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Chris Danielson

Montana Technological University

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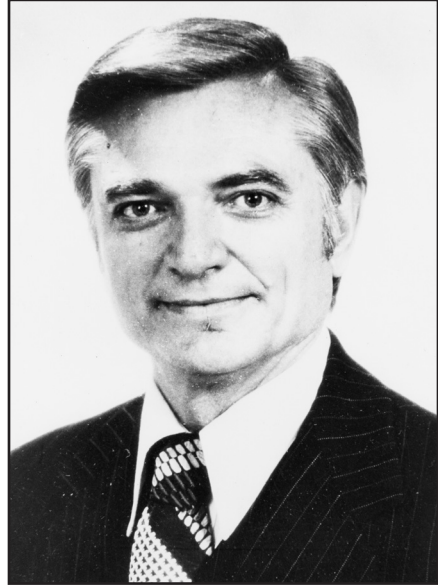
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Cliff Finch (1976-1980) and the Limits of Racial Integration

by *Chris Danielson*

Cliff Finch generally does not come to mind when one recalls governors of Mississippi who were elected after the civil rights movement. Elected in 1975 and serving immediately before the much more well-known William Winter, Finch, if he is remembered at all, mostly brings to mind a colorful character whose administration was marked by scandal and who quickly faded into obscurity after failed bids for higher office. Yet the reform administration of Winter was aided by Finch's pioneering 1975 gubernatorial victory, which brought the Mississippi Democratic Party into the modern era by healing its lingering racial divisions from the 1960s and undercutting biracial challenges



Cliff Finch, Courtesy, Mississippi Department of Archives and History

from the emerging Republican Party. But the Democrats' unity proved temporary, with continuing racial antagonisms within the party contributing to the rise of the Mississippi Republican Party in later years.

Charles "Cliff" Finch, the eldest of five children of a farming family, was born on April 4, 1927, near Pope, Mississippi. He attended public schools in Panola County, and after graduation, served in World War II in the 88th Infantry Division in Italy as a gunner. Unable to make a living in postwar Mississippi, he worked overseas in Guam, earning and borrowing enough to enter the University of Mississippi in 1953. He fin-

CHRIS DANIELSON is a professor of history at Montana Technological University. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Mississippi in 2006, and in 2008 won the Mississippi Historical Society's Franklin L. Riley Prize for his doctoral dissertation The Voting Rights Act and the Creation of Black Politics in Mississippi, 1965-1986.

ished law school there in 1958, working various jobs to make ends meet. Finch then opened a law practice in Batesville, and in 1959, defeated eight opponents in a legislative primary, winning a majority due to his personal connections, because he “had chopped cotton and plowed with more people than the others knew.” After two terms as a state representative, he then served two terms as the district attorney in Batesville.¹

Finch’s first statewide race was for lieutenant governor in 1971, where, with little money, he placed second in the primary against William Winter and Elmore Greaves. Winter won, and notably, both he and Finch campaigned without resorting to the racist appeals to white voters that had been so common among white candidates in the 1960s. That was a sign of the effect on white candidates of the three hundred thousand black voters who had registered since the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Greaves, who ran an openly racist campaign, received only five percent of the vote.²

Despite the growth of the black electorate, whites within the Democratic Party were still unwilling to share power with African Americans. The split in the party, which had begun with the challenge by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) against the all-white Mississippi Democratic delegation at Atlantic City in 1964, still had not been resolved by the 1970s. The integrated Loyalists enjoyed national recognition from the party but very limited state power, while the Regulars, composed mostly of the white segregationists, still held control of the state government.³

The rift between the Regular and Loyalist Democrats from the 1968 Democratic convention continued under Governor William Waller, who had been elected in 1971. Waller showed his limits as a racial moderate when he rejected an invitation from Aaron Henry to hold a joint meeting and possibly send a united delegation to the 1972 Democratic National Convention. Waller made gestures of reconciliation towards the Loyalists as the convention approached and as he realized that the Regulars would not be seated by the national party without Loyalist participation. Yet many white Regulars still opposed a compromise with the Loyalists, which would have required affirmative action to

¹ Cecil L. Summers, *The Governors of Mississippi* (Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Co., 1980), 141-43.

² Charles C. Bolton, *William Winter and the New Mississippi: A Biography* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 154-55.

³ For the MFDP and Atlantic City, see John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), chapter 12.

increase the representation of women and minorities in the convention delegation beyond their token efforts. Leon Bramlett, the Regulars' state chairman (and future Republican gubernatorial nominee), echoed the sentiments of many white Democrats when he said, "I don't think any of those men would be interested in a union with the Loyalist group." After an unsuccessful lawsuit by the Regulars to block their seating, the Loyalists again won national recognition and were seated.⁴

While Waller's limited attempts at biracial cooperation distinguished him from his segregationist predecessors, the split between the two factions continued throughout his term. His modest number of black appointments and outreach efforts were countered by his other actions, such as vetoing bills to fund hospitals in heavily-black Delta counties. In a sign of the continuing acrimony, a furious Aaron Henry of the Loyalists told Waller that blacks and poor whites "must finally, as hard as we have tried not to, accept you as our active enemy."⁵

Due to Cliff Finch's herculean efforts, the 1975 governor's election led to the healing of the divided Mississippi Democratic Party. In a move supported by both Regulars and Loyalists as a way to bridge divisions, the state legislature passed a bill in January that allowed voters to select 75 percent of the delegates for the national convention during the June 1976 congressional primaries.⁶ In the gubernatorial primary runoff in August 1975, Finch defeated Lieutenant Governor William Winter to win the Democratic nomination for governor. Finch had long shed his segregationist past including support for Ross Barnett and instead embraced a populist-style campaign for governor. Despite his \$150,000 salary the previous year, he carried around a lunch pail with bologna sandwiches and reached out to the "forgotten people of the state" by working at a variety of blue-collar jobs during the campaign. Observers commented that Finch's populist campaigning resembled that of Alabama governor George Wallace, but unlike Wallace, Finch openly sought black votes. For the general election campaign, Finch won the

⁴ Ken Bode, "Mississippi's Two Democratic Parties," *The New Republic*, March 25, 1972; Frank Parker, *Black Votes Count: Political Empowerment in Mississippi after 1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 149.

⁵ Jack Bass and Walter DeVries, *The Transformation of Southern Politics* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 212-13; Roy Reed, "A New, Biracial Course Found in Mississippi," *New York Times*, January 21, 1976; Edward Blackmon Jr. to Bill Minor, May 3, 1978, Box 5, 1978 Senate Election Folder, Wilson F. Minor Papers, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville.

⁶ Bill Pardue, "Senate Approves Delegate Election," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, January 22, 1975.

endorsement of Loyalists and civil rights veterans Charles Evers and Aaron Henry, and at the same time, received behind-the-scenes support from Klansmen and other segregationists because Henry and most black Democrats had supported Winter in the primary. Finch also hired Warner Buxton, the student body president at Jackson State College during the 1970 Mississippi Highway Patrol shootings, to serve on his staff.⁷

Finch campaigned for black support because his opponents did the same. Henry Jay Kirksey, a sixty-year-old black cartographer and former MFDP member, opposed Finch with an independent campaign that drew little support from the state's black political leaders. Kirksey, a plaintiff in a suit challenging the state's legislative reapportionment system, accused his opponents of trying to keep him off the ballot. Local black leaders throughout the state actively campaigned against him and neutralized any hopes that he could be a spoiler.⁸

Finch's more serious threat in the campaign for black votes came from his Republican opponent, Gil Carmichael. Carmichael, a Volkswagen dealer from Meridian, who had previously run against Senator James Eastland in 1972, ran as a moderate Republican who championed economic development and an end to the cheap export of the state's natural resources. He also backed a number of progressive issues, including a new state constitution, ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), compulsory school attendance, reduced punishment for marijuana possession, and handgun licensing. His support for gun control and the ERA cost him some support with white voters and alienated conservative Republicans. Carmichael also said some party conservatives opposed his support for the ERA. His issues-oriented campaign, which he put forth in both personal campaigning and television ads produced by campaign strategist Walter DeVries, contrasted with the vague economic proposals and rhetoric of Finch. Finch ignored Carmichael and refused to hold press conferences, and instead, issued muddled

⁷ "The Common Touch," *Newsweek*, September 8, 1975; Bass and De Vries, 216. Winter also had black staffers in his 1975 campaign. See R.W. Apple Jr., "Republican Courts Mississippi Blacks," *New York Times*, August 18, 1975; Fred Banks, interview by author, June 28, 2005, tape recording, copy in author's possession.

⁸ George Alexander Sewell and Margaret Elliott Dwight Barrett, *Mississippi Black History Makers* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 79; Jack Elliot, "Kirksey Charges State, Opponents Trying To Keep Him Off Ballot," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 2, 1975; Linda Buford, "Kirksey Vote: No Counties Won, No Black Support," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, November 6, 1975.

statements describing himself as a “progressive, but conservative.”⁹

With the absence of open race-baiting, both men freely campaigned for the black vote and sought to create black-white coalitions to help them into office. Carmichael countered Finch’s black endorsements by employing on his strategy committee Robert Clark, the first African American elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives after the Voting Rights Act went into effect. Carmichael also had personal connections with the black community, such as when he hired black salesmen at his car dealership in 1968.¹⁰ During the election, he opened a campaign office in Fayette, the stronghold of Finch supporter Charles Evers. Carmichael also visited the all-black town of Mound Bayou, a first for any gubernatorial candidate in Mississippi.¹¹

State Representative Robert Clark became one of Carmichael’s most prominent supporters and the front man for his outreach to black Mississippians. The 1975 election was still in an era when black Mississippians, due to the Democratic Party schism and the party’s long history of white supremacy, did not necessarily identify as Democrats. Clark saw himself not as joining the GOP, but as trying to broaden political and economic opportunities for black people. He said that Carmichael’s election would “force the [Democratic] party to become a real party and include all the people.” Some black organizations also took Carmichael’s efforts seriously. Black cooperatives, which were institutions that promoted community development in the poor areas of the state, were lured to Carmichael by the potential access to state funds under his administration.¹²

With the exception of Clark, Carmichael’s efforts did not sway the most prominent black political and civil rights figures in Mississippi. Aaron Henry publicly endorsed Finch in an open letter to the press that did not

⁹ Alexander P. Lamis, *The Two-Party South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 50-51; “Republican Courts Mississippi Blacks”; “New Breezes Blowing on the Old Magnolia,” *Time*, November 3, 1975; Roland Evans and Robert Novak, “Carmichael’s Mississippi Is Viewed,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, October 18, 2005; Jack Elliott, “Batesville’s Backing Its Man, Finch,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, November 1, 1975; Gil Carmichael, telephone interview with author, August 31, 2006.

¹⁰ Bass and DeVries, 210; Gil Carmichael, interview with author, tape recording, October 13, 2004.

¹¹ “Gil Carmichael Opens Campaign Office Here,” *Fayette (Miss.) Chronicle*, October 30, 1975; Gil Carmichael, interview by Jeff Broadwater, transcript, Washington, D.C., July 18, 1991, Congressional and Political Research Center, Mississippi State University, Starkville; “Mrs. Gil Carmichael Campaigns Wednesday in Claiborne County,” *Port Gibson (Miss.) Reveille*, September 18, 1975; Walter C. Gough to Gil Carmichael, folder 328, 1975 Campaign Correspondence, Gilbert E. Carmichael Papers (GEC), Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville.

¹² Robert Clark press conference, folder 454, and John M. Perkins to the Voice of Calvary, folder 47, both in 1975 Campaign Correspondence, GEC.

even mention Carmichael by name. Henry criticized “the unredeemable posture of the total Republican Party . . . an institution that not only has been against, and vetoed, program after program that would benefit the poor of our state and nation; but an institution that has fostered programs that now has all America teetering on the brink of economic, social, and moral decline.” He also dismissed the possible gains in federal patronage and funds that the state might get from the Ford administration if the state elected its first Republican governor in the twentieth century.¹³

Henry’s disdain for the GOP did not translate into enthusiasm for Finch. He flatly stated that he did “not feel that Cliff Finch was the best choice that we had during the Democratic primaries” but that he “needs our help in providing for him the stamina to withstand the forces that still exist . . . that would advise him to return to a policy of racism.” Charles Evers, while declaring that he “had a lot of admiration and respect for Gil” and liked his platform, said that a vote for a Republican candidate is “a vote of suicide.” He echoed Henry’s concerns about the national GOP’s hostility to social welfare spending and argued that Great Society programs would be cut under a Republican administration.¹⁴

Carmichael ran a strong race but could not win enough of the black vote from Finch to win the Governor’s Mansion. Black voters ignored Kirksey’s campaign and only delivered a few percentage points of the total vote to him. Statewide, Finch won 52.2 percent to Carmichael’s 45.1 percent. Finch’s populist appeal, along with the traditional identification of black voters with the Democratic Party, gave him 80 percent of the black vote, as opposed to the 50 percent Waller received in 1971. Most of Carmichael’s strength came from his home area of east-central Mississippi and urban areas like the Gulf Coast and Hinds County. Finch won sixty-six of eighty-two counties, including most of the predominately black counties. Carmichael only won two black-majority counties, Leflore and Washington. Clearly, the Democrats enjoyed the upper hand with their prior groundwork with black voters through the Loyalist wing. Leslie Burl McLemore, a former MFDP officer who supported Carmichael, said that the Republicans had

¹³ “Finch ‘Recommended’ For Governor; ‘Our Only Viable Choice’; Total GOP Posture ‘Unredeemable’ For Poor,” *Lexington (Miss.) Advertiser*, October 23, 1973.

¹⁴ “Evers Raps GOP Candidates; Calls For Support OF Finch,” *Fayette (Miss.) Chronicle*, October 30, 1975.

needed to “work on people over time” if they wanted a victory in 1975.¹⁵

Finch recognized the critical role black voters played in his campaign and moved to finally fuse the Loyalist and Regular wings of the Democratic Party. The two sides worked out a compromise after the election but before the 1976 presidential primaries began. Aaron Henry, leader of the Loyalists, and Tom Riddell, leader of the Regulars, became the co-chairs of the new Democratic state party organization. Both factions agreed to a pattern similar to the rules used by the national Democratic Party in 1972. The compromise increased the state executive committee from thirty-five to one hundred members and rotated all party offices among members of different races and genders. The Regulars reentered the national party, and the Loyalists won greater access to state and county politics, since the county Democratic executive committees now opened up to black participation. Increased access did mean a loss of independence because black Democrats had to accept minority status in the state party instead of the dominant position they had in the Loyalist organization.¹⁶

Finch held three biracial inaugural balls in January 1976 that heralded both his swearing-in and the healing of the divided Democratic Party. His inauguration dramatically highlighted the fusion when former governor and segregationist Ross Barnett sat a few seats from James Allen, a black businessman and aide to Finch. Finch also named Charles Evers and Aaron Henry colonels, which were honorary positions on the governor’s staff. Finch enlarged the Minority Affairs Council that William Waller had created by broadening black participation on the council and adding representatives of Chinese and Choctaw descent. This new diversity could not obscure continued division in the party. The state’s presidential primaries in 1976 illustrated the Janus-faced nature of fusion. In heavily-black Holmes County, local Democrats elected a slate split between uncommitted delegates and ones pledged to the conservative George Wallace and the liberal Sargent Shriver, the running mate of George McGovern in 1972. The Holmes County situation repeated itself in other counties across the state. The political marriage of the Loyalists and Regulars held together through the

¹⁵ *Mississippi Official and Statistical Register 1972-1976*, 497, 500; Gil Carmichael to President Gerald Ford, folder 167, General Political, GEC Papers; Bass and DeVries, 216; Lamis, 51; “Kirksey Vote: No Counties Won, No Black Support,”; Jack Elliott, “Finch Shows Rural, Black Strength,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, November 6, 1975; Leslie Burl McLemore, interview with author, tape recording, November 19, 2004.

¹⁶ Parker, 149-50; Lamis, 52.

1976 presidential election, in which Democratic presidential nominee Jimmy Carter carried Mississippi by 49.6 percent over President Gerald Ford's 47.7 percent. As Georgia Congressman Andrew Young said when the Magnolia State decided the Electoral College in favor of Carter, "The hands that picked cotton finally picked the president." Finch's fusion policy had helped elect not just himself but a president as well.¹⁷

Ultimately, Finch proved to be far more important for his election and his unification of the state party than for any accomplishments as governor. His administration championed economic growth, with the theme "Help Build Mississippi." Economic projects during his administration included a new law on strip mining and the construction of the Yellow Creek nuclear power plant by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) near Iuka in northeastern Mississippi. Other economic projects included the ongoing construction of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Canal and the Grand Gulf nuclear power plant near Port Gibson, but work on those projects began under the previous administration.¹⁸

Finch could only boast limited accomplishments in improving the Magnolia State's economy. His programs to help unskilled workers and poor people, such as repealing sales taxes on food and drugs, ran into opposition from the conservative Democratic legislature. A crisis in the state's savings and loan associations led Finch to call a special session of the legislature in 1976 to deal with the emergency. He signed into law new legislation allowing the state to take over the reorganization of the institutions while minimizing depositor losses. Mother Nature also hampered him. The Pearl River flooded over Easter weekend in 1979, inundating much of Jackson and other areas, which forced

¹⁷ Roy Reed, "A New, Biracial Course Found in Mississippi," *New York Times*, January 21, 1976; "Mayor Evers Attends Governor's Council in Jackson," *Fayette (Miss.) Chronicle*, January 29, 1976; "Holmes Democrats Elect Delegates And Executive Committee," *Lexington (Miss.) Advertiser*, February 19, 1976; Lamis, 52; Steven F. Lawson, *In Pursuit of Power: Southern Blacks and Electoral Politics, 1965-1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 256. For example, in Jefferson County the Wallace-Shriver split occurred, in Wilkinson County Wallace polled a majority, and in Claiborne County the entire delegate slate was uncommitted. See "Jefferson County Elects Democratic Executive Committee and Delegates," *Fayette (Miss.) Chronicle*, February 19, 1976; "Wallace Polls 55% of County Ballots at Precinct Meetings," *Woodville (Miss.) Republican*, January 30, 1976; "Claiborne Democratic Slate Uncommitted," *Port Gibson (Miss.) Reveille*, February 19, 1976.

¹⁸ Summers, 144.

him to call another special legislative session to provide flood relief.¹⁹

While he increased the number of minority appointments, Finch's efforts were not much greater than tokenism. Despite fusion, only seven percent of Finch's appointments in his first year in office went to African Americans. Charles Evers became dissatisfied when Finch began to appoint white segregationists, another part of Finch's base, to state jobs in larger numbers than he did African Americans. The anger became an open break when Finch rebuffed Evers and a delegation of the state's black mayors when they protested the beating of a fellow mayor by a state patrolman. The early fragility of fusion began to show with the Finch-Evers split.²⁰

Scandal also dogged Governor Finch, as a federal grand jury conducted a three-year investigation of his administration, with several state agencies accused of corruption and mismanagement, including the use of state antipoverty funds to pay for Finch's office furnishings. Although Finch was never indicted, several of his key appointees and aides were, casting a cloud over his tenure. His marital problems also entered the headlines. Zelma Finch moved out of the Governor's Mansion and to Laurel during his time in office. Finch attributed her behavior to mental illness during televised remarks. There were rumors that the Finchs had fought frequently at the Mansion.²¹

Finch made no secret of his ambition for higher office. When James Eastland decided to not run for reelection in 1978, Finch entered the Democratic primary to succeed him. Finch ran in a field of nine Democratic candidates, including former governor William Waller. Even at

¹⁹ Ibid, 144-45; "Reduced Land Tax To Be Requested By Farm Bureau," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, January 3, 1977, 3; "Governor Charles Clifton Finch," https://www.nga.org/cms/home/governors/past-governors-bios/page_mississippi/col2-content/main-content-list/title_finch_charles.default.html; "Charles (Cliff) Finch dies at 59; Governor of Mississippi in 1970's," 24 April 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/04/24/obituaries/charles-cliff-finch-dies-at-59-governor-of-mississippi-in-1970-s.html>.

²⁰ Bolton, 199; Joseph L. Rauh Jr. to Charles Evers, August 29 1978, and Henry to Rauh, September 1, 1978, both in Charles Ramberg Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson; Charles Evers and Andrew Szanton, *Have No Fear: The Charles Evers Story* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 286-87.

²¹ Summers, 144-45; Bob Zeller, "Investigation of Funds Unsettled," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, February 17, 1978, 17; "Charles (Cliff) Finch Dies at 59; Governor of Mississippi in 1970's," *New York Times*, April 24, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/04/24/obituaries/charles-cliff-finch-dies-at-59-governor-of-mississippi-in-1970-s.html>; Robert S. McElvaine, "A Big Mississippi Thank Y'all," August 15 2003, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/aug/15/opinion/oe-mcelvaine15>; Bill Minor, "Musgrove Divorce? What Would Have Thought It?" *Clarksdale Press Register*, 27 June 2001, http://www.pressregister.com/article_e90f27b3-4563-593a-9b63-032c21c568dc.html.

this early stage, the strains of fusion were showing. Black civil rights veterans Charles Evers and Henry Kirksey filed as independents, and Evers lashed out at black leaders who campaigned for the white Democrats. NAACP leader Aaron Henry refused to endorse any candidate before the primaries. The state AFL-CIO had endorsed Columbia attorney Maurice Dantin for the Democratic nomination, but Henry predicted that most black voters would go with Finch since Dantin had made no attempts to win NAACP support. Despite Henry's claim, Dantin led the first primary and defeated Finch in a runoff to win the Democratic nomination. Dantin went on to lose to Republican Congressman Thad Cochran in a bitterly contested three-way race where Evers siphoned off many black Democratic votes from Dantin, while many white Democrats voted Republican.²²

Finch's poor showing indicated that his laboring for fusion of the Democratic Party factions was not going to reap him long-term political dividends. That did not prevent him from announcing his candidacy for president in January 1980, with the intention of unseating fellow southern Democrat Jimmy Carter. Without a hint of humility, he said that he "waited, hoping and praying there would be somebody who would come out and lead this country and restore its greatness, but no one did. Now, there is someone." Yet by the time he had announced, he had failed to get his name on the ballot in New Hampshire, a failure that did not keep him from saying that it was "a strong indication that I can be the next president." His antics added to the absurdity of his campaign, which included driving an eighteen-wheeler to Washington and getting himself photographed in a heart-shaped bathtub. Carter rolled over his opponents in the subsequent primaries and caucuses, including in Mississippi, where Governor William Winter and the state Democrats backed Carter over Finch. Finch withdrew in June 1980 and returned to his law practice in Batesville. He died of a heart attack in his law office on April 22, 1986, at age fifty-nine.²³

The fusion of the white and black wings of the state Democratic Party

²² "Blacks Are Criticized By Evers For Backing White Candidates," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 29, 1978; "Blacks Favoring Finch, NAACP Says," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 10, 1978; *Mississippi Official and Statistical Register, 1980-84*, 446-47, 455-56; Chris Danielson, *After Freedom Summer: How Race Realigned Mississippi Politics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 107.

²³ "Gov. Finch Announces Candidacy," *The Shreveport (La.) Times*, January 17, 1980, 2; "Muddling Through Once Again," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, December 31, 1979, 4B; David W. Kubissa, "Debs Remain, Finch Abandons Presidential Hopes," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 31, 1980, 3A; "Carter Maintains Winning Stride Throughout South," *Pensacola News Journal*, March 16, 1980, 4; "A Big Mississippi Thank Y'all!"; "Charles (Cliff) Finch Dies at 59" *New York Times*, April 24, 1986.

was Finch's greatest legacy. This action integrated and modernized the state Democrats and finally led to a shedding of the party's segregationist past. That was vividly seen in 1977, when James Eastland attended a highly publicized Democratic fundraiser in Biloxi while he entertained another reelection bid to the U.S. Senate. "Big Jim" Eastland, the Citizens' Council supporter who had once boasted that his tailor sewed special pockets in his suits to hold the civil rights bills that he killed, listened to Aaron Henry tell the audience that "this is a new experience for some of us, breaking bread with Jim Eastland." Political correspondent Bill Minor observed that Henry's comments "brought down the house."²⁴ Henry endorsed the senator's planned bid for a seventh term and urged black Mississippians to "give him [Eastland] a chance" to reverse his past record and let their votes "make a Javits of an Eastland."²⁵

Of course, in the end, Eastland did not run again, which led to Finch's abortive attempt to succeed him. The Democratic Party's fusion also enabled the election of William Winter, considered by many as the most progressive governor in modern Mississippi history. Gil Carmichael made a second run for governor in 1979, but with far less success. Despite his racial moderation, his Republican Party label made him look like a lily-white alternative to the biracial Democrats. Winter easily defeated him, winning with a coalition of white and black voters to amass 61 percent of almost 700,000 votes cast. Winter went on to push through the legislature a major reform of the state's education system, creating publicly funded kindergartens, compulsory school attendance, a reading aide program, teacher pay raises, and certification mandates. The Education Reform Act of 1982, which passed with the critical support of black legislators, was the most important education law in the state's history, one that Winter biographer Charles Bolton called "a racial turning point" for the state.²⁶ Finch's healing of the party played a role in Winter's important achievement.

Yet in the long run, Finch played a role, however unwitting, in turning Mississippi Republican. Many white Mississippians never reconciled

²⁴ Bill Minor, "Breaking Bread with Blacks," *Jackson Capitol Reporter*, October 20, 1977.

²⁵ Norma Fields, "Startling Things Came From Holly Springs," *Northeast (Tupelo) Mississippi Daily Journal*, December 26, 1977; J. Todd Moye, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 19; Aaron Henry to NAACP Leader and Civil and Human Rights Supporter, January 1, 1978, Box 1, Folder 9, Ed King Papers, Department of Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Memorial Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford; Sewell and Barrett, 86.

²⁶ Bolton, 189, 229-31.

themselves to a biracial Democratic Party. Some white Democrats had tried to kill the education bill because of its benefits to black Mississippians, while prominent white Democrats like U.S. Senator John Stennis refused to campaign for or endorse black Democratic candidates such as Robert Clark, who twice tried and failed to get elected as Mississippi's first black congressman since Reconstruction. White Democrats began to shift, albeit slowly, to supporting Republicans—first Ronald Reagan for president in 1980, then again in 1984 and then they soundly rejected Winter's attempt to unseat Republican Senator Thad Cochran. Trent Lott won the Senate race in 1988 to replace John Stennis, making both Mississippi senators Republicans. Although Ray Mabus, a Democrat, had won the Governor's Mansion in 1987, Kirk Fordice defeated him in 1991 to become the first Republican governor since Reconstruction. Fordice ran as a cultural conservative on issues like abortion but also used racially charged ads on welfare to mobilize white voters. This victory was followed by Republicans winning control of Mississippi's U.S. House seats as the old Democratic delegation retired in the 1990s. Although Ronnie Musgrove managed to win a close election as governor in 1999 by having the state House of Representatives decide the election, his defeat by Haley Barbour in 2003 marked the last time a Democrat has occupied the Governor's Mansion, and both houses of the legislature have been held by Republican majorities since 2011. In 2019, the office of attorney general is the only statewide office held by a Democrat. The continued salience of racial issues and racially polarized voting, such as the state flag controversy and the state Republican embrace of Confederate heritage and iconography, remain. The dominance of an overwhelmingly white Republican Party in the state shows that the legacy of Finch's fusion policy was a relic of the recent past and a victory that was short-lived. Even his political skills could not overcome the white supremacy deeply rooted in many Mississippi voters.²⁷

²⁷ Ibid, 227-29, 246-47; Jere Nash and Andy Taggart, *Mississippi Politics: The Struggle for Power, 1976-2006* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 206-07, 228-30, 257-58, 277-77, 279-84; "Party Control of Mississippi State Government," https://ballotpedia.org/Party_control_of_Mississippi_state_government; Rich Cohen, et al., eds., "Mississippi State Profile 2018," *The Almanac of American Politics*, https://ballotpedia.org/Mississippi_state_profile_2018.