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ABSTRACT

In analyzing the reasons for George McGovern's failure in the presidential election of 1972, the author cites weaknesses in rhetoric, rhetorical strategy, and confroptation with and answers to the issues, and the apt handling of the South by Richard Nixon's aide, Harry Dent. McGovern's continual citation of the "errors of our ways" and his rhetoric of defense is contrasted negatively with Harry Dent's smooth, grass-roots, Southern Base Building. The author concludes that it is indeed still true what they say about the South and that President Nixon listened to the voice of this South in Building his winning campaign. (CH)

"Is it true what they say about Dixie?"

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The story has been told of a fledgling orator assailing his opponent from the back of a flat-bed trailer parked near the town square of Columbia, South Carolina. A farmer standing nearby was asked by a late-arriving reporter, "What's he been talking about?" The farmer replied, "He don't say." Such an enlightened answer could well have been labeled as Dixie's response to Senator George McGovern, presidential candidate for the Democratic Party in 1972.

However, the people of the South didn't merely misunderstand George McGovern. The South openly and dramatically rejected the rhetoric and the programs of the "Popocrat" McGovern because of several strategic mistakes in his campaign for the Presidency. The mistakes of the McGovern campaign strategy, the successes of the Nixon campaign strategy, and the enigma of southern politics will supply positive answers that in 1973, "it is still true what they say about Dixie."

Howard Odum, an authority on southern affairs, has noted that "the way of the South has been and is the way of the folk." From the "Old South" to the present, the people of the South still perceive their "province," their states, and their hometowns as theirs--a value concept of "place" to be nutured for its social, economic and political good as well as a "place" to be protected from a hostile national environment.

Thus, in varying degrees, the South has borne a tradition of populist appeal streatching from James Weaver, Populist presidential candidate for the 1892 election, to South Carolina's Cole Blease and his political descendants in the statehouses of the contemporary South. John S. Reed, in his book, The Enduring South-Subcultural Persistence in Mass Society, provides trend data to the effect that the South has paid and still pays more attention to state politics than to national and international affairs, more so than other Americans. A "Friends and Neighbors" voting pattern is the sine qua non of southern politics. Yet, Populism in the South has been and remains a peculiar, ironic movement e.g., to succeed, the candidate and his party must be sure that the right people get the benefits of lower taxes, higher wages, home control of government, and security of their status quo. Of course, we are still talking about the white South, not the blacks or the liberals. Such is the way of the "folk."

The contemporary South that faced Richard Nixon and George McGovern continues to be a region in transition. Despite its widespread social and economic progress, the South remains the poorest section of the nation. By 1975, more than half of all southerners will live in their major cities. However, no matter where they live, the middle-class, poor white, and non-white will still account for two-thirds of the nation's poor. Last in per capita income and last in education, the South's "forgotten man" exerted a dominant impact on the elections of 1972, at all levels of influence. Weak, yet strong, the middle-class and the poor southerner will be the dominant force for political change and continuity in this decade.

How did the candidates handle this hot potato? Why did President Nixon receive a solid southern vote? Why did the McGovern "campaign strategy" for the South get inundated vis-a-vis the "Posiedon Adventure"? Perhaps

the best way to answer these questions is to examine the persuasive strategy adopted by Richard Nixon and George McGovern for the November elections.

President Nixon's persuasive strategy for the South in 1972 can best be labeled as "contemporary populism" e.g., moderate legislative changes to benefit the middle-class based on past Republican achievements in southern legislative problems. The Nixon camp orchestrated a rhetoric for the South that opted for lower taxes, higher wages, enforcement of civil rights legislation, and a promise of no new social programs for the 1972-76 administration.

A central figure in the Nixon victory in the South was Harry S. Dent, the President's chief political strategist for the region. As the "goodwill ambassador" to the South for the President, or as the Washington Post called him, "the Southern Fried Rasputin in Uncle Strom's Cabin," Dent was the tactician of the Republican's sweeping southern victory in 1972. In an interview, he revealed the rhetorical strategy that sealed the Dixie states in the GOP column.

First, Dent's major task was to develop increasing Republican support in the South from 1968 to 1972. Dent's singular role was to be "speech-maker" for the President throughout the region. During his speaking tours he throughly organized southern Republican chairmen at all levels. The theme of Dent's rhetoric during these years of grassroots political cultivation was "President Nixon will treat the South like the rest of the country." Eventually, the President came to be labeled as a friend of the South, not an enemy. Legislative achievements in southern affairs tended to buttress this new rhetoric of southern Republicanism. For example, the textile voluntary agreements with several Far Eastern countries aided

numerous business sectors in the region. Additionally, Supreme Court appointments finalized from 1968 to 1972 were favorably received. The President's hardline on Vietnam was applauded in the South while the rest of the country expressed mixed emotions. The basic result of these four years of speaking tours in the South was a public perception of the President as a "patriot" standing for stability and strength in foreign affairs and domestic affairs.

Secondly, the 1972 campaign produced the most unusual situation in Republican campaign circles in the past decade. Dent revealed that less money, less time, and fewer people were used in the South than in any other part of the country. To wit, there was no Nixon strategy during the course of the election because of the thorough and successful Republican labors of the previous three years. There were thirty surrogate candidates carrying the standard for the party during the fall, 1972 campaign. Among them were several Governors, Congressmen, Senators, Cabinet members, and two White House staff members (including Dent). Fewer surrogate candidates were used in Dixie than anywhere else in the country. In a word, by 1972, the tide had fully turned and President Nixon knew it.

Finally, the key to the successful Republican persuasive strategy was the superior political abilities demonstrated by President Nixon. Dent stated that "he is the key man-(there is) no question on who is the key signal caller of this administration. The master planning and scheming of this administration is right in the head of Richard Nixon." Dent labeled Nixon's trips to China and the Soviet Union, along with the mining of Haiphong harbor as his "triple play," (a phrase the sports-minded President liked). These three hallmarks in foreign affairs supported

Governor John West's (D. S.C.) judgment that the President "is the master political strategist of the twentieth century."

What about 1974 and 1976? Gains on the regional level will be as slow as in 1972. In the recent elections the Republican party won one new governorship, two additional Senate seats, and a net increase of five members in the House of Representatives, which gives the party control of three of the eleven southern statehouses and a total of seven Senators and thirty-four Representatives, precisely thrity-one per cent of the southern congressional delegation. Despite Nixon's overwhelming victory, the Democrats remained clearly dominant in the region.

Dent noted several positive factors for the Party at the national level that will take up the obvious slack on the regional level. First, the South will have the most votes at the 1976 convention, a veritable "Solid South." The South will be a pragmatic group of Republicans--they want to win again. Black support will be sought along with a continued effort to gain the largest youth vote of any other section of the country. The Dixie Republicans will place "their heads over their hearts" to keep Senator Kennedy out of the White House . . . and, if you listen to Harry Dent, they will do it.

George McGovern's persuasive game plan in the South was non-existant. In separate interviews, former Governor Robert McNair (D. S.C.) and Harry Dent agreed that McGovern had no strategy for Dixie. McNair, a long-time participant on the Democratic National Committee, stated that the entire Democratic campaign strategy for McGovern was based on Joe Napolitan's book, The Election Game and How to Win It (Doubleday, 1972). Napolitan's thesis was: 1) to win the major states with the big electoral votes, 2) to win a large black vote and youth vote, and 3) to have it understood

that the Democratic party had an impossible task in winning the South in the 1970s. Dent revealed that he and Pat Goddell (a chief McGovern strategist) argued the strategy issue on a Novack-Evans PBS forum. During their discussion Goddell lined out the McGovern game plan with reference to the nation and the South. In short, the McGovern "Populist" design to turn the "havenots" of this country against the "haves" simply didn't wash out, in Dixie or anywhere else.

The McGovern speech tour of key southern cities in June, 1972, (Little Rock, Arkansas; Jackson, Mississippi; Atlanta, Georgia; and Columbia, South Carolina) was devoid of any positive impact. McNair argues convincingly that the McGovern forces had already written off Dixie by then and only "ran by" or "passed over" the South as a token gesture. A damaging result of this southern swing was McGovern's "begging" speech in Columbia. Governor West noted, that in a post-speech news conference, McGovern stated that he would go to Hanoi or Paris and "beg" for Prisoners of War to be released. This defensive rhetorical statement was picked up locally and nationally. As a footnote to this story, Governor West had earlier gone to Paris and "begged" for the same type of immediate release by Hanoi, but the press did not glaringly record the event. With no positive rhetorical strategy for the South, the McGovern candidacy fell heir (during this June tour and beyond) to numerous errors in judgment, many of their own making.

A key faux pax that rankled the old line southern democratic hierarchy was the South Carolina delegate challenge at the Miami convention by the McGovern forces. The women's liberation-reform movement challenge to a seat on the Palmetto state's delegation was perceived as an "absolutely ridiculous extension of the reform movement." (Governor West declared that

he would have given up his seat, gone home, and left the Democratic Party on a national basis.) Several southern delegations expressed similar sentiments.

Another error in judgment effecting the South, as well as the rest of the country, was the Eagleton affair. Again, Governor West related that several southern governors were distressed because their states had already initiated and/or passed into law progressive mental health programs. Along with the unpopular McGovern plans concerning amnesty, tax spending, bussing, and the Shriver choice as a running-mate, the Eagleton affair cemented Dixie's perception of the Democratic nominee as a defensive wild-eyed liberal totally unpalatable to the average southern voter.

A final error in judgment in the McGovern game plan, as perceived in the South and elsewhere, was the actual design of George McGovern's rhetoric. Robert Semple and James Naughton, of the New York Times, have argued that the rhetorical output of the entire campaign was basically "attack and defense." In a scenario of speaking tours aimed at three media markets a day, McGovern talked to only the committed, hardly ever to the uncommitted. Semple and Naughton state that Frank Mankcowitz, the "major domo" of the Democratic camp, held back or denied any positive speeches to help the public learn "what it was that he was." In particular, the South received no positive "uplift" rhetoric during that June, 1972 tour and for that matter, neither did the rest of the country. On a related issue, Semple and Naughton took note and questioned McGovern as to why he rarely, if ever, mentioned his running mate. McGovern responded that he never realized his obvious omission. When contrasted with the positive "friend of the South" rhetoric produced by four years of Republican grassroots work by Harry Dent, the McGovern rhetoric and accompanying

"populist" program fell on fallow ground.

Sol Chaneles and Jerome Snydor, in their book, that pestilent cosmetic, rhetoric, argue that the art of rhetoric ". . . is the bag of crafty tricks for common word-mongers; it is the sublime esthetic for the consummate orator." Call the art of persuasive discourse what you will, but the evidence of a superb Republican rhetoric in the South is not the bad breath of rankling politicos like Harry Dent and others. Rather, it is the evidence of a careful process of prediction, strategy, and control produced by a political party that decided to treat Dixie like any other section of the country by offering the "open hand" of rhetoric at its ethical best and by shunning the "closed hand" of political superiority practiced for too long in the South.

"It is still true what they say about Dixie," even though analysists of all persuasions would argue to the contrary. A rhetoric of better jobs, a healthy economy, lower taxes, successful court-ordered desegregation, and no mention of radical governmental change was a total per ive package listened to by the South in 1972. Richard Nixon listened to the voices of the common man in the South and George McGovern did not. So much for McGovern and the Democrat's populism for 1972, and for that matter, 1976.

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