Williams Views Southern Politics

By GERRY URBACH

Professor T. Harry Williams discussed the image and role of politicians and demagogues last Tuesday night in Hamman Hall.

The LSU professor was the fourth lecturer in the symposium “The Idea of the South” sponsored by the Rice History Department.

Taking a modern-day Machiavellian approach to the art of politics in general, Professor Williams stated that it is a distinct function of the politician to exercise power and that people should not expect, as they often do, a politician to refrain from this natural act.

Perhaps exaggerating but certainly making his point, the LSU professor implied that the only way to make progress and disturb the old order is often through the use of graft, lies, and other morally reprehensible means and that this professional ruthlessness in politics which so often leads to the construction of the machine is not to be condemned as long as progress is made.

Discussing politicians in general, Professor Williams said that they must by nature be adjusters and brokers able to compromise conflicting interests. Their most important task, he asserted, is “to arrange a solution that everyone can live with.”

The Professor's definition of a great politician, while probably valid, lent little comfort to idealists. The mark of a great politician, insisted Professor Williams, is that he must be a leader who can create a new political context and win followers. Professor Williams, significantly, did not state that this had to be a good political context, only a new one. This type of leader, he asserted, is known as the demagogue, a word which has a bad connotation in American usage.

In the South, said Professor Williams, only a few of the so-called demagogues have filled the role of the great politician. Most have left the context of political life in the South as it was—purely revolving around one issue—that of race—and this is what has invested southern politics with an air of romance and unreality which has produced the “Jamison psychology.”

In one of the most telling points of his talk, Professor Williams illustrated how Southern reaction has often been determined by what the “enemy” or (Continued on Page 7)
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(Continued from Page 4) other side of the racist issue has said and that it has concentrated so much on this that it has neglected other much more important problems like the chronic poverty and lowness in economic position of the south.

All this was changed and a great politician, in Professor William’s sense of the term, arrived when Huey Long became governor of Louisiana in the late 20’s. Obviously overemphasizing to make his point, Professor Williams stated that Huey Long was a successful demagogue because he changed the political context of life in Louisiana. He turned away from the issue of race to the one of economic betterment, and in doing so he naturally was forced to ruthless measures and to the creation of a political power machine to cope with the opposition.