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Richard Nixon, Mississippi, and the Political Transformation of the South.

by Justin P. Coffey

On November 7, 1972, President Richard M. Nixon won one of the most decisive electoral victories in American history. Nixon and his running mate Spiro T. Agnew won forty-nine states and took over 60 percent of the popular vote. Nixon received an overwhelming vote in every part of the country, but his largest margins were in the Deep South. The Republican incumbent swept all of Dixie, becoming the first Republican to capture every state in the South. Nixon won over 70 percent in five southern states, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida. Mississippi gave Nixon his biggest total—78.2 percent.¹

Nixon's staggering victory in 1972 is generally attributed to his "Southern Strategy." Although it has become part of American political history that Richard Nixon and his advisors developed a plot to lure southern whites to the Republican Party, there is no evidence to suggest Nixon ever devised a Southern Strategy. Critics claim Nixon initiated this plan beginning in the 1968 campaign, but the reality is that with the exception of South Carolina, Nixon all but ignored the Deep South in 1968. He ceded it to the American Independent Party candidate George Wallace and adopted what historian Dean Kotlowksi calls a "Border Strategy," concentrating on states like Tennessee and Kentucky.² Over the next four years, as the argument goes, Nixon pursued policies to block school integration and used code words to woo disaffected southern

¹ 1972 Presidential General Election Results," <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php?year=1972>, accessed January 3, 2015.

² Dean Kotlowksi, *Nixon's Civil Rights: Politics, Principle, and Policy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Jere Nash and Andy Taggart, *Mississippi Politics: The Struggle for Power, 1976-2008* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 49.

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whites to his side.³

The historical evidence, however, presents a more complicated picture. A look at Nixon's first term shows that his administration desegregated public schools across the South. Nixon supported and helped create the federal government's affirmative action program and launched efforts to bolster economic opportunities in black urban areas. A decade after his resignation, Nixon granted several interviews with historian Joan Hoff, in which he denied having a "southern strategy."⁴ Arguably, the Nixon administration is the most documented in American history, but no tape exists of Nixon discussing a southern strategy, nor are there any memos in the Nixon Library attesting to this subject. There is no evidence that Nixon, who wrote everything on yellow legal plans, ever put to paper a strategy for capturing the South. Patrick J. Buchanan, Nixon's speechwriter and in-house conservative, calls the claims that Nixon had a Southern Strategy one of the "big lies of U.S. political history."⁵

Buchanan does argue, however, that Nixon created a "New Majority." According to Buchanan, this coalition included disaffected Democrats, but not just those from the South. Nixon brought in white ethnics, union members, white southerners, and suburbanites. These disparate groups had little in common, and the first three had long been reliable members of the Democratic Party. But according to Buchanan, Nixon and his aides never drew up plans to win these blocs, instead they went about it on an ad hoc basis. For example, in an effort to make inroads with Catholics, Nixon supported aid to parochial schools.⁶ In 1972 Nixon signed a bill into law indexing Social Security payments to the inflation rate which helped him with elderly voters.⁷ Ever the consummate politician, Nixon knew where the votes were.

It was out of this sense of political pragmatism that Nixon decided to ignore black voters. White House Domestic Policy Advisor John D.

³ For two authors who contend Nixon had a "Southern Strategy," see Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008); Elizabeth Drew, *Richard M. Nixon* (New York: Times Books, 2007).

⁴ Joan Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 79.

⁵ Patrick J. Buchanan, "Nixon's 'Southern Strategy' and a Liberal Big Lie," July 3, 2014, Townhall.com, accessed September 23, 2014.

⁶ William Safire, *Before the Fall: An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House* (New York: Belmont Tower Books, 1975), 555-563.

⁷ Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered*, 135-136.

Ehrlichman once told an assistant in the Nixon administration, “You know Jack, the blacks aren’t where our votes are.”⁸ The man often credited (or blamed) for formulating the Southern Strategy, Kevin Phillips, was quite explicit about what direction Nixon and the GOP needed to take. Writing in *The New York Times* in 1970, Phillips argued:

“From now on, the Republicans are never going to get more than 10 to 20 percent of the Negro vote and they don’t need any more than that . . . but Republicans would be shortsighted if they weakened enforcement of the Voting Rights Act. The more Negroes who register as Democrats in the South, the sooner the Negrophobe whites will quit the Democrats and become Republicans. That’s where the votes are. Without that prodding from the blacks, the whites will backslide into their own comfortable arrangement with the local Democrats.”⁹

Wresting the South from the Democrats was never guaranteed. By the time Nixon took office in January 1969, almost all remnants of Jim Crow were no more. The 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act had abolished legal racial discrimination. The laws had not eradicated racism or ended de facto segregation in the South (or outside the South), but there was no turning back the clock, and Nixon had neither the intent nor inclination to do so. The issue for Nixon was not halting integration or fighting the legal gains made over the past decade, but finding a way to enforce the law without alienating white southerners. Doing so was a tricky business, but Nixon, the master politician, hoped to pull it off.

The one major area where little progress had been made involved the desegregation of schools. For fifteen years much of the South had ignored the Supreme Court’s rulings to end segregation, and the majority of schools in the South were still racially separated, none more so than in Mississippi. Mississippi’s segregated school system tested Nixon’s attempt to transform the Deep South. When he took office in January 1969, Nixon was faced with the problem of trying to desegregate the

⁸ Quoted in “Richard M. Nixon, Southern Strategies, and Desegregation of Public Schools,” in *Richard M. Nixon: Politician, President, Administrator*, eds., Leon Friedman and William F. Levantrosser (Westport CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1991), 146.

⁹ *The New York Times*, May 17, 1970.

schools while not angering white southern voters. White House aide Harry Dent, a former assistant to South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond, penned a memo that outlined the White House's political position. If the administration could end segregation in the South "without blame being attached to this administration . . . then we will have achieved the miracle of this age."¹⁰

Within a few months that approach was put to the test. The issue involved the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), which had issued a court-backed mandate that Mississippi's schools integrate by August 1, 1969. HEW was threatening to withhold federal funds from school districts that failed to implement desegregation plans. One of Mississippi's House members, Democrat Jamie L. Whitten, had tried to place an amendment in a HEW appropriation bill to prohibit the department from withholding funds from districts failing to comply with desegregation edicts. The Nixon White House backed Whitten's proposal, and in so doing tried to send a message that the administration was sympathetic to the likes of Whitten. Nixon could have come out in opposition to the Whitten amendment, which had little chance of passing the House and no chance whatsoever of making it through the Senate. Whitten knew his maneuver was more symbolic than realistic. Nixon gave Whitten's gesture aid and comfort, realizing that there would be no penalty for supporting the doomed effort, while thinking that his action might possibly reap a reward with whites, who were grateful for his quiet resistance to immediate integration.¹¹

During the summer of 1969, Nixon met with Mississippi Senator John Stennis, who asked that Nixon delay an order that would have cut federal funding for thirty-three Mississippi school districts. When the August 1 deadline arrived, most school districts in Mississippi had failed to comply with the HEW requirements. Shortly after Hurricane Camille struck the Gulf Coast. In addition to the loss of life and catastrophic property damage, the hurricane produced a political storm. An official in the United States Office of Education informed Mississippi school administrators that the State's school districts were not in compliance

¹⁰ Quoted in Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 242.

¹¹ Gary Allen, *Richard Nixon: The Man behind the Mask* (Boston: Western Islands, 1971); Mark M. Smith, *Camille, 1969: Histories of a Hurricane* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2011), 27-29.

with Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and therefore would not receive any federal aid for the repair of damaged schools. Then the same Office of Education official ordered the state of Mississippi not to spend \$32 million in federal aid that it had received from the federal government because HEW had learned that African American students in the state were not receiving the same educational aid as white students.¹²

The two rulings enraged large numbers of Mississippians, and state and federal officials turned to President Nixon for help. During the 1968 campaign Nixon had allegedly told a group of southern Republican politicians that under his administration no federal funds would be given to school districts that practiced overt segregation, but at the same time “he agreed that no Federal funds should be withheld from school districts as a penalty for tardiness in response to a bureaucratic decision in Washington.”¹³ Nixon had no intention of allowing his own department to withhold funds from Mississippi. His problem, however, was that he was almost at war with certain members of his administration. HEW Secretary Robert Finch and his aide Leon Panetta continued to threaten to deny aid to Mississippi unless desegregation plans were in place by December 31, 1969. Nixon had Finch fire Panetta in March 1970. Two months later, Attorney General John Mitchell filed a brief with the Supreme Court supporting a tax exemption for payments to private schools in the South.¹⁴

Such steps were popular in Mississippi, as many white Mississippians blamed Finch and Panetta—not Nixon—for the federal government’s heavy-handed tactics. Columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak noted the success the Nixon administration was having at avoiding blame for school integration. The country’s most influential and perspicacious political commentators wrote that white Mississippians distinguished between the White House and HEW bureaucrats.¹⁵

The state continued to receive federal disaster relief and education aid. Still, the vexing segregation issue remained. In 1969, in *Alexander v. Holmes*, the United States Supreme Court ordered the school

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Frederick M. Wirt, *Politics of Southern Equality: Law and Social Change in a Mississippi County* (Chicago: Albion Publishing Company, 1970), 189-190. The quote is from Theodore White, *The Making of the President 1968* (New York: Atheneum, 1969).

¹⁴ Ibid, 200.

¹⁵ Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 276.

districts across the South to integrate without delay. The decision irked Nixon, who viewed the Court's February deadline for compliance as "unrealistic," but the ruling left him no choice but to comply.¹⁶ How to do so, without angering whites in the South and while preventing violence from breaking out, were major concerns for Nixon. The Court's ultimatum essentially mandated school busing programs. As the era's shrewdest politician, Nixon knew the pitfalls of integrating southern schools. Enforcing the decision might well doom his efforts to gain political support in Dixie, so Nixon devised a politically ingenious solution—he named Vice President Spiro T. Agnew the Chair of the President's Cabinet Committee on Education. In a typically Nixonian manner, the president never asked for Agnew's input, instead he sent a memo on January 26, 1970, requesting that Agnew "chair a group whose purpose would be to develop political and programmatic plans to help southern communities maintain a decent system of public education while wrestling with the problems of complying with tough, categorical court orders."¹⁷ The group included Agnew, Attorney General John Mitchell, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Robert Finch, Secretary of Labor George Schultz, presidential advisor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and presidential aides Bryce Harlow, John Ehrlichman, Leonard Garment, and Harry Dent. The president announced the formation of the committee in February 1970. Since Nixon was torn about the direction his administration should take, the committee initially produced no substantive ideas. Over the next few weeks a pitched battle ensued, as those who urged restraint, or even inaction, warred against those demanding forceful action, with Agnew casting his lot with the conservatives. Though he never advocated massive resistance, Agnew saw no political advantage for Nixon (or for himself) in choosing open compliance with the courts.¹⁸

So Agnew distanced himself from the committee, and George Schultz took the lead. On the advice of Schultz, Nixon formed advisory committees for seven states, Arkansas, Mississippi, North Carolina,

¹⁶ Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 440.

¹⁷ "Memorandum for the Vice President," March 27, 1970, box 2, White House Special Files, President's Office File, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁸ George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: Diplomacy, Power, and Victory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana. The bi-racial groups included elected officials, ministers, and other prominent members of their communities. The first meeting took place on June 24, 1970, in the Jefferson Room in the State Department and involved the fifteen-member Mississippi delegation. The Magnolia state was chosen because it was looked upon as the “most recalcitrant” state in the nation. Nixon personally attended the meeting and later wrote that one of the black members told him, “The day before yesterday I was in jail for going to the wrong beach. Today, Mr. President, I am meeting you. If that’s possible anything can happen.” Although the meeting was by no means smooth, it began the process of once and for all ending school segregation in the South.¹⁹

School desegregation proceeded at a remarkably brisk pace, with almost no violence. In early February 1971, Elliot Richardson, the new Secretary of HEW, sent Nixon a memo detailing the success of the administration’s desegregation policies. Richardson noted that in the fall of 1968, 68 percent of black pupils in the South attended all-black schools; two years later the number had fallen to just 18.4 percent. The schools in the South were desegregated, owing no small part to Nixon’s efforts to see integration through.²⁰

If Nixon helped end the last racial barrier in the South, why would he prove to be so popular in Dixie, in particular in Mississippi? As with almost everything concerning Nixon, the answer is complicated. While Nixon helped end segregation in the schools, he did so in a manner that seemed to suggest he did so more because the courts were forcing him to than out of a great desire to create integrated schools. Firing Leon Panetta sent a signal to the South that he was not sympathetic to liberals who wanted to coerce the South. And since many white southerners were resigned to the fact that the schools were going to have to change, Nixon was not much blamed for the result. Further, Nixon sent signals to white southerners that he was with them. Southern whites hated the Supreme Court more than any other institution in the country, blaming in particular Chief Justice Earl Warren for the social changes of the 1960s. During the 1968 campaign Nixon promised to appoint justices to the Court who “would follow the law.” Nixon replaced Earl Warren with

¹⁹ Tom Wicker, *One of Us: Richard Nixon and the American Dream* (New York: Random House, 1991), 485.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 486-487.

Warren Burger, and then when Associate Justice Abe Fortas resigned in 1969, Nixon appointed Clement F. Haynsworth, a South Carolinian who served on the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals. The choice sent a message that Nixon wanted to turn the court in a more right-wing direction and also that he wanted a conservative from the South on the Court. A furor erupted over Haynsworth's nomination with critics charging the jurist had failed to recuse himself in a number of cases where he supposedly had a financial stake in the outcome of the case. Nixon noted that the Kennedy administration had cleared Haynsworth of any wrongdoing, but that fact was largely ignored. After an intense battle, the Senate rejected Haynsworth by a vote of 55-45.²¹

Undeterred, Nixon next picked another southerner, G. Harrold Carswell of Florida. His decision to do so was disastrous. Nixon had delegated the selection process to his attorney general John N. Mitchell, whom Nixon had met in the 1960s when Nixon moved to Manhattan in the wake of his 1962 defeat by Governor Pat Brown of California. Nixon joined Mitchell's law firm, and the two established a bond that would last until Mitchell's death in 1988. Mitchell, who specialized in municipal bond law and had established political contacts throughout the country, impressed Nixon so much that Nixon would call him "my strong man." He ran Nixon's 1968 campaign. After the election Nixon persuaded a reluctant Mitchell to serve in his cabinet. While there was no doubt that Mitchell was an excellent attorney he lacked political instincts, and his political tone deafness cost Nixon dearly.²² Carswell was intellectually challenged, so much so that Senator Roman Hruska of Nebraska came to his defense with the famous line, "Even if he is mediocre, there are a lot of mediocre judges and people and lawyers. They are entitled to a little representation, aren't they, and a little chance?"²³ The Senate decided not, as Carswell was voted down 51-45.

Even though Nixon lost the nomination battles, he gained support across the South. Haynsworth and Carswell came to be seen as victims, and for a region of the country dedicated to the "Lost Cause," the pair

²¹ Nixon, *RN*, 420-421.

²² James Rosen, *The Strong Man: John Mitchell and the Secrets of Watergate* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

²³ Sarah Katherine Mergel, *Conservative Intellectuals and Richard Nixon: Rethinking the Rise of the Right* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 121-122; the quote is from *Time*, "Supreme Court Nomination Battles," http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1895379_1895421_1895542,00.html, accessed May 28, 2015.

became almost martyrs. By the late 1960s, there was a disconnect between the Deep South and urban Northeast, which the fight over the Supreme Court encompassed. Nixon knew this, and so did Vice President Spiro T. Agnew. While Agnew never had a substantive policy role in the Nixon administration, he did help in specific areas, such as rousing the conservatives in the GOP who were never particularly fond of Nixon. It was with his speeches that Agnew made his mark, and some of his more controversial addresses were in Mississippi.

On Monday, October 20, 1969, Agnew was the keynote speaker at a \$100-a-plate Republican fundraiser in Jackson, Mississippi. Organizers of the dinner expected a crowd of 1,500. Earlier in the day Agnew had toured the area. Nearly 2,600 jammed the Mississippi Coliseum, many of them Democrats, including Mississippi Governor John Bell Williams and Jackson Mayor Russell Davis. Speaking in the heart of the Deep South, a state that in 1964 had given Barry Goldwater 87 percent of the vote, Agnew delivered a searing assault on those who mocked Dixie. In the speech, entitled “Racism, The South and The New Left,” Agnew lectured:

“For too long the South has been the punching bag for those who characterize themselves as intellectuals. Actually they are consistently demonstrating the antithesis of intelligence. Their reactions are visceral, not intellectual; and they seem to believe that truth is revealed rather than systematically proved. These arrogant ones and their admirers in the Congress, who reach almost for equal arrogance at times, are bringing this nation to the most important decision it will ever have to make. They are asking us to repudiate principles that have made this country great. Their course is one of applause for our enemies and condemnation for our leaders. Their course is a course that will ultimately weaken and erode the very fiber of America. They have a masochistic compulsion to destroy the country’s strength whether or not that strength is exercised constructively. And they rouse themselves into a continual emotional crescendo—substituting disruptive demonstration for reason and precipitate action for persuasion.”

The crowd cheered Agnew’s defense of Dixie. Tired of being uniformly derided by the northern liberal intelligentsia, Southerners

welcomed this ringing defense of their land and traditions. But Agnew stressed that his words were not part of a ‘Southern Strategy’: “This administration,” Agnew told the all-white audience, “will never appeal to a racist philosophy.” Instead, Agnew argued, the Nixon administration, in concert with the GOP, was trying to develop a “national strategy.”²⁴

The intellectuals whom Agnew denounced attributed the Mississippians’ applause to Agnew’s playing to the basest instincts of white southerners. They were quick to accuse Agnew of playing the race card. Still, some of the establishment grudgingly admitted that Agnew was not entirely out of line. *Time* allowed that Agnew “had a point about the South.”²⁵

Agnew returned to the Magnolia state in May 1971. Addressing an audience in the Mississippi Coliseum estimated to be more than 3,000 on May 18, the vice president called the Southern Strategy a myth created by the media: “It is a political phenomenon that is born in the suspicious minds of the liberal pundits and flung at an unsuspecting public via tons of newsprint and network rhetoric whenever a national administration attempts to treat the South on equal terms with other regions of this country.”²⁶

The 1972 election provided evidence that the wooing of the South was well worth it. Nixon pulled in 78 percent of the Mississippi vote, the highest percentage of any state he won that year. His popularity helped elect two Republicans to the House of Representatives, Thad Cochran and Trent Lott, only the second and third Republicans elected to the House from Mississippi since Reconstruction. Though Nixon did not equal Barry Goldwater’s 87 percent eight years earlier, his victory in Mississippi was much more than an anti-McGovern vote. Voters in Mississippi—which really meant almost all the white voters—went for Nixon and Agnew.²⁷

Nixon and Agnew’s victory ensured that James Eastland would

²⁴ Speeches—October 20, 1969,” folder 28, box 2, subseries 3.7, series 3, Spiro T. Agnew Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries, College Park, Maryland. Hereafter “Agnew MS.”

²⁵ *Time*, October 31, 1969, 12.

²⁶ Speeches—Mississippi Fundraiser,” May 18, 1971, folder 7, box 6, series 3.7, series 3, Agnew MS; Jackson Clarion-Ledger, May 19, 1971.

²⁷ Nash and Taggart, *Mississippi Politics*, 52; “Election of 1964,” The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showelection.php?year=1964>, accessed June 26, 2015.

serve another term in the United States Senate. During his presidency Nixon developed a fondness for Southern Democrats whom he believed were his most reliable allies in Congress, none more so than Eastland. The seventy-three year old Eastland was running for his sixth term. For almost a century, being the Democratic nominee in Mississippi had guaranteed victory, but the times were changing. In 1972, Eastland faced a solid, if not formidable, Republican challenger in Gil Carmichael. Given Nixon's popularity in Mississippi, coupled with a revulsion many traditional Democrats in the state felt for their party's nominee Senator George McGovern, a Carmichael victory was not out of the question, provided that he received an endorsement from Nixon and Agnew. No such endorsement ever came, for Nixon decreed that he would back Eastland. When Agnew went down to Jackson, the White House issued a directive that Carmichael not be on the platform. Eastland won the race with 58 percent of the vote, the lowest margin of his career. It is likely that Eastland would have won even if Nixon and Agnew had campaigned for Carmichael, but it is certain the race would have been closer.²⁸

Following the election, Nixon seemed poised to make good on building a Republican majority. Though the Democrats still controlled both houses of Congress, the voters' decisive rejection of McGovern's liberalism seemed to herald a shift to the right. Although Nixon was more of a moderate than a conservative, he sensed that the country had turned away from the liberalism of the 1960s. With a convincing mandate, Nixon was in a position to alter the direction of American politics. Then came Watergate.

When the scandal that engulfed Nixon's presidency broke, Nixon lost the support of many of his traditional backers, but not in Mississippi, where he remained popular. Nixon recalled meeting with the "deans of the Senate," John McClellan of Arkansas, Louisiana's Russell Long, Stennis, and Eastland. As Nixon began reviewing the charges against him, "Jim Eastland leaned forward and said, 'Mr. President, we don't need to hear any explanations. We don't even want to talk about

²⁸ Jack Bass, *The Transformation of Southern Politics: Social Change and Political Consequences Since 1945* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 215-216; Nash and Taggart, *Mississippi Politics*, 51-52. In his biography of Eastland, Maarten Zwiers argues Carmichael and Prentiss Walker, Eastland's opponent in 1966, "never came close to defeating Big Jim Eastland." Maarten Zwiers, *Senator James Eastland: Mississippi's Jim Crow Democrat* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 239.

Watergate. Just tell us what to do to help.' The elder statesman John Stennis leaned over to Eastland and said, "Quiet Jim. Let the boy speak."²⁹

By early October 1973, Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox was demanding that Nixon turn over the subpoenaed tapes. Nixon had offered summaries of the tapes and wanted to have a supposedly neutral person verify the accuracy of the summaries. According to Nixon, White House Counsel Fred Buzhardt recommended that John Stennis be requested to serve in this capacity. The idea appealed to Nixon, for Stennis "was a Democrat, the Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Standards and Conduct, a former judge, and one of the few men in Congress respected by members of both parties for his fairness and integrity."³⁰ Left unmentioned was the fact that Stennis was seventy-two years old and reputedly hard of hearing. J. R. Haliman, who served as Stennis's legal counsel from 1971-1973, disputes the idea that Stennis was hard of hearing. In an interview years later, Haliman claimed Stennis "could hear perfectly well."³¹ Stennis accepted the arrangement without knowing that Nixon hoped Stennis's involvement would enable him to get rid of Cox, whom he wanted to fire. Nixon kept that between himself and a few advisors.³² The "Stennis Compromise," when it was announced, went over well in Congress, and Nixon thought he might have solved his Archibald Cox problem.³³

Nixon was wrong. He had hoped that Cox would find the compromise unpalatable and resign. When Cox rejected the compromise, Nixon ordered Attorney General Elliot Richardson to fire Cox. Richardson refused to comply with the president's directive and resigned. Nixon then ordered Richardson's deputy, William Ruckelshaus to fire Cox, but he also refused, so Nixon fired him. Robert Bork, the Solicitor General and next in line, followed Nixon's orders and dismissed Cox. The resulting uproar from the "Saturday Night Massacre" led to the House Judiciary

²⁹ Nixon, *RN*, 947.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 929.

³¹ "Interview with John R. Hailman," John C. Stennis Oral History Project Script, Mississippi State University, 25.

³² Alexander Haig, *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World, A Memoir* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 392.

³³ Elliot Richardson, *The Creative Balance: Government, Politics, and the Individual in America's Third Century* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1976), 38; Conrad Black, *Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 933-935.

Committee to open impeachment hearings.³⁴

The proposed Stennis Compromise had failed. Nixon may have truly believed the deal was acceptable but Cox's refusal to go along and Nixon's rash reaction helped lead to Nixon's eventual downfall. Stennis had little to say about the incident and over the next nine months remained mostly quiet about Watergate. When asked about Watergate, Stennis invariably responded that since he might sit in judgment of Nixon at a senate trial, he did not wish to prejudge the case. Though he remained mostly silent, Stennis continued to be a Nixon supporter. And the mail he received from his constituents demonstrated that many in Mississippi backed Nixon during the Watergate crisis.³⁵

Almost all of the Mississippi congressional delegation members, including Democrats G.V. (Sonny) Montgomery and David Bowen, remained steadfastly behind Nixon. The president had no more ardent defender than freshman congressman Trent Lott, who served on the Judiciary Committee. Throughout the impeachment hearings Lott was one of Nixon's most steadfast defenders. Watergate, Lott believed, was nothing more than "politics as usual."³⁶ When the Judiciary Committee began its investigation in the spring of 1974, Lott vowed that he would be a "very aggressive defender" of the president, a man Lott "greatly respected" and believed was a victim of the liberal establishment. Lott went so far as to pen a letter in defense of Nixon and persuaded fourteen of his fellow House Republican freshmen to sign it. After months of hearings, the committee settled on five counts of impeachment against Nixon, including one for improperly taking a tax deduction when he donated his vice presidential papers to the National Archives. Lott was asked by the senior Republican on the committee Charles Wiggins of California, to take the lead in defending Nixon against that charge, which Lott did. When the time came for a vote, Lott voted no on all five counts.³⁷

Though the House Judiciary Committee approved three of the articles of impeachment, Nixon still had a chance of surviving. The

³⁴ Nixon, RN, 935; Keith W. Olson, *Watergate: The Presidential Scandal That Shook America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 116-122.

³⁵ Luke Fowler and Jeffrey Markham, "John C. Stennis and the Watergate Controversy," Congressional Research Brief, The Stennis Institute of Government at Mississippi State University, 2008.

³⁶ Trent Lott, *Herding Cats: A Life in Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 62.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

House was almost certain to vote for impeachment, but that required a simple majority of its members. The battle would take place in the Senate, where a conviction required a two-thirds majority. In that congressional session, the Democrats had fifty-seven seats to the Republicans forty-three.³⁸ There were some Republicans, particularly the more liberal ones, who were likely to vote for conviction, but Nixon only had to hold thirty-four members of his own party to stay in office. But he did not even need that many, given the support he had from Southern Democrats, including Stennis and Eastland, who were firmly with Nixon. After a year of investigations and hearings, there was still no concrete piece of evidence that Nixon had obstructed justice.³⁹

All that changed in late July when the Supreme Court ruled that Nixon had to turn over additional tapes to Leon Jaworski, who had replaced Cox as Special Prosecutor. One of the tapes included the “smoking gun” that doomed his presidency. On Friday, June 23, 1972, Nixon had met with his chief-of-staff H. R. Haldeman. During the meeting, Haldeman informed Nixon of the plan to block the FBI investigation into the Watergate burglary, which involved having the CIA Director telling the FBI that the break-in had been a CIA operation. Nixon gave his approval, ordering Haldeman to tell the FBI: “Don’t go any further into this case, period!”

Nixon had listened to the contents of this tape in early May and knew that if it was released, the game was up. Before turning the tapes over to Jaworski, Nixon had his aides show the June 23 transcript to some of his congressional supporters, including Trent Lott. Lott had been on a family vacation in Florida when he received a call from White House aide Gene Ainsworth, who said that he needed to share important information with Lott. Lott flew to Baltimore to meet with Ainsworth, who gave Lott a transcript of the June 23 conversation. Lott recognized the gravity of the situation and soon after began drafting a statement that he would vote for impeachment. With Lott gone, Nixon had no

³⁸ There were two independent members of the Senate, Harry Byrd, Jr. of Virginia, and James Buckley of Vermont. Byrd caucused with the Democrats; Buckley with the Republicans. <http://www.senate.gov/history/partydiv.htm>. Accessed June 3, 2015.

³⁹ In his memoirs, Nixon quotes the journalist Jack Germond, who wrote in early July 1974, “The smoking pistol has yet to be found in President Nixon’s hand.” Nixon, *RN*, 1042.

chance of survival.⁴⁰

The public release of the June 23, 1972, tape ended Nixon's presidency. The outcry was immediate, and Nixon had only two options—to stay in office and be impeached by the House of Representatives and then convicted in the Senate, or resign. By August 6, Nixon had chosen the latter course of action. On August 7, 1974, the night before he announced his resignation, Nixon gathered congressional leaders at the White House, including Speaker of the House Carl Albert and Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield. James Eastland was also there. The mood was somber, but Nixon later wrote, “Jim Eastland was the only one who seemed to really share my pain.” Eastland was still with Nixon, one of the few defenders on either side of the political aisle who remained with the President. Even John Stennis had decided to vote to convict Nixon.⁴¹

Faced with the prospect of impeachment and conviction, Nixon resigned. He had lost all support, including the Mississippi delegation. Less than two years earlier, Nixon had been reelected in a landslide of epic proportions and seemed poised to alter the nation's political landscape. He had succeeded in bringing in white southern voters into his fold and had achieved a striking electoral majority before Watergate engulfed his presidency and destroyed his political dreams.

What, then did Nixon achieve? Nixon won an overwhelming mandate in 1972, and his biggest triumphs were in the Deep South, with none larger than Mississippi. The problem for Nixon was that his victory in 1972 was a personal one. While Nixon talked about building a “new Republican majority,” he focused obsessively on getting reelected, which meant all but tossing aside the GOP. He raised enormous sums of cash for his reelection campaign and refused to share it with Republican congressional candidates. Nixon rarely campaigned for Republican candidates and even endorsed Democratic incumbent Alabama Senator John Sparkman over his former Postmaster General Winton Blount. Though winning control of the House or Senate was a long shot, given Nixon's popularity, coupled with public dissatisfaction with the Democratic candidate George McGovern, the GOP stood a chance of

⁴⁰ Lott, *Herdling Cats*, 62. Gene Ainsworth, a native Mississippian, had served as administrative assistant to Mississippi Congressman G. V. (Sonny) Montgomery for more than five years prior to his joining President Nixon's staff for congressional relations. Montgomery was one of the Southern Democrats who supported Nixon's Vietnam policies. *Jackson Daily News*, June 1, 1973, p. 1A.

⁴¹ Nixon, *RN*, 1081.

making clear inroads into the congressional Democratic majority. But Nixon's refusal to aid his own party damaged those chances, as the Republicans gained only two senate seats and eleven in the House.⁴²

The Republicans picked up two House seats in Mississippi, with Trent Lott and Thad Cochran both winning districts that had been Democratic fiefdoms for over a century. Though Nixon did not campaign in Mississippi, his coattails undoubtedly helped. Lott and Cochran were destined to become political institutions in Mississippi politics. Cochran ran successfully for the open senate seat when James Eastland retired in 1978. Ten years later Lott was elected to the Senate after John Stennis retired. It was the first time in Mississippi's history that the state's voters had elected Republicans to fill both seats in the Senate. Lott and Cochran began their political careers as Democrats, but both switched to the GOP, mirroring the political realignment in Mississippi and across the South.⁴³

The South was transforming, but in politics, as in life, nothing is inevitable. Whites in the South were not destined to leave for the Democratic Party, so it took the efforts of the GOP to encourage these disaffected Democrats to their side. Nixon helped the realignment, though his efforts were much more the result of ad hoc policies and not some grand design formulated by Nixon and his aides. Nixon's efforts testify to the uneven nature of his efforts to woo white southerners. He, more than any other president, ended school desegregation. But he did so in a manner calculated not to offend white southern voters. Nixon also helped create the affirmative action program, and he also pushed for aid to minority businesses. None of these measures could have in any way built up his support in the white South, yet Nixon supported them anyway.⁴⁴

Given all these measures—did Nixon have an organized plan to win over whites in the South? No, but he did make an effort to court whites in the South. Nixon appealed to southerners' patriotism and disdain for the liberal elites. Certainly race played a part in wooing white voters, but Nixon was not George Wallace. During his campaign for

⁴² For an analysis of Nixon, the Republican Party, and the 1972 election, see "Watergate and the Committee to Reelect the President," University of Wyoming, unpublished M.A. thesis (Laramie, Wyoming: 1998).

⁴³ Nash and Taggart, *Mississippi Politics*, 49-51.

⁴⁴ Gareth Davies, "Richard Nixon and the Desegregation of Public Schools," *Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 19 (4), 2007, 367-394.

the presidency in 1960, Nixon stopped in Greensboro, North Carolina, and “declared race a national issue, endorsed civil rights, and approved sit-ins.”⁴⁵ Nixon supported the 1964 Civil Rights Act, something that many of his fellow Republicans did not. As President, Nixon helped start affirmative action, created the Office of Minority Business Enterprise, an agency designed to help African American business owners, and expanded funding for federal civil rights agencies.⁴⁶

Could Nixon have reached out more to African Americans? Possibly, but Nixon certainly realized that blacks had been part of the Democratic coalition for decades and were unlikely to vote for him or other Republicans. Nixon knew where the votes were, and more importantly, where the votes were going. Whites in the South were a crucial part of the electorate, and on the face of it, there is nothing nefarious about courting blocs of voters. Many of those voters were still registered Democrats and although disgusted by the liberal turn of the party, they were by no means guaranteed to go for Nixon in 1972. So it made sense for Nixon to reach out to them. Nixon is also accused of using “code words” to appeal to whites. But Nixon’s tough on crime language was no different than that of many liberals. Crime rates in the late 1960s skyrocketed and many polls showed that crime was the single most important issue to voters during that time. Nixon was hardly alone in calling for a crackdown on crime, and to dismiss his appeals to “law and order” as simply racist is reductionist and misguided. Nixon undoubtedly had some racial prejudices, as the White House tapes show. Yet Nixon’s racial attitudes were not more malevolent than many white Americans of his time and the generation.⁴⁷

Nixon’s moves in his first term paid dividends as witnessed by his sweep of the South in his campaign for reelection, the first Republican ever to do so. As mentioned previously, he received almost 80 percent of the vote in Mississippi. It is important to note, however, that 1972 was

⁴⁵ W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Real Making of the President: Kennedy, Nixon, and the 1960 Election* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 141.

⁴⁶ Wicker, *One of Us*, 566; Dean Kotlowski, “Civil Rights Policy,” in *A Companion to Richard M. Nixon*, Melvin Small, ed. (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 224.

⁴⁷ A Harris Poll taken in September 1968 “found that 81 percent of voters nationwide agreed that ‘law and order has broken down,’ and 84 percent thought a ‘strong president’ could ‘make a big difference in directly preserving law and order.’” Timothy N. Thurber, *Republicans and Race: The GOP’s Frayed Relationship with African Americans, 1945-1974* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2013), 277.

not necessarily a harbinger of things to come, because four years later Mississippi and much of the South voted for the Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter. At the time, Carter was a moderate Democrat who attracted support among many in the South who voted for Nixon four years earlier. But Carter is never accused of having waged a “Southern Strategy.”⁴⁸

Mississippi did not become solidly Republican until after Nixon left office. During the Ford and Carter years, social issues began to unite many Americans against the Democratic Party. Many citizens were evangelical or fundamentalist Christians, two groups who had traditionally shied away from political activism or directly aligning with political parties. However, the legalization of abortion, more permissive attitudes toward sex, and changing gender roles alienated social conservatives, who began to mobilize. Jerry Falwell, a Baptist minister from Virginia, created “The Moral Majority” organization in 1979 to combat the perceived threat to traditional American values. Initially “The Moral Majority” was decidedly non-partisan. Falwell did not care if candidates were Republican or Democrat, and his only concern was that they took stances on the aforementioned social issues that aligned with his views. In 1976, Jimmy Carter won a fair number of evangelical votes by stating that he was a “born again” Christian. Support for Carter among those Christians fell precipitously during his presidency, and by 1980 they were looking for someone who shared their conservative moral vision.⁴⁹

Ronald Reagan became their candidate. During the 1980 campaign, the former actor, a divorcee who rarely attended church, attracted the support of the growing evangelical vote, most of it centered in the South, including Mississippi. It was not by coincidence then that Reagan made his first major address following the Republican National Convention in Mississippi at the historic Neshoba County Fair. The scene carried heavy symbolism, for the fairgrounds are located near the site where sixteen years earlier three civil rights workers were murdered during Mississippi’s “Freedom Summer.” On August 3, 1980, Reagan spoke

⁴⁸ Following Carter’s election in 1976 the New York Times editorialized, “If President-elect Carter can turn his personal triumph in the South into a viable biracial coalition, the Republican Southern strategy will stay wrecked for a long time to come.” Quoted in Laura Kalman, *Right Star Rising, A New Politics, 1974-1980* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 180.

⁴⁹ Kalman, *Right Star Rising*, 253-256.

before an estimated 25,000. He told the crowd:

“I believe in state’s rights; I believe in people doing as much as they can for themselves at the community level and at the private level. And I believe that we’ve distorted the balance of our government today by giving powers that were never intended in the constitution to that federal establishment. And if I do get the job I’m looking for, I’m going to devote myself to trying to reorder those priorities and to restore to the states and local communities those functions which properly belong there.”⁵⁰

Reagan’s aides worried about the address and the message it might carry, with some urging that he cancel it. He refused and delivered the speech to an almost all-white audience.⁵¹ The phrase “states’ rights” was and remains a charged term. Critics condemned Reagan’s use of it, arguing the candidate was using code words to attract white southerners. For decades southerners had used states’ rights as a fig leaf for their defense of segregation. The fact that Reagan used the wording in such close proximity to the place where three civil rights workers were murdered added to the perception that he was making a racial appeal.⁵² As shrewd as any politician who ever sought the presidency, he knew as well as anyone the power of words. The “Great Communicator,” as he was dubbed, could not help but understand that his “states’ rights” language would resonate with whites who were unhappy with the course of the civil rights movement. In another speech that year, Reagan claimed the 1965 Voting Rights Act had caused “humiliation” for the South.⁵³ And over the next eight years, Reagan pursued policies that were more conservative on race than Nixon’s. For example, Nixon had helped initiate affirmative action, while Reagan tried to end it. Reagan opposed the creation of a holiday in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr.

⁵⁰ “Transcript of Ronald Reagan’s 1980 Neshoba County Fair speech,” *The Neshoba Democrat*, accessed May 27, 2014, <http://neshobademocrat.com/main.asp?SectionID=2&SubSectionID=297&ArticleID=15599>.

⁵¹ Michael Schaller, *Reckoning with Reagan: America and its President in the 1980s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 28.

⁵² For an insightful overview of the debate about the meaning of Reagan’s speech, see David Greenfield, “Dog Whistling Dixie,” http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history_lesson/2007/11/dogwhistling_dixie.html, accessed June 9, 2014.

⁵³ Thurber, *Republicans and Race*, 376-377.

and fought against the extension of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. If a southern strategy is based upon policy, then Reagan had one, while Nixon did not.⁵⁴

Reagan went on win Mississippi, and the Republicans have carried the state in every presidential election since 1980. Mississippi is a “red state” and will likely be so for the foreseeable future. That result owes more to Reagan and the social conservative movement than to Nixon. Nixon did help prepare the way, but to reduce his efforts to a base attempt to motivate white voters by appealing to their worst instincts ignores much of Nixon’s politics and policies. If Nixon does not deserve better, a correct interpretation of our nation’s political history is merited.

⁵⁴ Jules Tygiel, *Ronald Reagan and the Triumph of American Conservatism* (New York: Pearson, 2005), 187