



1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: Bring back the Southern Gentleman

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 02.16.26



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There is a man disappearing. Not suddenly – the way a candle gutters – but slowly, the way a word falls out of a language. No one notices until someone reaches for it and finds only air.

I knew him once. We all did, or thought we did, which amounts to the same thing in a region that has always understood the productive confusion between a man and his mythology.

He wore a suit and tie to work – every single day – and it was neither costume nor exhibition, neither disguise nor defensive armor. It was simply what one wore, the way a bird wears its coloring: naturally, inevitably, as a marker of something deeper than vanity.

Here is where we must be careful, because the suit is not the thing itself. The suit *signifies* the thing itself: an orientation toward the world, a posture of the soul dressed up, if you will, in cotton and wool.

My grandfathers wore those suits. Both of them. Every morning, the ritual: the knot tied with the peaceful precision of one observing a sacrament he has never questioned. And then, on a Saturday, the same hands might crack open a shotgun, saddle a horse, bait a hook, or chalk a cue before a long, patient shot. This was not a contradiction. This was a synthesis. The high and the low, the book and the oar, the sonnet and the game: all of it collapsed into a single coherent presence, a man who meant something whole.

We have lost the grammar of that wholeness.

Consider what the Southern Gentleman actually embodied. I use the term advisedly: every gesture, every choice, every nourished habit purposed beyond itself – a legible text for those who knew the syntax. George Washington grasped this instinctively. So did Atticus Finch, that most luminous of fictional Americans: courtly, serious, principled, wholly without pretense.

These men were not staging but inhabiting nobility. The distinction matters.

Performance is self-referential; it calls attention to its own display. The genuine article directs the gaze outward, toward a standard larger than the individual, a tradition received rather than invented, a way of being in the world that demands stewardship rather than applause.

The Southern Agrarians understood this as well – Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Andrew Nelson Lytle, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson – men of letters who wrote with intelligence about actual places, who insisted that culture was not imported but cultivated, grown like tobacco in the red soil of a particular region.

They were learned men, certainly, but their learning was no refuge from the world. It was a means of entering it. Warren could write a novel that splits your chest open and then go sporting with the same deliberate ease. Dapper, but never a dandy. An entire civilization is encoded in that distinction.

A dandy is a closed emblem: self-referential, pointing nowhere beyond itself, a mirror endlessly facing a mirror. The Southern Gentleman, by contrast, is – or was – an open sign, a figure meant to be read. His refinement avoided display because spectacle betrays a lack. Ostentation announces itself only when there is nothing else to announce. The Gentleman's elegance moved more quietly. It resembled a well-made sentence, noticed only by the attentive, and then not for its technique but for what it says.

This is what separated him, always, from the other type the South exports: the posture of studied roughness, often labeled the redneck or the good ol' boy – a counter-myth defined less by circumstance than by stance, by the decision to aim low and call it authenticity.

That figure, too, is a signal, but one of capitulation: an easy surrender to crudeness, to comfort, to the belief that refinement is mere pretense and therefore fair game for ridicule. The Southern Gentleman rejected this bargain outright. He aimed higher – not from snobbery (which is itself another closed form, another mirror), but from the conviction that standards are meant to be kept, that culture is not an ornament but a discipline, practiced as one practices prayer, citizenship or love.

For him, class was permeable. This was perhaps his most radical trait, the one that most unsettled those who tried to parse him too narrowly. He was at ease in a library and in a duck bind, fluent in literature as well as in land. He didn't disdain the man who couldn't quote Shakespeare, any more than Walker Percy disparaged the man who couldn't write a novel. He simply held the door – literally and figuratively – and trusted that the act itself might instruct.

Self-restraint. A leisured, almost invisible virtue, and therefore a trace of confidence, of security, of one who does not need the room to know he occupies it.

He is disappearing. The suit remains in the closet. The books collect their slow dust. Somewhere, in the widening silence between what we were and what we are becoming, a vestige goes dark – not erased, but unread. In the end, that may be the saddest death a meaning can suffer.

We might still learn to read it again. If we remembered how to look.

Allen Mendenhall is a Senior Advisor for the Free Enterprise Initiative and a Research Fellow in the Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation. A lawyer with a Ph.D. in English from Auburn University, he has taught at multiple colleges and universities across Alabama and is the author or editor of nine books. Learn more at AllenMendenhall.com (<http://AllenMendenhall.com>).

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