city of Montgomery. With backing from the Ku Klux Klan, Patterson defeated a young George C. Wallace, who carried NAACP backing in the 1958 Democratic primaries—in those days, the real contest in Alabama. Patterson became the youngest governor in Alabama history and the first to move directly from the post of attorney general to governor. His defeat of Wallace is often credited with turning Wallace from a civil rights supporter to an ardent segregationist.

Patterson served as Alabama governor during the first half of the centennial of the civil rights movement. His clashes with the civil rights movement continued during his tenure as governor. A supporter of the state's segregationist policies, Patterson instigated the expulsion of Black students for staging a sit-in at Alabama State University and defended Alabama's voter registration policies against federal criticism. He withheld police protection for interracial bus riders who were staging a "Freedom Ride" from Washington D.C. to New Orleans. Many of the riders were badly beaten by white mobs at the Birmingham bus station through Patterson's deliberate neglect. Subsequent freedom riders were guaranteed safe passage only with the intervention of then United States Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy's office through future Supreme Court Justice Byron White's initiative.

Aside from his support of segregation, Patterson's tenure was considered progressive for the time. During his term, the Alabama legislature approved greatly increased funding for highway and school construction and provided additional monies for facilities for the mentally ill. Programs to improve Alabama's waterways and docks were expanded. Laws curtailing loan sharking were also passed. In addition, old age pensions were supplemented, including free hospitalization for elderly patients. In 1960, NASA designated Huntsville as the site for the George C. Marshall Space Flight Center.

In 1960, Patterson, like Wallace, was an active supporter of U.S. Senator John F. Kennedy's presidential candidacy.

According to investigative reporter Seymour M. Hersh, during the 1960 presidential campaign, Patterson played an important role in preparations for the Bay of Pigs Invasion carried out in April 1961 against Fidel Castro's new government in Cuba. U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower informed Patterson, whom he knew from military service in World War II, about the operation and asked for use of the Alabama Air National Guard aircraft. These planes transported Cuban emigres to training grounds in Nicaragua and then during the invasion itself. Patterson informed presidential candidate John F. Kennedy, thinking that the invasion if carried out before election day would have benefited Kennedy's Republican opponent, Vice President Richard M. Nixon.

In 1962, the Constitution of Alabama prevented Patterson from seeking a second term and instead his previous Democratic opponent, George Wallace, was elected. In 1966, when Wallace could not seek a second term either, Patterson made another bid for the Democratic nomination. He faced former U.S. Representative Carl Elliott of Jasper, former Governor Jim Folsom of Cullman, and sitting Attorney General Richmond Flowers, Sr. However, none of those men were nominated. Voters instead chose Wallace's wife and surrogate candidate, Lurleen Burns Wallace. After she secured a first primary victory, Mrs. Wallace then handily defeated the first serious Republican candidate for governor in many years, James D. Martin, a one-term U.S. representative from Gadsden.

In 1972, Patterson unsuccessfully contested the Democratic nomination for the post of Alabama Chief Justice, but he was defeated by a wide margin by later U.S. Senator Howell Heflin of Tuscumbia.

From the late 1970s through the late 1980s, Patterson taught American government at Troy University in Troy, Alabama. During part of this time, George Wallace, Jr., was an administrator at the school. And the former California Superintendent of Public Instruction, Max Rafferty, headed the education department.

In 1984, Patterson was appointed to the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals, where he remained until his retirement in 1997.

A 90-minute documentary film on Patterson was completed in 2007 by Alabama filmmaker Robert Clem. Entitled *John Patterson: In the Wake of the Assassins*, the film features an extended interview with Patterson himself as well as with journalists, historians, and such key figures as John Seigenthaler of Tennessee, aide to Robert Kennedy at the time of the Freedom Rides.

Having long since recanted his previous segregationist views, Patterson endorsed Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential election. On the day before Obama was sworn in, Patterson said that during his era, support for integrating the public schools was a political non-starter in Alabama.