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BEYOND THE BACKLASH THESIS

At a birthday party for Strom Thurmond in December 2002, Senate majority leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) praised the centenarian's role in the Dixiecrat Revolt of 1948, saying, "When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years, either." Lott's comments were widely quoted in the press and drew an angry response from civil rights leaders and liberal Democrats. Lott was initially taken by surprise at the outrage prompted by his words, and his office issued a curt response intended to quell the controversy: "Senator Lott's remarks were intended to pay tribute to a remarkable man who led a remarkable life. To read anything more into these comments is wrong." Indeed, as conservative columnist Robert Novak wrote, "When Democratic attacks began, Lott was advised by Republican counselors the storm would soon blow over."¹

Yet the storm continued to build and threatened to wash away the GOP's recent assertions of being a racially inclusive party. Prominent black Republicans began to call for his resignation, followed by conservative pundits like Paul Greenberg and Charles Krauthammer. Faced with mounting controversy, President George W. Bush addressed a largely black audience in Philadelphia, saying: "Recent comments by Senator Lott do not reflect the spirit of our country." Republican colleagues soon deserted him, and by early January 2003 he resigned his post as Senate majority leader.²

How is it that Lott—or his GOP advisers—could have initially found his comments uncontroversial, only to be so strongly rebuked by that same party within a couple of weeks? As Lott explained it afterward, the man he praised had consistently held up the principles of strong defense, law and order, and fiscal conservatism. That these policies went hand in hand with a defense of white supremacy in the Dixiecrat Revolt may have gone unnoticed by Lott because the postwar histories of race and conservative politics have been so intertwined. “States’ Rights Strom” logically made the journey from the States’ Rights Democratic Party to the GOP when the latter became the anti-civil rights party in the 1964 presidential election. The South Carolina senator helped make the Republican Party dominant by delivering the South to Nixon in 1968 and continuing to move the region into the Republican column over the next three decades. Indeed, Thurmond himself never apologized for his leadership of the Dixiecrat Revolt, and the party never asked him to.³

For Republicans, Lott’s real crime was to reach back across forty years of modern GOP history to revel in its unseemly genealogy. Acknowledging Thurmond’s racist past was one thing, but claiming it as a legacy too clearly gestures to the foundational violence of modern Republicanism which—as political theorists from Machiavelli to Ernest Renan have observed—must be forgotten in every regime. To be sure, the Republican Party has gone to great lengths in recent years to distance itself from the taint of racism. George W. Bush is the first president to place African Americans in such key White House positions such as Secretary of State and National Security Adviser. But it has not been easy for the GOP to shed its racial legacy because the party became dominant through racially inflected positions on poverty, crime, affirmative action, and government assistance.

However, the GOP mostly embraces a politics of “colorblindness,” and many conservatives promote policies that are claimed with nonracist intent. Such are the paradoxes of the GOP: Lott began his political career as a protégé of the ultrasegregationist Democrat William Colmer, and prior to that he presided over the Sigma Nu Fraternity at the University of Mississippi when it was raided by the FBI for stockpiling weapons during the desegregation riots there in 1962. Forty years later, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice leaned on her biography of having been born black in Jim

Crow Birmingham to justify Bush's war in Iraq. With Lott and Rice, both highly visible figures, representing contradictory narratives about race, the South, and the GOP, how should we interpret the political trajectory of the modern Republican Party?⁴

The Backlash Account of the Rise of the Right

The rise of the modern Right has become naturalized in much academic and popular literature as a “backlash” against the excesses of the 1960s, particularly in regard to race. In turn, the story goes, conservatives were thus granted the opportunity to assert basic American values of patriotism, family, hard work, independence, and governmental fiscal responsibility; in doing so, they reclaimed the political field. Versions of the backlash account from across the political spectrum have abounded over the years. Kevin Phillips's *The Emerging Republican Majority* (1968) made the case, in the wake of both sixties-era protests and Nixon's presidential triumph, that stoking white populist resentment toward both liberal elites and the black poor could make the GOP the dominant party in years to come. But what had been for Phillips an intentional strategy (he had been a campaign adviser for Nixon) came to be understood twenty years hence as an truism of recent political history for Thomas and Mary Edsall.

Their 1991 book *Chain Reaction*, which exercised strong influence over rising Democratic star Bill Clinton, claimed that sixties-era black politics reached a “combustion point” that set off (to continue their atom-splitting analogy) a fission process of self-reproducing effects, including tax revolt, opposition to rights claims of other disadvantaged groups, the emergence of anti-government conservatism, and finally the presidential election of Ronald Reagan. Their story that programs to enforce desegregation of schools, jobs, and neighborhoods broke up the New Deal coalition and “forced” a realignment avoids mention of the racial stratification built into the New Deal on the one hand and active conservative mobilization on the other. The inescapable conclusion was that Democrats, in order to win back a majority of white middle- and working-class voters, would have to disown prior commitments to racial equality and the “special rights” of other marginalized groups.

The hegemonic power of the backlash is perhaps most dramatically

demonstrated, though, by its articulation further on the Left. Sociologist and former New Left leader Todd Gitlin and others have repeatedly assailed racial militancy and identity politics as the major contributors to the demise of the American Left, and have extended this critique to scold post-9/11 antiwar activists for being insufficiently patriotic. Such is the reach of the backlash chain of associations.⁵

Thus while backlash accounts assert that racial issues were key to the rise of the Right, they generally do not interrogate the cross-cutting institutional, discursive, and cultural paths that made race an important aspect of political identification for an increasing segment of white voters in the postwar era. Nor can backlash explain how that political identification became linked to others, such as social or economic conservatism, in a coherent political rhetoric. Finally, backlash cannot tell us how that rhetoric was translated into effective political strategies by the Republican Party.

Instead of accepting the premise that white voters were pushed too far in the 1960s, we might ask: Why should white voters necessarily have seen increasing claims for black equality as detrimental to their own interests? Why, for that matter, should anxiety about racial issues have automatically become yoked to conservative positions on other matters and finally be translated into identification with the Republican Party? What's more, to foreground only the political upheaval of 1960s is to miss both the deeper legacy of the modern Right to which Lott unwittingly referred and the racial exclusions stretching back through the New Deal that helped lay the basis for later confrontations.

Politics is not merely the realm where preexisting interests, grievances, and passions are given expression. Rather, it is in and through politics that interests, grievances, and passions are forged and new collective identities created. Backlash, the ideological cornerstone and justification for modern conservatism, masks what was a long-term process whereby various groups in different places and times attempted to link racism, antigovernment populism, and economic conservatism into a discourse and institutional strategy through linguistic appeals, party-building, social movement organizing, and the exercise of state power. In the process, the very interests and self-understanding of these groups were continually under construction as they moved from coalition to collective political identity. As opposed to being entrenched and traditionalist (or reactionary, depending

on one's politics), the Right that developed is better viewed as contingent, mobile, and highly adaptive, constantly responding to changing conditions on the ground.

By the end of the 1960s energized conservatives claimed to speak for a majority. With the benefit of two decades of prior experience in reframing issues of race and economics, they were successful to a great degree in getting many voters from across classes, regions, and occupations to understand their resentments and desires, as well as their social, cultural, and economic experiences in opposition to racially egalitarian policies, to Great Society programs for the poor, to liberal elites generally, and to the state itself.

Southern Origins

Southern racial politics clearly had an impact on the rise of the Right, but what is the nature of that impact? To the degree that the South is discussed in accounts of national political changes in the postwar era, focus tends either to be on the dismantling of Jim Crow or the success of the Republican southern strategy. Yet there is a flip side to each of these phenomena which reveals a more critical role for the South in national politics. Although legal segregation and barriers to voting were largely undone in the decade between the *Brown v. Board of Education* decisions and the Civil and Voting Rights Acts, the racial politics that animated the southern system were translated into a national political idiom. While southern segregationists are generally depicted as primarily wanting "local control," this book shows that there were important figures in the opposition to racial liberalism who sought to make their struggle national from the start.⁶

Recent work has begun to demonstrate the role of class politics in the postwar realignment of the South. Such scholarship can expand our understanding of both southern and national politics of the era. However, it is a mistake to separate out race and class as fully distinct elements. As this book demonstrates, race was increasingly articulated in a language of economic conservatism both regionally and nationally, just as conservative appeals were continually made by reference to racial identity.⁷

Far from simply being regionalists, segregationist intellectuals, citizen

activists and politicians attempted to align themselves with forces outside the South from the onset of the New Deal. Some actors looked northward because they knew that their only real hope for the preservation of southern racial practices depended on a national movement. Many believed that white supremacy was not merely a southern concern but the true ground of American national identity. And as they looked northward, they began to find other opponents to the New Deal who had different prerogatives, but the possibility of shared commitments. This national focus was manifested in Dixiecrat attempts to win over northern sentiment and George Wallace's Democratic and independent presidential campaigns.

And as opposed to the Republican capture of the white South, we may better speak of a southern capture of the Republican Party. Moderate Eisenhower Republicans built the first viable Republican Party structure in the South since Reconstruction, but segregationists soon turned that structure into a vehicle for promoting Barry Goldwater, who proved sympathetic in regard to their views on civil rights. The new party apparatus was put to use across the South in the 1966 midterm congressional elections, and was critical to securing Richard Nixon's presidential victories in 1968 and 1972.

As political scientist V. O. Key cautioned more than half a century ago, there are many "Souths." Rather than treat the South and its influence as homogeneous, I argue that the success of modern conservatism depended on the mobilization—and nationalization—of many different southern political elements. Among these were the bourbon politics of the black belt regions, which dominated the South for most of its history; the complex tradition of southern populism; and the political aspirations of the emergent metropolitan bourgeoisie of the mid-twentieth century. All have been contributing elements to modern American conservatism.⁸

The Politics of Race in the Rise of Modern Conservatism

Racism has had enormous potency in American politics, but this is not to say that "race" itself has been a static concept or identity, nor that racism is expressed in politically consistent ways over time. Race is not a biological attribute, but rather a contingent product of politics, and its

meaning varies with context. Racial identifications have become linked to political grievances and aspirations when political actors—in widely varying circumstances—have successfully developed credible language through which to make these links.⁹ In the case of modern conservatism, race has been both an open and coded signifier for popular mobilizations against redistribution, regulation, labor protections, and myriad other aspects of neo-liberal opposition to “big government.”

The rightward shift in American politics since the 1960s has gone hand in hand with stubborn forms of racial stratification including starkly disproportionate rates of poverty, unemployment, infant mortality, poor health, as well as the construction of what Naomi Murakawa has called the American “carceral state,” which has the world’s highest imprisonment rates both per capita and in absolute numbers, half of which is black. And across the nation, the *Brown* era of school integration appears to be coming to a close, with school districts resegregating across the nation with Supreme Court approval.¹⁰

Yet the rise of the Right came about as enduring civil rights reforms were also achieved. Jim Crow has been dismantled, there is now a large black middle class, and major American institutions are far more integrated than in any previous era. The civil rights movement is enshrined in American iconography and cited as a source of inspiration for actors across the political spectrum. Most Republican leaders now attempt to claim the mantle of racial inclusiveness, a fact which makes a racial archaeology of the modern GOP that much more necessary.

Outline of the Book

I begin Chapter 2 by examining the opposition to racial liberalism that emerged from the South in the 1940s in the States’ Rights or Dixiecrat Party, and focus on the movement’s primary intellectual, Charles Wallace Collins. Although Collins’s influence on the Dixiecrats was fundamental, his influence on the revolt has hardly been explored, nor his ideas examined. Collins’s analysis and critique of the racial liberalism that emerged in the 1940s, and his vision of a new national alignment of conservatives and segregationists, shaped the philosophy and political direction of the states’

rights movement, which had southern ramifications in “massive resistance” and national ramifications in later connections with northern conservatives.

Collins and other Dixiecrats looked for allies outside the South and anticipated what that alliance might look like. Thus in Chapter 3 I move from a focus on northward-looking southerners to southward-looking northerners to examine how northern conservatives responded to the states’ rights movement. I do so through an analysis of the southern focus of the most prominent conservative periodical of the 1950s and 1960s, *National Review*. Numerous scholars have chronicled the fundamental role of the *National Review* in creating the modern Right. None have examined the magazine’s extensive reportage and editorial interest in the struggle over desegregation. Soon after its inception in 1955, *National Review* developed a keen interest in the political possibilities of the South. By the end of the decade, articles on the South appeared regularly, often penned by prominent southern segregationist authors and journalists. Conservatives at *National Review* also began working with GOP strategists in the late 1950s and early 1960s to develop a language and political strategy to produce an active Republican Party across the South for the first time since Reconstruction. This new southern party used its concentrated strength to make Goldwater a critical Republican player in 1960 and the presidential nominee in 1964.

The southern-driven Goldwater movement succeeded in securing the nomination of its candidate in 1964, but it failed miserably as a strategy for winning over large segments of the American electorate outside the South who still saw conservatism as the province of wealthy elites. In Chapter 4 I look at another attempt to take southern race politics national that began to establish populist credibility for the Right: the presidential campaigns of Alabama Governor George Wallace. Wallace had a surprising impact in a number of Northern Democratic primaries in 1964, and collected more than ten million votes when he ran as an independent in 1968. Wallace drew on older racial sentiments, to be sure, but he linked them to the fears and desires experienced by many white southerners and northern working-class white ethnics threatened by neighborhood and job integration. Wallace drove a wedge into the New Deal coalition outside the South and severed the party identification of many Democrats, thereby creating new

opportunities for the Republican Party. While later conservatives would distance themselves from Wallace's overt racism and pugnacious rhetoric, he left an indelible mark on the campaigns of Nixon and later Reagan, both of whom drew from his language of racial, antigovernment populism.

In Chapter 5, I examine the culmination of the conservative race strategy in Richard Nixon's presidential campaigns and administration. Nixon's presidency built on the legacy of the Dixiecrats, Goldwater, and Wallace; weaving together racism, conservatism, and populism in a coherent political identity that could claim majoritarian status. The key was a rhetorical constituency variously called the "silent majority," the "emerging Republican majority," "the Forgotten Americans," and "Middle America." This invented political demographic was meant to appeal to voters primarily on the basis of white racial resentment. This strategy won two elections for Nixon, but his emergent coalition could not be sustained in the face of a still-vital liberal regime. Hence the president who sought to "bring us together" left a country politically divided, ambivalent about both parties, and distrustful of the federal government itself.

What did the deep political divisions in the United States mean then for the triumph of racial conservatism? I turn in Chapter 6 more explicitly to the cultural sphere, where crises of political interpretation are often worked out. I argue that the antigovernment sentiment that ranged across the political spectrum in the early 1970s began to cohere into modern conservative discourse, not just through race, populism, and economic conservatism but also through the selective appropriation of antiracist, Left, and countercultural themes. Specifically, I focus on the work of former Citizens' Councilor, Klan leader, and Wallace speechwriter Asa Carter and the discourse of antistatist populism he developed throughout his career. In particular, the chapter centers on his book *Gone to Texas* and the popular 1976 Clint Eastwood film based upon it, *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. Metaphorically linking anti-Vietnam War sentiment, anger over FBI abuse of power, and Indian rights issues to a defense of the white South, the film makes a culturally potent case for backlash against the liberal state.

In the concluding chapter I consider the implications of my account of the rise of modern conservatism for the study of politics. Reflection on the relationship between political order and change, and between culture and

institutions, suggests that close attention to the way that language reshapes political identities (and therefore interests) can yield much that is missed by prevailing methods of political analysis. Such attention may help us move beyond the standard narrative of twentieth-century U.S. politics, which not only constrains our thinking, but which restricts us to cramped notions of the possible.