

The Republican Party and racism: from the "southern strategy" to Bush

By Patrick Martin
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It was Richard Nixon who, after the landslide defeat of Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater in 1964, sought to reorient the Republican Party to the white racist elements in the southern states. Nixon's "southern strategy" involved an appeal to those former Democrats in the South who were disaffected by the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act by a Democratic Congress, and the enforcement of these laws by the Johnson administration.

The southern states—where blacks had been virtually barred from voting since the end of the post-Civil War Reconstruction period in 1876—began to break with the Democratic Party in 1948. Strom Thurmond's Dixiecrat campaign carried South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana, winning margins of up to 80 percent in the all-white electorate. In the next three presidential elections, the southern states largely returned in the Democratic camp, as the two major bourgeois parties vacillated over the civil rights question.

In 1956, for instance, Republican President Dwight Eisenhower won a landslide reelection, but six southern states, including the four that had voted for Thurmond, backed Democrat Adlai Stevenson, who was considered more sympathetic to the maintenance of Jim Crow. Eisenhower had nominated Earl Warren, a liberal Republican from California, as chief justice of the Supreme Court, and Warren was the principal author of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision outlawing segregated schools.

In the 1964 election, with Johnson as president after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Republican presidential nominee Goldwater came out openly against the passage of the Civil Rights Act, which a majority of his own party in Congress had supported. Goldwater's far-right campaign was overwhelmingly

rejected at the polls, but he carried five states in the Deep South: the four carried by Thurmond in 1948, plus Georgia.

In 1968 Alabama's segregationist governor George Wallace mounted an independent presidential campaign, which carried four of the five Goldwater states—Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia—as well as Arkansas. But in a sign of things to come, South Carolina followed the lead of Senator Strom Thurmond, who abandoned the Democratic Party, switched to the Republicans, and held the state for Nixon.

The Republican Party took up the long-time political methods of the southern Democrats, using racial demagoguery to tie impoverished white workers and small farmers to the ruling aristocracy. In many cases—Thurmond was the forerunner for hundreds—Democratic politicians simply changed party labels while maintaining the same political orientation.

Lott followed a slightly different career path. He began as an aide to a notorious segregationist Democratic congressman, William Colmer. When Colmer retired in 1972, Lott sought to fill the vacancy, but ran as a Republican, not a Democrat, aligning himself with Nixon's victorious presidential reelection campaign.

In the aftermath of the mass movement for civil rights, which mobilized millions of black workers and youth with the support of substantial layers of the working class and middle class nationally, it was less and less possible to gain political office through open appeals to segregationism. Instead, the Republican Party evolved a sort of political code, in which opposition to welfare programs and advocacy of "states' rights" took the place of overt defense of white supremacy.

The political meaning of this language was clear to all involved. One incident demonstrates the method: Ronald Reagan's decision to launch his 1980 general election campaign with an appearance at the Neshoba County Fair in Philadelphia, Mississippi, the site of the most notorious crime of the civil rights era, the murder of three young civil rights workers in 1964. When Reagan delivered a speech in which he declared, "I believe in states' rights," he was giving his tacit support to the maintenance of the social and economic oppression of the black population, even while the outward forms of legalized racism had been eliminated.

From then on, the Republican Party cemented its domination of the South, and especially of the states of the Deep South, which were the poorest and most backward in terms of social conditions, and where segregation and racial terror were practiced in the harshest form. By 1994, when the Republican Party won control of the House of Representatives and the Senate for the first time in 40 years, it controlled the bulk of the congressional delegation from the southern states, and its congressional leadership was nearly all from that region: Newt Gingrich of Georgia, Richard Armey and Tom DeLay of Texas, and Trent Lott of Mississippi.

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