Whistling Dixie: Ronald Reagan, the White South, and the Transformation of the Republican Party

Jonathan Peter Bartho

UCL

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I, Jonathan Peter Bartho, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis explores the political relationship between Ronald Reagan and the white conservative South. It was a relationship that had a profound impact on Reagan's own career, on the political landscape of both the South and the US, and on the identity of the modern Republican Party. Millions of southerners were attracted to the GOP by Reagan's anti-statist ideology and by affection for the man himself – an affection that had been built over decades of appearances in the region. As this thesis demonstrates, the support of white southern conservatives was crucial to Reagan's political success, ultimately propelling him to the White House in 1980. Conversely, by supporting Reagan's presidential campaigns, southern conservatives were able to influence the direction of the Republican Party and begin restoring their region to a position of power in Washington.

Reagan's personal popularity in the white South masked a significant divergence between Reaganite conservatism and southern conservatism. During an era when Reaganism appeared to be ascendant in the party, the GOP was, in fact, an awkward and often fractious coalition of two distinct strands of conservatism. The southern conservative agenda was often significantly different – particularly when it came to economics, trade, and social issues – to that of Reaganite conservatism. In the years since, this divergence has largely been overshadowed by the mythology that has surrounded the Reagan era. Nonetheless, it has had a dramatic impact on the Republican Party. Having been drawn to the party by Ronald Reagan, millions of white southerners formed a new Republican base characterised by economic populism and reactionary cultural conservatism. They would go on to transform the identity of the GOP during the early 21st century.

Impact Statement

In several ways, this thesis makes an important contribution to the academic understanding of both American history during the late 20th century and developments in US politics in the early 21st century. It highlights a divide within the GOP – between Reaganite conservatism and southern conservatism – that has existed since the Reagan era, but which has often been obscured by the hagiographic way in which American conservatives have perceived Ronald Reagan himself. It demonstrates that, instead of representing the dominant rise of an anti-statist ideology, the conservative ascendancy during the 1980s was the story of a coalition between economically focused Reaganites and culturally conservative, but economically populist, white southerners. As this thesis reveals, these white southerners – and their congressional representatives – were far from being fully aligned with the political priorities and broadly libertarian philosophy of the man they helped elect to the presidency.

Furthermore, the thesis counters contemporary arguments that white southern identity had largely dissipated by the 1980s and had become merely a constituent part of a broader 'Sunbelt'. Instead, by opposing Reagan on various economic issues and consistently seeking to further the social and economic priorities of their region, southern conservatives demonstrated that the South remained a distinctive cultural entity throughout the Reagan era. Though the political power of the white conservative South had waned in the years immediately following the civil rights revolution, Reagan's political career provided a vehicle for the region to reassert itself in Washington and to steadily increase its influence over the national Republican Party. As a result of the recent academic focus on the Sunbelt, this is a crucial trend in American political history that has frequently been overlooked.

This thesis is also valuable to journalists and commentators outside academia who seek to understand the development of the Republican Party over the past four decades. It provides historical context to the emergence of a populist, racially and culturally conservative base in the GOP, a base that ultimately took control of the party under the leadership of President Donald Trump. For many in the media, Trump's rise was a shock – difficult to explain and often regarded as something of an historical aberration. Yet, as this thesis shows, elements of what some journalists later described as 'Trumpism' were present in the party during the Reagan era. In fact, the very same southern conservative electorate that was drawn to the party by Reagan's presidential campaigns ultimately formed the basis of Donald Trump's support in the GOP. The modern southernisation of the Republican Party was decades in the making, and Ronald Reagan's relationship with the white South, spanning a period from the mid-1950s to the late 1980s, was a critical part of the process. By exploring and explaining this relationship, this thesis illuminates an as yet understudied aspect of US history – one that continues to have a huge impact on the course of modern American politics.

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Introduction: Southern conservatism and Ronald Reagan

"This certainly is the wave of the future" – Ronald Reagan to an audience of Mississippi Republicans, November 1973.[1]

"For however long the South is going to be Republican, it will be because of Ronald Reagan" – Rusty Paul, former Georgia Republican Party Chairman, speaking after President Reagan's death, June 2004.[2]

The ascendancy of southern conservatism in the Republican Party is one of the most important trends in modern American politics, influencing the identity of the GOP and the political direction of the United States. Crucial to this trend was the relationship between the white conservative South and the political career of Ronald Reagan. Though Reagan is an iconic figure in the history of American conservatism and the subject of a vast amount of scholarly study, this is an aspect of his political career and legacy that has yet to be fully understood. Exploring this highly consequential relationship will shed new light on divisions within conservatism and the Republican Party during the Reagan era, as well as the often-underestimated influence of the white South on US politics during the last quarter of the 20th century.

Reagan's political relationship with southern conservatives was mutually beneficial but complex, and fraught with difficulties and disappointment on both sides. His personal bond with white southerners was vital to his political success. Yet the culturally focused, traditionalist conservatism of the white South was distinct from the more economically driven

[1] Lou Cannon, "Support for Reagan Grows in South", *WP*, 18 November 1973.
[2] Tom Baxter, "Ronald Reagan, 1911-2004", *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 10 June 2004.

ideology embodied by Reagan. These two strands of American conservatism were brought together in the GOP when white southerners supported Reagan's political campaigns, but they never truly merged. Each had differing aims and priorities within the Republican Party. Southern conservatism was rooted in generations of antagonism towards outside interference and an ingrained antipathy to any change in the South's political, economic, and social status quo. In contrast, the ideologically anti-statist strand of conservatism personified by Ronald Reagan – identified in this thesis as 'Reaganite conservatism' or 'Reaganism' – was built on varied foundations. Developing in the burgeoning suburbs of the West and Southwest during the mid-20th century, it melded political philosophy, a desire for low taxes and deregulation, and an individualistic suspicion of big government.

This thesis begins by exploring the critical importance of southern conservatism to Reagan's political career. Before becoming president, Reagan had spent almost three decades building a loyal following across the South. He believed the white South's deep-seated conservatism made it instinctively Republican and came to understand the region's importance in creating a potential GOP majority. White southerners, attracted by Reagan's charisma and conservative rhetoric, helped to launch his presidential ambitions in the 1960s and 1970s. His anti-statism resonated powerfully with their own hostility towards changes in the region's socio-economic structures. In turn, the white South's support for Reagan enabled it to return to a position of political power during the late 20th century. Many southern conservative leaders recognised that a Reagan presidential candidacy was their best opportunity to further their cause on the national stage. At the 1976 Republican Convention, for instance, Reagan's southern supporters helped to craft what was then the most culturally conservative platform in the party's post-war history. With toughened language on welfare, abortion, and gun control, it acted as a prototype for future Republican positions on social

issues. Likewise, many of the southerners who shaped the GOP's agenda and identity going into the 21st century – men such as Jesse Helms, Trent Lott, and Newt Gingrich – rose to prominence during the Reagan era.[3]

However, the domestic priorities of Reagan and his southern supporters regularly diverged. These differences revealed a deeper divide within American conservatism – between the ideology of Reaganism and the conservatism of the South – that the mythologization of Ronald Reagan has often obscured. Even before he reached the White House, Reagan blinkered himself to the racial aspects of southern conservatism that surfaced during his campaigns in the region, while his southern supporters struggled to accept Reagan's more libertarian inclinations and displays of political pragmatism. Once he became president, Reagan's emphasis on free markets, budget cutting, and supply-side tax cuts ran counter to southern conservatives' determination to preserve regional industries and federal subsidies. Similarly, though he maintained a rhetorical alignment with his southern supporters regarding religion and morality, his inattentiveness to their social agenda provoked discontent. Nonetheless, there were unquestionably areas of overlap between Reaganism and southern conservatism. Overt patriotism and a belief in the projection of US military power, for example, were important to both. Such factors, when combined with a deep personal affection for him, meant Reagan's popularity among white southern conservatives remained high throughout his presidency and beyond.

Reagan's relationship with southern conservatives was ultimately critical to the South's transformation into a reliably Republican region and, consequently, to the 'southernization' of the GOP. Within a few years of Reagan leaving office, southern

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[3] "Republican Party Platform of 1976", American Presidency Project website.

conservatives had risen to positions of power in the party and the region was becoming a Republican electoral stronghold. This produced a significant shift in the Republican base that influenced the party's direction and identity. "As the new Southern-state Republicans lurched their party organizations to the right, they unbalanced the GOP nationally," former Republican operative Chris Ladd lamented in *Forbes* in August 2017. By the second decade of the 21st century, "Their influence [had] energized extremists all over the country, fueling the rise of a strange, previously unimaginable white nationalist fringe in the Party of Lincoln." The GOP gradually became a more obstructionist, anti-intellectual, and culturally and socially conservative party, increasingly focused on tapping into the racial insecurities and resentments of white voters. By providing an insight into Reagan's role in attracting white southerners to the GOP, this thesis offers a fresh perspective on a key trend in recent American history and a new lens through which to view the development of the modern Republican Party.[4]

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For decades, academics and commentators have argued that the idea of an 'exceptional' South, a region with a culture, history, and character distinguishable from the rest of the United States, is no longer valid.* The notion of a distinctive southern identity, they claim,

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[4] Chris Ladd, "How A Sub-Party Captured the GOP", *Forbes*, 4 August 2017.

* In this thesis, the South is defined as the eleven former Confederate states plus Kentucky. In their 2017 work *The Resilience of Southern Identity*, Christopher Cooper and H. Gibbs Knotts found 'southern' identification was strongest in the Deep South but also high in peripheral southern states including Florida and Virginia. Though not a former Confederate state, Kentucky strongly identified as culturally southern. Oklahoma was also found to have a considerable level of southern identification, but this is a comparatively recent evolution. Given

dissipated during the second half of the 20th century. Harry Ashmore's 1958 book *An Epitaph for Dixie* is an early example of this argument. As a result of increasing urbanization and the homogenization of American culture, Ashmore contended, the South was no longer very different to the rest of the US. In their introduction to *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, published in 2010, Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino claim that viewing the South as distinctive or unique is counterproductive. Centring their case on segregation and racial injustice in the mid-20th century, they argue that the South bore little difference to the broader United States. Instead, the focus on southern confrontations over civil rights has been at the expense of similar struggles in other parts of the nation. In an essay subtitled 'The End of Southern History' they write, "the notion of the exceptional South has served as a myth, one that has persistently distorted our understanding of American history…the constant need to mine the South for its symbolic possibilities has often come at the expense of exploring the deeper currents of American history".[5]

One recent academic approach has been to view the South as part of a wider 'Sunbelt'. GOP strategist Kevin Phillips coined the term 'Sunbelt' in his 1969 book *The Emerging Republican Majority* to frame the rise of pro-growth Republican conservatism across the southern rim of the United States. It has since become a popular shorthand, denoting a region – stretching from Southern California to Florida – that experienced an economic and population boom in the mid-20th century, along with a concurrent increase in national political influence. In line with Lassiter and Crespino's thinking, Sean Cunningham has described the

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Oklahoma has strong historical links to the West and was not a state at the time of the Confederacy, it is excluded from the South as defined in this thesis.

[5] Harry S. Ashmore, *An Epitaph for Dixie*, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1958); Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, "Introduction: The End of Southern History" in *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino (eds.), (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 7-9.

concept of the Sunbelt as "the geographic, economic, cultural, and political convergence of the South and West after 1945."[6]

In light of these arguments, therefore, it is important to establish that the South continued to be a distinctive region throughout the late 20th century and remains so to the present day. For instance, viewing the entirety of the South as part of a broader Sunbelt is deeply problematic. As a largely academic notion, the Sunbelt lacks historical or cultural resonance. While affluent, rapidly expanding cities such as Dallas, Miami, Phoenix, Atlanta, and San Diego have shared similar economic success stories, they have no overarching historical or regional identity which unites them. Instead, their residents remain far more likely to identify with a state or region, be that Texas, southern California, or the South. Even Cunningham concedes that "the Sunbelt seems less like a vast region of connected states and more like an archipelago of metropolises that have experienced rapid growth during roughly the same decades as a result of roughly the same economic forces, populated by individuals living in roughly similar suburban and exurban developments." The notion of the Sunbelt as a definable region should therefore be treated with scepticism.[7]

At first sight, the South does appear to fit the popular conception of the Sunbelt as a region of prosperity and growth. By 2014, the southern economy made up approximately 35 percent of the entire US economy and was the biggest GDP generator of any American region. However, these numbers are deceptive. Three states – Texas, Florida and Georgia – dominate the South's economy, and in 2013 provided 48 percent of its GDP. This uneven growth explains why southern states continue to exhibit some of the highest poverty rates in the

[6] Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1969); Sean Cunningham, *American Politics in the Postwar Sunbelt*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 19.
[7] Cunningham, *American Politics*, 7.

nation. In 1989, after two decades in which the Sunbelt had seemingly undergone a remarkable economic expansion, census data showed that many of the poorest American states were in the South. Louisiana, Mississippi, Kentucky, Alabama, South Carolina, Arkansas, and Texas each had over 15 percent poverty rates, while Georgia's was only marginally under 15 percent. Mississippi's was over 25 percent. The disparity was summed up in the same year by Thomas Lyson, who wrote of "a South checkered with places that are best characterized by their slow growth, declining industries, and static or falling standard of living" and "populated by people who have few skills, little education, and little hope of entering the economic mainstream of American society." Though sizeable areas of the Southwest, notably southern California, could lay claim to the popular image of the Sunbelt – with flourishing economies and many residents living in suburban comfort – such an image remained alien to countless southerners. This economic landscape has persisted. Based on average household income and poverty rates, in 2018 seven of the ten poorest American states were in the South.[8]

Even in those southern states containing prosperous Sunbelt cities, economic growth did not spread state-wide. While Dallas and Houston enjoyed high levels of prosperity, the poverty rate in Texas in 1989 was 18.1 percent. Thirty years later, Atlanta has enjoyed a boom built on information technology, banking, and communications. Yet Georgia remains one of the poorest states in the nation, with a poverty rate of around 17 percent. Additionally, levels of income inequality, premature deaths, infant mortality, and rural poverty continue to be disproportionately higher in the South than the US average. Most southerners, therefore,

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[8] Samuel Rines, "The Economic Engine of America Is...The South", *National Interest*, 8 September 2014; "The Southern Economy", Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation website; "Poverty in the United States – Changes Between The Censuses (August 1993)", US Census Bureau website; Thomas Lyson, *Two Sides to the Sunbelt: The Growing Divergence Between the Rural and Urban South*, (New York: Praeger, 1989), 2; Grant Suneson, "Wealth in America", *USA Today*, 8 October 2018.

have had little involvement in the affluence and growth of the Sunbelt. Economic expansion was chiefly confined to a few major cities and their surrounding suburbs, while large swathes of the South continued to endure high levels of poverty. The South has long been the nation's poorest region. This status did not change during the 20th century.[9]

As with economic statistics, demographic data appears to show a significant transformation in southern society since the mid-20th century, in line with the population boom of the Sunbelt. Migration increased the region's population from 31 percent of the US total in 1970 to 37 percent in 2010, and by the turn of the 21st century around one eighth of southerners had been born outside the South. Yet these overall numbers exaggerate the extent to which southern society has changed. Between 1970 and 2010, Florida and Texas saw a combined population increase of more than 26 million people – over 50 percent of the region's total population growth. The rest of the South grew at a much slower rate, with eight southern states combined (Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia) adding less than 13 million people in total during the same period. Kentucky, Arkansas and Alabama each added only around a million new residents, while Mississippi and Louisiana both grew by less than a million. Much of the region remains overwhelmingly white and African-American. Indeed, whites and African-Americans comprise over 80 percent of the population of all southern states barring Texas and Florida. In six states the total is over 90 percent. This is a different story to the West and Southwest, where Hispanic migration has had a much greater impact. Hispanic residents now comprise over 25

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[9] "Poverty in the United States"; Marty Swant, "What Cities Across America Can Learn From Atlanta's Financial Tech Boom", *Adweek*, 10 April 2017; "Maps and Data", Poverty USA website; John Shelton Reed, *Minding the South*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 5; Jay Maddock, "5 charts show why the South is the least healthy region in the US", *The Conversation*, 5 February 2018; "Infant Mortality Rate", Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation website; "Rural Poverty & Well-Being", US Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service website.

percent of the total population in California, Nevada, and Arizona, and almost 50 percent in New Mexico. In contrast, with the exceptions of Florida and Texas, the Hispanic population in every southern state stands at 10 percent or lower. Migration has therefore done little to change the long-established demographic makeup of most southern states.[10]

In the South's recent history, Florida and Texas are clearly outliers. They dominate the region in terms of economic and population growth and pose challenges in identifying the boundaries of the South, the Southwest, and the Sunbelt. Both states contain archetypal Sunbelt metropolises: Miami and Orlando in Florida, and Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio in Texas. Yet both also contain large areas which are historically and culturally southern. While the southern half of Florida looks outwards to the Caribbean and Latin America, much of northern Florida – particularly the Florida Panhandle and those counties bordering Alabama and Georgia – has strong links to the South. The former has a prosperous, tourism-based economy, while the latter remains heavily reliant on agriculture. Historically, northern Florida also spent much of the early 20th century in the grip of Jim Crow laws. In proportion to population size, Florida saw the highest number of lynchings of any southern state, and these occurred primarily (but not exclusively) in its northern counties. Today, northern Florida remains predominantly white and African-American, reflecting the demography of the wider South, while southern Florida's culture and identity have been transformed by inward Hispanic migration. Florida highlights the problems of encompassing the South under the Sunbelt label. One half of the state epitomises the economic prosperity and population boom

[10] "Demographic Trends in the 20th Century – Census 2000 Special Reports (November 2002)", US Census Bureau website; US demographic data, Population.us website; "US Population Distribution by Race/Ethnicity, 2017", Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation website.

of the Sunbelt, but the other continues to bear the cultural, economic, and demographic hallmarks of the South.[11]

Likewise, Texas retains strong cultural and historical ties to the South, particularly in its eastern counties, yet has also become popularly associated with the economic growth of the Sunbelt. As Texan journalist John Nova Lomax has noted, at the turn of the 20th century the state was "every much a part of the King Cotton economy as Alabama or Mississippi…Dallasites and Houstonians saw themselves as just as Southern as Memphians or New Orleanians." Since then, the heavily populated eastern half of Texas has remained culturally close to the South, while the less populated western half has formed a stronger identification with the southwestern border states of New Mexico and Arizona. Demographics reflect this divide. Texas's black population lives principally in its eastern counties bordering Louisiana, while western counties, particularly those on the Mexican border, have seen sizeable increases in their Hispanic populations over recent decades.[12]

In both Florida and Texas, political and civic leaders sought to reinvent the images of their states in order to break with southern history. Beginning in the 1910s, Texas remodelled itself as the home of cattle drives and cowboys, while post-war Florida promoted itself as the 'Sunshine State', officially adopting the nickname in 1970. Both were deliberate efforts to shed the darker aspects of southern identity. When monuments were erected in Texas, for example, the state's Confederate history was marginalised in favour of the Texan Revolution.

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[11] Raymond Mohl and Gary Mormino, "The Big Change in the Sunshine State: A Social History of Modern Florida," in *The New History of Florida*, Michael Gannon (ed.), (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 421-443; Ary Lamme and Raymond Oldakowski, "Spinning a New Geography of Vernacular Regional Identity: Florida in the Twenty-First Century", *Southeastern Geographer*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (November 2007), 320-340; 2013 Hispanic and Black population percentages by Florida county, IndexMundi website.

[12] John Nova Lomax, "Is Texas Southern, Western, or Truly a Lone Star?", *Texas Monthly*, 3 March 2015; 2013 Hispanic and Black population percentages by Texas county, IndexMundi website.

As Gregg Cantrell, former president of the Texas State Historical Association, observed in 2015, "the notion of Texas as a Western state, when you really boil it down to its essence, it's really been part and parcel of what is now a hundred-years-and-running effort to escape what C. Vann Woodward called 'the burden of Southern history'". This effort to 'Westernise' the image of Texas was undoubtedly successful, but it did not alter the deeply ingrained southern culture that prevailed in large parts of the state. While "Texans escaped from the defeated, isolated, impoverished, brutally bigoted South", in Walter Buenger's words, their reimagining of history ultimately represented a "divorce of memory and reality". Embracing the Sunbelt label was another step in this reinvention, as Texans and Floridians sought to attract migrants and investment by distancing their states from the turbulence of the civil rights era. Still, deep cultural and political connections to the South have persisted in both states. "In so many fundamental ways, Texas has so much in common with the Deep South", Cantrell says of his home state. "All you have to do is look at our regulations, look at our politics. We certainly have a lot more in common with Mississippi than we do with California".[13]

So, while some states have made concerted efforts to reinvent themselves, they have found their southern heritage difficult to expunge. Economically, demographically, and culturally, the South remains distinctive. Most southern states retain largely the same socio-economic traits they have historically exhibited, most notably higher than average poverty and populations consisting chiefly of whites and African-Americans. For millions of southerners, economic growth has been fragmentary, slow, or non-existent. Moreover, despite being embraced by civic and business leaders, political strategists and academics, the Sunbelt concept failed to account for the durability of a deeply-rooted and powerful southern

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[13] Lomax, "Is Texas Southern"; Walter Buenger, "Texas and the South", *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 103, No. 3 (January 2000), 324.

identity. “Today’s residents of the southern United States are at least as likely to proclaim their southern identity as they have ever been”, Christopher Cooper and H. Gibbs Knotts found in 2017 after researching the subject. “Southern identity does not represent just a tacit connection to an ephemeral concept, but rather one that is central to how people organize their values and understand their connections to the physical and social worlds around them.” Even in states that have attempted to break with southern history, a psychological and cultural identification with the South remains strong.[14]

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The notion of a distinctive southern identity has endured for generations. “[T]he South has always been as much a cultural region as an economic one”, observed John Shelton Reed in 2003. Given that regional identities can be amorphous, varying from person to person depending on their own experiences, communities, or backgrounds, it is important to clarify that discussion of southern identity in this thesis will focus on that of the white conservative South since the mid-20th century, predominantly in the post-civil rights era. For millions of white southerners, political identity is closely intertwined with cultural identity and, importantly, interpretations of southern history. While data indicates that much of the South remains different to – or continues to lag – other regions of the United States, statistics alone cannot explain what makes the South distinctive. As David Goldfield suggests, “The poll and statistical data, the numerous institutes and study centers…are surface manifestations of

[14] Christopher Cooper and H. Gibbs Knotts, *The Resilience of Southern Identity: Why the South Still Matters in the Minds of Its People*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 3.

deeper distinctions between the South and the rest of country." Even as the southern economy has diversified, and southern traits have gradually spread to other parts of the United States, the South has remained a region apart, distinguishable by its cultural characteristics as well as its societal deficiencies and flaws. "[T]here is something different down in Dixie," Goldfield notes, "the difference is real and deep, grounded in the region's distinctive past."[15]

In terms of politics, even the migration of whites into the South from other areas of the US has done little to dilute the region's character. James Glaser asserted in 2005 that "the political culture of the region does not simply pass from generation to generation, it permeates the environment, shaping the attitudes of those who live there, native and newcomer alike…The southern political culture is thus self-sustaining, perpetuating itself in myriad ways". At the heart of southern politics is the region's complex and frequently paradoxical brand of conservatism. Southern conservatism is a manifestation of the region's enduring connection to its past, grounded in white southerners' shared cultural inheritances and interpretations of their region's history rather than in an intellectually considered ideology. "Southern conservatism…is a doctrine rooted in memory, experience, and prescription rather than in goals or abstract principles," wrote Texan historian M. E. Bradford. "It is part of a nonnegotiable Southern identity with what it *is* prior to what it *means*. Not the consequence of dialectics or reasoning, it emerges from a historical continuum engendered by a recognizable people who have, over a long period of time, a specific set of experiences." Though Bradford held some controversial views on Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War, his definition of southern conservatism is valuable in encapsulating just how closely it is tied to

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[15] Reed, 7; David Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 12.

southern identity and history. Contemporary debates over the removal of Confederate monuments prove that Southern history remains highly resonant. It continues to exercise a profound, often intangible, influence on the lives, identities, and perceptions of southerners. "In the South, the past is like a bothersome pest that we try to keep hidden", observed writer Edward Ball in 2002. "Our region's remarkable story – which includes the prolific beasts of slavery and Jim Crow – forms the backdrop of everyday Southern life, from politics to schools, churches to gardening clubs."[16]

Because southern conservatism is rooted in this peculiar mix of history and identity, it is essentially tribalistic and reactionary in nature. The white southern character has long been marked by an instinctive hostility to change – a profound antipathy towards any alteration or disruption to southern life, particularly if it is externally driven. The white South, in Glenn Feldman's view, is the archetype of a "status quo society". He writes, "The history of the South is, in many respects, the story of an ongoing clash – a centuries-old conflict now, between progress and tradition, change and continuity, reform opposed to reaction." White southerners perceive their history rather differently to many of their fellow Americans. As historian Angie Maxwell put it in a 2019 interview, they have been "looking at this history from the other side of the room…if you already had the ideal society you wanted, then 'progress' is just chipping away at that." The enduring inclination of white conservative southerners towards one-party political control, for instance, is evidence of their antipathy for the social and cultural instability that can result from a more contested political

[16] James Glaser, *The Hand of the Past in Contemporary Southern Politics*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 6-7; M.E. Bradford, "Southern Conservatism", in *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia*, Bruce Fohnen, Jeremy Beer, Nelson Jeffrey (eds.), (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006), 800; Carla Hall, "Bradford's Boosters", *WP*, 20 October 1981; Edward Ball, "Ghosts of Carolina", *NYT*, 22 December 2002.

environment. As such, it is a manifestation of their determination to maintain the status quo.[17]

Similarly, a racial dividing line has remained strikingly apparent in the voting habits of white southerners. In 1996, Peter Applebome observed that Republicans "look ever more like the party of the white South and the Democrats look like the party of the black South". Even after the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s, race-based tribalism remained central to the political culture of the South and continued to be a powerful influence on the one-party loyalty of the region's white conservatives. This influence is most overt in areas that were historically reliant on a slave-based, plantation economy. In 2013, political scientists from the University of Rochester in New York conducted an extensive survey of southern whites. They concluded, "the legacy of the plantation economy and its reliance on the forced labor of African Americans continues to exacerbate racial bias in the Deep South." White southerners in these areas displayed more negative attitudes towards African-Americans, were more strongly opposed to affirmative action and federal or state level assistance to the black community, and were more likely to vote Republican. Southern political discourse largely moved onto different terrain after the civil rights era, but, in Feldman's words, the issue of race "settled at a seething place just beneath the surface of polite conversation." The maintenance of white control over regional political institutions – essentially reinforcing a

[17] Glenn Feldman, "The Status Quo Society, the Rope of Religion, and the New Racism", in *Politics and Religion in the White South*, Glenn Feldman (ed.), (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), 287, 292; Paul Rosenberg, "'The Long Southern Strategy': How Southern white women drove the GOP to Donald Trump", *Salon*, 1 July 2019.

racial status quo – remains central to conservatism in the South, animating and underpinning voting behaviour in the region.[18]

After defeats over segregation and voting rights signalled the beginning of the end for the solid Democratic South and a dwindling of southern power in Washington, southern conservatives sought other ways to exercise political influence. During the 1970s, conservative takeovers of evangelical organisations such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the formation of groups like the Moral Majority – founded by Reverend Jerry Falwell in Virginia in 1979 – created a politically active, fervently traditionalist Christian Right. Advocating ultra-conservative positions on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and school prayer, these groups were effectively defending a moral status quo from what they perceived as the dangers posed by the liberalisation of American society. Yet the preservation of a racial hierarchy also motivated the Christian Right, most notably in its campaigns to preserve tax exemptions for Christian colleges that still practiced segregation. Some scholars contend that this issue, rather than the liberalization of abortion laws in *Roe v. Wade*, provided the impetus for the political mobilization of conservative southern evangelicals. Historian Randall Balmer has argued, "it wasn't until 1979 – a full six years after *Roe* – that evangelical leaders…seized on abortion not for moral reasons, but as a rallying cry to deny President Jimmy Carter a second term. Why? Because the antiabortion crusade was more palatable than the religious right's real motive: protecting segregated schools."[19]

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[18] Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising: How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1996), 110; "Legacy of Slavery Still Fuels Anti-Black Attitudes in the Deep South", University of Rochester website, September 2013; Feldman, "The Status Quo Society", 291.

[19] Mark Rozell and Mark Caleb Smith, "Religious Conservatives and the Transformation of Southern Politics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Southern Politics*, Charles Bullock and Mark Rozell (eds.), (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 138-142; Randall Balmer, "The Real Origins of the Religious Right", *Politico*, 27 May 2014.

This thesis will not explore in detail the origins of the Christian Right, but there is little doubt that the movement was born in the white conservative South. Both its base and its leadership have long been predominantly southern. Since the 1970s, it has arguably been the most overt manifestation of the white South's tribalism and cultural traditionalism. As Philipp Adorf observes, "The South would prove to be not only the cradle but also the crèche, school and university of the Christian Right as the broader region provided Christian conservatives with the perfect environment to enter the world of politics and move into positions of considerable power and influence in a relatively short period of time." During the last quarter of the 20th century, Christian Right leaders such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson (both from Virginia), and Texans James Robison and W. A. Criswell achieved large followings among southern conservatives and wielded considerable political influence in the South and beyond. Essentially, all were ardent defenders of the southern status quo. "Southern religious conservatives came to national prominence after the demise of race as the central issue of national life", writes Paul Harvey. "Underlying their political movements, however, lay philosophical positions that updated older and venerable defences of social hierarchies as necessary for a properly ordered liberty."[20]

However, the white South's hostility to change also creates paradoxes in the southern conservative worldview, most clearly in the sphere of economics. For example, despite being innately antagonistic towards the federal government, southern conservatives have also been deeply wary of the change that free market capitalism can bring. "Though they have always been intensely hostile to government intervention in markets, this should never be

[20] Philipp Adorf, *How the South was won and the nation lost: The roots and repercussions of the Republican Party's Southernization and Evangelicalization*, (Bonn: V&R unipress, 2016), 127; Paul Harvey, "Religion, Race, and the Right in the South", in *Politics and Religion in the White South*, Glenn Feldman (ed.), (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), 118-120.

interpreted as an affinity for capitalism," Chris Ladd notes. "Few forces are more disruptive of a perfect social order than the constant, churning creative destruction that accompanies capitalism." Southern conservatives' profound antipathy towards government interference is accompanied by a populist desire for economic safeguards against the turmoil that capitalism can bring to their region's status quo – safeguards that can only be provided by government. Thus, core aspects of the southern conservative character forge a seemingly contradictory political agenda.[21]

Beginning in the 1930s, and increasing substantially during World War II, federal participation in the southern economy provided jobs and a level of protection against the instability inherent in free markets, be it through military spending, infrastructure projects, or agricultural subsidies. With the exceptions of Texas and Florida, southern states have long received, per capita, more in federal investment than they have paid in federal taxes. Likewise, southern states are regularly found to be among the most dependent on federal spending. Attempts to reduce this federal spending generally meet with intense resistance. As this thesis illustrates, agricultural subsidies that aided southern farmers, or large-scale federal projects that boosted the southern economy – such as the Rural Electrification Administration and the Tennessee Valley Authority – have been fiercely guarded. Despite generations of overt antagonism towards federal power, southern conservatives have proved willing to scale back government only when it did not negatively impact the economic interests of the South or important regional industries.[22]

[21] Ladd, "Southern Conservatives Are America's Third Party", *Forbes*, 16 March 2017.
[22] "Federal Taxes Paid vs. Federal Spending Received by State, 1981-2005", Tax Foundation website, 19 October 2007; "Which States Rely the Most on Federal Aid?", Tax Foundation website, 11 January 2017.

In an internal White House report written in 1983, Reagan advisor Lee Atwater – himself a southerner – emphasised economic populism when assessing the political character of the region. In terms of its economic priorities, he declared, “The South is not conservative. If one label had to be ascribed to the whole South, that label should be ‘populist’.” In Atwater's analysis, the political culture of the white South incorporated a populist, even liberal, approach to economics alongside hard-line cultural conservatism and a belief in military power. “On social issues, the South is still the most conservative area”, he continued. “But on economics, the liberal side of Southern populism shines through”. To the present day, southern politicians accept federal assistance in their states and districts, while simultaneously attacking the federal government as bloated or overbearing. As local media in South Carolina reported in 2014, while “political candidates shake their angry fists at Washington, the state's citizens are benefitting from a host of government programs, grants, contracts and entitlement spending that have made the state among the most dependent in the nation on federal dollars.” This inconsistency reflects the extent to which southern conservatism is tied to the region’s past. Entrenched antagonism towards external interference is mixed with a deep aversion to changes in the South’s social and economic status quo – and supplemented by a significant degree of regional self-interest.[23]

Southern interpretations of individualism and liberty are similarly paradoxical. Personal freedoms are protected by maintaining social, cultural and religious strictures. “Southern conservatism”, argues Chris Ladd, “finds freedom and equality, by its unique definitions, through adherence to a social hierarchy based on race, Christianity, a male duty to protect women, and a commodity-driven economy.” The Christian Right exemplifies this

[23] “The South in 1984” draft report, March 1983, Box 7, RDF; Tim Smith, “SC does better than most in receiving federal dollars”, *Greenville News*, 19 October 2014.

contradiction. It employs the rhetoric of personal freedom and religious liberty while pushing the federal government into enforcing fundamentalist Christian values, whether by banning abortion or mandating Christian prayer in public schools. Conservative southerners, in John Shelton Reed's words, comprehend individualism as "culturally prescribed. One is individualistic because one is supposed to be." In the South, individualism refers to "a norm of self-reliance, an anti-institutional orientation that says: you should be responsible for you and yours…[It] may also be reflected in Southern localism and familism, a preference for the known, tried, and true, as opposed to the distant and formal." As with so many aspects of southern conservatism, definitions of individual freedom are strongly influenced by an antipathy to change. Freedom does not equate with nonconformity, but rather with tradition and a structured society.[24]

Arguably, a deep-seated sense of insecurity underpins every aspect of southern conservative identity. Angie Maxwell has asserted that understanding southern conservatism requires understanding the complex of inferiority and insecurity that ultimately drives it. The white South's unity of political, social and cultural behaviour is sustained, to a significant extent, by an acute propensity to perceive external interference and criticism. "[O]ver time the structure of Southern whiteness became, in effect, an intricate web of inseparable strands, a web that extended beyond a commitment to racial segregation and oppression to rigid stances on religion, education, the role of government, the view of art, an opposition to science, and any other topic that comes under attack", Maxwell writes. "It envelops a community and covers everything. When viewed in this way, what arises is a new sense of just how intimately and productively southern white identity has allied itself with the unifying

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[24] Ladd, "Southern Conservatives"; Reed, 23-24.

sense of inferiority." In the economic sphere, this inferiority is apparent in conservatives' animosity towards interference by a federal government viewed as oppressive and distant. Yet it is also present in the fear that federal assistance, in the form of safeguards against market turbulence or economic decline, will be taken away.[25]

The rise of the Christian Right as a vehicle through which southern conservatives sought to regain national political ascendancy was also, in part, rooted in inferiority and insecurity. During the 1930s and 1940s, as Ira Katznelson details in *Fear Itself*, conservative southern Democrats exercised "pivotal powers" over federal government policy. By utilising their senior roles on congressional committees and acting as a cohesive voting bloc, southerners wielded enormous influence. From this commanding position, Katznelson writes, "the South became the self-conscious arbiter of what could, and what could not, become law." In the post-civil rights era, white southerners viewed the waning of this dominant southern Democratic voting bloc with concern, particularly as it was combined with an increasingly liberal Supreme Court.[26]

Between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s, the deaths of influential senators Richard Russell of Georgia and Allen Ellender of Louisiana – long-serving chairmen of the Senate Armed Services and Agriculture Committees respectively – followed by the primary defeat of Arkansas Senator William Fulbright in 1974, epitomized the decline in southern conservative influence in Washington. The South's grip on the legislative agenda was also weakened by changes to the committee system which reduced the authority of committee chairmen. A lack of powerful guardians left the white South exposed and potentially under threat of further

[25] Angie Maxwell, *The Indicted South: Public Criticism, Southern Inferiority, and the Politics of Whiteness*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 4.
[26] Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*, (New York: Liveright, 2013), 161, 192.

social and cultural change. Anxiety at this seemingly perilous position was arguably a key factor in the mobilization of conservative southern evangelicals in the mid-1970s. The Christian Right's political activity has often been equally focused on placing trusted allies into positions of power as on achieving specific policy goals. Campaigning for the appointment of Supreme Court justices seen as likely supporters of the southern status quo has been just as important, if not more so, as pushing Congress to enact a ban on abortion.[27]

After the 1994 mid-terms, when conservative southern Republicans ascended to positions of congressional leadership, a celebratory opinion piece appeared in the *Atlanta Journal*. The column was indicative of how having powerful allies and representatives in Washington has acted to attenuate southern conservative insecurity. The new Congress marked "the resurrection of the South in national politics. We're not policy-takers any more." Southern conservatives were now "back, liberated, free, vindicated…What happened today is that Southern conservatives now write the rules, define the debate, set the agenda." Taking a wider view, the white South's partisan shift from being solidly Democratic to reliably Republican – largely complete at national, state, and local levels by the early 21st century – reflects a herd mentality in southern conservative voting behaviour that can be understood as a manifestation of insecurity. It demonstrates fear of upheaval in the southern status quo and a resulting determination to prevent the loss of white political power.[28]

Inferiority and insecurity also inform the South's traditionally aggressive political style. White southerners have long found reassurance in authoritarian language directed at those they regard as a danger to social stability, whether its former Alabama Governor George

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[27] Bob Hurt, "Talmadge, Ellender and Others Move Up With Russell's Death", *AC*, 25 January 1971; "Senate Seniority", *AC*, 1 August 1972; Laurence Stern, "Fulbright's Defeat May Bring Shifts in Senate", *WP*, 30 May 1974.
[28] Jim Wooten, "The South Is Back: Oh, Happy Day", *Atlanta Journal*, 4 January 1995.

Wallace's threats of violence towards student protesters, or the draconian law and order stances adopted by national figures like Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Donald Trump. Similarly, a proud anti-intellectualism on the part of political candidates plays well to a southern electorate frequently derided by outsiders as unsophisticated. Wallace's vitriol directed at "intellectual snobs who don't know the difference between smut and great literature" or "pseudo-intellectuals" who look "down their noses at the average man on the street" are prime examples. This embrace of anti-intellectualism has reinforced stubborn inclinations in the region, such as contempt for expert opinion and a widespread belief in creationism. Significantly, it has also been a way in which white southerners have attempted, in Maxwell's words, to "overcome a sense of inferiority, a heritage passed from generation to generation that [has] resurfaced when public criticism intensified."[29]

Additionally, the white South's sense of inferiority has, in the view of some academics, fostered a deeply patriotic and militaristic tone to the region's political discourse. James Cobb writes of "the long-standing determination of so many southerners to show their 'Americanness' through ostentatious professions of patriotism and an aggressive, 'my country right or wrong' attitude" which "typically translated into historically high levels of military participation and enthusiasm for military action." Southern patriotism was undoubtedly intensified by huge increases in federal military spending in the region during and after World War II, which led to a significant number of southern jobs being reliant on the US armed forces. Yet, considering the region's history of secession, it is also likely that the South's peculiarly vociferous brand of patriotism has been driven by insecurity, as white southerners sought to prove themselves truly American. In that vein, Maxwell argues that during the Cold

[29] Dan Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 344-350; Maxwell, 241-242.

War white southerners “railed against communism in an effort to gain national acceptance and to prove their patriotism.” Clearly patriotism, support for the military, and opposition to communism are tenets of conservatism across the US and not simply in the South. Nonetheless, white southerners’ overtly bellicose patriotism is suggestive of an anxiety about their standing in the nation.[30]

The southern brand of conservatism, therefore, is rooted in white insecurity and inferiority, and characterised by political tribalism, cultural traditionalism, and a determination to maintain the region’s social and economic status quo. Over generations it has forged an aggressive political style and an uncompetitive electoral landscape which remain largely unique to the region. Southern conservatism’s dominance has survived dramatic changes in the South’s racial and social structures and a partisan realignment during the latter half of the 20th century. “Conservative whites have generally controlled the politics of the South throughout its history”, Glaser observes. “The reassertion of conservative white political power in the South through the Republican Party is thus both a significant departure from the past and another iteration in a longstanding pattern.” White southern conservatism marks the region out as the most socially and culturally illiberal part of the United States. Yet it also incorporates a notably populist strain apparent both in its political rhetoric and, particularly, in its approach to economics and federal spending. Conservatism in the South is indelibly connected to regional identity and history. Its resilience shows that many white southerners remain, consciously and subconsciously, profoundly influenced by their

[30] James Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 325; Maxwell, 6, 239.

interpretations of the past. Despite similarities in political style and areas of overlap when it comes to foreign policy, its DNA is very different to that of Reaganite conservatism.[31]

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The development of Reaganism represents the convergence of two largely distinct stories: the evolution of Ronald Reagan's own political philosophy and the emergence of an ideological strain of conservatism on the right of the Republican Party during the 1950s. Not until Reagan became a national political figure in the mid-1960s did these two narratives truly merge. By the 1980s, he was inextricably linked to this ascendant ideology and it had come to bear his name. The roots of what became 'Reaganite conservatism' lay in post-war anti-communism. As historian Jeff Roche argues, the language of an emergent Republican conservatism was configured through a visceral opposition to communism. It "enabled conservatives to both criticize national liberalism and provide a language that projected their community values. Couching a political philosophy in anticommunist terms forced Americans to define what it meant to be American in opposition to communism". Because communism mandated state control, Americans must defend personal liberties, and because communist regimes sought to manage their nations' economies, Americans should always seek to preserve the free market and free enterprise. Thus, during the late 1940s and 1950s, opposition to communism metamorphosed into a discourse of patriotic American conservatism that emphasised individual freedom. (Anti-communism also played an

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[31] Glaser, 180.

important role in the discourse of southern conservatism, but with substantively different aims – as will be examined in Chapter One). Anti-communism was the foundation stone for a new post-war American conservative movement. “Conservatism is many things,” Godfrey Hodgson has written, “but near the heart of them was an unfeigned fear and hatred of communism.”[32]

Anti-communism was at the heart of the anti-statist ethos that developed in the expanding, newly affluent, ‘Sunbelt’ metropolises of the West and Southwest. Sean Cunningham notes that the early years of the Sunbelt boom “coincided with the development of a national political culture that was powerfully shaped by anti-communism.” Anti-communist sentiments became especially ingrained in the Sunbelt suburbs because their growth owed much to the burgeoning military-industrial complex. Hundreds of thousands of new residents had been drawn to cities like San Diego by the promise of jobs in defence and aerospace manufacturing. Consequently, a pro-military, anti-communist culture developed – one which encompassed an anti-statist, at times libertarian, approach to domestic politics. “As the Sunbelt grew, many of its residents became increasingly committed to fighting communism abroad by protecting the free market at home”, Cunningham writes. “Such protection, many of these men and women believed, depended on the preservation of individuals’ ability to pursue economic independence without government interference.” During the 1950s, this in turn gave rise to discontent among Sunbelt suburbanites over rising property and income taxes and increasing federal regulation. In *Suburban Warriors*, her study of mid-20th century conservatism in Orange County, Lisa McGirr asserts that these white,

[32] Jeff Roche, “Cowboy Conservatism”, in *The Conservative Sixties*, David Farber and Jeff Roche (eds.), (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 79-81; Godfrey Hodgson, *World Turned Right Side Up: A History of the Conservative Ascendancy in America*, (London: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 230.

middle-class "kitchen-table activists" formed "the nucleus of a broader conservative matrix evolving in the Sunbelt and West".[33]

Added to this matrix was an aggressively capitalist business culture. Though a wealthy business class had been a powerful influence on American conservatism since the 19th century, the Sunbelt's corporate ethos had a significantly harder edge. "Sunbelt capitalists are decidedly unsupportive of compromises made by the old rich over unions and welfare", wrote James Salt in 1989. Instead they tended to "favor laissez faire economic policies that allow them free reign [*sic*] to defend their profits and reject state attempts to ameliorate the impact of capitalism". In her study of Phoenix, Elizabeth Tandy Shermer argues that the creation of a pro-business climate in the Southwest was crucial to the development of post-war Republican conservatism. Local "boosters" – largely business and political elites – worked hard to attract external investment, reinforcing an ethos that prioritised low corporate taxes, deregulation and opposition to unionization. This aggressively capitalist politico-economic culture inevitably melded with the Sunbelt's anti-statist character. Pro-business policies became rhetorically aligned with typically American notions of personal liberty and self-determination. As Nickerson and Dochuk have observed, in the Sunbelt, "Political-economic structural formations and ideological formations...shaped and reshaped each other". Efforts to undermine union activity, for example, were framed as supporting the freedom of the American worker. Promoting deregulation and corporate tax breaks was rendered as liberating American entrepreneurialism from government constraints.[34]

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[33] Cunningham, *American Politics*, 17-18, 30-34; Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4-6, 174, 237-239.

[34] James Salt, "Sunbelt Capital and Conservative Political Realignment in the 1970s and 1980s", *Critical Sociology*, Vol. 16, No.2-3, (May, 1989), 148; Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 1-13; Michelle Nickerson and Darren

Hence, a conservatism was forged that, in Cunningham's words, was "anchored by pre-existing notions of entrepreneurialism; rugged individualism; self-help or 'bootstrap politics' [and] limited and local government". Both Cunningham and Roche have labelled it 'cowboy conservatism'. Though it owed far more to the concerns of the Sunbelt's business class and suburbanites than to the old West, it came to be wrapped in frontier symbolism. Cowboy conservatism first found personification when Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater entered Congress in 1953. A former pilot in the Arizona Air National Guard, Goldwater often appeared on the campaign trail wearing cowboy boots and a Stetson. His persona – "a careful blend of Old and New Wests" – played a crucial role in recasting the image of Republican conservatism. He had been a successful and popular manager of his family's department store and retained the Sunbelt capitalist's antipathy towards unionisation and employment regulations. Goldwater's political philosophy, combining anti-communism, a resolute belief in individual liberty and entrepreneurialism, and an assertive emphasis on American military power, was redolent of "frontier traditionalism and a gunslinger foreign policy". Having once been the preserve of north-eastern country club elites, by the mid-1950s Republican conservatism was acquiring the image of a forceful and dynamic western creed.[35]

At the same time, a theoretical underpinning for this new brand of conservatism was developing. Conservative writers such as Russell Kirk, William Rusher, and William Buckley railed against the national Democratic Party and provided a counterbalance to the liberal intellectualism that predominated in academia. Steeped in the work of Friedrich Hayek and other early 20th century advocates of free market economics and limited government, each

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Dochuk, "Introduction" in *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Space, Place, and Region*, Michelle Nickerson and Darren Dochuk (eds.), (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 16.

[35] Cunningham, *American Politics*, 12; Shermer, 101-105; Roche, "Cowboy Conservatism", 83-84.

man played a significant role in establishing the new conservatism as an intellectual phenomenon. William Buckley was particularly effective in giving it philosophical weight. As editor of the *National Review*, which he had founded in 1955, Buckley created a crucial forum for conservative debate. Published by William Rusher and employing Russell Kirk as a writer, the magazine was, as David Farber suggests, "an institutional beachhead on which conservative political activists could sort out their worldviews and organize their campaigns to take on what they perceived as an establishmentarian liberal consensus."[36]

Buckley, Kirk, and others helped to propel the new conservative movement from the political fringes towards the mainstream. They explained it to a generation of American voters that was largely unacquainted with such an aggressively anti-statist ideology, often doing so by framing it in the context of anti-communism. During the late 1950s and 1960s, Buckley used his growing celebrity to promulgate the kind of anti-statist views that were increasingly common in Sunbelt suburbs, but which were not yet widely appreciated by an American populace accustomed to New Deal liberalism and an expanding federal government. As Farber observes, Buckley helped to give conservatism "a human face by becoming one of the first kings of media." By far the most influential literary work on the new conservatism – Barry Goldwater's 1960 book *The Conscience of a Conservative* – was ghost-written by Buckley's brother-in-law and fellow *National Review* writer, Brent Bozell, who had worked as a speechwriter for Goldwater in the 1950s. The book became a huge bestseller and established Goldwater as a national figure, demonstrating the effectiveness of Buckley and his cadre of conservative writers.[37]

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[36] David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism: A Short History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 39-42.

[37] Farber, 40, 89-90; Patrick Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities throughout American History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 168-175.

By the early 1960s, as the new ideology of the Republican right was beginning to receive widespread attention, Ronald Reagan was completing his philosophical migration from liberalism to conservatism. He had undertaken a similar journey to others on the right of the GOP: anti-communism had led to disenchantment with liberalism and then to an embrace of anti-statism and free market economics. Yet Reagan's transformation was guided to a great extent by personal experiences, albeit ones that reflected the broader trends shaping conservatism in the mid-20th century. Just as it had been the bedrock of conservatism nationally, anti-communism was critical in forging Reagan's personal philosophy. In Reagan's case, it pre-dated his conservatism by several years. As Matthew Dallek writes, in the post-war period "Reagan became a staunch foe of all things socialistic, plunging headlong into the struggle against the Soviet Union". At this point, Reagan remained a liberal Democrat and did not participate in the McCarthyite red-baiting of the time. However, his fears of communist influence in the United States were reinforced by his experiences in Hollywood during the red scare of the late 1940s and early 1950s. His concerns deepened to the extent that he informed the FBI of acquaintances he suspected of having communist sympathies and appeared as a friendly witness before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 1947. As president of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), Reagan did little to resist purges of suspected communists in Hollywood. By the early 1950s, he was convinced communism posed an existential threat to liberty in the United States. In his view, the Cold War was a struggle between good and evil, between American democracy and communist totalitarianism. A belief that his fellow liberals were not sufficiently committed to fighting communism

precipitated Reagan's turn away from liberalism and instilled in him an incipient "conservative skepticism about institutionalized power".[38]

Underscoring Reagan's scepticism of big government was a resentment at being forced to pay high tax rates. His substantial earnings placed him in the top marginal tax bracket and a proposal by the Truman administration to close tax loopholes threatened to cause further financial pain. These experiences led Reagan to develop an "antipathy to high taxes" that would, as Iwan Morgan writes, become "a constant theme of his political life." It was the tax issue that first drove him to break with his Democratic loyalties and support Republican Dwight Eisenhower for president in 1952. However, as David Farber suggests, "It was not just self-interest that moved him. High taxes, the future president observed, made any man less likely to put in more hours at work, and that could not be good for the overall economy." Anti-communism was the first step on Reagan's journey to conservatism, but it was his intense antipathy towards high federal taxes that pushed him further away from Democratic liberalism and towards an ideological commitment to small government.[39]

Reagan's anti-statism deepened during his time as a spokesman for General Electric in the 1950s. The role entailed gruelling cross-country trips to make appearances and speeches promoting GE. A fear of flying forced him to undertake countless long journeys by train, which he passed by reading works of conservative political science and economics. By immersing himself in Friedrich Hayek's 1944 book *The Road to Serfdom* or Henry Hazlitt's *Economics in One Lesson* (1948), Reagan absorbed arguments that added intellectual substance to his already conservative instincts. Such texts "undoubtedly helped to shape his

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[38] Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 34-35; Farber, 165-168; John Patrick Diggins, *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 96-101.
[39] Iwan Morgan, *Reagan: American Icon*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 59-60; Farber, 168.

basic philosophy", Thomas Evans observes. They strengthened his belief that the expansion of government portended the rise of socialism and even a potential communist takeover of the US. Hazlitt's work, especially, was "classic conservative fare" that bolstered Reagan's growing belief in the benefits of free market economics. His education in conservative theory mirrored national developments, as William Buckley sought to rationalise and explain the ascendant conservative movement. Indeed, Reagan was an early subscriber to the *National Review* and read it throughout his political career, while Buckley became a friend and admirer of Reagan as both Governor of California and US president. Ultimately, Buckley, William Rusher and others would provide an intellectual foundation for Reaganite conservatism throughout the latter decades of the 20th century.[40]

During the 1950s, Reagan's philosophy was also heavily influenced by the unambiguously capitalist culture of General Electric's management. His visits to GE plants were part of a programme designed to create wider support for the company's political priorities: deregulation, lower corporate taxes, and limits on the power of unions. The programme's architect, GE executive Lemuel Boulware, assigned an aide named Earl Dunckel to travel with Reagan. According to Thomas Evans, both Boulware and Dunckel were crucial in aligning Reagan's views – and, more importantly, the content of his speeches – with GE's agenda. They encouraged him to read Hayek and Hazlitt, as well as pro-business material produced by GE itself. "Everything that went into [Reagan's] mind," Dunckel later claimed, "stayed there." Much of the GE agenda chimed with Reagan's increasingly conservative instincts and his speeches began to reflect the way he was taking on board the pro-business

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[40] Morgan, *Reagan*, 66-68; Thomas Evans, *The Education of Ronald Reagan: The General Electric Years and the Untold Story of His Conversion to Conservatism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 77-80; Diggins, 212.

ethos of his company bosses. Significantly, GE's political priorities echoed those of Sunbelt capitalism, particularly its executives' antagonism towards unionisation and government regulations. Though GE was a long-established corporation based in the Northeast, in Lemuel Boulware it had a conduit to the newer, more aggressive entrepreneurs of the Sunbelt. Boulware forged strong links to political and business figures in the Southwest – particularly in Phoenix where he sought to expand General Electric's operations – and allied with them to restrict the power of labour unions. He later struck up a close friendship with Barry Goldwater.[41]

Thanks to Boulware's influence, Reagan's philosophy did not develop in isolation from the rise of the conservative movement. Boulware was not only connected to the Sunbelt capitalist culture of the Southwest but was also one of the founding backers of the *National Review*. Yet Reagan began his journey towards anti-statist conservatism prior to his time with General Electric. His political transformation was driven primarily by personal experiences. Indeed, throughout his life, much of Reagan's political philosophy remained self-referential, and he regularly related stories from his life (real or sometimes imagined) to explain his views. Nonetheless, the forces that moulded his anti-statism unquestionably reflected broader trends that were transforming Republican conservatism nationally. Thus, by the early 1960s, Reagan had arrived at the same point on the political spectrum as Barry Goldwater, William Buckley, and countless residents of affluent, middle-class Sunbelt suburbs. The stories of Reagan's political evolution and the rise of the new Republican conservatism truly merged when Reagan delivered a speech on national television in support of Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign. Widely viewed as extremist, Goldwater's campaign markedly failed to

[41] Evans, 65-80; Shermer, 253, 282-284.

persuade Americans of the merits of anti-statist conservatism and was defeated in a landslide by the Democratic liberalism of President Lyndon Johnson. But that campaign established Reagan as an emerging political figure. In the eyes of many on the GOP right, he was a potentially transformative leader who could spearhead the conservative movement. Little more than a decade later, Reagan had become the personification of anti-statist Republican conservatism. Doug Rossinow writes that national conservatism at the start of the 1980s represented "an insistence that unfettered capitalism is both socially beneficial and morally good; a fierce patriotism that waves the flag, demands global military supremacy, and brooks no criticism of the United States; and a vision of society as an arena where individuals win or lose because of their own talents and efforts." This is an excellent summary of what, by 1980, had come to be regarded as Reaganite conservatism.[42]

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There are, undeniably, areas of overlap between Reaganite conservatism and southern conservatism. Both venerate military power, and both espouse ardent patriotism and an assertive foreign policy. But in terms of origins, motivations, and domestic priorities, they represent markedly different political outlooks. These differences are highlighted in an essay by William Link on the relationship between Barry Goldwater and a leading southern conservative of the post-civil rights era, Republican Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina. Both men agreed "on the foreign policy issues at the heart of post-war conservatism: both

[42] Evans, 104-108; Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 1.

strongly opposed détente and believed the military should combat Soviet expansionism." Helms had also greatly admired Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign. But Helms appears to have overlooked significant disparities in their political agendas. When both men subsequently served together in the Senate their domestic political aims and voting behaviour diverged considerably.[43]

While Helms became a champion of social conservatism and a standard-bearer for the Christian Right on Capitol Hill, Goldwater was often antagonistic towards his legislative agenda. Link writes, "Goldwater had little interest in Helms's 'social' issues – school busing, ERA, and abortion – and he thought that 'more important things' were inflation, high interest rates and having a strong military." On social issues, Goldwater remained "more consistent" in his opposition to federal interference than Helms, retaining a "steadfast antipathy to governmental restrictions on individual liberty". Goldwater opposed moves in the Senate to restrict abortions and later in life became committed to gay rights, arguing that people "have a constitutional right to be gay". In contrast, Helms embodied the status quo traditionalism of the white South, introducing bills to ban abortion whilst also opposing federal action on equal rights for women and homosexuals. Similarly, when it came to southern conservative obstructionism in Congress, such as regular use of the filibuster, "Goldwater did not approve of the aggressive tactics that Helms and his allies so often employed."[44]

On racial issues, the story is more complex. In the mid-1960s, Goldwater opposed the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act on the grounds that desegregation and black voting rights were issues of state jurisdiction. Ronald Reagan also opposed both acts, avowedly for

[43] William Link, "Time Is an Elusive Companion: Jesse Helms, Barry Goldwater, and the Dynamic of Modern Conservatism," in *Barry Goldwater and the Remaking of the American Political Landscape*, Elizabeth Tandy Shermer (ed.), (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 240-43.
[44] Link, "Time Is an Elusive Companion", 249-253.

the same reasons. Their opposition was at variance, however, with white southern resistance to civil rights as embodied by Jesse Helms. As Link notes, Helms emerged "out of the taut environment of the highly racialized political world of North Carolina" and had employed race-baiting tactics when working as an election strategist in the 1950s. In contrast, "Goldwater had no such political roots, no such context. His conservatism was primarily anti-communist and anti-statist, and his core belief was in the sanctity of individual freedom." He had been a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the 1950s and retained a "personal abhorrence of discrimination". Eventually, he became "reconciled" to the need for federal intervention on civil rights. But in 1964 Goldwater's anti-statism won him the support of many white southern conservatives. His rhetoric on civil rights – like that of Reagan – reflected a discourse of 'colour-blind conservatism' that had developed in the white middle-class suburbs of the Sunbelt. It was a discourse which, according to Matthew Lassiter, "embraced the dual doctrines of suburban neighborhood autonomy and white racial innocence."[45]

Essentially, colour-blind conservatism amounted to a reliance on the notions of individual liberty and local control when campaigning against federal action on behalf of minorities. But it acted to conceal the underlying racial tensions which existed in the Sunbelt's white suburbs and which manifested themselves, for example, in local, organized opposition to state and federal housing legislation. "Although 'rights' were championed…it was not civil rights that the conservatives supported, but individual property rights", Lisa McGirr observes of Orange County suburbanites. Even in issues of race, they vehemently opposed "the assertion of federal over state power, an assertion that would, in their eyes, 'undermine the

[45] Link, "Time Is an Elusive Companion", 244-247; Matthew Lassiter, "The Suburban Origins of "Color-Blind Conservatism," *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 30, No. 4, 578.

Republic.'" By claiming that civil rights legislation acted to erode the rights of states and individuals, both Goldwater and Reagan were employing the same discourse on the national stage. As this thesis will demonstrate, it enabled Reagan to win the support – and later the votes – of millions of white southerners. However, suburban opposition to changes in housing laws in the Sunbelt never reached the level of the unashamed, virulent resistance to desegregation seen in the white South. As McGirr notes, grassroots conservatives in Orange County "did not express the kind of segregationist sentiments championed by southern leaders".[46]

To an extent, these differences can be seen in electoral results. Even in the troubled year of 1968, Sunbelt cities and suburbs did not prove fertile ground for George Wallace's presidential campaign, which was principally a vehicle for white southern anger over civil rights legislation. In the Southwest, Wallace won roughly the same vote share as he achieved in the Midwest and Northeast, with his highest tally being 13 percent in Nevada. As Cunningham points out, Wallace's 19 percent vote share in Texas – which predominantly came from East Texas, the most culturally southern part of the state – was "by far his worst showing in any state of the old Confederacy." So, while racial issues played a role in sparking grassroots conservative campaigns in Sunbelt suburbs, racial insecurity and prejudice were not the powerful political motivators they have long been for southern conservatives.[47]

Likewise, Reagan's personal views on race were a long way from the overt segregationism of conservative southerners. Indeed, Reagan had "grown up absorbing from his parents a vigorously emotional dislike of racial prejudice". Throughout his life Reagan was

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[46] McGirr, 182, 184-185;

[47] "1968 Presidential Election", American Presidency Project website; Sean Cunningham, *Cowboy Conservatism: Texas and the Rise of Modern Right*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 106-107.

convinced of his own lack of prejudice and was sincerely upset by any accusation of racism. He justified and reinforced this self-perception by recounting stories from his youth of his own and his parents' acts of benevolence towards individual African-Americans, though these were limited in number. Prior to his shift towards conservatism, Reagan's public pronouncements on racial issues were on the liberal end of the spectrum, including opposing segregation in baseball and writing powerful condemnations of the Ku Klux Klan. Yet his actions as both candidate and president led to him being viewed by many black Americans as personally racist – or at the very least as someone who was insensitive to their interests.[48]

Various factors contributed to this image. Reagan's inveterate optimism, particularly when it came to his perception of the United States, often blinded him to America's flaws and to the struggles of many of its citizens. His idealistic vision of the US as a force for good and a beacon of liberty was chiefly an image pertaining to white America. Such notions differed radically from the everyday African-American experience. Though he recalled helping African-Americans as a young man, Reagan had never gained, in James Broussard's words, "a full emotional realization of the simply ordinary, taken-for-granted, casual racism that made its constant impact on the daily life of blacks". Similarly, Reagan's profound belief – a foundation of his conservatism – was that all Americans would have the opportunity to achieve anything they wanted if only the federal government would get out of their way. This overlooked the critical fact that federal protections were often essential to guarantee black civil rights and economic opportunities. Reagan's attacks on what he perceived as an overbearing federal government, whether rhetorically as a candidate or in practice once he achieved office, were

[48] James H. Broussard, *Ronald Reagan: Champion of Conservative America*, (London: Routledge, 2014), 150; Iwan Morgan, "In Black and White: Ronald Reagan's Image on Race", in *The Presidential Image: A History from Theodore Roosevelt to Donald Trump*, Iwan Morgan and Mark White (eds.), (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 176-177.

effectively attacks on programmes that ensured the welfare and security of black Americans. As such, they appealed to racially conservative whites, particularly in the South, who wanted to restrict or reverse the progress made by African-Americans. As Broussard observes of Reagan's opposition to the 1964 Voting Rights Act, "The reason for his opposition might be 'pure' as opposed to the racism of some Southern Democrats, but the result was the same: blacks would get no help from Reagan in securing their right to vote in the South." Reagan's core political principle, that federal government involvement should be reduced or removed from almost all areas of American life, had the effect of disadvantaging minorities and strengthening the cause of white political power – something that many black voters quickly recognised.[49]

Another important motivator in African-American mistrust of Reagan was his close association with racially conservative politicians, such as Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond, as well as his longstanding popularity among white southerners. His biographer Lou Cannon states simply, "Reagan was no bigot." But for a man who believed himself to lack any racial prejudice, Reagan was certainly willing to tolerate – and sometimes engage in – racially provocative political campaigning. Whether he was sharing a stage with segregationist former southern Democrats or denouncing a "welfare queen" to highlight the abuse of government benefits, it is understandable that African-Americans saw Reagan as simply another practitioner of white backlash politics. While this thesis will not embark on a psychological exploration of an often-unknowable man, on an emotional level Reagan was apparently able to disassociate himself from such politicking and sustain his unprejudiced self-image. If his allies used racialised rhetoric when campaigning on his behalf, then he was not responsible

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[49] Broussard, 6, 151.

because he was not racist. By the same logic, Reagan seemingly convinced himself that if he personally used a phrase such as "states' rights" then its meaning must be entirely innocent, even when addressing an audience of southern conservatives who would have interpreted it as code for white control and racial segregation.[50]

Ultimately, as his remarkable political resilience demonstrated, Reagan's faith in his conservative ideology – and the importance of the cause he was fighting for – was absolute. In his view, the United States needed rescuing from the grip of big government, before it led to economic ruin, socialism, or worse. Driven by such beliefs, he was prepared to do what was necessary to succeed, whether that was making pragmatic political compromises or racially coded appeals to white voters. He understood that, in the post-civil rights era, African-Americans predominantly voted Democratic and his target audience therefore consisted largely of whites. Reagan was, as David Farber writes, "willing to go into the swamps" if the cause required it. "He simply gave the audience what it wanted; he hoped they would give him their votes." While Reagan lamented the fact that African-Americans mistrusted him, his efforts to win them over were limited. He made occasional speeches to civil rights organisations including the National Urban League and the NAACP, but once black opinion hardened against him early in his presidency, such appearances ceased. Arguably, Reagan's speeches to civil rights groups were aimed principally at convincing moderate white voters – increasingly suspicious of the Democratic Party's liberalism – that he was not prejudiced, regardless of his popularity in the racially conservative white South.[51]

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[50] Lou Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 487; Rossinow, 8-9, 24-25.
[51] Farber, 190; Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 477-478; Morgan, "In Black and White", 181.

In practice, Reagan's views on race aligned him with the colour-blind conservatism of the Sunbelt. Government should be limited in order to allow equality of opportunity for all Americans and civil rights laws should protect every citizen regardless of race. This approach was encapsulated in a 1985 radio address, when he criticised those who "tell us the government should enforce discrimination in favor of some groups through hiring quotas under which some people lose their jobs or promotions solely because of their race or sex. Some bluntly assert that our civil rights laws only apply to special groups and were never intended to protect every American." They had, Reagan argued, "turned our civil rights laws on their head, claiming they mean exactly the opposite of what they say." Thus, in the Reaganite view, federal policies such as affirmative action programmes, racial quotas, and compulsory integration were unwarranted and intrusive – liberal distortions of the demands made by civil rights campaigners in the 1960s. Of course, the impact of this approach to civil rights and affirmative action was heavily racialised. African-Americans suffered disproportionately as a consequence of cuts to federal programmes and the abolition of racial quotas in university admissions, among other Reaganite policies. Yet, unlike some of his southern supporters, Reagan's approach to race (and that of Reaganism more broadly) was not dedicated to the preservation of a racial hierarchy. The racial insecurity that was deeply ingrained in millions of white southerners – alongside a determination to maintain control of political and social structures in the region – was of a different order of magnitude.[52]

Economically too, Reaganite conservatism and southern conservatism represent distinctive philosophies. Ultimately, Reaganite conservatism is exemplified by an unswerving faith in capitalism and a steadfast belief that a deregulated, free market economy, combined

[52] Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on Civil Rights", 15 June 1985, *Public Papers of the President*.

with low taxes and local control, is the best way to promote national growth and to preserve personal freedoms. Reaganite conservatives accept the flaws and potential failures inherent in free market capitalism in the belief that it rewards those who innovate and work hard. But this kind of economic ideology leads to precisely the "constant, churning creative destruction" that southern conservatives have long regarded as a threat to their social and political status quo. Southern conservatism, though frequently narrow-minded and draconian, cannot truly be regarded as ideological. Instead, it is closely entwined with white southern identity and driven far more by regional interest and history than by intellectual principle. Reaganite conservatism also came to be imbued with the experiences and characteristics of Reagan himself, most notably his innate positivity and optimism, creating a sharp contrast with the insecurity and social intolerance that are integral to the white conservative South. Rhetorical similarities between these two strands of conservatism, particularly concerning vague notions such as individual freedom and patriotism, have obscured impulses that are often divergent and at times conflicting. Still, as this thesis will demonstrate, the Republican Party's ascendance in the white South during the latter decades of the 20th century led to southern conservatives forming a sometimes-turbulent political alliance with Reaganite conservatives. Consequently, they steadily increased their influence over the direction of the GOP, began to transform the party's identity in their own image, and reasserted the South's influence on the national political landscape.[53]

When examining the relationship between southern conservatism and Reaganism, this thesis will focus predominantly on domestic and economic policy. Differences over economic and cultural issues have resonated powerfully in the decades since Reagan left

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[53] Ladd, "Southern Conservatives".

office. At the same time, the foreign policy issues on which the two strands of conservatism were generally aligned have fallen down the political agenda. The threat of communism abated after the end of the Cold War and, except for the War on Terror, it has instead been on the domestic front that Americans have become increasingly divided over how they perceive themselves and their country's direction. As debates over domestic issues became more acrimonious, the divide within conservatism became sharper and gained greater significance. Broadly, the thesis is divided into two sections, of two and four chapters respectively. The first section focuses on Ronald Reagan's pre-presidential relationship with the conservative South and retains a largely chronological structure. It considers how Reagan established his popularity among white southerners during his pre-political career and his time as Governor of California, as well as the importance of this popularity in rescuing and sustaining his first presidential campaign in 1976. It also examines how the 1976 primaries helped Reagan to strengthen alliances with prominent southern conservatives, most notably with Jesse Helms, which ultimately propelled his candidacy to the Republican convention. Lastly, this section explores the conservative South's role in Reagan's 1980 election victory. It seeks to illustrate the importance of Christian Right support for Reagan and how this reflected his southern popularity. These chapters illustrate the importance of Reagan's candidacies in pulling millions of conservative white southerners towards the GOP.

The second section centres on Reagan's presidency. Adopting a more thematic approach, it explores the interaction between the Reaganite agenda and the interests of the conservative South. Firstly, it considers the crucial role played by southern 'Boll Weevil' Democrats in enacting Reagan's economic policies. In doing this, however, it also highlights significant divergences, as numerous Boll Weevils exhibited a populist scepticism towards Reagan's signature tax cuts on the grounds that they disproportionately benefited the

wealthy. Southern conservatives also opposed the Reagan administration on issues of trade and agriculture. Throughout Reagan's presidency, they fought to preserve or even increase federal subsidies for their region's farmers and demanded limits on US textile imports in order to protect the southern economy. Moving on to social and cultural issues, the thesis then demonstrates how the economic focus of Reaganism led to disenchantment among conservative southern evangelicals, as the Reagan administration prioritised cutting taxes and reducing spending over acting on abortion or school prayer. It assesses how, despite this lack of attention to social issues, Reagan was able to retain the support of groups like the Moral Majority by preserving a rhetorical alignment with their agenda. Issues of race are also considered, particularly several which became political minefields for the Reagan administration, including debates surrounding Bob Jones University, Martin Luther King Day, and the extension of the Voting Rights Act. In dealing with many of these issues, the administration sought to maintain the support of racially conservative white southerners while at the same time facing widespread criticism that its own positions were racially insensitive. To conclude, the thesis briefly explores how southern conservatism came to be an influential force in the Republican Party after Reagan left office. Arguably, it became more influential than Reaganite conservatism, as the GOP's new southern base led an insurgency that drastically altered the party's identity during the early 21st century.

This thesis demonstrates the extent to which Ronald Reagan's career was propelled not just by those who shared his radical anti-statism, but also by voters, politicians, and religious leaders who typified the racial insecurity and status quo traditionalism of the white conservative South. In turn, Reagan played a crucial role in the transformation of the South into a Republican stronghold, first at the presidential level and subsequently at the congressional and state levels. Yet his relationship with southern conservatives was often a

fractious one, and they determinedly pursued their own political priorities even when it meant going against Reagan's agenda. In exploring this relationship, this thesis challenges the recent historiographical view that the distinctive political and cultural identity of the South diminished during the late 20th century. It contends instead that conservatism in the region remained typically southern throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and beyond. Through their support for Reagan's campaigns or by exercising influence in Congress during his presidency, southern conservatives were able to achieve considerable power in the Republican Party. Subsequently, it became a party that bears many characteristics of the conservative South. This thesis makes an important contribution to the historiography of American conservatism by challenging those arguments that have downplayed the importance of the traditional South in recent decades. It also provides new perspectives on Ronald Reagan's career, on the legacy of the Reagan era, and on changes in the Republican Party's character and identity that continue to dramatically influence the course of US politics. Ultimately, it explores a telling paradox at the heart of modern American political history: while Ronald Reagan sought to transform America through his brand of conservatism, to millions of white southerners he was their best hope of preserving the southern status quo.

Chapter One

"He brought them the gospel": Ronald Reagan and the white South 1953-1975

Between the early 1950s and the announcement of his second presidential candidacy in November 1975, Ronald Reagan underwent an unlikely transformation from liberal Hollywood actor to conservative political icon. His speeches, focusing on anticommunism, hostility to big government, and disaffection from the national Democratic Party – all delivered with unaffected charisma – resonated powerfully in the white South, then undergoing one of the most turbulent periods in its history. By the mid-1960s, when Reagan embarked on his own political career, he was regarded by many southern whites as a conservative standard-bearer and their preferred presidential candidate. Following his election as California governor, Reagan's supporters in the South encouraged him to run for the 1968 Republican presidential nomination. His challenge failed, but it demonstrated that the region could act as a crucial foundation for his future presidential hopes. By the end of his governorship, Reagan was again considering a run for the presidency, this time with the backing of some of the most prominent figures in southern conservative politics. In tracking Reagan's relationship with the conservative South between the early 1950s and the mid-1970s, this chapter explores his appeal in the region and how he forged a bond with southern conservatives that would endure for the rest of his political life.

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At the mid-point of the 20th century, Ronald Reagan was an unlikely candidate to become a political champion of culturally, socially, and racially conservative white southerners. He was a moderately successful actor in the superficial world of the Hollywood film industry and – as head of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) – a union leader. He was also, by his own later admission, a "near-hopeless hemophiliac liberal", having idolized Franklin Roosevelt and campaigned for Harry Truman in 1948. Following the Second World War Reagan had joined a liberal veterans group, the American Veterans Committee (AVC). In articles written for the *AVC Bulletin* he criticised a variety of organizations for discriminating against Jews and African-Americans and, in Stephen Vaughn's words, "condemned efforts to widen racial and class divisions". By the early 1950s, Reagan's only connection to the racial ferment of southern politics had been on a Hollywood film set. In 1951, he starred in the movie *Storm Warning*, playing a county prosecutor attempting to bring the hooded killers of a newspaper reporter to justice in a fictional southern town. Though the story's location was kept deliberately vague, the movie was inspired by reports of real-life lynchings in the South and its portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan – in particular a menacing depiction of a KKK meeting – was so disturbing that studio executives were nervous the Klan might take legal action. As reviews of the "hard-hitting" film suggested, *Storm Warning*'s viewers were left in no doubt as to its liberal political leanings.[54]

A year after *Storm Warning*'s release, Reagan made his first major personal appearance in the South. In his role as president of SAG, he travelled to Dallas in June 1952

[54] Ronald Reagan, *My Early Life or Where's the Rest of Me?*, (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1981), 139; Ronald Reagan, *An American Life: The Autobiography*, (New York: Threshold, 1990), 132; Stephen Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood: Movies and Politics*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 162-164; "Melodrama Is Taut Film About Klan", *RTD*, 1 February 1951; "Story of Klan Provides Taut, Terrifying Film", *CT*, 9 February 1951; Carl Milliken to Roy Obringer, 6 October 1949, Carl Milliken to Jerry Wald, 11 October 1949, both in Storm Warning Files: Communication, WBA.

to preside over a film industry conference. His main task as host was to promote Hollywood and its interests, such as arguing for changes to federal tax laws which would favour movie studios. During the visit, Reagan's charisma and eloquence caught the attention of the *Dallas Morning News*, which described him as a "dynamic speaker". A return trip to Texas in 1953, after he had stepped down as SAG president, was even more auspicious. On this occasion Reagan fell into conversation with two prominent Southern Baptist leaders: Billy Graham, a North Carolinian rapidly gaining fame as a compelling evangelical preacher, and W. A. Criswell, the fundamentalist pastor of Dallas's First Baptist Church. After watching him convince a sceptical Criswell that the Hollywood film industry was not "of the devil", Billy Graham recognised Reagan as a persuasive and gifted communicator with "charm, conviction, and humor". The two men would become lifelong friends and Graham, though avoiding overtly partisan politics, would act as a confidant to several presidents during the late 20th century, including Reagan.[55]

In meeting Criswell, Reagan was encountering the traditional conservatism of the white South. Criswell embodied his region's distinctive combination of fervent religiosity, intense belief in racial hierarchy and profound hostility to social change. He was also, as Robert Wuthnow notes, "uniquely influential in Dallas and in Southern Baptist circles nationwide." As the firebrand pastor of an expanding and important church, Criswell subscribed to a literalist interpretation of the Bible. His sermons regularly offered scriptural justifications for racial separation, and speeches he made in 1956 marked him out as a vehement segregationist. Speaking in South Carolina, Criswell denounced integration as

[55] Vaughn, 234; Fairfax Nisbet, "Film Notables Arriving for COMPO Parley", *DMN*, 9 June 1952; Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2011), 270; Billy Graham, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 528-529.

"idiocy" and those promoting it as "a bunch of infidels, dying from the neck up." Civil rights activists were "two-by scathing, good-for-nothing fellows who are trying to upset all of the things that we love as good old Southern people and as good old Southern Baptists." Though Criswell had renounced his segregationist views by the time he became president of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in 1968, he remained a reactionary southern conservative, repeatedly venting his rage at liberals and the federal government. During the 1970s, he became a key figure in the conservative takeover of the SBC, a revolution that would ultimately prove politically beneficial to Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party, as millions of Southern Baptists coalesced into a powerful conservative voting bloc.[56]

So, as early as 1953, Ronald Reagan was making valuable acquaintances in the South. Over the following decade he became "a familiar face" throughout the region. In 1954, with his film career stalling, he accepted an offer to become host of a new television show, *General Electric Theater*. The role entailed introducing weekly dramas sponsored by General Electric, bringing him into the living rooms of millions of Americans and helping to revive his career, as well as touring company plants around the country to meet workers and give speeches. Visiting every one of GE's 135 plants provided Reagan with an invaluable opportunity to hone his public speaking skills, create a bond with working class Americans, and burnish his appeal in towns and cities across the nation, including in the white South. During his eight years with GE, Reagan criss-crossed most of the southern states. As Toby Glenn Bates observes, he "laid down trails to be followed in future political campaigns: Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia." According to Reagan, the GE plant in

[56] Curtis Freeman, "Never Had I Been So Blind": W. A. Criswell's 'Change' on Racial Segregation", *Journal of Southern Religion*, Vol.10, 2007, 1-2; Robert Wuthnow, *Rough Country: How Texas Became America's Most Powerful Bible Belt State*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 337-346.

Louisville, Kentucky had “forty-six miles of assembly line” which he claimed to have walked twice. “I had to meet the night shift too…*But I enjoyed every whizzing minute of it.*” Reagan’s appearances involved more than simply meeting GE workers and often made quite an impression on their wider communities. His visits were keenly followed by the local media and included dinners, autograph signings and photo opportunities away from GE’s facilities. When visiting a company plant in Henderson, North Carolina, for example, Reagan also breakfasted with news reporters, toured a high school, and dined with community leaders and plant executives. Similarly, on a three-day trip to Kentucky in March 1955, inspections of two GE plants were scheduled alongside a country club luncheon and a service at the Central Christian Church in Lexington, where Reagan was even invited to give a “layman’s witness” from the pulpit.[57]

Reagan’s period with GE gave him experience in political networking and demonstrated his seemingly innate ability to connect with ordinary Americans. It also served to propel his political shift from liberalism to conservatism. As time went on, Reagan’s philosophy became increasingly influenced not only by his company bosses and the works of political science and economics they encouraged him to read, but also by the instinctive small-government conservatism – as he perceived it – of the average American worker. In the South, as in other regions, his speeches evolved during the mid-1950s from promoting General Electric, boosting the morale of workers, and recounting Hollywood stories, to more overtly political topics. “Reagan’s speaking tours through the South occurred simultaneously with his ideological conversion from liberal Democrat to conservative Republican”, Bates points out.

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[57] Toby Glenn Bates, *The Reagan Rhetoric: History and Memory in 1980s America*, (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011) 19; Reagan, *My Early Life*, 257-261; Broussard, 51; “Reagan To Be Guest Of Central Christian”, *LH*, 27 March 1955.

"At many Southern locations, Reagan took his first baby steps with words and phrases that would become familiar in later decades." More and more, Reagan's audiences wanted him to both hear and echo their own grievances, often regarding taxes or federal bureaucracy, and so he adapted his words, forging a new identity for himself as a champion of individual freedoms. Reagan's conversion to anti-statist conservatism has been detailed in numerous biographies, most extensively in Thomas Evans' *The Education of Ronald Reagan*. But in terms of his relationship to the white South, Reagan's eloquent and forceful speeches encompassing issues such as personal liberty, opposition to big government, and the dangers of communism struck a chord with audiences across the southern states. As Bates has noted, "Reagan seemed to say what many in the region needed to hear."[58]

At the time of Reagan's appearances for GE, the South was undergoing its greatest upheaval since Reconstruction. Early in the 1950s, "fears of black equality gripped many white southerners". This was true even prior to the turmoil caused by the Montgomery bus boycott and the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board Education* (1954) that racial segregation in schools was unconstitutional. In the wake of the Brown decision, and as civil rights protests gathered pace, it became ever more apparent that the fundamental structures of southern society – Jim Crow laws that had maintained white hegemony in the region for generations – were under threat. Some white southerners reacted with brutality. Ku Klux Klan activity increased, and violence against black southerners occurred with appalling regularity. For most whites, though, the mood was one of confusion and nervousness. As Jason Sokol writes, their certainties were being challenged on an almost daily basis: "just as they attempted to adapt to yesterday's news, tomorrow's overwhelmed it". To many in the white South, the issue

[58] Bates, 19; Morgan, *Reagan*, 65-66.

went beyond a fear of racial integration and was rooted in a deeper anxiety about the threat of social change. A black southerner observed to the writer Robert Penn Warren in 1956, "a lot of people down here just don't like change. It's not merely desegregation they're against so much, it's just the fact of any change. They feel some emotional tie to the way things are." Facing seemingly inexorable transformations to their way of life, most white southerners clung to deeply held convictions. They were adamant, for example, that civil rights protests were planned and incited by outside agitators or by the federal government. "Many thought blacks were incapable of organizing, and were content 'in their place'", observes Sokol. "They could hardly divine, or ever acknowledge, a sufficient motivation for black protest." As the decade wore on, and the civil rights movement started to undertake widespread direct action under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr., white southerners' resentment, fear, and hostility to change only intensified.[59]

Against this backdrop it is understandable that Reagan's speeches had a particularly powerful impact in the South. The simplicity of his rhetoric on personal liberty and the dangers of big government appealed to white southerners seeking reassurance. Reagan was, moreover, not merely a bombastic local politician or preacher. Rather, he was a charismatic national celebrity (his television work made him one of the most recognizable men in the nation by 1958) making appearances across the South at a time when white southerners felt their region was being persecuted. National media reports frequently depicted the white South in an overwhelmingly negative light, as a pariah region in which racial hatred and violence were the norm. By appearing regularly in the South, Reagan was – in the view of his

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[59] Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975*, (New York: Knopf, 2006), 35-43, 84-85; Robert Penn Warren, *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South*, (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1957), 46.

audiences at least – lending his support to white southerners and recognizing their fears and concerns. This perception was crucial to his burgeoning appeal across the region. Yet Reagan's message was largely the same no matter where he was speaking. His words were reflective of his own anti-statism far more than they were tailored to audience demands. He was still a registered Democrat and regarded his speeches as "nonpartisan as far as the two major political parties were concerned", but as time went on his emerging conservative ideology was becoming more apparent. Transcripts of these speeches are scarce, but Reagan later wrote that he made a determined effort to highlight to his audiences "the problems of centralizing power in Washington, with subsequent loss of freedom at the local level". Eventually "it became basically a warning to people about the threat of government", Reagan recalled. "I'd emphasize that we as Americans should get together and take back the liberties we were losing". To southerners facing dramatic changes to their way of life – changes that were, in their view, being imposed by external forces – these themes were profoundly persuasive. Reagan "did not fashion a southern rhetoric", Kurt Ritter notes. "Instead, Reagan's standard political rhetoric resonated so well with conservative white southern Democrats that they embraced him and would not let him go."[60]

There was an especially powerful resonance when Reagan spoke about the dangers posed by communism. Reagan's anti-communism was deeply entrenched, dating back to his days as a Hollywood liberal in the late 1940s, and it intensified further during the 1950s. The anti-communism of the white South was similarly longstanding, beginning in the 1930s and deepening during the post-war years. But instead of sharing Reagan's perception of a global

[60] Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 305; Reagan, *My Early Life*, 266-267; Reagan, *An American Life*, 129; Kurt Ritter, "Ronald Reagan's 1960's Southern Rhetoric: Courting Conservatives for the GOP," *Southern Communication Journal*, (1999), 334.

struggle between American liberty and Soviet totalitarianism, white southerners viewed communism through a regional lens. The concept of communism in the South became highly racialized during the 1940s and 1950s, to the extent that, as Sokol writes, "[it] begged the question, which did southern whites really fear – communism or integration?" He concludes, "the two were so closely entwined in the minds of many that the answer did not seem to matter…Whites were poised to shout 'communist' at any advance the civil rights movement might make". When Martin Luther King emerged as the talismanic leader of the black freedom struggle, he was decried as a communist agitator, with supposed evidence being discovered of his attendance at a "Communist training school" and contacts with other communists in Washington.[61]

For millions of white southerners, the term 'communist' could be linked to any entity threatening to undermine their region's socioeconomic foundations. According to Georgia Governor Herman Talmadge in 1956, for example, Americans were under "furious and unceasing attack" from "communism without and the Supreme Court within." Alongside civil rights campaigners and Supreme Court justices, other threats deemed to be part of a communist conspiracy included Jews, Catholics, the federal government and trade unions. In the late 1940s, accusations of communist influence had played a crucial role in the efforts of southern political and business leaders to defeat Operation Dixie – an organized campaign by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to unionise southern workers. Similarly, after a spate of cross burnings in the South in 1951, a KKK leader declared the actions to be part of

[61] Dallek, 34-35; Sokol, 38-42, 84-87.

the Klan's ongoing "fight against Communism." To southern whites in every strata of society, anti-communism was "a force they could mold to their needs, fears and confusions."[62]

When Ronald Reagan travelled across the South, therefore, his warnings about the dangers of communism were music to the ears of those listening. Yet their appreciation of his anti-communist rhetoric was imbued with the cultural fixations of conservative southerners, and the inferences they took from it would likely have been more racialized and socially traditionalist than Reagan intended. In the minds of his white audiences in the South, Reagan was endorsing the region's social, racial, and cultural status quo. It is open to question whether he fully understood how his words were being interpreted by his southern audiences. He makes no reference to segregation or civil rights, for example, in any of his subsequent recollections of the time. As noted, Reagan's optimism often blinded him to his country's flaws, so the extent to which he was conscious of the tumult in the South as he travelled around the region is difficult to discern. Nonetheless, even before he entered politics, the way in which white southerners interpreted Reagan's anti-statist and anti-communist rhetoric was at the core of his appeal in the region. It remained so throughout his political career.

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[62] "Talmadge Denounces U.S. Supreme Court", *WP*, 5 July 1956; Sokol, 38-42, 88-89; Michael Honey, "Operation Dixie: Labor and Civil Rights in the Postwar South", *The Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 4, (1992), 445-446; "14 Klan Crosses Burned In 4 Southern States", *AC*, 27 July 1951.

As Reagan's speeches became more overtly political during his time with GE, his audiences came to resemble those of a candidate on the campaign trail. Reagan recalled that his trips began to feature "more important annual events: state Chamber of Commerce banquets, national conventions, and groups recognized as important political sounding boards". One such event was the 1957 Rose Festival in Tyler, Texas, which Reagan attended as part of a trip to visit the local GE plant. During the festival, Reagan introduced the state's most prominent senator, Democrat Lyndon Johnson, and spoke in front of an audience which included leading figures from the oil and gas industry, agriculture, aerospace and defence contracting, as well as local federal and state politicians. "In short," Kurt Ritter points out, "it was an audience that two future US presidents thought was worth addressing." However, Reagan's oft-repeated warnings about the dangers of big government sometimes collided with the South's political and economic interests, most notably when he criticised federal funding for the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Beginning in 1959, Reagan's standard speech included strong criticism of the TVA, suggesting that "the annual interest on the TVA deal is five times as great as the flood damage it prevents." Representatives of the Tennessee Valley Authority informed GE bosses that the company's $50 million worth of business was in jeopardy if such criticism continued, and the offending passage was removed from Reagan's speech – something he later claimed to have done voluntarily. The episode foreshadowed differences that would resurface years later between Reagan's deeply held commitment to free markets and small government on the one hand and the entrenched economic interests of the South on the other.[63]

[63] Reagan, *My Early Life*, 267; Ritter, 335; Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 109-110; Evans, 111-112.

In Reagan’s later GE years, his speeches grew noticeably darker in tone. His increasingly apocalyptic warnings about communism – regularly depicting an America under siege – began to garner occasionally negative media coverage. After a speech in North Carolina in October 1961, Reagan was criticised by two of the state’s more liberal newspapers, the *Carolina Israelite* and the *Charlotte News*, for his inordinate fearmongering. Indeed, his doom-laden rhetoric appears to have been a significant factor in the decision by a new generation of GE executives to try a different promotional strategy. The reasons for GE bosses parting company with Reagan in 1962 were complex, but according to Reagan’s own explanation, they asked him to stick to speeches which promoted GE products and when he refused, his contract ended. Whatever the cause of his parting with General Electric, Reagan was now moving into a different phase of his career. His involvement in politics was deepening and he was increasingly focused on his role as a conservative speaker, writer, and campaigner. By his own account, Reagan’s conversion to conservatism was now complete, and he finally registered as a Republican in 1962 after years of feeling alienated from the “tax and spend liberals” at the top of the Democratic Party. His popularity in the South was undiminished, and his speeches continued to resonate with conservative southerners. On a tour of Texas in 1962, he hinted at a socialist conspiracy in Washington: “Under the high flown phrases of ‘freedom from want,’ ‘human rights’ and so on, we have seen the federal government lay its hand on almost every facet of our existence”. The speech received fulsome praise. Reagan “exploded a score of liberal myths, built a foolproof case against centralized government and outlined one of the best platforms for conservatism ever heard in Dallas”

according to the *Dallas Morning News*. "His statements came from deep conviction and this conviction was transferred to most of those who heard him."[64]

In national terms, however, Reagan was well outside the political mainstream. Speeches in which he declared peace with the Soviet Union to be "a satanic, diabolical device of the enemy to blunt our sword while he moves into position for the kill" did little to make him appear moderate, and often seemed at odds with his genial demeanour. As Matthew Dallek observes, by the early 1960s "Reagan had taken up a firm position on the margins of American politics." His popularity among white southerners added to this image, particularly at a time when they seemed to be meeting demands for racial integration and equality with ever more intransigence and brutality. Indeed, while Reagan's vociferous anti-communism led many to regard him as extremist, it made him an even greater hero to southern whites. Exemplifying the way in which the white southern mindset blurred the lines between anti-communism, resistance to civil rights, and hostility to social change, Reagan's own abhorrence of communism resulted in him sharing platforms with vociferously segregationist Southern Democrats. Governors Ross Barnett of Mississippi and Orval Faubus of Alabama, for example, both gave Reagan awards and acclaim for his outspoken anti-communism. In little more than a decade, Reagan had travelled a long way from his days as a 'hemophiliac liberal'. Now, his conservatism, his anti-communism, and his southern popularity had led Reagan to publicly ally himself with some of the most reactionary politicians in America.[65]

Reagan's connections to southern politics deepened in early 1964 when he campaigned in support of Charlton Lyons, the Republican candidate for the Louisiana

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[64] Ritter, 339; Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 112-114; Reagan, *An American Life*, 137-138; "Liberalism Lambasted By Reagan", *DMN*, 28 February 1962; "Stirring Address", *DMN*, 1 March 1962.

[65] Dallek, 39; "Encroaching Control: An Address by Ronald Reagan", Box 12, DHR; Curt Gentry, *The Last Days of the Late, Great State of California*, (New York: Ballantine, 1968).

governorship. The two had known each other since the 1950s and, like Reagan, Lyons was a recent Democratic convert to the GOP. Lyons, though, remained a southern conservative and a committed segregationist. His rhetoric on race, both in 1964 and in a previous 1960 congressional campaign, was almost indistinguishable from that of his Democratic opponents in Louisiana. His claims that the 1960 Democratic platform was "a veritable blueprint for a complete Socialist State" and that the GOP now offered the "greatest hope of perpetuating Constitutional Government in America", were clearly designed to speak to white fears of racial and social change in Louisiana. Yet they also reflected an increasingly powerful political narrative: that the national Democratic leadership had abandoned its once loyal southern supporters. After his party switch, this narrative also began to appear repeatedly in Reagan's southern speeches. Addressing an audience of both Democrats and Republicans in Baton Rouge, Reagan described himself and Lyons as "ex life-long Democrats. We changed parties…states' rights, limited government, adherence to the Constitution – no longer are these the principles of that national party."[66]

Reagan appears to have felt genuine sadness when he contemplated the party he had once keenly supported. In correspondence with his "old friend" Lyons, he set out some of the reasons he believed the Democrats were no longer the party of Thomas Jefferson, Woodrow Wilson or Franklin Roosevelt. In particular, he argued the party had abandoned Wilson's philosophy that "Liberty cannot exist where govt. takes care of the people, it can only thrive where the people take care of the govt." Reagan's words reflected his personal views but they would, of course, have meant something rather different to white southerners. When he

[66] Eric Pardue, "Kennedyphobia and the Rise of Republicans in Northwest Louisiana, 1960-1962," in *Painting Dixie Red: When, Where, Why, and How the South Became Republican*, Glenn Feldman (ed.), (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 122-126; Gerald Moses, "Reagan Talks on Conservatism At Republican Banquet Here", *Advocate*, 21 January 1964.

spoke in the South, his claims that Democratic liberalism threatened to undermine the liberties of individual Americans could be easily reinterpreted by white audiences. In their understanding, Reagan was condemning a party that had betrayed generations of white southern support by advocating black equality and was now threatening to overturn their region's entire social structure. His use of "states' rights" highlighted the ambiguity in his rhetoric. As Lou Cannon has written, Reagan "believed in states' rights". His faith in federalism and his antipathy towards the growth in size and power of the federal government were undeniable. In the South, however, "states' rights" had become a euphemism for resistance to integration. Undoubtedly, this is how an audience of white southerners would have understood it in 1964. It is difficult to know the extent to which Reagan – a man entirely convinced of his own lack of prejudice – was aware of this, but his feelings of anger and sadness at the Democratic Party meant he was perfectly placed to speak to similar feelings among white southerners. Certainly, he adopted the political vernacular of the white South during his appearances in the region. [67]

Despite Reagan's efforts on his behalf, Lyons failed to win the Louisiana governorship. Reagan had repeatedly been derided by Lyons' opponent as a "carpetbagger", but his campaigning helped Lyons achieve 38 percent of the vote. Given that the previous Republican candidate had received 17 percent and no Republican had won more than 20 percent since 1888 – most won less than 5 percent – this was a remarkably high tally. Significantly, in the next gubernatorial election four years later the GOP did not even field a candidate. The spike in Republican support that Lyons received in March 1964 was, arguably, the first electoral evidence of Reagan's popularity in the white South. Certainly, his campaign appearances in

[67] Ronald Reagan to Charlton Lyons, undated (1964), Series 1, Box 1, CLP; Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 139.

Louisiana were well received. During a stop in Lafayette, Reagan had trialled a new speech that contained elements familiar from his previous addresses in the South, but which would go on to become one of the most famous of his career. In the struggle against communism, Reagan told his audience, Americans were confronting "the most evil enemy that has ever faced mankind in his long climb from the swamp to the stars." He continued, "You and I have a rendezvous with destiny. We can preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on earth, or we can sentence them to take the first step into a thousand years of darkness." This was perhaps the starkest elucidation yet of Reagan's good-versus-evil interpretation of the Cold War. But his language also spoke obliquely to conservative southerners of their own struggle to defend their society against the encroaching enemies of liberalism, civil rights, and the federal government. His speech was reprinted in its entirety in newspapers, as well as later being broadcast to audiences in cities across Louisiana, and unquestionably captured the attention of the state's voters. The *Shreveport Times* thought it "a speech that perhaps could not be excelled by any North Louisianian in its sound and solid conservatism."[68]

The speech garnered much wider attention six months later when Reagan delivered it on national television in support of Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign. Amended and refined, and given the title "A Time for Choosing", it signalled Reagan's emergence as an influential figure on the national political stage, albeit in support of a candidate many regarded as an extremist. The embodiment of western 'cowboy conservatism' and a hero to the Republican right, Barry Goldwater had, like Reagan, spent much of the early 1960s making apocalyptic speeches warning of the dangers of communism

[68] "'Ridicule' and 'Personal Abuse' Charges Raised in N.O. by Lyons", *Advocate*, 20 February 1964; Roy R. Glashan, *American Governors and Gubernatorial Elections, 1775-1978*, (London: Meckler, 1979), 116-119; "'Lyons Carpetbagger' Talks About Conservative Beliefs", *Shreveport Times*, 1 March 1964.

and big government. In 1964, his popularity in the white South rivalled that of Reagan. But Goldwater lacked Reagan's easy charisma and eloquence. Reporting from the campaign trail in the South, Richard Rovere observed in the *New Yorker* that Goldwater demonstrated little ability to connect with audiences. "The lines he got from his writers were as flat as his delivery of them. Even when the substance was inflammatory, the form was soporific".[69]

Instead, Goldwater's appeal rested on the interpretation that white southerners placed on his anti-statist, anti-communist language. As with Reagan, Goldwater was perceived as an ally in the fight to prevent racial integration and to repel the threat of social change in the South. This was particularly true given his opponent, Democratic President Lyndon Johnson, had pushed through Congress the 1964 Civil Rights Act, outlawing segregation. Rovere described Goldwater's southern rallies as "great carnivals of white supremacy", while Ronald Keith Gaddie has similarly argued that "Goldwater's appeal to southern whites can be described as a meeting of his deeply felt libertarian convictions about limited government and the appeal of limited government as a codeword for segregation and rolling back federal intervention". Though Goldwater never advocated racial segregation, he did believe the issue should be one of state jurisdiction. Accordingly, in eyes of the white South, his campaign served to make the GOP a "vehicle for expressing displeasure with the national Democrats over integration and civil rights." The support he received from South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond bears this out. As a Southern Democrat in Congress

[69] Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 123-125; Richard H. Rovere, "The Campaign: Goldwater", *New Yorker*, 3 October 1964.

Thurmond had been a bitter opponent of integration, before switching parties in September 1964 and campaigning in the South on Goldwater's behalf.[70]

Though he suffered a landslide national defeat, winning only the five Deep South states plus his home state of Arizona, Goldwater's campaign marked a significant fracture in the Democratic Party's once impregnable hold on Dixie. As well as bringing the Deep South into the Republican fold for the first time since Reconstruction (including winning 87 percent of the vote in Mississippi), Goldwater came within fifty thousand votes of carrying Florida and garnered around 45 percent of the vote in North Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Virginia. Goldwater's landslide defeat was widely interpreted as a humiliation for the nascent Republican right, but Ronald Reagan emerged from the campaign as an esteemed figure among conservatives. Many regarded him as the perfect messenger for conservative ideals in the mid-1960s, and certainly more personally appealing than Goldwater. Within weeks of Goldwater's defeat, influential Republican donors were urging Reagan to challenge incumbent Democrat Edmund 'Pat' Brown for the governorship of California. By late December 1964, Reagan was telling Charlton Lyons that he was "doing some real soul searching" about his future in politics. He would decide "based on what I believe is the best way I can continue to serve in this fight we must win".[71]

Reagan's conservatism and anti-communism had brought him to prominence as an emerging voice on the right of the national GOP and had made him a political hero in the white South. Though Reagan, like Goldwater, had never openly supported segregation, by the

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[70] Ronald Keith Gaddie, "Realignment," in *The Oxford Handbook of Southern Politics,* Charles Bullock and Mark Rozell (eds.), (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012*)*, 303-305; Charles Mohr, "Thurmond Joins Goldwater Drive, *NYT*, 18 September 1964.

[71] "1964 Presidential Election", American Presidency Project website; Dallek, 62-73; Ronald Reagan to Charlton Lyons, 29 December 1964, Series 1, Box 1, CLP.

mid-1960s he had campaigned with and for southern segregationists, and had appeared on national television in support of a presidential campaign that had been a vehicle for southern resistance to black civil rights. He had, moreover, opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act and would oppose the Voting Rights Act the following year. Reagan's stance, though, was not racially motivated. As Matthew Dallek has written, "Reagan did not embrace the bigoted opinions and platforms of his southern friends". Reagan's opposition – like that of Goldwater – stemmed from a belief that both measures promulgated unconstitutional expansions of federal power over the rights of states and private citizens. Indeed, he reacted angrily when questioned about his opposition by an audience of black Republicans in California, shouting "I resent the implication that there is any bigotry in my nature." Thus, Reagan argued that he abhorred bigotry whilst at the same time speaking to white southerners of "states' rights" and denouncing civil rights legislation. An unwavering certainty about his own racial innocence meant Reagan seemingly struggled to comprehend the possibility that his speeches or actions may be viewed in a racial context. Similarly, his faith in the conservative cause meant he often blinkered himself to the racism of his southern allies, a wilful blindness to the South's racialized political climate that would resurface in his future campaigns. Nonetheless, by the time of the next presidential election, Ronald Reagan's level of support among conservative Republicans had increased to the extent that he would be a contender for the party's nomination at its 1968 convention in Miami Beach. His decision to mount a belated challenge was prompted, in no small part, by his popularity in the white South.[72]

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[72] Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 122, 139-143; Dallek, 39.

By mid-1965, when Reagan was preparing his challenge for the California governorship, he was already being viewed by pollsters as a potential Republican presidential candidate for 1968, albeit as an outside bet. His progress in California would also be watched with keen interest by white southerners. Indeed, a significant percentage of Californians had strong connections to the South. Around 1.6 million white residents of California were southern-born, and millions more were descended from earlier generations of white southerners who had migrated during the first half of the 20th century. Most had settled in California's southern counties, in the rapidly expanding suburbs of Los Angeles and San Diego where Reagan enjoyed his highest popularity in the state during the mid-1960s. James Q. Wilson observed that in southern California, 28 percent of residents had migrated from dustbowl states: from those neighbouring the South including Oklahoma and Kansas, from peripheral southern states such as Texas and Arkansas, and notably from one state of the Deep South, Louisiana. Reagan's popularity in the white South seemingly translated, at least in part, into popularity among these white Californian 'southerners'. A prominent Reagan backer claimed the "one-half million Texans living in Los Angeles County" would be a huge source of support for his 1966 gubernatorial campaign.[73]

This diaspora had imbued southern California with some of the South's social and cultural conservatism. Consequently, by the 1960s California's political landscape was beginning to bear a passing resemblance to that of the southern states. Early in the decade, for instance, Strom Thurmond twice visited southern California, firstly on an anti-communist

[73] Gallup, George, "No Standouts But Nixon Leads GOP Possibilities", *Hartford Courant*, 27 June 1965; James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 18-19; James Q. Wilson, "A Guide to Reagan Country: The Political Culture of Southern California", *Commentary*, 1 May 1967; Dochuk, 268-269.

tour and subsequently to campaign in support of a constitutional amendment to mandate prayer in public schools. Both times Thurmond was met by appreciative audiences and his trips served to strengthen conservative links between southern California and the South. Likewise, the 1964 debate surrounding Proposition 14 revealed southern overtones to Californian politics and led to concerns the state was undergoing a process of "southernization". The proposition sought to overturn the 1963 Rumford Fair Housing Act prohibiting discrimination in the sale of property based on race or religion. Leading the opposition to the initiative was California's Democratic Governor Pat Brown, who decried it as "a provision for discrimination of which not even Mississippi or Alabama can boast".[74]

Thurmond and other southern conservatives travelled to California to support the proposition, and conservative evangelicals in the Southern Baptist Church were also vocally in favour. Between 1940 and 1970 the Southern Baptist Church in California expanded from around twelve congregations to over 250,000 members. Migrants from the white South had metaphorically, as Darren Dochuk writes, "carried their churches with them, then replanted them on California terrain." They had also brought with them vestiges of their racially infused, fundamentalist religiosity. Race was, therefore, a significant factor behind California's Southern Baptist leaders supporting Proposition 14. "Their religious empires were white religious empires," Dochuk observes, "walled from the multicultural city by the middle-class ideology of property rights." The expansion of the Southern Baptist Church would be critical in transforming the religious and political landscape of southern California, helping to turn the sprawling suburbs of Los Angeles and San Diego into bastions of Republican conservatism

[74] "Thurmond Says Russia 'Ordered' U.S. Muzzling", *LAT*, 30 November 1961; Joseph Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 167-168; Lassiter and Crespino, 9-11; Jonathan Bell, *California Crucible: The Forging of Modern American Liberalism*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 205-213; "Brown Assails Prop. 14 as 'Cudgel of Bigotry'", *LAT*, 8 October 1964.

in the latter decades of the 20th century. The campaign for Proposition 14 won landslide approval from 65 percent of voters in November 1964, but the proposed law was ultimately struck down by the state's Supreme Court as a violation of federal rights of equal protection.[75]

After Proposition 14 had been deemed unconstitutional, Reagan campaigned in 1966 on a pledge to repeal the original Rumford Fair Housing Act. Like his opposition to the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act, Reagan's view that the Rumford Act infringed on the rights of property owners was grounded in a belief in personal liberty rather than a desire to see communities racially segregated. Nonetheless, Reagan's stance served to enhance his appeal among California's southern immigrants – as did his occasional use of harsh, racially-tinged language that would have resonated equally with white audiences in the South. In the wake of riots in the predominantly black Watts area of Los Angeles in August 1965, for example, Reagan warned that the "streets of our cities have become jungle paths". Moreover, what incumbent Governor Pat Brown described as "white backlash" was, according to Reagan, "nothing more than the concern people have for…extremists in the civil rights movement taking to the streets, the use of violence, of demonstrations, instead of an orderly process of appealing wrongs through legitimate channels". Though such statements were not a recurring feature of Reagan's campaign rhetoric they undoubtedly spoke to the racial conservatism of transplanted southerners in California, as well as to wider concerns among whites across the state about increasing unrest in predominantly black neighbourhoods. It also hinted at how a decade of addressing audiences in the white South had, knowingly or otherwise, influenced his political discourse. Overall, though, Reagan tried to avoid discussing the Watts riots or civil rights issues directly during the campaign. Instead, as Matthew Dallek writes, Reagan argued

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[75] "Thurmond Unleashes Attack on Democrats", *LAT*, 27 September 1964; "Brown Assails Prop. 14", *LAT*; Dochuk, xvi-xvii, 81-88, 243-45; 259-261.

that "a combination of individual initiative, private enterprise, and creative energy" would ease social unrest. Ultimately, he "worked hard to avoid statements that could be construed as racist, and came across as too good natured a person to be a demagogue."[76]

Overall, Reagan's campaign was a positive one. The California gubernatorial race represented the first electoral test for Reaganism, as the anti-statist conservatism of the Republican right was infused with the personal charisma and innate optimism that would be central to Reagan's subsequent political successes. The framework of his campaign message was provided by Reverend William McBirnie, a former Baptist minister and radio evangelist from San Antonio who had moved to California and established himself as the fervently anti-communist host of 'The Voice of Americanism', before befriending Reagan and becoming a member of his political circle. McBirnie had written to Reagan in November 1965, suggesting a way of packaging his anti-statist conservatism for a broader electorate. Under the slogan "the Creative Society", McBirnie argued the campaign should offer a positive platform based "upon the firm belief that there exists within this state the resources, mainly the human resources, to solve any problem – without the growth of bureaucracy…It would lay emphasis upon self-help, individualism, and would make sense to people. All they need is a program and a leader." According to McBirnie, conservatives particularly would "rejoice in greater self-government and wider participation by more people on the local level". It was his belief that Reagan's opposition to big government, translated into a forward-thinking platform, "could have *national* repercussions if it can be made to work in California."[77]

[76] Richard Bergholz, "Reagan Opposes Homeowner Curb", *LAT*, 31 October 1966; Dallek, 186-188, 195.
[77] Dochuk, 267-268; William McBirnie to Ronald Reagan, 30 November 1965, Box C31, 1966 GCF.

Revelations about McBirnie's past adultery – along with the often-extreme anti-communist language heard on his radio broadcasts – made him a controversial figure from whom Reagan would later distance himself. Nevertheless, his 'Creative Society' idea proved popular with Reagan and his campaign advisors. Their embrace of the Creative Society slogan and manifesto represented a significant step on the way to creating the brand of conservatism with which Reagan would be inextricably linked for the rest of his life. With its emphasis on individualism and entrepreneurialism, the confidence of the Creative Society concept, according to Matthew Dallek, "helped Reagan style himself as a kind of new-look conservative with a positive approach to the problems of modern society." It also enabled him to shift away "from the dour anti-communist ideology that he had championed just a few years earlier." Essentially, it was the perfect message to combine Reagan's instinctive hostility to big government with his inherent positivity.[78]

The adoption of William McBirnie's Creative Society concept illustrated the influence of the Sunbelt in Reagan's campaign. With his background in San Antonio – a fast-growing Sunbelt city in southwest Texas – and his emergence in the early 1960s as "a star on Southern California's anti-communist lecture circuit", McBirnie's life reflected the anti-communist and anti-statist conservatism that developed in the Sunbelt suburbs during the mid-20th century. Moreover, Reagan had been persuaded to run, and was financially supported, by a group of millionaire businessmen who personified the ethos of Sunbelt capitalism. Led by Holmes P. Tuttle, who had amassed his wealth through a chain of automobile dealerships after moving west from Oklahoma in the 1920s, these "Friends of Reagan" had backed Goldwater in 1964 but became dismayed by that campaign's descent into a "fiasco". Within weeks of

[78] Dallek, 226-228.

Goldwater's defeat, they turned their focus to Ronald Reagan. Tuttle had known Reagan since the 1940s and had been instrumental in funding the television broadcast of his 'A Time for Choosing' speech. Aside from their wealth, as Lou Cannon has written, Tuttle and his fellow businessmen shared "a fervent belief in the efficacy of the marketplace in which they had made their millions and a conviction that Reagan was uniquely inspirational." Each man had "amassed fortunes without the start-up advantage of inherited wealth", few had any links to the old money of Wall Street and the northeast, and all were vehemently anti-communist. In short, they embodied the new, assertive capitalism of the thriving Sunbelt. Their crucial role in Reagan's campaign – along with that of McBirnie – highlighted the belief among conservatives on the right of the GOP that they had found their new leader. So too did William Buckley's praise of Ronald Reagan in the *Los Angeles Times*. Almost a year before the gubernatorial election, Buckley was describing Reagan as "developing a political know-how which astounds the professionals" and as having "the mind of a true conservative." The parallel stories of Reagan's personal journey to conservatism and the ascendance of the post-war Republican right had truly merged.[79]

Reaganite conservatism passed its first electoral test in November 1966, when Reagan defeated Governor Pat Brown in a landslide. His message of optimism won the support of moderate and conservative suburbanites across the state. Notably, however, his victory was marked by crushing vote margins in heavily populated counties that had seen significant white southern immigration, including Orange County, Los Angeles, San Diego, Riverside, and San Bernardino. California's political landscape retained strong liberal and libertarian elements, but the migration of southern whites to the state had helped to create an ideal electorate for

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[79] Dochuk, 268; Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 132-134; William Buckley, "Ronald Reagan Is Getting Good Start in Race for Governorship", *LAT*, 17 December 1965.

Reagan's first political candidacy, particularly considering his first-rate education in dealing with conservative southerners over the previous decade. His anti-statist rhetoric resonated with southern conservatives' racial insecurity and hostility to government intrusion whether they lived in Shreveport or San Diego. Reagan's success in building a powerful base in the southern-tinged counties of California acted as a foretaste of his national campaigns.[80]

As California governor, Reagan continued to make appearances in the South. In September 1967, he attended a fundraising dinner with Strom Thurmond in Columbia, South Carolina that was designed to help pay off $30,000 of the state Republican Party's campaign debt but ultimately raised $170,000. The adulatory reception Reagan received showed his popularity in the region had only increased since his victory in California. He was greeted at the airport by a thousand-strong crowd and, according to local press reports, at the packed fundraising event later that evening Reagan's "charisma…warmed the hearts" of the audience, which "literally mobbed him as he moved about the room, shaking hands, signing autographs and kissing pretty girls." The *Atlanta Constitution* observed that, to the overwhelmingly white audience of around 3,500 – as well as hundreds in the overflow outside and many watching on television across the state – Reagan had "brought them the gospel". His "opposition to present economic policies, big government, social welfare, indecision in Vietnam, and U.S. trade agreements to help Russia's economy" was so well received, reported the *Constitution*, that "the only way to describe the reaction is that it was fanatic." Reagan once again returned to his personal narrative as a former Democrat, saying "I know the feeling of betrayal…I say to you, you did not leave that party, but the leadership of that party left

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[80] Michael Rogin and John Shover*, Political Change in California: Critical Elections and Social Movements, 1890-1966*, (Westport: Greenwood, 1970), 165-178; "1966 Gubernatorial Election Results – California", US Election Atlas website.

you." As Joseph Crespino writes of Strom Thurmond in the late 1960s, he "was like a man liberated from a bad marriage. A world of new opportunities lay before him." Reagan likely felt much the same. By the end of his speech, some in attendance were already demanding that he run for president, shouting "Reagan in '68".[81]

By the summer of 1968, Reagan was indeed contemplating a presidential bid. By some distance, he was white southerners' preferred potential candidate in either major party. He did, however, have a rival for the affections of the white South: the segregationist former Democratic Governor of Alabama George Wallace, now running on a third-party ticket. As Lou Cannon points out, "Wallace posed a special problem for Reagan. Without Wallace, Reagan was the strongest potential nominee of any party in the South. With Wallace, he was a question mark, for their appeal to white conservatives overlapped." Before embarking on a tour of southern states in July 1968, Reagan was asked about his and Wallace's similar appeals to southern conservatives. In response, he clumsily attempted to walk a tightrope of maintaining his appeal to white southerners without explicitly agreeing with Wallace's advocacy of racial separation. When questioned, he was forced to acknowledge that differences between the two men "would be kind of hard to pin down". Reagan eventually fell back on Wallace's economic record, stating he disagreed with Wallace because "as a governor he showed no opposition particularly to great programs of federal aid and spending programs etc." Asked directly what he would say to those whose support for Wallace was based on segregation, Reagan responded curtly "Why should they ask for my opinion?" Pressed further, he replied, "If they seek my advice and someone asks me on an outright segregation or racist basis, I'd have to tell them that I think racism is wrong." The *Los Angeles*

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[81] Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America*, 196-197; Lee Bandy, "Reagan Warms GOP Hearts", *State*, 30 September 1967; Remer Tyson, "Reagan's Theme: Safe with GOP", *AC*, 4 October 1967.

Times pointedly observed that "The governor appeared reluctant to discuss Wallace's segregationist views" and reported that Reagan "had no plans to initiate a discussion of racial problems in the South" on his upcoming trip. As an emergent national political figure, Reagan appears to have become increasingly conscious that courting white support in the South could pose acute dangers for someone with presidential ambitions – as Barry Goldwater had demonstrated four years earlier. Reagan's strategy, it seems, was simply to avoid the issue.[82]

A few days later Reagan left California for what an aide described as "a Southern solicitation". Nominally, this was a fundraising trip for southern Republican parties en route to the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, Florida. In reality, it was a test of southern support for a potential, but very belated, challenge to favourite Richard Nixon for the 1968 GOP presidential nomination. After travelling to Texas, Arkansas, Virginia, and Kentucky, Reagan stopped in Birmingham, Alabama on 24 July to meet that state's Republican delegates as well as some from South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi and Louisiana. Addressing a crowd of 3,800 in Birmingham, he denounced "bearded beatniks and so-called intellectuals" and sounded, as the *Los Angeles Times* noted, rather like George Wallace. In its main aim of convincing Nixon-supporting delegates to switch sides, Reagan's southern trip met with some success. "Reagan's Southern raids unquestionably are slicing away a delegate here and a delegate there from Nixon's massive strength", reported the *Boston Globe*, "a Mississippi defection, coupled with Reagan infiltrations in South Carolina and Louisiana, would hurt Nixon badly on the first ballot." Reagan and his advisors were aware that if he was to build a groundswell of support among GOP members and convention delegates, that surge would have to begin in the region where his popularity was highest: the South. If Nixon did not win

[82] Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 263-264; Tom Goff, "Reagan-Wallace Differences Blurred, Governor Admits", *LAT*, 17 July 1968.

on the first ballot, they believed, the nomination would go to Reagan. For his part, Richard Nixon had spent the previous years building allegiances with party leaders around the country with a view to winning the nomination, but even he was nervous about the threat posed by Reagan's southern popularity.[83]

Despite making his candidacy official when he reached the Miami Beach convention, and spending hours in his trailer attempting to win over southern delegates, Reagan's strategy failed. Ironically, it was Strom Thurmond who played an instrumental role in keeping southern delegations on Nixon's side. Thurmond's "love" for Reagan remained strong – he repeatedly told fellow Republicans "He's the best we've got" – but, like many senior GOP figures, he viewed Nixon as the candidate best placed to win the 1968 presidential election. Harry Dent, an ally of Thurmond and chairman of the South Carolina GOP, told delegates, "We have no choice, if we want to win, except to vote for Nixon. We must quit using our hearts and start using our heads. Believe me, I love Reagan, but Nixon's the one." Dent was reflecting concerns among senior southern delegates that, for all his popularity and charisma, Reagan was still a political neophyte. His ideological position on the right of the GOP also likely worked against him in a party still scarred by the Goldwater debacle.[84]

Though Richard Nixon narrowly won the nomination on the first ballot, this did not signify that Reagan's popularity in the South was waning. Rather, as Theodore White argues in his study of the 1968 election, it was the Reagan campaign's late entry into the contest which cost him the support of the South and potentially the GOP nomination. "At any moment in 1967, had he chosen, Reagan might have captured this bloc of Southern delegates and

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[83] Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Nixon's Southern front is unravelling", *BG*, 26 July 1968; Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 265-266; Jack Nelson, "Reagan Openly Courts 5 Southern Delegations", *LAT*, 25 July 1968; Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*, (New York: Scribner, 2008), 283-284.
[84] Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 295-302.

deadlocked the nomination". Instead, he was trying to win delegates in states "where Richard Nixon's lieutenants had long preceded him." By the time Reagan's campaign was attempting to persuade individual southern delegates, many were unwilling to renege on their commitment to Nixon, despite their personal affection for Reagan. One Louisiana delegate, Reagan's old friend Charlton Lyons, was on the verge of tears after telling him he could not offer his support. Reagan's campaign manager said of Lyons, "he agrees with everything we say – but he can't get off his commitment to Nixon." In response, Reagan wrote to Lyons a few weeks later to reassure him, "[I] would not want you to think for a moment that I was hurt or disappointed or that this in any way affects our friendship." The Miami Beach convention was ultimately a failure for Reagan, but it signified that his southern support would be a crucial springboard in future presidential campaigns. As an editorial in South Carolina's *State* newspaper observed in the wake of the convention, Ronald Reagan remained "the sentimental and ideological choice of most Southerners".[85]

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Reagan's popularity among southern conservatives remained high throughout his two terms as California governor, despite several occasions in which his conservative rhetoric took a back seat to political pragmatism. For example, after it became clear that liberals in the state legislature, both Democrat and Republican, would fight hard to preserve the Rumford Fair Housing Act, Reagan quietly backed away from his pledge to repeal it and instead accepted

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[85] Theodore White, *The Making of the President 1968*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 239-249; Ronald Reagan to Charlton Lyons, 3 September 1968, Box 2, 1980 PCP; "The Bellyachers", *State*, 13 August 1968.

revision of the legislation. In doing so, he could avoid a potentially damaging political battle and at the same time blame the legislature for preventing him fulfilling his campaign promise. The issue arose again some months later, but after meeting with leaders of minority groups Reagan stated that the Act had become a "symbol" for California's minority communities, and he would veto any attempt at outright repeal. Ultimately, the debate over the Rumford Act was superseded by fair housing provisions in the 1968 Civil Rights Act. This was just one area in which Reagan's California governorship demonstrated the differing priorities between his own anti-statist conservative philosophy and the racial and social conservatism of the South. Reagan also appointed more minorities to government posts than any previous California governor, supported a programme to provide African-Americans in Watts and South Los Angeles with employment, "reluctantly" signed a bill which liberalized the state's abortion laws, and tightened gun controls by signing the Mulford Act in 1967. (The latter, it should be noted, was motivated in part by fears of guns being used in race riots after a heavily armed protest by Black Panthers outside the state Capitol building.) Though Reagan was personally dubious about the effects of such legislation, he was nevertheless willing to adopt relatively liberal stances on social issues if he thought it politically necessary.[86]

Reagan was utterly convinced of the rightness of the conservative cause, and expertly conveyed that conviction to his audiences, but he did not regard himself as a die-hard right-wing ideologue. Instead, his self-image was that of a "citizen-politician" who reflected the priorities and concerns of average Americans. In Reagan's interpretation those concerns were predominantly economic, and his time as governor was an early demonstration that his anti-

[86] Tom Goff, "Reagan Alters Rumford Stand", *LAT*, 3 April 1968; Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 201-205, 263, 348-361; Jerry Gillam, "Governor Signs Law on Abortion", *LAT*, 16 June 1967; Jerry Gillam, "Reagan Gets Bill on Loaded Guns", *LAT*, 28 July 1967.

statist conservative philosophy placed greater emphasis on personal and economic freedom than on imposing or enforcing moral values. Yet white southerners – far more uncompromising in their cultural conservatism – held him in such esteem and affection that he was nonetheless able to maintain their political support. This would be a recurring theme throughout his subsequent career. "Conservatives were not blind to Reagan's pragmatism," Lou Cannon writes. "They liked what he said, even when it required ignoring what he did". Some of Reagan's actions as governor, however, served to reinforce his southern popularity. His cautious embrace of Southern Baptist churches in California, for instance, helped to strengthen his connections to the South. At the same time, it also gave him a valuable education in how to maintain evangelicals' support whilst keeping their religious zeal in check. Reagan was astute enough to understand that he needed to keep personal relations with evangelical leaders cordial and to incorporate religious rhetoric into his speeches. "To hold their confidence and continue tapping their considerable resources, the governor enshrouded the ceremonial side of his politics in an aura of heartfelt, homespun Protestantism", Darren Dochuk writes. Reagan was "always courting the patricians and power brokers among them but controlling the populist preachers and activists".[87]

Though in policy terms he often gave them scant reward for their support, Reagan welcomed the counsel of prominent Southern Baptist leaders, regularly publicising his meetings with them to provide conservative evangelical voters and activists with reassurance and an illusion, at least, of influence. His appearance at Billy Graham's Southern California Crusade in Orange County in 1969 illustrated the burgeoning relationship between Reagan and southern evangelicalism. When introducing Graham, Reagan used language calculated to

[87] Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 149, 206, 324. Dochuk, 269-270.

position himself as an opponent of secular, liberal government and an ally of evangelicals even in the face of political disapproval. "I'm sure there will be those who question my participation here tonight", Reagan told his audience. "People have become so concerned with church-state separation, that we have interpreted freedom of religion into freedom from religion." He went on to call for a rediscovery of "our spiritual heritage." Attended by 384,000 worshippers over a ten-day period in Anaheim Stadium, the event was a notable landmark in the political journey of southern evangelicals. Billy Graham himself may have remained non-partisan, but evangelicals and their leaders in southern California and across the South began to see Reagan as a man who could bring their values and priorities to the centre of the political stage. As Dochuk observes, they increasingly "had the ear of a key political leader". Ultimately, Reagan's handling of transplanted southern evangelicals in California – embracing them rhetorically but doing little to advance their political agenda – was indicative of how he would relate to the Christian Right on the national stage two decades later.[88]

As he approached the end of his governorship, Reagan's displays of pragmatism in California had done little to dent his popularity among southern conservatives. He was again talked of as a Republican presidential candidate and many leading southern Republicans now regarded him as the best vehicle for furthering their cause within the GOP. In a letter to Reagan, Strom Thurmond wrote that he could not think of "a more articulate and knowledgeable spokesman for the conservative position". Reagan was influential in supporting Republican candidates for office in many southern states, including writing fundraising letters – such as one for Thurmond in 1970 – and recording television campaign advertisements. One campaign endorsement helped Jesse Helms win a Senate seat in North

[88] Dochuk, 269-270, 292; John Dart, "Graham Launches 10-Day Southland Crusade in Anaheim", *LAT*, 27th September 1969; Jack Boettner, "Impact of Graham Crusade Cited After 384,000 Attend", *LAT*, 6th October 1969.

Carolina in 1972, a favour Helms would repay during Reagan's campaign for the 1976 Republican presidential nomination. Reagan also continued to receive rapturous welcomes on his regular appearances in the South. At a GOP fundraiser in Jackson, Mississippi in November 1973, he was feted as the man white southerners wanted to see as the next president. One Mississippi Republican told him, "Nowhere else in this country are you better understood and respected", and in return Reagan described his audience of southern Republicans as "the wave of the future". Similarly, after a visit to Alabama in October 1974, an editorial in the *Mobile Register* declared Reagan had seemed "right at home" before claiming that "he talked the language of Alabamians…and has the ability to follow up his talk with action. That's strong medicine. Come back to see us again, Governor Reagan. We could form a mutual admiration society!"[89]

During Reagan's time as Governor of California, the white South had continued to experience social and political upheaval. The passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and Voting Rights Act in 1965 appeared, to outsiders at least, to be transformative for the region – racial segregation was outlawed and there was a dramatic increase in black voter registration during the late 1960s. Optimistic talk of a "New South", a region of harmonious integration and racial justice, began to appear in national newspapers. In reality, life for millions of southerners, white and black, continued largely unchanged. As Jason Sokol writes of the Civil Rights Act, "many whites could live just as though the law had never been passed…African-Americans did not attempt to integrate eateries; segregation was an uncontested fact." While the national media visited symbolic cities like Birmingham, Alabama and Little Rock, Arkansas in

[89] Strom Thurmond to Ronald Reagan, 21 November 1974, Box 4, 1980 PCP; Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America*, 244; William Link, *Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 146-147; Lou Cannon, "Support for Reagan Grows in South", *WP*, 18 November 1973; "Governor Reagan made good sense", *MR*, 2 October 1974.

search of positive stories of integration, in the smaller communities and towns of the rural South desegregation did not arrive until well into the 1970s. Even among those white southerners who grudgingly adjusted to racial integration, relatively few fully accepted it. Across the region, heightened concerns about “white rights” came to the fore, taking the place of overt opposition to desegregation. The white South’s political vernacular of states’ rights, anti-communism and hostility to welfare remained the same, but it now spoke to fears of increased black political and economic power and the threat this posed to white southern identity. It also spoke powerfully to a deep, widespread resentment towards the federal government. Southern leaders including George Wallace and Georgia Governor Lester Maddox “positioned the government as the aggressor and white southerners as victims”, in Sokol’s words. The late 1960s and 1970s saw something of an existential crisis for conservative white southerners, one that was rooted in their entrenched insecurity and aversion to change. In the words of one Alabama mayor, it amounted to “fears of losing your white skin or losing your job.” This was not simply a racial backlash. There were also many white southerners who had been ambivalent about segregation and abhorred the idea of violent resistance to black rights, yet who now “deplored riots, feared a civil rights struggle shorn of its nonviolent heart, and chafed under court-ordered school integration, busing, and the tax burden imposed by an active federal government.”[90]

In this context, it is unsurprising that Reagan’s anti-statist rhetoric continued to appeal to white southerners who were fearful of losing their identity or viewed the federal government as authoritarian. Yet Reagan now represented more than merely a prominent celebrity whose speeches provided succour to anxious or angry southern whites. By the mid-

[90] Sokol, 222-229, 275-276; James Kilpatrick, “The ‘New South’ Is Rising”, *LAT*, 19 March 1971; Terry Wooten, “Blacks Finding a ‘New South’”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, 18 July 1970.

1970s, he was a political figure who appeared to offer white southerners a chance to reassert themselves and make their voices heard at the national level. After two decades of believing their rights, freedoms and identity had been "trampled on" by the federal government, this made his appeal to conservatives in the region even more profound. Alienated from the leadership of the Democratic Party, white southerners had been in search of a national political standard-bearer for years, as southern support for Reagan's short-lived candidacy in 1968 had indicated. This was a significant factor behind partisan fluctuations in the white South in the wake of the civil rights movement. For many southerners, George Wallace was the solution. However, as a third-party candidate in 1968 – running on a platform advocating segregation – he was highly unlikely ever to reach the White House. After performing strongly in the South in the 1968 election, winning Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas, Wallace was paralysed in an assassination attempt when campaigning for the Democratic nomination in 1972, after which he largely ceased to be a factor in national politics.[91]

The other alternative was Richard Nixon. Though he had seen off Reagan's challenge in 1968, for many conservatives support for Nixon did not translate into personal affection. As Robert Mason observes, Nixon was "no better than the second choice of many activists representing the party's new conservatism." Among those selecting the GOP presidential candidate that year he had simply been the pragmatic option. This was particularly true for those southerners who regarded Ronald Reagan as "a soul brother" (in the phrase of one Georgia Republican) but still too politically inexperienced. Consequently, though Nixon won the presidency that year with the help of millions of white southern voters, their faith in him

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[91] Sokol, 223, 273-275; "1968 Presidential Election", American Presidency Project website; Howell Raines, "George Wallace, Segregation Symbol, Dies at 79", *NYT*, 14 September 1998.

was far from wholehearted. His history as Dwight Eisenhower's vice president and his image as a calculating political operator meant he was regarded with considerable suspicion. Indeed, many southerners only voted for him after being warned by Republican campaign adverts that a vote for Wallace could result in Democrat Hubert Humphrey – a liberal reviled for his decades-long support for civil rights – winning the presidency. Ultimately, Nixon barely won a plurality of southern votes: 34.7 percent to Wallace's 34.4 percent. Even his landslide re-election in 1972, which included winning every southern state, was largely a consequence of the Democrats choosing one of the most liberal senators in Washington, George McGovern of South Dakota, as their nominee. "Nixon's success was almost solely the result of McGovern's liberalism", Sean Cunningham has written of the 1972 election in Texas. "Nixon was considered a moderate, still distrusted by most Texas conservatives". Hence, throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s many white southerners continued to look to Ronald Reagan. When contrasted with the untrustworthy Nixon and the increasingly marginalised Wallace, the widely held view of Reagan across the white South – that he was not only a trustworthy ally but also a potential president – was reinforced.[92]

This perception only grew stronger after the Watergate scandal led to Nixon's downfall in 1974. His successor, Gerald Ford, was regarded with even greater suspicion by conservatives in the white South. Ford was viewed "as part of a liberal establishment that had controlling interests in both the Democratic and Republican parties" observes Cunningham. His choice of former New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller – a leading GOP moderate – to be vice president was "evidence that Ford (and Ford's GOP) was a tool of the northeastern establishment". At the same time as Ronald Reagan was addressing large, rapturous southern

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[92] Robert Mason, *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 25-29; Sokol, 274-275; Cunningham, *Cowboy Conservatism,* 134-141.

audiences, a tour of the region by President Ford in October 1974 was greeted by crowds that were, according to the *Atlanta Constitution*, "warm and friendly but small." By the mid-1970s, after watching him win two terms as California governor and rise to national prominence, white southerners were once again giving Reagan overwhelming encouragement to seek the presidency. At a chamber of commerce meeting in Cullman, Alabama on 21 March 1975, Reagan was introduced by George Wallace who described him as "a great governor", inspiring the vain hopes of some southern whites that the two men could unite on a conservative third-party ticket. Reagan, however, remained publicly coy about another presidential run. Though he and his advisors had long been looking to the 1976 campaign as a potential opportunity, he would now have to challenge an incumbent Republican president. This, Lou Cannon writes, was "a heretical notion" to Reagan and several of his close advisors. Moreover, after his abortive last-minute candidacy at the 1968 Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, he was wary of another failure. To the frustration of many supporters Reagan hung back, keen to maintain his political influence but wary of committing to a campaign which would divide his party and had only a slim chance of success – no incumbent president had been unseated by their own party since 1884. Reagan told Barry Goldwater in May 1975 that he was "waiting in the wings". Nevertheless, confidence remained high among Reagan's devotees in the South that their region could propel him to the nomination. "We could take just about every Southern delegate vote for him," one supporter optimistically declared to the *Atlanta Constitution. "*He'd win two-to-one in every state primary in Dixie."[93]

[93] Cunningham, *Cowboy Conservatism*, 177; Eugene Risher, "Ford Begs South's Voters To Stop Demo 'Monopoly'", *AC*, 20 October 1974; Rex Thomas, "Gov. Wallace welcomes Reagan to Alabama", *MR*, 22 March 1975; Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 393-400; Peter Hannaford Record of Meeting with Ronald Reagan and Barry Goldwater on 5 May 1975, Box 7, PHP; Reg Murphy, "Ronald Reagan's Decision Not Easy", *AC*, 10 July 1975.

As conservative anger towards the Ford administration deepened, and his own supporters grew restive, Reagan drew closer to entering the race. In speeches, he began to justify a potential challenge to a sitting Republican president by suggesting that the conservative "mandate" of 1972 was being "obscured" and the country needed "a new second party – the Republican Party – raising a banner of bold colors, with no pale pastels." Though he was careful not to attack President Ford personally, the inference to Reagan's supporters was clear: under Ford's moderate leadership, conservative values were being betrayed. On 24 July, Reagan attended a GOP fundraising event with Jesse Helms in Raleigh, North Carolina which helped set the scene for a likely Republican primary battle the following year. As well as rallying support for a future campaign, Reagan's appearance before a two thousand strong audience was also "designed to consummate the Helms-Reagan alliance" according to William Link. Returning to familiar southern themes, Reagan likened Helms to Confederate General Thomas 'Stonewall' Jackson for his unwavering conservatism, avowed that Americans had "repudiated the welfare state", and attacked Voting Rights Act extension as "pure cheap demagoguery". His speech finished to a standing ovation as some in the audience held aloft "Reagan for President" posters.[94]

Four months later Ronald Reagan was back in North Carolina, addressing hundreds of cheering supporters in Charlotte to promote his candidacy for President of the United States. Having declared his intention to run at a Washington press conference the previous day, Reagan had embarked on an intensive two-day, 5,000-mile tour of early primary states including New Hampshire, Florida, Illinois, and North Carolina. As in 1968, the South would act as a catalyst for his campaign. Over the coming year, southern conservative support would

[94] Arnold Sawislak, "Reagan tells GOP to stand firm", *BG*, 9 March 1975; Ferrel Guillory, "Reagan Says Rocky Abused", *NO*, 26 July 1975; Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 146-149.

prove pivotal in driving Reagan's challenge to a sitting Republican president and would ultimately help take him to within a few votes of becoming the GOP's presidential nominee. In Charlotte, Senator Jesse Helms once again introduced Reagan. Helms was delighted Reagan had decided to run, describing him as "our party's most articulate and exciting conservative spokesman. He has the personal magnetism and leadership ability to capture the imagination of the American people." In reality, the chances of a Reagan presidency were remote. But when Helms introduced the newly-announced candidate, he spoke for many white southerners who saw Reagan as the man to restore their region to a position of influence and power in Washington and as someone who, above all else, had been a loyal ally for two decades. Reagan was, in essence, one of them. Helms declared, "Isn't it great that, as of yesterday, *we* have a presidential candidate!"[95]

[95] Ned Cline, "Reagan Tells Crowd That He'll Be Back", *GDN*, 22 November 1975; Richard Bergholz, "Reagan Returns From Whirlwind 2-Day Trip to Launch Presidential Campaign", *LAT*, 22 November 1975; Jesse Helms, "Reagan's Announcement to Seek Presidential Nomination", Record Group 2, Box 229, JHP.

Chapter Two

"Reagan country": The South in Ronald Reagan's presidential campaigns, 1976 to 1980

The white South proved critical to Ronald Reagan's 1976 presidential campaign. Victory in the North Carolina primary rescued his candidacy when it appeared on the verge of ignominious failure, and subsequently the support of conservative Texans, Alabamans, and Georgians helped carry him to the Republican convention. In the end, another southern state, Mississippi, eventually deprived Reagan of the nomination. The 1976 primaries highlighted a developing divide in the southern GOP between the party establishment and an emerging base of insurgent conservatives, many of whom were recent Democratic converts. Their influence on Reagan's campaign enabled these new southern Republicans to push the GOP's policy agenda in a markedly more conservative direction. Yet, at the same time, significant philosophical differences also began to appear between Reaganism and southern conservatism. Still, Reagan maintained his personal standing in the white South. Four years later, southern backing – particularly from the rising Christian Right – helped him defeat President Jimmy Carter and finally win the presidency. In examining the importance of the South in Reagan's presidential campaigns, this chapter focuses chiefly on his unsuccessful primary challenge to President Ford in 1976. During this campaign, affection for Reagan among white southerners started to coalesce into a powerful electoral base and, consequently, the white South began to reassert itself on the national political stage. The chapter ends by exploring how Reagan forged an alliance with Christian Right leaders during the late 1970s and how his foundation of southern support ultimately propelled him to the White House.

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In the mid-1970s, the Republican Party in the South was divided. Large numbers of racially conservative white southerners, disgusted by the liberalism of the national Democratic leadership, had gravitated towards the GOP in search of a political home. The late 1960s and early 1970s had seen an "influx of Democratic segregationists into the party" at the state and county level. This wave of new southern Republicans then proceeded to establish a "beachhead inside the GOP", in the words of former strategist Chris Ladd. Power struggles between these tenacious, socially conservative insurgents and comparatively moderate Republican establishments were being played out in North Carolina, Texas, Tennessee, and several other southern states. The 1976 primary battle between Reagan and President Gerald Ford would bring them into national focus. Conservative insurgents viewed Reagan as their ideal candidate, while the southern GOP establishment remained loyal to the president. In October 1975, the *Atlanta Constitution* correctly predicted that the white South would be pivotal in deciding the 1976 Republican nomination. This region, it declared, was "vital to both of these leading Republicans, but it is more vital to Reagan, who knows he is basically stronger here than any other region."[96]

Early missteps by the Ford campaign reinforced Reagan's southern strength. In December 1975, Ford declined to appear at the Southern Republican Conference in Houston after aides advised he would seem more presidential by remaining in Washington. In a

[96] David Nordan, "Ford vs. Reagan: The Dixie Battle", *AC*, 19 October 1975; David Nordan, "Republicanism Growing Force in Dixie", *AC*, 15 October 1972; Ladd, "How a Sub-Party Captured the GOP"; Cunningham, *Cowboy Conservatism*, 153-159; William Lyons, John Scheb, et al., *Government and Politics in Tennessee*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 2017), 229-230.

remarkable misjudgement, sent in his stead was Nelson Rockefeller, a hate figure to southern conservatives whom they had recently helped to dump from the 1976 ticket. In an expletive-laden appearance, Rockefeller "vented several years of frustrations with southern Republicans." To encourage support for Gerald Ford, for instance, Rockefeller said "You got me out, you sons of bitches, now get off your asses and help the President." Ford's campaign manager Howard 'Bo' Callaway, a former congressman from Georgia whose appointment to head the campaign was intended to placate conservative southern Republicans, compounded the situation. He derided Ronald Reagan as "Sir Galahad on a white horse" and Reagan's campaign as no more than a "Hollywood movie set" and "bait advertising". South Carolina GOP chairman Jesse Cooksey, one of the few Ford supporters in a heavily pro-Reagan audience, believed that "irrevocable" damage had been done. Certainly, the episode appeared to solidify Reagan's southern support. "The foot soldiers of the GOP in the South are swinging towards Reagan", claimed one Virginia Republican. Similarly, a Reagan backer from Mississippi told journalists, "The South is Reagan country…Some leaders have aligned themselves with the Ford effort, but they're just out of touch with the grass roots."[97]

By February 1976, the Ford campaign had regained enough national momentum to eke out victory by little more than 1,300 votes in the first primary in New Hampshire and followed this with a comfortable win in Massachusetts. The next primary in Florida was now crucial to Reagan's challenge. The first contest in the South, it was "a major key to our entire effort" in the view of Reagan's southern campaign coordinator David Keene. Far ahead in the polls at one stage, Reagan saw Ford eventually sweep home by a 53-47 percent vote margin.

[97] Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 345; David Nordan, "Rocky Doesn't Delete Expletive", *AC*, 14 December 1975; R.W. Apple, "Callaway Scores Reagan in South", *NYT*, 14 December 1975; David Nordan, "'Bo' Makes Strong Attack on Reagan", *AC*, 14 December 1975; "Reagan Strong in South; Ford Said in Trouble", *Hartford Courant*, 14 December 1975.

Afterwards, Reagan declared himself "delighted" to have won 47 percent of the vote and said the reason for his defeat was because Florida was "not a typical Southern state" – a claim that had some validity. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, "only 13% of Florida's 1 million Republicans were born here and only 14% more were born elsewhere in the South. The rest migrated from other regions, bringing with them views that are not as strongly conservative as those of most southern Republicans." Reagan ran strongly in Florida's more socially and racially conservative northern counties, which were "close to the rest of the South not only in geography but in ideological outlook", but this did not offset his losses elsewhere. Additionally, the Ford campaign exploited some old Reagan statements on social security reform, notably that a portion of trust funds could be invested in the stock market. In a state where 70 percent of GOP primary voters were over fifty years old, this tactic helped the president capture two-thirds of the senior citizen vote.[98]

Following Reagan's defeat, his campaign manager John Sears told journalists he was now looking to "Texas, Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, and Tennessee, which are more natural grounds for us". Reagan's challenge needed rescuing by his southern conservative supporters. In the short term, Florida was followed by two more defeats in Illinois and Vermont and by the time the contest returned to the South in mid-March, Reagan's campaign was around $2 million in debt, senior staff were working without pay, and donations were drying up. Ford's team used surrogates including Texas Senator John Tower to publicly and privately pressure Reagan to concede defeat "in the best interest of the Republican Party". Even Nancy Reagan repeatedly encouraged her husband to leave the race. Yet Reagan was undeterred. When he

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[98] Robert Shogan, "Narrow Ford Victory", *LAT*, 25 February 1976; Benjamin Taylor, "GOP voters turn down Reagan by nearly 2 to 1", *BG*, 3 March 1976; David Keene to Tommy Thomas, 19 September 1975, Box 4, CFR; David Nyhan, "Carter stuns Wallace; Ford defeats Reagan", *BG*, 10 March 1976; Robert Shogan, "Loss Deals Severe Blow to Reagan", *LAT*, 10 March 1976; Jules Witcover, *Marathon: The Pursuit of the Presidency 1972-1976*, (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 402-404.

told a crowd of around 400 at a campaign stop in Fayetteville, North Carolina that he was being pushed to concede, the crowd drowned out his speech with cries of "No!" and "Stay in!". He responded by saying "You took the words right out of my mouth…I'm not walking away from this."[99]

The next primary was in North Carolina, where Reagan had enjoyed enormous popularity since the 1950s. It was also home to Senator Jesse Helms, his most ardent southern supporter and a conservative scourge of the Republican establishment. The two men had first met in the early 1960s. During a stop in Raleigh, Reagan had visited WRAL, the television station where Helms was executive vice president. Helms recalled in his memoirs that they hit it off immediately, discussing shared interests in "Hollywood, the media and politics", and over the years they developed a mutual admiration and friendship. As Helms biographer Ernest Furgurson notes, both men were from modest, small town backgrounds and both had worked in radio and television before "[riding] their broadcast careers into right-wing politics." While Reagan did so via his work for GE, Helms had written and presented editorials on WRAL that became a forum for his conservative views and a springboard for his political career.[100]

Like Reagan, Helms had been a lifelong Democrat until he switched parties in 1970. Unlike Reagan, however, Helms was not a former liberal. Rather, he had been a traditional southern Democrat. His popularity among conservative Democratic voters was such that so-called 'Jessecrats' comprised a substantial portion of North Carolina's electorate. As Rob Christensen observes, "Helms was a conservative Democrat in Republican clothing. He carried

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[99] Nyhan, "Carter stuns Wallace"; Witcover, 405-414; Daniel Hoover, "Three Presidential Hopefuls Woo Tar Heels: Reagan", *NO*, 19 March 1976.

[100] Jesse Helms, *Here's Where I Stand: A Memoir*, (New York: Random House, 2005), 97-99; Ernest B. Furgurson, *Hard Right: The Rise of Jesse Helms*, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1986), 117.

to Washington the southern conservative and segregationist tradition of [former North Carolina Senator] Sam Ervin, coupled with the angry belligerence of a George Wallace." In 1950, Helms had "spearheaded" the Senate candidacy of Democrat Willis Smith, directing perhaps the most racist campaign in North Carolina's political history. In defeating his liberal, anti-racist opponent, Frank Porter Graham, Smith used race-baiting tactics, including circulating doctored photographs of Graham's wife dancing with an African-American man. Helms would later employ similar, though more nuanced, tactics in his own campaigns. During his years in print and broadcast journalism Helms was an outspoken opponent of federal desegregation efforts which, according to Furgurson, he "liked to convert into another Yankee war on [his] beloved South." In editorials he railed against enemies including communists, liberals, intellectuals, and civil rights protesters. Like other southern conservatives, he deployed these labels interchangeably against those he suspected of a conspiracy to undermine the social foundations of the white South. In the turbulent 1960s, he became a "conspicuous hero to the Carolinians who were angry but seemingly helpless to resist the crumbling of the world they held dear."[101]

Helms carried this reactionary populism into politics and after Ronald Reagan recorded a television advert for Helms's successful 1972 senatorial campaign, their personal friendship evolved into a political alliance. In his memoirs, Helms writes of a lunch at Reagan's California home in October 1973 during which they discussed his running for president. Helms recalls promising Reagan that "if you ever decide to run for President, and if you feel that I can be helpful, count me in. I'll be honored to do anything I can." In 1976, Helms was true to his word. On the stump in Florida he attacked the Ford administration with glee. Henry

[101] Rob Christensen, *The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics: The Personalities, Elections and Events that Shaped Modern North Carolina*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 213-214; Sokol, 39; Furgurson, 48-72.

Kissinger, he declared, was a "proven failure", while President Ford was being "led around by the nose by his advisors". Criticising Ford's policy of détente with the Soviet Union, he said, "Jerry Ford is getting rid of the word détente, but he is keeping Henry Kissinger. That's like throwing away the safety pin and keeping the soiled diaper." In short, Helms was the perfect ally for Reagan's faltering campaign.[102]

Helms could also call upon one of the most effective conservative political machines in the US, the North Carolina Congressional Club. Chaired by his close associate Tom Ellis, the NCCC began life as a political action committee formed to retire Helms' 1972 campaign debt. It subsequently became a vehicle to provide strategic guidance and money – raised through a technologically advanced direct mailing operation – to conservative candidates across the South and nationwide. The NCCC epitomised the conservative insurgency that was rapidly gaining ascendance in the southern GOP. In Christensen's words, it "served as a bridge between the Republicans and the conservative Democrats who were looking for a new home." It also embodied the aggression of southern conservative politics. Former state party chairman, Frank Rouse, recalled of the NCCC leadership, "They go out there and they don't take any damn prisoners – from day one they're in it to win." Though nominally a Republican organisation, the NCCC prioritised electing conservatives over party loyalty and even refused to allow moderate Republicans to appear at their rallies and events. Like other southern Democrats who had converted to the GOP, NCCC leaders' commitment to the social and cultural conservatism of the white South often bordered on zealotry. Rouse's recollection was

[102] Helms, 99; Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 150; Address by Senator Jesse Helms in Miami, 6 March 1976, Record Group 2, Box 230, JHP.

that Helms, Ellis, and their associates were "a closed society" who felt they were "on a mission from God".[103]

As was the case in state Republican parties across the South, this conservative faction was regularly in conflict with the North Carolina GOP establishment. In 1976, the traditional party elite lined up behind President Ford, with Governor James Holshauser serving as the Ford campaign's southern coordinator. Consequently, the *Greensboro Daily News* observed that the Reagan-Ford primary was "a test of political strength". Reagan's campaign gave Helms and Ellis the chance to gain control over a state Republican Party they had joined just six years earlier. The dynamics of this power struggle were evident a few days before Reagan announced his candidacy. According to news reports, the North Carolina Republican Convention in November 1975 was "unexpectedly turned into a presidential forum" after Helms used his address as an encomium for Ronald Reagan. Reagan "offers to the American people a new thrust of leadership and an assurance that he is not part of the Washington apparatus," Helms declared. "Ronald Reagan *can* win the 1976 presidential election. He is a proven winner." Governor Holshauser spoke next and was forced to "scrap his intended remarks and respond with a bid of support for President Ford". It would not be the last time Jesse Helms and his fellow southern conservatives caught the Republican establishment off guard.[104]

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[103] Christensen, 216-223; Frank Rouse Oral History, 14 November 1996, Southern Oral History Program website.
[104] Ned Cline, "Primary's GOP Vote to Test Efforts by Helms, Holshauser", *GDN*, 22 March 1976; Helms speech to Republican State Convention, 15 November 1976, Record Group 2, Box 229, JHP; Daniel Hoover, "GOP Presidential Choices Debated", *NO*, 16 November 1975.

Helms and Ellis were infuriated by the Reagan campaign's failures in New Hampshire and Florida. The candidate's best assets, they believed, were going underused by campaign manager John Sears. Instead of emphasising competence in office, as Sears had done, Reagan's candidacy should focus on his charisma, his celebrity, and his ability to speak eloquently and persuasively about his conservatism. After a series of heated meetings, Sears yielded to Tom Ellis's demand for complete control in North Carolina. Though Jesse Helms was nominally the chair of Reagan's state campaign, its management was in the hands of Ellis and his staff at the North Carolina Congressional Club. Historian Rick Perlstein credits Ellis and the NCCC with saving Reagan's candidacy, claiming "The Dixie boys opened up the thinking of what had become a stodgy campaign". Many of those close to Reagan shared this view. Indicating the wariness with which Reagan's circle regarded their southern conservative allies, Reagan advisor Lyn Nofziger described Tom Ellis as "a right-wing zealot", but also lauded him for "almost single-handedly turning the campaign around."[105]

Helms and Ellis understood how to appeal to conservative southern voters. The campaign had to exploit North Carolinians' existing affection for Reagan and find issues that spoke emotionally to white southern discontent. They formulated a campaign that was "hard-hitting, aggressive, and heavily dependent on media exposure", as William Link writes. To attract publicity, and to recreate the feeling of glamour that Reagan had brought to small southern towns in the 1950s, the NCCC sought to involve some of his old Hollywood friends. Jimmy Stewart, a movie star who epitomised the American everyman, was enlisted to introduce Reagan at several campaign stops. The tactic had the desired effect. "I can't believe

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[105] Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 152-153; Rick Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 645; Lyn Nofziger, *Nofziger*, (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1992), 178-179.

it!" one woman who attended a Reagan event in Greensboro exclaimed to a *New York Times* reporter. "I've seen Ronald Reagan, but there's Jimmy Stewart!" Tom Ellis also arranged for a thirty-minute television broadcast to be shown on fifteen stations across the state in prime-time. According to Lou Cannon, the broadcast "introduced North Carolinians to the old-fashioned Reagan doing what he did best". Reagan spoke directly into the camera and expressed his sadness that Americans had to "celebrate our bicentennial beset by troubles that have us in a time of discontent". He also restated a claim that had long been at the centre of his appeal: that he was simply a concerned citizen with a desire to change how things were being done. Of his time as California governor, Reagan said "I didn't think of myself as part of government. I was a citizen, temporarily serving and representing my fellow citizens, and my loyalty was to them." It was a performance akin to that which had thrust him onto the national stage in 1964. "It was Reagan talking from the heart and nobody talks from the heart better than Reagan", observed Lyn Nofziger.[106]

The issues Reagan addressed in the broadcast highlighted the other major change in campaign strategy instigated by Helms, Ellis and the NCCC – a shift away from Reagan's record and onto to topics that spoke to feelings of anger, insecurity, and betrayal among conservative North Carolinians. After blaming the federal government for a litany of problems including inflation, recession, and high taxes, Reagan warned of American foreign policy "wandering without aim" and of US power being in retreat around the globe. The NCCC also alighted on an issue that provoked a visceral reaction among southern voters: the proposed return of the Panama Canal to the Panamanian government. Both Reagan and Helms had

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[106] Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 152; James Naughton, "Reagan Suggests Ford Quit the Race", *NYT*, 19 March 1976; Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 423-424; "Reagan 30 minute statement, 16th March 1976", CFR; Joseph Lelyveld "Reagan's Upset Victory in North Carolina Attributed to Impact of Last-Minute TV Speech", *NYT*, 29 March 1976; Nofziger, 178.

raised the subject in Florida, but too late to change the outcome of the primary. Now, it became central to the campaign's theme of the betrayal of ordinary Americans by the Washington establishment. On the stump, Reagan asked rhetorically "What kind of foreign policy is it when a little tinhorn dictator in Panama says he is going to start guerrilla warfare against us unless we give him the Panama Canal?" and "How can we defend the giveaway of the Panama Canal?" Similarly, Jesse Helms demanded to know what George Washington would have made of those "who cringe, in fear and terror, at the threats of two-bit communist puppet dictators who demand, among other things, that we give away the Panama Canal which was bought and built with the blood and resources of the American people?" To answer the question, he concluded "I suspect George Washington would ask: What has happened to America?"[107]

Reagan and Helms were both aware that ownership of the Canal itself was not the issue for most North Carolina voters. More important was what it represented. On an emotional level, it chimed with the sense of grievance and betrayal southern conservatives felt towards the national Democratic Party, a mood Reagan had been tapping into for twenty years. The Canal issue was also symbolic of a nation in decline both at home and abroad – a decline that was not merely political but moral and social. To white southerners resentful at the changes their region had undergone over the previous decade, the issue spoke to a conviction that the Washington establishment was deceitful, weak, and increasingly liberal. President Ford was as much a part of this untrustworthy elite as the leaders of the Democratic Party. Reagan's North Carolina audiences, Rick Perlstein writes, "responded to the message

[107] "Reagan 30 minute statement"; Adam Clymer, *Drawing the Line at the Big Ditch: The Panama Canal Treaties and the Rise of the Right*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 30; Helms speech at Reagan rally, Greenville, 21 February 1976, Record Group 2, Box 230, JHP.

that Gerald Ford was surreptitiously giving away the might of God's chosen nation, for free, to a Marxist tinhorn dictator in Panama…like people hearing the Holy Word." In Florida, the issue had failed to generate the powerful response it did in North Carolina. As the *Baltimore Sun* observed, this reflected differences in Republican voters between the southern and non-southern states, particularly the growing preponderance of conservative former Democrats in the southern GOP. "[In] New Hampshire, Illinois – and, yes – Florida, the majority of the registered Republicans are the same breed of voter. They are traditional Republicans, supporters of the party of Lincoln and even Hoover," the *Sun* reported. "But in the real South, traditional Republicans are a rarity". The GOP's southern primary electorate was increasingly dominated by voters who "did not become Republicans because they believed in just not rocking the boat, as traditional Republicans elsewhere did." Instead they believed that "angry protest" and "drastic change" in Washington were required. These were the white southern voters Jesse Helms and Tom Ellis understood instinctively, in large part because they were cut from the same cloth.[108]

Though nearly a decade had passed since the turbulence of the 1960s civil rights campaigns, race also remained a central factor in North Carolinian politics, just as it did in most of the South. "It's race in North Carolina. That is not supposition. That is a fact," Frank Rouse later recalled. "The Democrats by and large were pro-busing, pro-integration, pro-welfare, pro-something for nothing. The Republicans resent the fact that blacks bloc vote for Democrats and white Democrats resent the fact that blacks have such a stranglehold on their party…Folks who live in suburbia or folks who moved to North Carolina don't understand it, but it is an absolute fact of life." Accordingly, as Jason Sokol observes, the GOP had begun "to

[108] Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge*, 647; Ernest Furgurson, "Ford's Campaign Experts Misread the Real South", *BS*, 28 March 1976.

morph into a sanctuary for southern whites". In North Carolina, the men who knew best how to exploit these racial and partisan shifts were the NCCC strategists. Tom Ellis and his colleagues printed leaflets suggesting that Gerald Ford was considering black Massachusetts Senator Edward Brooke for the vice presidency – without noting that he was only one of several possibilities under consideration – and distributed them to the predominantly white crowds at Reagan rallies. The racial overtones were clear.[109]

When Reagan found out about the flyers, he ordered Ellis to stop the distribution and, moreover, informed the media that he had done so. His national advisors maintained that their candidate had "never campaigned on race or used it as an issue, never will". Given Helms' past involvement in racist campaigning and Ellis's love of southern "slash-and-burn" politics, it seems unlikely that Reagan could have been genuinely surprised by the NCCC's distribution of such material. Instead, the episode was further evidence that Reagan's determination to win – driven by his profound belief that the US needed a conservative revolution to restore its greatness – often led him to overlook the race-baiting tactics of his southern allies. This will to succeed had kept Reagan in the primary race when all looked lost and, as this chapter will show, sometimes prompted him to make pragmatic political decisions that shocked his southern supporters. Ultimately, his campaign was unscathed by the brief media storm that surrounded the leaflet. As Rick Perlstein points out, Reagan was able to "have it both ways…by loudly denouncing it to the press while benefitting from the race-baiting, too."[110]

[109] Frank Rouse Oral History; Sokol, 280; James Naughton, "Reagan Halts Pamphlet Linking Ford to Brooke", *NYT*, 21 March 1976.
[110] Naughton, "Reagan Halts Pamphlet"; Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 423; Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge*, 643-647.

The Ed Brooke leaflet also signified that the vast majority of the NCCC's target electorate in North Carolina consisted of racially conservative white voters disenchanted with the political establishment, particularly disaffected Democrats and those who had fallen off electoral lists. Newspaper advertisements assured these malcontents that "you can vote your beliefs by re-registering Republican in order to cast a ballot for Ronald Reagan…Regardless of party registration, all citizens of North Carolina are invited to work and contribute to the Reagan for President effort." This was just one element in a highly effective direct mail and get-out-the-vote operation. NCCC staff also worked relentlessly to gather lists of registered Republicans from county and district election boards. Their details were then entered into a computer database and the voters repeatedly contacted by mail and telephone. Ellis and his staff amassed a list of 80,000 voters in North Carolina and a further 350,000 conservative supporters nationwide who would make up a fundraising base for Reagan's campaign in the Tar Heel state and beyond. The NCCC was, as William Link puts it, "at the cutting edge of a new approach to political mobilization."[111]

The NCCC's expertise and determination made Reagan's operation in North Carolina a formidable one. To some, it was more than a mere nomination challenge. In Jules Witcover's words, many "Helmsites" saw the campaign as "a holy war". Theirs was not a cause tethered by partisan affiliation. Little consideration was given to shaping a nuanced message in order to please the numerous interest groups within the GOP. Instead, it was a campaign aimed at harnessing the southern conservative insurgency that had been gaining traction in the party since the late 1960s. To these southerners, many of whom had been Republicans for less than

[111] "Political Advertisement: How Democrats and Republicans can help Ronald Reagan. And America", *NO*, 2 February 1976; Craig Shirley, *Reagan's Revolution: The Untold Story of the Campaign that Started It All*, (Nashville: Nelson Current: 2005), 168-173; Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 153.

a decade, Ronald Reagan was a totemic figure – a man they held in great personal affection, who was their best hope as a national leader, and who provided an excellent opportunity to reassert southern political power in Washington. Feeling betrayed and abandoned by the Democrats, they had found a new political home in the GOP and through Reagan's candidacy they sought to exert as much influence over it as possible at both state and national levels.[112]

Journalists who were largely unaware of the NCCC's efforts continued to predict a Reagan defeat and an embarrassing end to his nomination challenge. Instead, when the North Carolina primary results came through, Reagan was victorious by 52 percent to 46 percent. "Just when President Ford thought he had Ronald Reagan staggering on the ropes," wrote the *Los Angeles Times*, "the former California governor came slugging back". There were varied reasons for the outcome. Certainly, the differing attitudes of the campaigns was crucial. While Helms and Ellis were turning Reagan's candidacy into a 'holy war', Ford spent just two days in North Carolina and was expecting an easy win to wrap up the nomination. In addition, the low turnout of 40 percent favoured the passionate Reagan-Helms conservatives more than the moderates backing Ford. Reagan's enthusiastic support in the eastern part of North Carolina – Jesse Helms's electoral stronghold – enabled him to offset Ford's strength in the state's mountainous western counties, home to more traditional, long-standing Republican voters. The factional battle within the state GOP further encouraged a strong showing by the Helms-led insurgents. As Reagan advisor Peter Hannaford observed of the primary, "control of the state party was at stake."[113]

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[112] Witcover, 412.
[113] "Back in the Scrap", *LAT*, 24 March 1976; Ford, 375; "Voter Shifts, TV Spark Reagan Win", *NO*, 25 March 1976; Peter Hannaford, *The Reagans: A Political Portrait*, (New York: Coward-McCann, 1983), 85.

Though Helms received widespread credit, ultimately it was Tom Ellis and the NCCC who masterminded Reagan's win. The main elements of Ellis's campaign strategy – combining a state-wide media blitz with discreet but intensive voter registration and direct mailing – proved remarkably effective. A significant majority of the 20,000 newly registered voters had supported Reagan, and a post-election NBC poll found that his 30-minute television broadcast had "helped swing undecided voters". It was the first time a sitting president had been defeated after actively campaigning in a primary contest, and the result also gave Helms and his fellow conservatives "the upper hand" in the state Republican Party. Helms and Ellis would control the North Carolina delegation to the Republican convention that summer, with Governor James Holshauser not even a member, and the NCCC was elevated to a position of dominance in the state GOP. Reagan's victory also demonstrated that his candidacy was a viable vehicle for southern conservatives to assert greater influence within the national Republican Party. For Reagan personally, North Carolina had rescued his campaign – possibly even his political career – and established him as a serious contender for the presidency. As Lou Cannon notes, "After the North Carolina primary, Reagan was at all times a legitimate, full-fledged presidential candidate". Reagan remembered the importance of the primary for the rest of his political life. Fifteen years later, he wrote to Jesse Helms: "I'll never forget what you did for me in 1976. I shudder to think how things would have turned out had North Carolina not gambled on this guy." Though Reagan still trailed Ford's delegate total, the North Carolina result made the Ford team acutely aware that the nomination contest would be a hard-fought battle.[114]

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[114] Ned Cline, "Reagan TV Spots, Backlash Won It", *GDN*, 25 March 1976; Furgurson, 118-119; Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 424-426; Ronald Reagan to Jesse Helms, 18 October 1991, Presidential Letters: Reagan, JHP.

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A financially motivated decision to stop campaigning in Wisconsin, followed by similar concessions in Pennsylvania and New York, meant Reagan's momentum waned in the weeks after his victory and allowed Ford to recover. Reagan's advisors again looked to a southern primary to revitalise his campaign, this time in Texas. Ironically, events in the Democratic primaries proved to be an enormous help to Reagan. As Jimmy Carter began to wrap up the Democratic nomination and deflate George Wallace's final presidential campaign, culturally conservative Wallace supporters became potential Reagan voters, particularly in states such as Texas which allowed crossover voting. In Texas, flyers were distributed reassuring conservative Democrats that voting for Reagan would not be betraying their values, and radio advertisements were aired featuring a Wallace supporter from Fort Worth, Rollie Millirons. "George Wallace can't be nominated. Ronald Reagan can," Millirons told listeners. "He's right on the issues. So for the first time in my life I'm gonna vote in the Republican primary. I'm gonna vote for Ronald Reagan." After Reagan aide Jeff Bell advised that "appeals to like-minded Democrats to cross over should be renewed whenever possible," Reagan's personal narrative, as a former Democrat who believed the party had abandoned its principles, was resurrected in his stump speeches. It proved especially resonant in the Wallace stronghold of East Texas.[115]

When Reagan campaigned on social issues, it was in East Texas that audiences responded with the most fervent applause. Reagan condemned school busing as an

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[115] Witcover, 418-419; "Some Wallace backers join Reagan campaign", *FWST*, 9 April 1976; Memo from Jeff Bell to Peter Hannaford, 12 April 1976, Box 6, PHP; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "In Texas, a Wallace-to-Reagan Switch", *WP*, 21 April 1976.

experiment which treated children as "guinea pigs" and criticised Betty Ford for her views on premarital sex and the legalisation of abortion. Gerald Ford, however, refused to fight on the same ground. As Sean Cunningham notes, "the battlefield of social values was forfeited to Reagan without a fight." In several areas, Ford proved an easy target. Reagan adroitly positioned himself as both a populist champion and an exponent of big business, variously condemning the decline of Christianity in public schools, Ford's signing of an unpopular energy bill that placed price controls on oil companies, and an expansion of the Voting Rights Act which brought Texas under that law for the first time. "Into each topic, Reagan infused anti-government animus and dire warnings of impending national insecurity", observes Cunningham. "The public's awareness of this appeal acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy, drawing even larger numbers of undecided conservative Democrats into the Reagan tent." As it had in North Carolina, the Texas primary exacerbated the divide between conservative insurgents and the GOP establishment. John Tower – a leading Texas Republican since being elected to the Senate in 1961 – became a victim of this intraparty battle after taking on the role of Ford's state campaign chairman. Though Tower had endorsed Reagan's bid for California governor in 1966, Reagan now attacked him for backtracking on social issues. Tower had indeed adjusted his positions considerably to align himself with the Ford campaign and consequently saw his reputation among conservative Texans suffer. "By endorsing Ford over Reagan in 1976," writes Cunningham, "Tower unwittingly positioned himself as the villain standing in the way of Texas conservatives' new hero."[116]

[116] Carolyn Barta, "Texas Taken By Horns", *DMN*, 6 April 1976; Linda Pavlik, "800 in attendance at evening rally for Reagan in Dallas", *FWST*, 6 April 1976; Cunningham, *Cowboy Conservatism*, 164-173; Remarks by Ronald Reagan in Midland, Texas, 13 April 1976, Box 40, CFR.

A remarkably high turnout on 1 May resulted in a stunning victory for Reagan. He won by 66 percent to 33 percent, garnered all of Texas's 96 delegates to the GOP convention, and inflicted the heaviest defeat ever suffered by a sitting president. The *New York Times* reported that a "massive Democratic crossover vote" had helped Reagan beat Ford by more than 3 to 1 in many East Texas districts. After the primary, the concerns of the Ford campaign were apparent in an internal report. Many voters in the primary contest, it noted, "have not been involved in the Republican political system before; they vote overwhelmingly for Reagan." The energy and enthusiasm among conservatives were a consequence of "skillful organization by extreme right-wing political groups in the Reagan camp operating almost invisibly through direct mail and voter turnout efforts". Reagan was receiving help from various groups, including gun ownership advocates, George Wallace supporters, and right to life organisations. These were "not loyal Republicans or Democrats…they will work to support their positions, they will turn out to vote in larger numbers than party regulars." The report concluded, "We are in real danger of being out-organized by a small number of highly motivated *right-wing nuts*".[117]

The report clearly suggested a sense of panic in the Ford campaign, but it was nevertheless true that southern conservatives were providing crucial strategic and fundraising assistance to Reagan's candidacy. Tom Ellis travelled to Texas to offer tactical advice, while the NCCC's direct mail operation had raised around $778,000 for the Reagan campaign since the North Carolina primary. It was also true that the men leading these efforts were driven far more by the political agenda and character of the white South than by any real loyalty to the Republican Party. Helms and Ellis were first and foremost conservative

[117] James Sterba, "Democratic Vote Propels Reagan to Texas Sweep", *NYT*, 3 May 1976; "An Explanation of the Reagan Victories in Texas and Caucus States", Box 25, JJF.

southerners. Journalist Ferrel Guillory observed that "from a long range perspective, the continued existence of the Republican Party as it is now known is not central to Helms' political concerns." Likewise, the American Conservative Union – which provided Reagan with fundraising help – was chaired by M. Stanton Evans, a pugnacious southern conservative born in Texas and raised in Tennessee. In Evans' view, the Republican presidencies of Ford and Nixon were merely "an extension of the Kennedy-Johnson administrations". In 1975, both Helms and Evans had publicly toyed with the idea of forming a conservative third party. The influence of these southerners effectively turned Reagan's 1976 candidacy into a nationwide version of the conservative insurgency that had been dividing the southern GOP in recent years. As such, it appealed powerfully to a white southern electorate that felt betrayed by the Democratic Party but was still a long way from trusting the Republican establishment to represent their interests. Many conservative voters in Texas, for example, were "initially reluctant to embrace the GOP, but could do so with less guilt if the man they were placing their trust in appeared to be just as hostile to established party leadership as they were."[118]

For the remainder of the primaries, Reagan and Ford traded victories, with Ford winning in the Northeast and Midwest and Reagan winning in the South and West. Reagan's wins included dominant victories in Georgia, Alabama and Arkansas – each propelled by crossover voting by George Wallace supporters. One columnist observed of Reagan in Alabama that he "sparked more enthusiasm and interest with his brief appearance than all the state and local candidates combined". Reagan's popularity in southern states provided his campaign with crucial momentum, with two notable exceptions. In both Kentucky and

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[118] Shirley, *Reagan's Revolution*, 180, 191; Ferrel Guillory, "Helms Interested in a Cause, But Not G.O.P. Cause", *NO*, 27 June 1976; "M. Stanton Evans, Who Helped Shape Conservative Movement, Is Dead at 80", *NYT*, 3 March 2015; "Irked conservatives look to third party", *CT*, 15 February 1975; Cunningham, *Cowboy Conservatism*, 176.

Tennessee on 25 May, he suffered defeats in southern primaries his advisors had been confident of winning. These defeats reflected a divergence that would re-emerge throughout Reagan's political career, between anti-statist Reaganite conservatism and the economic interests of his southern supporters.[119]

As noted, in the late 1950s Reagan had repeatedly criticised the Tennessee Valley Authority as an example of federal encroachment into the sphere of private enterprise. As one of the largest federal programmes enacted under Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the TVA had originally been intended to provide electricity to impoverished rural areas using hydroelectric dams, to aid flood prevention, and to manage numerous factories and farms producing food and industrial materials. By the mid-1970s, it had branched out into nuclear power and remained economically vital to huge swathes of Tennessee and Kentucky. As Rick Perlstein notes, it was particularly popular in Tennessee: "even conservatives loved the TVA in the Volunteer State." Reagan had largely avoided criticising the TVA after entering politics, but he could not avoid the subject when campaigning in Tennessee and Kentucky. Questioned by reporters in Knoxville shortly before primary day, Reagan claimed the TVA's expansion meant it was now "competing with private enterprise…able as an agency without the consent of the people to amass a debt against the people, to put the people into debt for hundreds of millions of dollars." Asked directly if he would privatise the TVA, Reagan replied "I don't think I can give you an answer...It would be something to look at." President Ford's surrogates jumped on Reagan's comments. One Kentucky Representative described TVA privatisation as "a disaster to Southcentral and Western Kentucky", while Tennessee Senator Howard Baker said it was "simply out of the question to seriously talk about selling it." When Reagan went

[119] Kenneth Reich, "Triple Victory for Reagan", *LAT*, 5 May 1976; Bill Sellers, "Reagan's stopover brought primary life", *MR*, 25 April 1976; "30,000 vote Republican", *AD*, 26 May 1976.

on to lose both Tennessee and Kentucky primaries, his defeats were by such narrow margins – around 2,000 votes and 5,000 votes respectively – that the TVA backlash is almost certain to have made the difference. The TVA was a prime example of the way the South's economic self-interest could trump its anti-government sentiment once a federal project or subsidy had become crucial to the region. The episode also indicated the extent to which Reagan's southern supporters were willing to oppose him if their economic interests were endangered, something they would demonstrate repeatedly during the 1980s.[120]

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With Ford holding a slim delegate lead as the convention neared, Reagan's political pragmatism caused the first major rift with his southern conservative supporters. In late July, the Reagan campaign announced the nomination of Pennsylvania Senator Richard Schweiker as his vice-presidential running mate. The decision to announce a running mate before the convention was prompted by a narrowing of the delegate count in early summer. With media estimates suggesting Ford was less than 50 delegate votes from winning the nomination, Reagan's campaign manager John Sears concluded drastic action was needed. Naming a running mate, Sears believed, would force Gerald Ford into the difficult position of doing the same. However, the choice of Schweiker was to prove deeply problematic. Though Schweiker's Catholicism meant he took relatively conservative stances on abortion and school

[120] "About TVA – Our History", Tennessee Valley Authority Website; Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge*, 691; Witcover, 427-428; "Reagan Talks Of TVA Sale, But Backs Off", *LH*, 22 May 1976; "Ford seeks Tennessee Wallace Vote", *KN*, 7 May 1976; Adam Clymer, "GOP test in South watched", *BS*, 24 May 1976; Shirley, *Reagan's Revolution*, 227-228.

prayer, he was otherwise regarded as one of the most liberal Republicans in the Senate. He had opposed the Vietnam War, was an ally of national labour unions – the only senator from either party whose voting record received a 100 percent rating from the AFL-CIO in 1975 – and advocated the break-up of large oil companies. He even received an 89 percent rating from Americans for Democratic Action, the same as Democrat George McGovern.[121]

The choice of Schweiker sparked fury among Reagan's southern allies. "Instead of relying upon Southerners, Mr. Reagan has written them off – and in a manner that can only be described as callous," claimed an editorial in the *Charleston News and Courier*. "He is one who wants the presidency badly enough to resort to graceless betrayal of an early and enthusiastic constituency which deserves better of him." Letters echoing the *Courier*'s fury arrived at Reagan headquarters from conservatives across the South. A Texan who had donated "several hundreds of dollars" to Reagan's campaign somewhat hysterically described the choice of Schweiker as "the worst rape of the South since the Civil War" and demanded that Reagan withdraw his candidacy: "I believe this is the only choice left to a turncoat!" Others were less overwrought but equally embittered. "I feel that you have stabbed your friends in the back," one Louisianan wrote to Reagan. "You are evidently a hypocrite." A North Carolinian suggested his $225 donation should be spent on flowers for Reagan and Schweiker's shared "political grave", while a correspondent from Mississippi wrote plaintively, "I now feel that you have lost a major portion of your Southern support. This is very disappointing because you were really our man."[122]

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[121] Adam Clymer, "Reagan, Ford play GOP poker", *BS*, 21 July 1976; Witcover, 441, 456-459; Steven Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Fall of the Old Liberal Order, 1964-1980*, (Roseville: Prima, 2001), 474-475.

[122] "Reagan's Dismaying Choice", *CNC*, 28 July 1976; B.E. Quinn to Citizens for Reagan Headquarters, 28 July 1976, Edgar Saunders to Ronald Reagan, 28 July 1976, Carl Payler to Ronald Reagan, 27 July 1976, C.M. Treppendahl to Ronald Reagan, 27 July 1976, all in Box 47, CFR.

Prominent southern conservatives reacted with similar consternation. Tom Ellis told journalists, "I don't like it. I couldn't believe it." According to William Link, Ellis saw choosing Schweiker as "a capitulation to the party's liberal wing – as much, perhaps, as Ford's selection of Rockefeller in 1974". Reagan telephoned Jesse Helms at 9.05pm the evening before the Schweiker announcement. Helms later remarked that he "wanted to record for posterity the exact time I received the shock of my life." At a subsequent gathering of North Carolina Republicans, he declared "I will not go along with political expediency, whether intended to be that or not" and described the previous days as "a week that I wish had never been." Nonetheless, he remained a Reagan supporter. Helms wrote in his memoirs that Reagan had reassured him "Jess, you know where my heart is…It's all right." He continued to believe in Reagan's commitment to conservatism and urged his state's delegates to remain loyal, albeit with the aim of pressuring the campaign to replace Schweiker once the nomination had been won.[123]

According to the *Atlanta Constitution,* the fallout was widespread: "all across the south Reagan supporters appeared to be slipping away." Leading Reagan backers were stating publicly that their position was under consideration. Strom Thurmond – who had not been informed ahead of the announcement – was lukewarm in reaffirming his support for Reagan: "I expect to fulfil that commitment, unless something else comes up in connection with this". Some Louisiana delegates who had pledged to vote for Reagan claimed his actions had "negated" their support. One told the *Advocate*, "I recognize a responsibility to the people who elected me to vote for Reagan, but whether I honor that commitment is totally another

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[123] "Reagan Gambles Big on Schweiker", *NO*, 28 July 1976; Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 160; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Miscalculations in the Schweiker ploy", *GDN*, 29 July 1976; Martin Donsky, "Schweiker Choice Dampens Event", *NO*, 1 August 1976; Helms, 104; Ferrel Guillory, "Helms Sees Obligation Only to Reagan", *NO*, 6 August 1976.

matter". Similarly, a prominent Texas Republican admitted "I'd be less than candid if I didn't express substantial disappointment…[I] had operated under the faith that when Governor Reagan selected a vice president, it would be someone compatible with himself and the South." The response demonstrated the extent to which conservative southerners had previously overlooked Reagan's streak of political pragmatism. His actions as California governor had often been more expedient than his rhetoric, but this was something many of his ardent followers in the South preferred to ignore.[124]

Undoubtedly, the choice of Schweiker was a significant reversal by Reagan. During the campaign, he had repeatedly spoken out against the idea of balancing the ticket, claiming that doing so meant being "false with the people who vote for you and your philosophy." After making such remarks, choosing Schweiker was bound to infuriate those southern Republicans who had left the Democratic Party because they believed it had betrayed them. Reagan cited GOP unity as the main reason behind his choice, saying he wanted to "bring two groups of the party together, that have been more or less estranged". Even years later, Reagan remained convinced that choosing Schweiker was not a mistake. "I had not abandoned my belief, nor will I, that the man suggested for the second spot on the ticket should be one who would carry on the programs enunciated by the presidential nominee", he wrote in 1979. Reagan's southern supporters needed a similar rationalisation in order to remain loyal. Some, like Jesse Helms, decided it was more important to focus on helping Reagan win the nomination, before then attempting to oust Schweiker from the ticket at the Republican convention. Others absolved Reagan of personal blame by directing their anger towards his

[124] "Your Move, Ronnie", *AC*, 29 July 1976; Joan McKinney, "Thurmond, Edwards Are Reassessing Their Commitments", *CNC*, 27 July 1976; "Schweiker May Alienate La. Reagan Delegates", *Advocate*, 8 August 1976; Larry Neal, "Reagan move shocks GOP leaders in Texas", *FWST,* 27 July 1976.

advisors, particularly John Sears. In their eyes, Reagan would not have resorted to such expediency had Sears not talked him into it. Within weeks, the “long knives” would be out for Sears, “wielded by some of Reagan’s most conservative, and most chagrined, supporters”. He would become a reviled figure among southern conservatives in the wake of the 1976 convention.[125]

Southerners’ desire to excuse Reagan and instead focus responsibility elsewhere reflected the deep well of personal affection and political credit he had built up over two decades spent visiting the South. Nonetheless, the choice of Schweiker did hurt Reagan’s nomination chances. The main purpose had been to win the backing of the large, uncommitted Pennsylvania delegation, but Schweiker brought just one delegate over to Reagan’s side. Conversely, uncommitted southern delegates started to come out in favour of Ford, who was now less than 30 shy of the 1,130 required. Ultimately, it was Mississippi that deprived Ronald Reagan of the GOP nomination. Long thought a solid Reagan state, on 10 April Mississippi Republicans had voted for their delegation to remain uncommitted until closer to the party convention, a move designed to increase their influence in the nomination battle. The delegation would observe a so-called ‘unit rule’, meaning that a majority vote among delegates would determine which candidate received the state’s 30 votes. Gerald Ford later admitted his campaign “didn’t think we had much of a chance to win” Mississippi. However, in mid-June – as Ford inched towards his delegate target – Reagan’s advisors began to receive warnings that Mississippi delegates were wavering. This was confirmed when the delegation chairman, Clarke Reed, spoke to the *New York Times* on 22 July. Reed was “an

[125] Witcover, 456; “Reagan, Schweiker Grilled”, *AC*, 5 August 1976; Ronald Reagan to Mr. Kiesewetter, 15 November 1979, in *Reagan: A Life in Letters*, Kiron Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson (eds.), (New York: Free Press, 2003), 217-218; Edward Walsh, “Dump Schweiker Effort Surfacing”, *WP*, 7 August 1976; Jules Witcover, “As Reagan Bid Fades, Strategist Sears Faces Long Knives”, *WP*, 19 August 1976.

eminently pressureable man" with a desire to play kingmaker at the Kansas City convention, and the *Times* reported him as saying "the Mississippians were likely to board the Ford caboose if not the locomotive. He said they were "not going to be dead-enders.""[126]

The Schweiker selection gave Reed the pretext he needed to switch sides. He declared his endorsement of Gerald Ford on 28 July, on the basis that Reagan had chosen a running mate "with a philosophy opposite to his own and well to the left of the American mainstream. I believe that having this kind of vice-president is too big a price to pay for the nomination." Ford quickly flew to Mississippi to meet the state's delegates, before appearing in front of the media alongside Reed and declaring he was "very, very optimistic" that he would win the nomination. When Reagan and Schweiker made their first joint campaign trip in early August, they unsurprisingly began in Mississippi. Over six hours of meetings, they sought to persuade delegates that Schweiker was more conservative than he had been portrayed. But Schweiker struggled to convince the Mississippi delegation that, in his own words, "I don't have horns". His voting record was simply too liberal for many to abide, and his pleas were met with scornful responses: "Look, senator, you Yankees think we southern boys are stupid, but we ain't that stupid!" When the Mississippi delegates arrived at the Kansas City convention – to find themselves the focus of national media attention – their loyalty was still undecided. After the initial shock over Schweiker had abated, some Mississippi delegates started to move back in Reagan's direction, but neither side could be certain if they would have a majority once it came down to a vote.[127]

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[126] Kenneth Wiess, "3 La. Delegates to Ford", *Times-Picayune*, 30 July 1976; Jere Nash and Andy Taggart, *Mississippi Politics: The Struggle for Power, 1976-2006*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 59-60; "Mississippi's G.O.P. to Be Uncommitted", *NYT*, 11 April 1976; Ford, 395; Witcover, 442-454; James Naughton, "Shift of Mississippi G.O.P. To Ford Termed Imminent", *NYT*, 22 July 1976.

[127] "Mississippi leader leaves Reagan", *DMN*, 29 July 1976; "Ford Forces Claim Mississippi Gains", *Advocate*, 31 July 1976; Ed Anderson, "Reagan's Visit to Miss. Was Failure, Aide Says", *Times-Picayune*, 6 August 1976;

The complex events of the 1976 Republican Convention have been detailed in numerous works, including *The Invisible Bridge* by Rick Perlstein, *Marathon* by Jules Witcover, and *Reagan's Revolution* by Craig Shirley. In short, though, the nomination was decided when an attempt by John Sears to change convention rules was voted down. In a last roll of the dice, Sears proposed a change to Rule 16-C that would require all candidates to name their vice-presidential running mate before voting began for the party's nominee. This was an unsubtle attempt to place Gerald Ford in an awkward position, but the rule change became, in effect, a proxy nomination vote. As David Keene, Reagan's southern campaign director, understood, the Mississippi delegation was critical. "If Mississippi goes down the chute on 16-C, we lose it on the floor, we lose the nomination, it's all right there." By just three votes, the Mississippi delegation voted to oppose Rule 16-C. Following the unit rule, the state's 30 delegates on the convention floor would go in Ford's favour. The few remaining uncommitted delegates started to publicly side with Ford, not only on 16-C but also in the nomination battle, and the Reagan campaign finally had to acknowledge defeat. The South had revitalised and propelled Reagan's nomination challenge but, in the end, it was a handful of southern votes that kept victory out of his reach.[128]

The following day, President Gerald Ford defeated Ronald Reagan to win the nomination by 1,187 votes to 1,070. Demonstrating just how divided the state's delegates were, Mississippi ultimately broke its unit rule and cast 16 votes for Ford and 14 for Reagan. Reagan's southern supporters reacted to his defeat with grief, anger and disgust. For many, the prime target for blame was John Sears. The Texas delegation, for example, had remained

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"Reagan, Schweiker Grilled", *AC*; Drummond Ayres, "Mississippians' Stand Has Cost Them Dearly", *AC*, 17 August 1976; Nash and Taggart, 64-65.

[128] Shirley, *Reagan's Revolution*, 318-320; Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge*, 755-756, 776-780; Witcover, 495-497.

loyal and voted unanimously for Reagan, but one angry delegate singled out Sears for vitriol: "If Reagan is dead, it's because of Sears." Tom Ellis likewise condemned Sears' rule change ploy, saying, "I think it stank…You don't go on a procedural matter unless you've got the votes". Jesse Helms referred to it as "that Mickey Mouse thing of John Sears". Though Sears' missteps did not cost Reagan many southern delegates, they undermined southern conservative faith in the Reagan campaign. As the *Atlanta Constitution* put it, the choice of Schweiker "demoralized some of the Reagan faithful without adding any substantial number of new recruits to the cause." In something of an overstatement, the *Dallas Morning News* described it as "one of the most incredible blunders in the history of American politics".[129]

After Ford's acceptance address, he invited Reagan to speak from the convention podium in a gesture seemingly aimed at restoring party unity. Instead, Reagan's speech – condemning "the erosion of freedom that has taken place under Democratic rule in this country, the invasion of private rights, the controls and restrictions on the vitality of the great free economy that we enjoy" – made many conservatives even more certain the wrong man had won. Even Mississippi chairman Clarke Reed was regretful. When he approached Reagan and told him "Governor, I've made the worst mistake of my life", Reagan responded, "It's a little late now, Clarke." After the convention, the political editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* wrote that "southerners went home in hang-dog dejection, their energies drained, their spirits crushed. Ronald Reagan was their chief, numero uno for more than a decade. And Ronald Reagan was no more." This underestimated Reagan's personal and political resilience.

[129] John Geddie, "Republicans nominate Ford, ending long, stormy race", *DMN*, 19 August 1976; Nash and Taggart, 66; Larry Neal, "Viva Reagan Texans may vote: si, work: no", *FWST*, 19 August 1976; Ken Friedlein, "Helms, Reagan Apart at End", *AC*, 29 August 1976; "Reagan Retrospect", *AC*, 22 August 1976; Daniel Hoover, "Ellis Unleashes Criticism Of Reagan Staff", *NO*, 19 August 1976.

It also overlooked the way his campaign had created an opportunity for southern conservatives to increase their influence over the direction of the Republican Party.[130]

Their newfound influence was visible in the Republican platform. At a meeting in Atlanta in July, Jesse Helms, Tom Ellis, and others had devised plans to replace policy positions they regarded as too liberal with, in Ellis' words, "principles we think the Republican Party should stand for". Predictably, many of these principles ran "directly counter to Ford administration policies". Demands for constitutional amendments to ban abortion and forced busing sat alongside unambiguous opposition to gun control. Conversely, pro-Equal Rights Amendment language would be removed entirely. At the convention, Reagan's senior advisors wanted to avoid fights over platform issues, fearing they would alienate moderate delegates. But, as Rick Perlstein notes, Reagan's southern allies were now "too powerful for the campaign to ignore". The conservative platform challenge went ahead with the reluctant approval of Reagan's team. In response, also wanting to avoid divisive policy disputes, Ford capitulated. Platform committees approved most of the conservative policy planks and language on busing, abortion, and welfare was hardened substantially. Support for "a more rational distribution of welfare money" became a plank stating, "we oppose federalizing the welfare system…We also oppose the guaranteed annual income concept or any programs that reduce the incentive to work." A commitment to deal with the "root causes" of segregation was removed, while a pledge to prevent the sale of cheap handguns was replaced with an unequivocal pro-gun statement: "We support the right of citizens to keep and bear arms. We oppose federal registration of firearms."[131]

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[130] "1976 Presidential Endorsement Speech" video, C-SPAN website; Shirley, *Reagan's Revolution*, 329; David Nordan, "Reagan's Loss Hurts Dixie GOP", *AC*, 22 August 1976.
[131] Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 159-161; Spencer Rich, "GOP Unit Backs Abortion Plank", *WP*, 11 August 1976; Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge*, 758-759; "Republican Party Platform of 1976"; Hayward, 477-478.

On foreign policy, conservative demands caused even greater unease among Reagan's advisors. Calls for the US to retain "sovereignty" over the Panama Canal, to maintain arms "superiority" over the Soviet Union (rather than "rough equivalency") and to continue trading with white African governments were all stipulated. Most pointed of all was the demand for an outright condemnation of détente – a blatant attack on the signature policy of Ford's Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Ultimately, a new plank called 'Morality in Foreign Policy' was settled upon. It was milder than Helms and Ellis wanted, but still represented a thinly veiled critique of Ford's record. Declarations such as "Ours will be a foreign policy which recognizes that in international negotiations we must make no undue concessions" and "we are firmly committed to a foreign policy in which secret agreements, hidden from our people, will have no part" were clearly designed to undercut Ford and Kissinger's actions over the Panama Canal and détente. To Kissinger's dismay, Ford accepted the plank, fearing that a possible fight over the issue could cost him the nomination. Though they were more evident in domestic policy than foreign policy, the entire GOP platform bore conspicuous hallmarks of southern conservatism.[132]

It was apparent, therefore, that southerners like Jesse Helms were more interested in advancing their conservatism than healing a divided party. One columnist wrote that Helms believed "the same thing about political parties that he believes about wishbones: It doesn't matter if you tear them apart, just as long as you get the biggest piece." While Reagan had benefitted greatly from the support of southern conservatives, the reverse was also true. It is inconceivable that Helms, Ellis, and others could have forced such significant changes to the GOP platform had it not been for their role in Reagan's campaign. "It was because of the

[132] Hayward, 477-478; Hannaford, 129-131; "Republican Party Platform of 1976"; Ford, 398.

Reagan victories that began in North Carolina," Helms subsequently wrote to Stanton Evans, "that we were able to project the conservative message to millions of Americans and to have considerable influence on the drafting of the Republican platform, the most conservative in recent memory." Their influence in 1976 was an early manifestation of a profound transformation in the GOP's character. From that point on, it became unthinkable that a Republican platform could, for example, be pro-choice on the issue of abortion. Southern social and racial conservatism was on the way to becoming a central feature of the Republican Party's political identity. Carl Rowan, writing for the *Atlanta Constitution*, came away from the GOP convention with some perceptive "nagging thoughts" about the direction of the party. "I left Kansas City wondering if that throng of delegates, clamoring and weeping for Ronald Reagan long after the battle was lost, screaming that [Ford's running mate] Bob Dole wasn't conservative enough, begging for North Carolina's Sen. Jesse Helms, could be the wave of the future."[133]

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In November, Reagan's southern support split between Ford and Jimmy Carter, though both were viewed with circumspection in the white South. Rather than supporting Ford, Jesse Helms and Tom Ellis undertook what they described as an "educational" campaign, promoting the Republican platform while ignoring the top of the ticket. Many white southerners who backed Ford did so largely because of the GOP platform. According to Reagan's Georgia

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[133] Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 163; Jesse Helms to Stanton Evans, 14 September 1976, Record Group 2, Box 1544, JHP; Carl Rowan, "Nagging Thoughts From Kansas City", *AC*, 25 August 1976.

campaign director, "The Republican platform turned out to be one that every Reagan supporter could avidly support". Most Wallace Democrats, however, ultimately preferred Carter over Ford. As the *Christian Science Monitor* suggested, they were attracted to Carter almost solely because they were "reluctant to give up this opportunity to put a man from the Deep South in the White House." Still, their support was cautious at best – a consequence of Carter's moderate stance on civil rights and his popularity among black southerners. A *Dallas Morning News* editorial colourfully described much of Carter's white southern support as "conservative sheep…who went trotting off at the sound of a gentle Southern voice but who no longer care for some of the things that voice is saying." While Gerald Ford narrowly lost the presidential election to Jimmy Carter by 57 Electoral College votes and a popular vote margin of 2 percent, results in the South were more clear-cut. Aside from a Ford victory in Virginia, Carter's appeal among his fellow southerners enabled him to win the entire region. An unnamed Ford advisor argued the results showed that "blood was thicker than philosophy" in the South and described southern support for Carter as an "emotional binge".[134]

Reagan appeared on Ford's behalf in twenty states during the presidential campaign, including Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Florida. Like Helms, though, his speeches often made little mention of the president. Speaking at the Houston Music Hall, Reagan "continued to hold the undivided attention of Texas conservatives," according to the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, but his words "centered on the Republican platform" rather than the party's ticket. After Ford's defeat, Reagan claimed in an interview that he "could have broken into the Solid

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[134] "Most Reagan Backers Now Supporting Ford Campaign", *AC*, 15 October 1976; Godfrey Sperling, "South welcomes Ford, but hedges on endorsement", *CSM*, 28 September 1976; William Murchison, "A Breathing 'Corpse'", *DMN*, 11 November 1976; "1976 Presidential Election", American Presidency Project website; "Reagan is stirring again", *CT*, 5 November 1976.

South" and won the presidency, but this is debatable. Reagan would have provided a stiffer challenge in the South, but in 1976 Carter's appeal – as an outsider to Washington but someone who felt familiar to both white and black southerners – was formidable. Moreover, it is unlikely Reagan had the required electoral strength in the rest of the country. With Watergate still a painful recent memory, most Americans wanted a new face in the White House, but they were probably not yet inclined to move their country further to the right. Nevertheless, Reagan embarked on what amounted to a four-year campaign for the 1980 Republican nomination. He continued "selling the conservative elixir", as Lou Cannon puts it, throughout the late 1970s, making hundreds of appearances at GOP events nationwide, penning newspaper columns, and writing and presenting daily radio talks on a range of political topics. As intended, Reagan's activities kept him in the public eye and helped maintain his position as the unofficial leader of the Republican right.[135]

At the same time, a movement was emerging which would serve as a vehicle for southern conservatism and alter the political landscape of both the South and the US: the Christian Right. Conservative southern evangelicals had been politically involved from the early 20th century, notably in defending Prohibition during the 1920s. But their determination to exert partisan political influence – by forming groups like the Moral Majority and Christian Voice or by aggressively taking control of existing organisations such as the Southern Baptist Convention – was a new trend. The transformation of the SBC during the late 1970s exemplified the movement's rise. As Paul Harvey writes, conservatives in the SBC "built a political machine" and "engaged in astute parliamentary manoeuvring to advance their cause.

[135] Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 433, 437-439; "Reagan Pushes Republican Platform On Campaign Swing Through State", *Advocate*, 24 September 1976; Linda Pavlik, "Reagan Still Popular", *FWST*, 15 October 1976; "Could have beaten Carter – Reagan", *LAT*, 6 December 1976.

In short, they operated effectively as a political movement". As they took over its leadership positions, they pushed the SBC into increasingly draconian stances on social issues and towards a deeper involvement in partisan politics. From being a largely non-partisan organisation for much of its history, the Southern Baptist Convention became a prominent part of the Christian Right.[136]

The Christian Right's campaigns acted as an outlet for the political and cultural revanchism of the conservative South in the post-civil rights era. The movement had, as Rozell and Smith have observed, "deep roots in the South…the region's persistent overlap of religion and politics was moving away from race and civil rights and toward issues that would later define the Christian Right". In its vehement opposition to abortion and gay rights and its demand for mandatory prayer in public schools, the movement was "[waging] a defensive campaign against a changing society." The white South's struggle to maintain the institutions of racial segregation had morphed into a fight to preserve, and even export, the region's ingrained social traditionalism. Yet the Christian Right also demonstrated many of the white South's racial preoccupations. As Randall Balmer and others have pointed out, the political mobilisation of evangelicals occurred some years after *Roe v. Wade* (1973) removed legal barriers to abortion. Though evangelicals were undoubtedly determined to oppose abortion and gay rights, the establishment of groups like the Moral Majority was prompted instead by the Carter administration's 1978 revocation of tax exemptions from racially discriminatory Christian schools in the South. Alongside fighting to protect these exemptions, Christian Right groups "fleshed out their platforms to include positions not ordinarily dealt with in Sunday School." These also epitomised southern conservatism: fervent anti-communism (including

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[136] Daniel Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2; Harvey, "Religion, Race, and the Right", 118-120.

denouncing US-Soviet treaties limiting nuclear arms), support for white African regimes, opposition to relinquishing control of the Panama Canal, and demands for increased military spending.[137]

Ronald Reagan understood that winning Christian Right support was crucial if he was to challenge Jimmy Carter in 1980. Despite being politically moderate, Carter's evangelical Christianity (he had been a Southern Baptist layman when governor of Georgia) had proved persuasive to white southerners and helped him defeat Gerald Ford. In contrast, though he had developed connections to Southern Baptists as California governor, Reagan was comparatively inexperienced in dealing with evangelical voters in 1976. In an interview with William Martin, former Nixon aide Charles Colson – who became an evangelical Christian after being imprisoned as a result of Watergate – recalled a reporter asking Reagan if he was "born again". Colson said, "Reagan shrugged, like the fellow had landed from Mars. He didn't know what it meant." Reagan had won some support among southern evangelicals, particularly once Jesse Helms and the NCCC gained influence over his campaign and discussion of traditional morality began to appear more regularly in his speeches. But in 1980, following the Christian Right's emergence as a political force, such language was even more important. Reagan honed his moralistic rhetoric and learned how to, in the words of journalist Kenneth Briggs, "[play] the themes – the personal morality themes, his opposition to abortion, his emphasis on the family."[138]

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[137] Rozell and Smith, "Religious Conservatives", 134-140; Balmer, "The Real Origins of the Religious Right"; William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*, (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 210.
[138] Martin, 208-209; Craig Shirley, *Reagan Rising: The Decisive Years, 1976-1980*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 301.

Yet Reagan's instincts remained, in large part, "moderately libertarian". This was clear from his intervention in the debate over California's Proposition 6 in 1978. Republican State Senator John Briggs placed on the ballot a proposition calling for the removal of gay teachers from public schools. The so-called Briggs Initiative was strongly supported by anti-gay rights campaigners across the nation, including the Christian Right. In the end, however, the measure was defeated. Briggs himself attributed the result to a late intervention by Reagan, after the former governor argued that Proposition 6 "has the potential of infringing on basic rights of privacy and perhaps even constitutional rights…Innocent lives could be ruined." In response, Virginia Pastor Jerry Falwell – who founded the Moral Majority the following year – condemned Reagan for taking "the political rather than the moral route". Reagan, he said, would "have to face the music from Christian voters two years from now". Perhaps aware of a need to repair the damage, as the 1970s came to an end Reagan's rhetoric on social issues hardened. On abortion, for example, he told a supporter in October 1979, "my position is that interrupting a pregnancy means the taking of a human life. In our Judeo-Christian tradition, that can only be done in self-defense…I will agree to an abortion only to protect the life of the prospective mother." But the fundamentalist tone to his language did not change the fact that politically Reagan was more focused on economics and anti-statism than on religious morality. His priorities were evident in a letter to another supporter in July 1980, when he wrote that "threats to our economy and prosperity" were the "major issues facing this country today".[139]

[139] Daniel Williams, "Reagan's Religious Right: The Unlikely Alliance between Southern Evangelicals and a California Conservative", in *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s: Perceptions, Policies and Legacies*, Cheryl Hudson and Gareth Davies (eds.), (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 136; Doyle McManus, "Briggs to Try Antigay Move Again in 1980", *LAT*, 9 November 1980; Richard West, "Prop. 6 Dangerous, Reagan Believes", *LAT*, 23 September 1978; Williams, *God's Own Party,* 153; Ronald Reagan to Robert Mauro, 11 October 1979 and Ronald Reagan to Ann King Petroni, 31 July 1980, in *Reagan: A Life in Letters*, 197-198, 248-250.

Still, Reagan courted Christian Right leaders persistently. His deliberate framing of his anti-communism in religious terms – saying increased military spending was necessary to defend against the "godless tyranny of communism" – and his criticisms of welfare and food stamp programmes helped to redeem him for his stance on the Briggs Initiative. By 1980, Jerry Falwell had forgiven Reagan enough to declare support for his presidential candidacy. Falwell echoed Reagan's language on communism and welfare, denouncing "Godless, not-to-be trusted Russian Communists" and describing welfare as "needless giveaways for people who wouldn't work in a pie shop eating holes in a doughnut." By the time Reagan attended the National Affairs Briefing in Dallas on 22 August 1980, he was the Christian Right's preferred candidate for the White House.[140]

That event, however, also reiterated the discrepancies between the forward-thinking anti-statism of Reagan and the fervent religious and social traditionalism of the white South. Prominent attendees included Jerry Falwell, W. A. Criswell, Jesse Helms, and President of the SBC Bailey Smith, who stirred controversy by claiming that God did not hear the prayers of non-Christians. The event was organised by Texan pastor James Robison. Speaking prior to Reagan, Robison warned his audience, "We are to fight a war. Our weapon is faith…We'll either have a Hitler-type takeover, or Soviet domination, or God is going to take over this country." According to another attendee, Reagan's aides were "cringing and saying 'Where the heck did that guy come from?'" Though Reagan and his circle courted the Christian Right, they understood the dangers of appearing too closely associated. A few months earlier, Reagan advisor Martin Anderson had been keen to emphasise that, while Reagan would not ignore conservative evangelicals, "they're certainly not going to dictate to him". Nonetheless,

[140] Williams, "Reagan's Religious Right", 139; David Nyhan, "Falwell mixes religion with politics", *BG*, 6 July 1980.

Reagan's appearance at the National Affairs Briefing was widely regarded as the consummation of his political alliance with the Christian Right. In a line given to him by Robison, Reagan told his audience, "I know this is a non-partisan gathering, and so I know that you can't endorse me, but…I want you to know that I endorse you and what you're doing".[141]

Reagan's speech was strongly critical of federal attempts to revoke tax exemptions for segregationist Christian schools, a policy designed, in his view, "to force all tax exempt schools – including church schools – to abide by affirmative action orders drawn up by – who else? – IRS bureaucrats." In response, some in the audience shouted "Amen" and "God Bless You, Ronnie!" Reagan's defence of tax exemptions in part reflected his anti-statist belief in "[keeping] government out of the school". But it was also significant that his speech failed to directly address the issue of abortion, suggesting his advisors had an astute understanding of southern conservative priorities. In the minds of evangelicals and racially conservative southerners, the tax exemption issue required an urgent defence of their institutions and traditions against federal attack. As such, it created a powerful impetus for political engagement and activism. Furthermore, Reagan's decision not to discuss abortion, even before an audience of Christian Right leaders, suggested a sense of caution within his political circle when it came to potentially controversial social issues – a caution that became more apparent during his presidency.[142]

In 1980, the South again played a significant role in the early stages of Reagan's presidential campaign. His popularity in Dixie helped him fend off primary challenges from an adopted southerner, the Massachusetts-born former Texas congressman George H. W. Bush,

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[141] Martin, 214-218; Williams, "Reagan's Religious Right", 140; "Speech print – Roundtable National Affairs Briefing", Box 227, 1980 PCP.

[142] "Speech print – Roundtable National Affairs Briefing"; Jeffrey Howison, *The 1980 Presidential Election: Ronald Reagan and the Shaping of the American Conservative Movement*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 128.

and a native southerner, former Governor of Texas John Connally. Following a defeat to Bush in Iowa, Reagan staged a comeback in New Hampshire, before landslide wins in four southern states – South Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida – gave him an unbreakable grip on the GOP nomination in early March. At the start of Reagan's national campaign, the South's racial politics took centre stage when he became the first presidential candidate to address the Neshoba County Fair in Mississippi, historically a forum for segregationist politicians. "I believe in states' rights", Reagan asserted. "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…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." Just as when Reagan had spoken of "states' rights" in the early 1960s, the connotations would have been easy for white southerners to decipher. The racial context was made even more stark by Neshoba County's dark history. Reagan was speaking just a few miles from where three civil rights activists had been brutally murdered by Klansmen and local police in 1964.[143]

Rural Mississippi was not an obvious place to make an early campaign stop. Nor had Reagan regularly used the phrase "states' rights" since his appearances in the South almost twenty years earlier. His Neshoba speech was, therefore, seemingly designed to reinforce his appeal among conservative southerners. It indicated that his advisors believed the white South would once again be the foundation of his presidential challenge and, moreover, that it was now a weakness for President Carter. In late 1979, a senior Mississippi Republican had suggested an appearance at the Neshoba County Fair would help to win over "George Wallace

[143] Robert Shogan, "Reagan Overwhelms Bush, Connally in South Carolina", *LAT*, 9 March 1980; Martin Schram, "George Bush Buried in Southern Voting", *WP*, 12 March 1980; "Transcript of Ronald Reagan's 1980 Neshoba County Fair speech", *Neshoba Democrat*, 15 November 2007; William Endicott, "Reagan Opens Campaign at a Dixie County Fair", *LAT*, 4 August 1980; Jaime Fuller, "What the Neshoba County Fair says about Southern politics", *WP*, 31 July 2014.

inclined voters". Reagan's language when campaigning in the region – it was only in the South that he talked of "states' rights" – also demonstrated that wresting the region back from President Carter was a key campaign target. To that end, Reagan also held a rally with former Mississippi governor John Bell Williams, a vocal opponent of racial integration in the 1960s, and Mississippi Representative (and Reagan's state campaign chairman) Trent Lott extolled Strom Thurmond's segregationist presidential campaign of 1948. Reagan's advisors were now clearly attuned to the more regressive tendencies of white southern voters. While they may not have reflected racist views on Reagan's part – as noted, he maintained a lifelong perception of himself as entirely without prejudice – these racialised appeals showed that his campaign was prepared to exploit the darker aspects of the South's political culture in order to win the presidency and further the Reaganite cause.[144]

Around 60 percent of white southerners voted for Reagan in 1980. Except for Jimmy Carter's home state of Georgia, Reagan swept the South. Given the scale of his national victory – by a popular vote margin of 9 percent and an Electoral College margin of 489 to 49 – it is difficult to claim the region was ultimately crucial to Reagan's success. Four years of economic turbulence had created a widespread desire for a new administration. But the white South provided Reagan with over ten and a half million votes, around a quarter of his overall total, and 127 Electoral College votes. The election proved his popularity in the region was undimmed. Yet it also showed just how far President Carter had fallen in the estimation of white southerners. As Neil Young observes, Carter's reputation declined particularly steeply among conservative southern evangelicals: "once they peeled back the layers, Southern Baptists recoiled at what they found." Each time Carter adopted moderate positions on social

[144] Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 1-3.

issues he was met with angry disapproval, condemnatory SBC resolutions, and questions about the authenticity of his Baptist faith. Despite Reagan's intensive courting of the Christian Right, Young argues that southern evangelicals voted against Carter at least as much as they voted in favour of Reagan. "Southern Baptists went to the polls in 1980 not to elect the California governor with his own spotty record on their pet issues, but rather to reject the wolf in sheep's clothing who had misled them about who he truly was." Nonetheless, Reagan's victory in 1980 represented the emergence of the Christian Right as a reliably Republican voting bloc.[145]

When Jerry Falwell claimed that the Moral Majority had registered four million voters and encouraged a further ten million to go to the polls, it was almost certainly an exaggeration. But given Reagan won 67 percent of the evangelical vote and won several southern states by only narrow margins, it is likely that support from the Christian Right helped him win the South. He won both Arkansas and Tennessee, for example, by less than 1 percent, Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina by less than 2 percent, and North Carolina by just over 2 percent. Arguably, the results were a demonstration of the Democratic Party's residual southern strength. Black southerners and moderate whites provided the bulk of Jimmy Carter's southern support, but he also retained some white conservatives, for whom voting Republican remained – in the words of Alabama's Democratic Senator Donald Stewart – akin to "a chicken voting for Col. Sanders."[146]

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[145] "1980 Presidential Election", American Presidency Project website; Neil Young, ""Worse than cancer and worse than snakes": Jimmy Carter's Southern Baptist Problem and the 1980 Election", *Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 26, No. 4, (2014), 482.

[146] Adam Clymer, "Bush Says No Single Group Gave Reagan His Victory", *NYT*, 18 November 1980; Williams, *God's Own Party*, 193; "1980 Presidential Election"; "Jimmy Carter's Solid South Cracked Under the Reagan Onslaught", *WP*, 5 November 1980; Jeff Prugh, "The South: It May Not Rise So Solidly Again for Carter", *LAT*, 11 October 1980.

For many conservatives in the South, however, seeing Reagan win the presidency fulfilled a wish they had harboured for over a decade. Several southern Republicans were also elected to the Senate, House, and state governorships on his coattails. Among them, John East became North Carolina's second Republican senator alongside Jesse Helms, Mack Mattingly won a Senate seat in Georgia, and Frank White beat Democratic incumbent Bill Clinton to win the Arkansas governorship. In Alabama, Donald Stewart lost the Democratic primary and his seat was won by Republican Jeremiah Denton. Reagan's southern popularity had been a significant aid to these men in what proved to be narrow victories – John East, for instance, won by just over ten thousand votes. The GOP was now making inroads into once loyally Democratic areas of the South at both state and local levels. But this partisan shift did not reflect a change in the white South's conservative political culture. As a report in the *Christian Science Monitor* observed, "Most Southern Democrats are, on most issues, already fairly conservative. What this election saw, in many cases, was the defeat of conservative Southerners by even more conservative Southerners." The white South's conservatism was crucial in its support for Ronald Reagan. His language on social issues and tax exemptions for segregationist Christian schools – as well as the anti-statist and anti-communist rhetoric that had been central to his appeal for over two decades – meant white southern voters expected his administration to be aligned with their agenda. They had rescued Reagan's political hopes in 1976, and they had forgiven him for transgressions such as choosing Richard Schweiker and opposing the Briggs Initiative. Now, the man they believed would help restore southern political influence in Washington had finally reached the White House. As the early years of

his presidency proved, however, the priorities of Reaganite conservatism and southern conservatism would often diverge.[147]

[147] "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present", US House of Representatives History website; "1990 Gubernatorial Election Results – Arkansas", US Election Atlas website; Robert Press, "Southern politics: Can GOP stay on top of a Democratic mountain?", *CSM*, 14 November 1980.

Chapter Three

"We really seem to be putting a coalition together": The Boll Weevil Democrats and the 'Reagan Revolution'

In 1981, Ronald Reagan and his key aides constructed a coalition of Republicans and conservative southern Democrats that was critical to the success of the 'Reagan Revolution'. Support from southern 'Boll Weevils' in the House of Representatives enabled the new president to push his economic agenda of large-scale spending reductions and tax cuts through Congress. This chapter examines how the coalition was built and highlights the level of political horse-trading necessary to gain Boll Weevil votes. Yet it also illustrates divergences between the ideological anti-statism of Reaganite conservatism and the prioritization of regional interests and industries at the heart of southern conservatism. These differences were apparent even as dozens of southern Democrats were helping the Reagan White House to a succession of remarkable legislative victories. Though their support for his administration weakened as the economy declined, for many Boll Weevils their coalition with Reagan emphasised a growing sense of detachment from the mainstream of the Democratic Party. Several ultimately switched parties and became Republicans. Though short-lived, and despite notable differences in terms of economic priorities, Reagan's alliance with the Boll Weevils returned the South to the centre of power in Washington and undermined the Democrats' southern congressional superiority. It showed southern voters that, through their support for Reagan, their region's priorities and interests could rise to the top of the national agenda. In short, it was a crucial waypoint on the white South's journey towards the GOP.

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"I had come to Washington with my mind set on a program and I was anxious to get started on it," Ronald Reagan recalled of his first days in office. His administration's legislative blitzkrieg during the first half of 1981 has become fundamental to Reagan's image as a transformational president. Upon entering the White House, however, Reagan and his aides knew they would need to win the votes of around 50 conservative southern Democrats to enact his agenda. With Republicans having won control of the Senate, it would be in the House of Representatives – where the Democrats held a majority of 53 – that a bipartisan conservative coalition was essential to ensure the passage of Reagan's economic programme. As Nigel Bowles has noted, the situation on Capitol Hill was only "Moderately favourable…success was not assured." Ultimately, Reagan's popularity in the white South would play a critical role in winning the votes of southern Democrats and achieving what came to be regarded as a triumph of Reaganite conservatism.[148]

The administration's legislative agenda aimed to turn the philosophy of Reaganism into reality. Reagan sought massive tax reductions, unprecedented cuts to domestic programmes, and a huge expansion of military spending. It was a programme designed to tackle what the new president regarded as the "greatest economic emergency since the Great Depression. The most immediate priority was dealing with double-digit inflation, high unemployment, and a prime interest rate of 21.5 percent". In a televised address, Reagan warned the American people that "we cannot delay in implementing an economic program

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[148] Reagan, *An American Life*, 229; Nigel Bowles, "Reagan and Congress," in *The Reagan Years: The Record in Presidential Leadership*, Joseph Hogan (ed.), (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 104-105.

aimed at both reducing tax rates to stimulate productivity and reducing the growth in government spending to reduce unemployment and inflation." On 18 February, in his first appearance before a joint session of Congress, he laid out the details. At the heart of his economic package was a proposed 30 percent reduction in personal income taxes over three years – a reduction of 10 percent in each fiscal year beginning in FY1982. "This proposal for an equal reduction in everyone's tax rates," Reagan declared, "will expand our national prosperity, enlarge national incomes, and increase opportunities for all Americans." Then came the second major pillar of his economic programme: "I'm asking that you join me in reducing direct federal spending by $41.4 billion in fiscal year 1982". These reductions would come from eliminating some government agencies, such as the Economic Development Administration, tightening eligibility for various welfare programmes, including the Food Stamp programme and school lunches, and reducing subsidies to business and industry as well as to governmental bodies such as the Postal Service and the Department of Energy. Reagan's proposed reductions amounted to "the most significant domestic spending retrenchment since World War II" according to Iwan Morgan. Though he made only brief reference to it, Reagan's proposed budget would also include huge increases in funding for the US military, in line with his belief that "my duty as President requires that I recommend increases in defense spending over the coming years."[149]

Reagan's agenda met with broad approval among conservative southern Democrats in the House. Texan Marvin Leath later recalled, "We agreed with a lot of the things Ronald Reagan said he wanted to do. We agreed that the tax system needed to be reformed, that

[149] Reagan*, An American Life*, 230; Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Economy", 5 February 1981, and "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery", 18 February 1981, *Public Papers of the President*; Morgan, *Reagan*, 176.

our defense effort needed to be strengthened, and that the Great Society programs should be cut back and eliminated." Hopeful that their influence would increase with Reagan in office, southern Democrats had formed the Conservative Democratic Forum (CDF) in November 1980 under the chairmanship of Leath's fellow Texan Charles Stenholm. The group was quickly derided by congressional liberals as the 'redneck caucus'. In response, they revived and embraced the term 'Boll Weevils', a label previously applied to southern Democrats in the post-war era and derived from a notoriously resilient beetle which periodically infested southern cotton farms. Though Stenholm nominally co-ordinated the CDF, the Boll Weevils had no designated leader. Still, as had been the case historically, they made a determined effort to act as a unified southern bloc to increase their power, using Mississippi Representative Gillespie 'Sonny' Montgomery's congressional office as a "war room" to debate strategy. In the weeks after Reagan's inauguration, the Boll Weevils went from being a largely unheeded group of backbenchers to becoming "the fulcrum of political power".[150]

Compared to previous generations of southern Democrats, few Boll Weevils were known nationally, but several members of the group, including Texans Phil Gramm and Kent Hance, John Breaux of Louisiana, and Georgian Billy Lee Evans, gained prominence as a result of their newfound influence. "These southerners," reported the *Washington Post*, "recognize and relish their pivotal position". Their districts reflected the South's huge economic disparities. Some, like those represented by Gramm and Hance, exemplified the Sunbelt economic boom. The city of Midland in Hance's district, for example, was an affluent hub of

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[150] Nicol Rae, *Southern Democrats*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 89; Richard Lyons, "Conservative Democrats Press for Power in House", *NYT*, 21 November 1980; Hedrick Smith, "Republican Moderates Won't Be Pushovers", *NYT*, 20 September 1981; Margot Hornblower and T.R. Reid, "After Two Decades, the 'Boll Weevils' Are Back, Whistling Dixie", *WP*, 26 April 1981.

the Texan oil and gas industry – "a little bit of Beverly Hills…in the desert" according to one description. In such places, the popularity of Reagan's economic plan, particularly the tax cuts, was understandable. "Reagan won 72 percent of the vote in my district", Hance told the *New York Times*. "It's mighty tough to go against a popular President in a district like mine, especially when he's pushing for the same kind of economic policies I've been talking about all along." However, many other Boll Weevils – from states like Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina – represented rural areas that were economically reliant on industries that had been struggling for years, such as agriculture or textile production. These parts of the white South were characterised by "rural poverty and low skills and the lingering belief that the Democratic Party is, on bread and butter issues, the party of the people." As one journalist observed, when it came to federal spending Boll Weevils from such districts did "not necessarily see government as the enemy". Instead, they retained a traditionally southern desire to protect regional interests and to represent the populist disposition of their electorates. Several of these Boll Weevils would, for instance, reject Reagan's proposed tax cuts as a giveaway to the rich.[151]

Broadly, the congressional activity of the Boll Weevils reflected the conservatism of their districts. Their voting records were often well to the right of their Democratic colleagues on issues such as welfare and abortion. Some, notably Sonny Montgomery and Georgia Representative Lawrence McDonald, had voting records to the right of all but a handful of Republicans. By 1981, these southern conservatives had grown increasingly frustrated at the liberal course their congressional party was taking under Speaker Tip O'Neill's leadership.

[151] Hornblower and Reid, "After Two Decades"; Michael Barone, "The New Boll Weevils Hatch Into a Potent Political Force", *LAT*, 30 April 1981; Hedrick Smith, "Southern Democrats Discover New Strength in Union with G.O.P.", *NYT*, 5 May 1981; Steven Roberts "The Importance Of Being a Boll Weevil", *NYT*, 14 June 1981.

Charles Stenholm summed up the resentments that had built during the late 1970s: "We're people with a conservative philosophy who've been on the losing end of the majority of votes in the last couple of years." His claim was arguably based more on perception than reality – conservative Democrats had experienced some notable victories during Jimmy Carter's presidency, including supporting a $16 billion tax cut against the administration's wishes and obstructing the passage of liberal welfare and healthcare legislation. Nonetheless, Stenholm reflected the disillusionment of many southern Democrats. For them, the chance to push a conservative economic agenda through Congress was, in the words of Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "sweet revenge" for the disrespect they believed senior House Democrats had shown them. "Suddenly, the good ol' boys who sit together on "redneck row" on the House floor are pressuring the Democratic leadership to satisfy their wishes or face a reborn Dixie-GOP coalition".[152]

Most Boll Weevils were, above all, pragmatic, and acutely aware that the Democrats' grip on the South had been loosening for more than a decade. Louisianan Jerry Huckaby estimated that his district was "97 percent registered Democrat". Yet, he continued, "on a national level philosophically, most of the people in my district think more in tune with Republicans. It's just that they've been Democrats since the War between the States." This residual loyalty to the Democratic Party enabled many Boll Weevils to win elections throughout the 1970s with little Republican opposition, just as previous generations of southern Democratic congressmen had done. The few serious electoral tests they faced tended to come in wealthier, suburban districts – when Kent Hance was first elected in 1978,

[152] Congressional voting records, Govtrack website; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "'Boll Weevils' Get Revenge", *RTD*, 8 April 1981; Burton Kaufman and Scott Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter Jr.*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 122-131.

for example, he only narrowly defeated a challenge from future Republican president George W. Bush. But in early 1981, most Boll Weevils found themselves representing districts Reagan had won the previous November and were mindful that their political careers could be at stake. “Like all politicians, their first impulse is survival,” noted a *Washington Post* report, “and, in today’s South, that often has little to do with the interests of the Democratic Party.” Maintaining loyalty to the liberal Democratic House leadership was already difficult, and Reagan’s electoral strength in the South gave them further reason to rebel. As Charles Stenholm attested, “The similarities between my personal platform and the President’s program are such that if I did not support the President, I could not explain it to my constituents in any manner except that he is a Republican, and that doesn’t bother them.” Several Boll Weevils, including Phil Gramm, Kent Hance, John Breaux, Sonny Montgomery, and Billy Lee Evans, were candid in their approval of Reagan’s agenda. They needed little encouragement to support the new president's economic plan, at least in principle.[153]

Georgia Republican Newt Gingrich even believed his party should create a formal grouping with the Boll Weevils and attempt to oust Tip O’Neill. The speakership could then be occupied by a conservative southern Democrat, with committee chairmanships being divided between Republicans and southern Democrats – effectively implementing a conservative-led takeover of the House. His vision foreshadowed the future of the House GOP from the mid-1990s onwards, as southern districts turned Republican and southern conservatives rose to positions of influence. In early 1981, however, senior Republicans rejected Gingrich’s strategy. “If people think we’re already in charge, they won’t see any need to vote in more Republicans,” reasoned Max Friedersdorf, Reagan’s chief congressional

[153] Smith, “Southern Democrats Discover New Strength”; “Election Statistics”, US House History website; Hornblower and Reid, “After Two Decades”.

liaison. The Reagan White House and the House GOP leadership instead sought a less formal coalition, one similar, the *Baltimore Sun* explained, “to the GOP-Southern Democratic alliance that thwarted liberal legislation in the 1950s and 1960s.”[154]

In the mid-twentieth century, almost all southern Democrats had been committed segregationists. For them, the conservative coalition was a vehicle to resist advances made by African-Americans. However, as Julian Zelizer has written, by the late 1960s this coalition had “splintered on the rock of civil rights” and aging segregationist southerners gradually left Congress. Consequently, many of the southern Democrats Reagan was seeking to win over had first been elected in the wake of the civil rights era. An explicit dedication to maintaining white control in the South – a guiding principle for their predecessors – was not central to the Boll Weevils’ political identity. Yet their economic priorities, and those of the white conservatives who had elected them to Congress, certainly retained a racial dimension. Their determination to scale back Great Society welfare programmes, for example, disproportionately affected ethnic minorities, and racially coded anti-welfare rhetoric had become commonplace in the political vocabulary of white southern conservatives in the post-civil rights era. Mississippi Republican Trent Lott declared that the basis for this refashioned conservative coalition was to be “economics, strictly economics…We're not talking about abortion or busing, we're talking about budget controls, spending cuts, and tax rate cuts.” As would soon become evident, however, the Boll Weevils viewed economic policy from a distinctly southern perspective. Nevertheless, their conservative orthodoxy was at its peak in the early weeks of Reagan's tenure. When he hosted a breakfast meeting with them on 5 March, they urged extra spending cuts above what the administration had proposed. The Boll

[154] Fred Burnes, “GOP set to woo Democratic right to forge conservative majority in House”, *BS*, 6 January 1981.

Weevils were, Reagan noted in his diary, "Gung ho for our [economic package] but went further & gave us their recommendation for 10 [billion dollars] in additional budget cuts."[155]

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The first test of Reagan's Boll Weevil support was a vote on the budget resolution bill in May, which set out the broad framework for spending reductions. A Budget Reconciliation Bill – enacting the specific reductions decided by congressional committees – and Reagan's tax cut legislation would both follow later in the summer. Boll Weevils were finding themselves alternately wooed and pressured by leaders of both parties. Democrats on the House Budget Committee presented their own plan which proposed more modest reductions in federal spending and was designed to keep the Boll Weevils from straying over to Reagan's side. But, as Laurence Barrett notes, the Democratic resolution "followed the Administration's in its general direction…the White House already controlled the agenda." Indicating the importance the White House placed on Boll Weevil support, one senior Reagan advisor acknowledged, "In a very real sense, this economic campaign will be won or lost in the South." In mid-April, as Reagan recuperated from an attempt on his life less than three weeks earlier, his aides announced what they called a "blitz" of 53 districts across the region. This was a large-scale effort aimed at reinforcing support for Reagan's budget proposals among southern voters, thereby placing pressure on their Boll Weevil representatives to vote in favour. Internal administration polling put popular approval for Reagan's budget plan at 68 percent

[155] Julian Zelizer, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society*, (New York: Penguin, 2015), 218; Steven Roberts, "New Conservative Coalition", *NYT*, 7 January 1981; "The New Boll Weevils", *LAT*; Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries Unabridged: Vol. 1*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 21.

in the South, and White House strategist Lee Atwater outlined the operation's purpose in a memo: "Overwhelming positive public opinion will encourage their support and therein mitigate toeing the Democrat Party line."[156]

Financed by groups such as the Moral Majority as well as the Republican National Committee, the blitz initially comprised three days of campaign-style events featuring Vice President George Bush, Senators Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, John Tower of Texas, and Jesse Helms of North Carolina among others. It was maintained in subsequent weeks by direct mailing and television and radio advertisements. "We're not going in there [the South] to intimidate or blackmail," claimed a White House aide, "We're going in positively to help these congressmen". Still, Reagan and his advisors understood the political pressure their campaign would exert. "Behind the carrot of friendly persuasion," the *Washington Post* noted, "lies the potential club of political opposition in the 1982 elections…White House political strategists are aware of Reagan's enormous popularity in the South". Given Reagan's strong electoral showing in the South a few months earlier, the possibility that he might actively campaign against them in the midterms was a threat many Boll Weevils took seriously. Some even sought to help Reagan in his efforts to persuade any southern Democrats who had reservations. Stenholm, Montgomery, Breaux, and Hance were among eight CDF members to sign a letter declaring "in every respect the Reagan budget, with bipartisan revisions, is superior to the budget reported by the House Budget Committee…[we]

[156] Laurence Barrett, *Gambling with History: Ronald Reagan in the White House*, (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 151; Henry Eason, "White House Planning Budget Blitz Aimed At Southern Democrats", *AC*, 17 April 1981; Memo from Lee Atwater to Lyn Nofziger, 22 April 1981, Box 2, MOF.

urge you to join us in this effort to put the interest of the American people ahead of partisanship."[157]

When Reagan himself launched into a campaign of private coaxing during April and early May, he found more success with conservative southern Democrats than with recalcitrant members of his own party. During an address to Congress on his economic plan on 28 April, around 40 Boll Weevils joined Republicans in giving him a standing ovation. The following week Reagan hosted a meeting with several of them in the Oval Office, where Arkansas Representative Beryl Anthony told the president of his "concern that many South Arkansans may feel these budget cuts very deeply". His constituents, he said, were willing to make sacrifices but "not unfairly." However, Anthony was reassured when Reagan told him that his "door will be open in the coming months as the effects of the budget cuts are felt." This exchange gave a small indication of the potential for future divergence between Reagan's anti-statist philosophy on the one hand and the more populist economic beliefs of southern congressmen and their electorates on the other. But after the meeting Reagan was confident, noting in his diary, "These [Democrats] are with us on the budget…We really seem to be putting a coalition together." His confidence was borne out on 7 May, when the House approved his budget plan by 253 votes to 176, with 45 Boll Weevils among the ayes.[158]

The name of the legislation, Gramm-Latta, highlighted the crucial part played by one Boll Weevil in particular. Texan Phil Gramm stood out among southern Democrats as the strongest supporter of Reagan's agenda. Gramm co-sponsored the budget bill and pursued

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[157] "GOP Mounts 'Southern Blitz' To Sell Reagan Budget", *CO*, 18 April 1981; Fred Burnes, "GOP plans Southern 'blitz' to gain budget support", *BS*, 18 April 1981; Lou Cannon, "'Southern Blitz' Set for Economic Plan", *WP*, 18 April 1981; Charles Stenholm, Sonny Montgomery, John Breaux et al to colleagues, 14 April 1981, Box 296, MLP.
[158] Reagan, *Reagan Diaries: Vol. 1*, 27-30; Tom Hamburger, "Appeal From Reagan Gets Anthony's Vote", *AG*, 6 May 1981; Details of House votes on Amendment to H. Con. Res. 115, 7 May 1981, Govtrack website.

even greater spending reductions than Reagan's original proposal had demanded. He was also an old friend of Office of Management and Budget director David Stockman – the man largely responsible for formulating the details of Reagan's economic legislation – and liaised with him throughout the congressional debates. Gramm helped to thwart the rival budget resolution proposed by Budget Committee chair, James Jones of Oklahoma. His prominence gave Reagan's plan a bipartisan gloss that made it easier for other Boll Weevils to break ranks with the Democratic leadership. For his efforts in support of Reagan, Gramm was labelled a "collaborator" by Democratic House Majority Leader (and fellow Texan) Jim Wright. Equally important in winning Boll Weevil support, however, was the pressure applied by Lee Atwater's southern blitz. Prior to the vote, it was not just Republicans exerting pressure on the Boll Weevils. Alabama's Democratic Governor Forrest 'Fob' James called Ronnie Flippo, a Boll Weevil and fellow Alabaman, to urge his support for Reagan. The governor's office notified the White House that "James has 'persuaded' Flippo to vote for the president." Similarly, Dan Mica of Florida received calls from a local Democratic mayor urging a vote for Reagan's budget.[159]

This victory was merely the first hurdle in enacting Reagan's economic agenda. Next came the Budget Reconciliation Bill laying out precisely which spending programmes Reagan planned to cut. During the upcoming debate, one editorial predicted in mid-May, "the Southern conservative bloc can look forward to being courted even more heavily". This was a marked change for representatives who until recently had been marginalised by both parties: "a Democrat from south of Mason and Dixon's line can enjoy being treated no longer

[159] Hedrick Smith, *The Power Game: How Washington Works*, (London: Collins, 1988), 472-477; Monroe Karmin and Christopher Bonner, "Democrats' 'Redneck Row' getting some respect", *MH*, 25 June 1981; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Reagan's Lobbying Technique", *LH*, 28 May 1981.

as the proverbial illegitimate at the family picnic." As their influence grew, the Boll Weevils became increasingly organised and more demanding. "We never dreamed we would become the swing vote in the House," admitted Georgian Bo Ginn, "and we're pleased to have an open line to Reagan." He was quick to add, however, "the White House needs to understand that we can't be taken for granted." Realising they had a rare – and potentially brief – opportunity, many Boll Weevils set about exploiting their newfound power to extract substantial concessions for their districts.[160]

Max Friedersdorf recalled in a 2002 oral history that while Phil Gramm was the administration's "most open channel" when it came to budget legislation, CDF chair Charles Stenholm acted as the Boll Weevils' principal political link to the White House. "Stenholm was the one who corralled these guys. Stenholm was the one we would talk to about who we should go after. Give us a list of who you think is vulnerable – that's where Charlie was good." After the first budget vote had demonstrated their importance, administration efforts to retain Boll Weevil votes for the Budget Reconciliation Bill frequently descended into overt horse-trading. When called by Reagan, some conservative southerners demanded changes to an agriculture bill then under debate by Congress. Georgia representatives wanted increased protection for peanut farmers, while Louisiana congressmen John Breaux and Wilbert 'Billy' Tauzin won Reagan's agreement to introduce price supports for sugar. These and other concessions not only went against Reagan's ideological opposition to agricultural subsidies but also carried fiscal costs that contradicted the administration's drive to cut federal spending. Publicly, the administration denied it had struck any deals. In reality, according to Friedersdorf, the White House was often quick to accede to Boll Weevil demands. "I mean,

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[160] "Editorial", *Advocate*, 10 May 1981; Jack Germond and Jules Witcover, "Weevil Caucus", *Advocate*, 23 June 1981.

are you going to let the peanut subsidies rule your life? Or are you going to let the budget rule your life? So we'd call Stockman and we'd say, 'Houston we've got a problem. We need a little sugar in Louisiana, some peanuts in Georgia,' whatever it was…That's the way it worked."[161]

Further concessions included a victory for Georgia congressmen in getting cotton warehouses exempted from costly user fees, and changes to the Fuel Use Act demanded by several Texan Democrats in aid of the oil and gas industries in their districts. A restoration of $400 million for veterans' programmes won the support of Sonny Montgomery. Similarly, Reagan called Texan Representative Ralph Hall on the evening before the budget reconciliation vote and asked, "What do we need to do to get your vote?" As the *Miami Herald* reported, "Hall wasn't stumped for an answer." He requested changes to energy laws which would benefit the natural gas industry critical to his district's economy. That same evening, David Stockman and Chief of Staff James Baker telephoned Hall to say the changes would be made. According to the *Washington Post*, funding for the construction of a nuclear reactor in Tennessee also found its way into the bill. "The controversial Clinch River fast breeder reactor project, which is strenuously opposed by Stockman as a waste of federal funds, nonetheless receives $230 million more in the Republican budget plan." Deals of this nature were ultimately crucial to the passage of the Budget Reconciliation Bill. "I went with the best deal", John Breaux bluntly admitted, before joking that while his vote could not be bought, "It can be rented." For all their public alignment with Reagan's desire for dramatic spending reductions, the preservation of federal assistance to the South remained uppermost in Boll Weevil minds.[162]

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[161] Max Friedersdorf Oral History, 24 October 2002, Miller Center website; Joan McKinney, "Breaux and Tauzin traded votes for Reagan aid for sugar", *Advocate*, 28 June 1981.
[162] Smith, 478-479; Monroe Karmin, "House takes historic turn to right", *MH*, 28 June 1981; Ward Sinclair and Peter Behr, "Horse Trading", *WP*, 27 June 1981.

The extent of the bartering led David Stockman to subsequently claim, in his book *The Triumph of Politics*, that many Boll Weevils "weren't even remotely genuine fiscal conservatives." A few, notably Phil Gramm, were clearly ideologically committed to enacting the Reaganite agenda, but most took stances more typical of traditional southern conservatives. Populist anti-government sentiment remained deeply ingrained in the white South, and Reagan's proposed spending reductions were notionally popular. But the overriding instincts of conservative southerners were to be intensely protective of regional interests and strongly supportive of federal aid to important southern industries, something Reagan had discovered on the campaign trail after criticising the Tennessee Valley Authority. As Hedrick Smith noted, liberal Republicans were also bartering with the White House as they sought concessions in return for their support – requesting increased funding for the National Endowment for the Arts, provision of student loans to more families, and a higher Medicaid cap for example. Yet it is apparent that Boll Weevil demands were focused to a far greater degree on predominantly southern industries, be it sugar, cotton, peanuts or oil. Such was their focus on winning regional concessions, numerous Boll Weevils remained unclear as to the details of the enormous and complex final budget bill even as they were about to vote on it. On the day of the vote, House Majority Leader Jim Wright of Texas wrote to several Boll Weevils warning them of "unpleasant surprises in this clandestine deck of cards" and pleading with them to pause and reflect before supporting the President. "Have you read the Gramm-Latta substitute, and can you honestly say that you know what's in it?", Wright wrote to Marvin Leath. "Please think it over carefully…Do what you do in good conscience. If you can honestly face yourself in the morning, you'll have no quarrel from me. But be honest with

yourself.” Despite his entreaties, 38 southern Democrats supported the Budget Reconciliation Bill as it passed the House by 232 votes to 193.[163]

The budget debate demonstrated the prioritisation of regional interests that lay at the heart of southern conservatism and set it apart from the anti-statist ideology of Reaganism. The Boll Weevils had shown they were committed to preserving, even increasing, federal assistance to the South while at the same time demanding government spending be reduced. “They talked a good budget-cutting game,” David Stockman wrote, “but they loved even more their own regional pork”. Still, the importance of Boll Weevil support for Reagan’s budget cuts cannot be overstated. As Evans and Novak pointed out, “If Reagan’s radical effort to thin the governmental wedge of the economy had failed, his equally radical 33-month marginal tax-rate cuts would also have failed. That would have finished the Reagan revolution.” Instead, thanks to Reagan’s coalition with conservative southern Democrats, the 1981 budget was the first major legislative victory for Reaganite conservatism. It made sweeping cuts to domestic funding – largely by tightening eligibility for various welfare programmes and reducing funding to government agencies – while at the same time dramatically increasing defence spending. Southern conservatism was once again a decisive influence on the direction of US politics. One Boll Weevil, Georgia Representative Charles Hatcher, was certainly proud of what the coalition had achieved, telling a constituent that his “working relationship” with Reagan was “excellent”. “He and I have agreed that we share the same goals and have expressed our mutual hope that we will be able to work closely to implement them.” After years of being side-lined in Washington, the passage of the budget bill indicated to millions

[163] David Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics*, (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), 222; Smith, 478; Jim Wright to Marvin Leath, 26 June 1981, Box 296, MLP; Details of House votes on H.R. 3982, 26 June 1981, Govtrack website.

of white southerners that by allying with the Republican Party, and particularly with Ronald Reagan, their region's economic interests could return to the top of the agenda on Capitol Hill.[164]

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Southern votes continued to be critically important as the White House sought congressional approval for its tax legislation, which broadly favoured the wealthy over lower and middle-class Americans. Reagan's tax plan reflected his belief that growth could be promoted by reducing the tax burden on the rich and thereby increasing the incentive to invest and create jobs. Along with 30 percent across-the-board income tax cuts, it included an immediate reduction in the top marginal tax rate from 70 percent to 50 percent and an 8 percent cut in capital gains tax. Many Boll Weevils were far more circumspect about the president's tax bill than they had been about his spending reductions. As one *New York Times* reporter commented, while cutting federal programmes "had been gospel in their region for years", for the Boll Weevils "the situation is quite different on the tax issue." Some, like Kent Hance, represented districts where cutting taxes for rich Americans was popular. Midland's oil wealth meant it was "the kind of place that welcomes President Reagan's proposal to give the wealthy the same tax breaks as the poor and middle-class". Indeed, Hance would act as co-sponsor of the tax cut in the House, the role Phil Gramm had played for the budget. Yet the South also contained "the hardscrabble mountains of northern Georgia and the mill towns of

[164] Stockman, 181; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "The Revolution Rolls On", *WP*, 29 June 1981; Charles Hatcher to Mr. Gerald Thompson, 8 July 1981, Box 119, CHC.

South Carolina". In such areas, both representatives and constituents were inclined to be deeply sceptical of cutting taxes for the rich. "We're all for spending reductions," observed Ed Jenkins, whose largely rural district in Georgia had suffered textile mill closures and job losses. "The administration tapped that feeling in the budget fight. But there is a populist approach when it comes to taxes". Likewise, Ken Holland argued that his poor South Carolina district would benefit little from Reagan's tax cuts: "The per capita income in my district is $7,125…most of my constituents will only pick up enough to pay for a few gallons of gas."[165]

There was not the same unity of support among Boll Weevils as there had been for the budget bills. As early as mid-March, Max Friedersdorf warned Reagan's senior advisors: "While the budget reduction portion of the President's program seems to be going well, our staff continues to pick up disturbing intelligence with regard to the tax reduction side." Reagan received a memo stating that even Kent Hance was "more skittish about the process than Phil Gramm was about the spending cuts" and that a phone call was required to "buck him up". After calling Hance, Reagan jotted a note on the memo saying, "He's solid." Aware that his support among other southern Democrats was rather less solid, Reagan held a meeting with several Boll Weevils in late May at which, according to Charles Stenholm, he offered them "a shopping list" of potential compromises on the tax cut bill. He sought to ease their nervousness still further at another meeting on 4 June. When asked if he would campaign against them in the 1982 midterm elections even if they supported his tax cuts, Reagan reportedly replied, "I couldn't look myself in the mirror in the morning if I campaigned against someone that helped me on my program." Presidential aides later attempted to

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[165] Peter Grier, "Sweeping New Law Has Something for Everyone", *CSM*, 14 August 1981; Roberts, "The Importance Of Being a Boll Weevil"; Henry Eason, "Georgia lawmakers fight for little man", *AC*, 14 June 1981; Henry Eason, "Reagan Urged To Shield Textile Industry", *AC*, 10 December 1981; Steven Roberts, "3 Conservative Democrats Wary on Tax Cut", *NYT*, 17 May 1981.

backtrack on Reagan's pledge, but the concession served to assuage Boll Weevil concerns about his potentially powerful electoral influence.[166]

Democratic leaders again proposed alternative legislation designed to lure wavering Boll Weevils back into the fold. Their tax plan featured an individual tax cut over two years, smaller cuts for the wealthy and larger cuts for people on low incomes. In response, Reagan mounted a campaign of personal lobbying. This involved both friendly persuasion – including hosting a barbeque at Camp David for a group of Boll Weevils – and strategically directed pressure, such as calling into a radio talk show in the district of Texan Democrat Ralph Hall to promote his tax plan. He also telephoned Boll Weevils personally, but this time found them decidedly more tentative in their commitment. According to Reagan's notes, Buddy Roemer of Louisiana was undecided but nevertheless reassured Reagan that he was "enthusiastic about our plans generally". Doug Barnard of Georgia was also broadly supportive but concerned about "how to explain to his low-income constituents the [Democratic] bill offering a bigger break". When Tennessee's Bill Boner warily pledged his support, Reagan "assured him I'll remember come election time." All three men ultimately voted with the administration. Democratic leaders found the president's ability to cajole these conservative southerners both depressing and remarkable. "I was supposed to be a good communicator," Jim Wright later recalled. "In Ronald Reagan I'd met my master."[167]

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[166] Memo from Max Friedersdorf to James Baker, Ed Meese and Michael Deaver, 19 March 1981, Box 2, MOF; Smith, 480; Memo from David Gergen to President Reagan, Box 1, PTC; Gene Marlowe, "'Boll Weevil' Faction Ready to Back Tax Cuts", *RTD*, 24 May 1981; Monroe Karmin, "Reagan Hints Tax Plan Deal", *Hartford Courant, 6 June 1981*.

[167] Steven Roberts, "Reagan Displays Skill at Crafting Deals", *NYT*, 30 July 1981; Records of telephone calls to Buddy Roemer, Doug Barnard, and Bill Boner, Box 1, PTC; Jim Wright, *Balance of Power: Presidents and Congress from the Era of McCarthy to the Age of Gingrich*, (Atlanta: Turner Publishing, 1996), 367.

The administration also expanded its southern blitz to include a series of television advertisements promoting Reagan's tax cuts. These covered 32 media markets across the South but focused particularly on states which were home to the most reluctant Boll Weevils. One target was North Carolina Representative L. H. Fountain. The *Greensboro Daily News* reported that Fountain was "angered" by an advertisement which "praised [him] for supporting Reagan's budget cuts, but warned that he was under pressure from House Speaker Thomas P. 'Tip' O'Neill…to vote against the president's tax plan." Though Fountain decried the advert as "unprecedented and unwarranted", it was effective. According to Reagan's notes, Fountain told the president that "he's probably committing [political] suicide but he's voting for us." To further increase pressure on the Boll Weevils, Alabama's Democratic governor, Fob James, met with Reagan at the White House before embarking on a tour of six southern states to promote the administration's tax plan. In Raleigh, for instance, James derided his own party's tax proposals as "fine if you are only going to live for the next two years". Reagan's plan, he claimed, was "a truly bipartisan tax cut…one great thing about the Democratic Party is that it's big enough for Boll Weevils."[168]

Some, however, would not be convinced. Alabama Representative Ronnie Flippo told Reagan that he "wants to be helpful in the direction we're going but no commitments". One of several Boll Weevils who backed Reagan's budget legislation, he ultimately opposed the tax cuts, along with John Breaux and Billy Tauzin of Louisiana, Ken Holland of South Carolina, and Ed Jenkins of Georgia. On the day of the vote, Jenkins spoke against the Reagan tax cuts on the floor of the House. Observing that the "vast majority of my people make under $20,000

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[168] John Hall and Gene Marlowe, "TV Blitz for Tax Plan Studied", *RTD*, 15 May 1981; "Rep. Fountain Is Angered By Radio Ads On Taxes", *GDN*, 25 June 1981; Record of telephone call to L. H. Fountain, Box 1, PTC; A. L. May, "Alabama's Democratic governor pushes Republican tax cut in N.C.", *NO*, 28 July 1981.

a year," he condemned tax breaks for the wealthy. "How you vote in respect to fairness and equity to all classes of society will be a decision which will be long remembered," Jenkins declared. "Let us serve the best interests of our people." John Breaux made a similarly populist case, arguing Reagan's proposals would simply "give the break to the wealthy people because somehow they are going to invest it for the public good. I do not think that is a logical reasoning." Breaux announced he would instead support the Democratic tax bill because it directed cuts to "working people".[169]

Conversely, other Boll Weevils used the tax cut debate to reaffirm their support for President Reagan, highlighting just how far removed they had become from the Democratic Party leadership. "I can see no sense in approving the first two portions of the President's budget proposals, then balking at the underpinning of the proposals," said Florida Representative Andy Ireland, who declared himself "proud" to support the administration's tax package. In Buddy Roemer's view, "The spirit of the New Deal has become entombed in the programs of the Great Society." He had decided, therefore, that he would "vote with my conscience and for the dreams of my district. I will vote with the President." The administration's intensive grassroots lobbying also swayed several votes. The White House had enlisted numerous industry organisations to campaign in support of its tax proposals. Aides observed that "Groups with a southern orientation have been particularly active", notably including the Tobacco Institute, Cotton Council, and American Textile Manufacturers Association. These efforts, when added to a deluge of constituent communications, proved difficult to resist. Florida Representative Bill Nelson received around 1,000 pro-Reagan calls, while an aide to Lawrence McDonald of Georgia described "the greatest outpouring of

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[169] Record of telephone call to Ronnie Flippo, Box 1, PTC; Remarks by Ed Jenkins, *Congressional Record*, 29 July 1981, 18054; Remarks by John Breaux, *Congressional Record*, 29 July 1981, 18236.

comment on any one issue we've ever received." Another Georgian, Bo Ginn, remarked, "The constituents broke our doors down. It wasn't very subtle." Ultimately, after a few frantic days of lobbying and debate in late July, the House of Representatives approved the final major component of Reagan's economic programme by 238 votes to 195.[170]

The votes of 33 southern Democrats, albeit a dozen fewer than supported the budget plan, were instrumental in this success. The final bill bore evidence not just of Reagan's political compromises – his desired 30 percent income tax cut had been reduced to 25 percent – but also of the individual haggling which had been required for victory. As the Democratic leadership and the White House each attempted to outdo the other, the struggle over Boll Weevil votes became, as one headline put it, "more auction than debate". Alongside oil provisions aimed at winning the votes of Texan and Louisianan Boll Weevils, the Reagan administration promised to maintain a quota restricting the importation of foreign peanuts – a concession that helped to win the votes of seven out of nine Georgia Democrats. As Evans and Novak noted, there were numerous similar "Southern-flavored goodies" scattered throughout the bill.[171]

Some Boll Weevils found it necessary to justify their support of the tax cut to their constituents. Bill Nichols told a resident of his Alabama district, "let me assure you that I consider myself a Southern Conservative Democrat, and have no intention of changing to another party." He went on to state his "real reservations about Supply Side Economics" but argued that he had received 800 calls to his office in the 48 hours preceding the vote, the vast

[170] Remarks by Andy Ireland, *Congressional Record*, 29 July 1981, 18072-18073; Remarks by Buddy Roemer, *Congressional Record*, 29 July 1981, 18065-18066; Memo from Elizabeth Dole to James Baker, 28 July, 1981, Box 7, EMF; "Georgians Back Cuts", *MJ*, 29 July 1981; Details of House votes on Substitute to H.R. 4242, 29 July 1981, Govtrack website.
[171] Joan McKinney, "Tax-cut fight more auction than debate", *Advocate*, 26 July 1981; Barrett, 166-170; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Reagan Compromise Angers Big Business", *RTD*, 9 June 1981.

majority of which "asked that I give the President of the United States a chance to try his plan". Nichols concluded, "the ball is now in his court". In contrast, Ed Jenkins continued to make the case that Reagan's tax cuts were unfair and misguided. Writing to a constituent in March 1982, Jenkins argued, "I am still convinced that the tax cut is designed for the rich and discriminates against the working people of America. Its contribution to our astonishing deficit projections is a matter of record." These responses illustrate the unease with which many Boll Weevils viewed Reagan's tax cut legislation even if, like Nichols, they ultimately voted in favour. Cutting taxes for the rich was not high on their political agenda and did not sit well with the South's traditionally populist approach to economics.[172]

The passage of Reagan's tax cut marked the apotheosis for his administration's alliance with the Boll Weevils. In Hedrick Smith's view, August 1981 also represented the legislative "high tide of Reaganism". In the service of its economic agenda, the Reagan White House created a new variant of the GOP-southern Democrat conservative coalition that had once held sway in Congress. It was a coalition built through personal persuasion, the shrewd exploitation of Reagan's southern popularity, and no little political horse-trading. Southern conservatives played a critical role in a series of legislative achievements that quickly came to be mythologised as the 'Reagan Revolution', and Reagan's successes were celebrated almost as much in the ranks of the CDF as they were in the White House. Charles Stenholm spoke for many Boll Weevils when he acknowledged, "We had no earthly idea that things would work out this well." At the White House on 14 September, Stenholm, Kent Hance, and Sonny Montgomery were among 19 southern Democrats who presented Reagan with a boll weevil tiepin and a bumper sticker bearing the slogan "Thank Goodness for Boll Weevils". A few days

[172] Bill Nichols to Reverend Walker Bynum, 19 August 1981, Accession 82-003, Box 5, WNP; Ed Jenkins to Mr. Joseph Dinatali, 24 March 1982, Box 36, Constituent Services Series, EJP.

later, Billy Lee Evans responded to a Reagan speech by praising the "beauty of his leadership", a sentiment that summed up Boll Weevil satisfaction with his early economic record.[173]

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Even at the high point of their influence, the Boll Weevils were aware that their position was untenable in the long term. As early as September 1981, just weeks after the tax bill vote, there was media speculation that the Boll Weevil "phenomenon…may be evaporating even as it reaches the zenith of its power." Looking ahead to the 1982 midterms, Billy Lee Evans warned that if either Republicans or Democrats made major gains in the House, "We could wind up as a group without a party." At the same time, the White House was already planning its electoral assault on Democratic incumbents across the South. Though Reagan had promised not to personally campaign against southern Democrats who voted for his economic package, White House aides and GOP strategists had identified numerous districts as potential targets. An administration strategy report argued that Republicans needed to exploit deepening mistrust of the national Democratic leadership among white southern conservative voters. They should "keep hammering" the message that the "John Breauxs of this world may seem like good ole boys back in the district, but when they get to Washington

[173] Smith, 481; Art Pine, "'Boll Weevil' Power", *HC*, 5 July 1981; "Bumper Crop", *FWST*, 15 September 1981; Christopher Bonner, "Some Southern Democrats Cool To Reagan's Message", *MT*, 25 September 1981.

they consort with the likes of Teddy Kennedy and Tip O'Neill, the liberal, venal Yankees that run the Democratic Party."[174]

Highlighting the quandary in which many Boll Weevils found themselves, conservative Democrats from Georgia began telling journalists that – while proud of their alliance with the administration – they were reluctant to support Reagan if he demanded further spending reductions. The principal reason for the Boll Weevils' waning enthusiasm was a sharp downturn in the American economy that in turn damaged Reagan's popularity, even in the South. Beginning in the autumn of 1981, the US suffered a fall of 2.9 percent in its GDP and around three million jobs were lost. The South appeared to survive the recession better than other regions, but the prosperity of major cities in Texas and Florida acted to distort its overall economic picture. Average wages in the region remained substantially lower than the rest of the US and, the *Washington Post* reported, there were "significant differences in the economic structure and prospects" of the southern states, with the likes of Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Tennessee and Kentucky lagging far behind. Moreover, while unemployment levels were below the national average in most southern states, this was partly due to a tradition of "underemployment" in the rural South. "When jobs are hard to come by," a *Post* reporter observed, "people will eke out a living on the family farm and wait for the labor market to pick up rather than register as unemployed." Contrary to the positive headlines, many parts of the southern economy were hit hard by the recession of 1981-82.[175]

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[174] Henry Eason, "Congress' 'boll weevils' don't get called on the carpet, but they may be dying out", *AC*, 20 September 1981; Monroe Karmin and Christopher Bonner, "House 'Boll Weevil' Democrats Flexing New Muscle", *MT*, 21 June 1981; Office of Policy Development 1982 Election Report, Box 1, JPF.

[175] Eason, "Congress' 'boll weevils'"; Morgan, *Reagan*, 186; Caroline Atkinson, "The Southern States", *WP*, 10 January 1982.

Largely because of the downturn, Reagan's national popularity underwent a steep decline. From a high of 68 percent in Gallup polls during the spring of 1981, it fell to 49 percent by the year's end and had plummeted to 40 percent by the autumn of 1982. Though personal affection for Reagan remained high among white southerners, it was combined with widespread disapproval of his administration's economic performance, creating a political minefield for the Boll Weevils. Reagan's potential impact on the upcoming elections was a topic of discussion at a 1982 meeting of the Southern Governors Association. Many attendees conceded that if Reagan were running he would carry most, if not all, of the southern states. But they also cautioned that "Reagan's personal popularity…should not be confused with political popularity." His approval ratings in North Carolina, for example, slumped to 35 percent by August 1982, with most voters citing the failing economy as the reason for their dissatisfaction. David Treen, Louisiana's Republican Governor and a vocal Reagan supporter, argued that the president's "style, his personality, is attractive to the South". Yet he was also willing to acknowledge, "there's been some erosion, obviously. That's fundamental after a time." Consequently, for the Boll Weevils, supporting the president no longer appeared quite the electoral boon it had seemed a year earlier.[176]

The threat of censure by Democratic leaders was also growing. CDF members were largely excluded from the Democratic Party national conference in June 1982, but John Breaux and Kent Hance did appear before a party commission to defend the Boll Weevils' support for Reagan and to plead that no punitive action be taken against them. The possibility that committee assignments or campaign financing could be withdrawn was particularly worrying. "What is our crime?" Hance asked the commission, "Our crime is we represented

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[176] "Ronald Reagan From The People's Perspective: A Gallup Poll Review", 7 June 2004, Gallup website; William Cotterell, "Reagan Still Rates In The South", *State*, 2 August 1982.

the conscience of our district". Arguing that the Democrats risked committing "political suicide" by turning away from southern conservative voters, he went on to warn – somewhat presciently given the South's subsequent partisan shift – "If I get beat, you're going to have an ultra-right wing Republican." Hance also noted the electoral strength of conservatism across the South, observing that in the 1980 election Ronald Reagan won Boll Weevil districts by an average of 53 percent to 43 percent and that Boll Weevil candidates outperformed President Jimmy Carter by an average of 35 percent overall. In the end, party leaders delayed a decision on punishment, meaning the threat of retribution hung over the Boll Weevils for the remainder of the 97th Congress. Accordingly, many were rather less receptive to Reagan's personal appeals when he sought their votes for his budget in 1982. Georgia Democrat Doug Barnard warned Reagan of his concern that "we won't get as many Congressional [Democrats] as we need to". A few days later, after a call to Barnard's fellow Georgian Charles Hatcher, Reagan's frustration was apparent in his notes: "What is this – he won't commit either?" On 11 June, though, enough Boll Weevils voted in favour of Reagan's budget that it passed the House by a narrow margin of 219-206. Still, North Carolinian Bill Hefner told reporters he had supported the bill while "holding his nose" and, according to the *Arkansas Gazette*, there was a feeling that many Boll Weevils had to simply "go along with a Republican budget or be accused of leaving the country with no budget at all".[177]

Boll Weevil enthusiasm for Reagan was clearly dwindling. When the White House was pushed into action by the faltering economy and began seeking support for a tax bill which reversed some of the tax cuts of the previous year, the debate threw party affiliations in the

[177] Saul Friedman, "Democrats avoid fuss by excluding Boll Weevils", *FWST*, 25 June 1982; Jack Smith, "Hance defends record of Boll Weevils", *FWST*, 26 June 1982; Records of telephone calls to Doug Barnard and Charles Hatcher, Box 2, PTC; Bill Niekirk and Dorothy Collin, "House Oks budget", *CT*, 11 June 1982; Jim Luther, "Pressures build in tax battle", *Advocate*, 19 August 1982.

House into flux, particularly among southern Democrats. In August, when Reagan hosted a meeting at the White House with more than 20 Boll Weevils aimed at soliciting support for his tax bill, aides warned him beforehand that political calculations were uppermost in Boll Weevil minds. The scale of the tax increases contained in the bill had given rise to vehement conservative opposition in both houses of Congress. A bipartisan group of conservative representatives even filed a lawsuit aiming to stop the bill on the grounds that it was unconstitutional. In a memo prior to their meeting, Reagan was cautioned that many Boll Weevils were "hesitant to support the reconciliation tax bill because of the active opposition of conservative Republicans – opposition which they fear could cause difficulties in their home districts." One attendee, Doug Barnard, acknowledged the pressure he and many other Boll Weevils were under from their constituents to oppose the bill: "My mail is 10-to-1 against the tax increase." Reagan's personal coaxing, which had proved so effective the previous year, had also seemingly lost some of its persuasive power. "I don't know how convincing the president was," Barnard said after the meeting, "If I had to estimate, very few minds were changed in there today." Reagan himself was somewhat more optimistic, noting in his diary "They are pretty much with us."[178]

Several Boll Weevils who had loyally backed Reagan in 1981 sided with conservative southern Republicans in opposing the president's proposals. Doug Barnard, Billy Lee Evans and Lawrence McDonald joined their fellow Georgian, Newt Gingrich, in voting against Reagan's tax increase, along with Charles Stenholm and Sam Hall of Texas, Richard Shelby of Alabama, and around 25 others. Somewhat ironically, having opposed Reagan's original tax cuts, Ed Jenkins also voted against reversing them, fearing that taking money out of the

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[178] Kenneth Duberstein memo about meeting with selected House Democrats, 18 August 1982, Box 1, LAF; Jim Luther, "Pressures build in tax battle", *Advocate*, 19 August 1982; Reagan, *Reagan Diaries: Vol. 1*, 94.

economy would exacerbate the downturn. In the end, though, many of Reagan's most prominent Boll Weevil supporters, including John Breaux, Sonny Montgomery, Kent Hance, and Phil Gramm, were among around 15 who voted in favour. Their votes were motivated chiefly by concerns that the size of the federal deficit could hamper any chance of economic recovery, while one Texan Boll Weevil also told journalists that he feared "some uglier options (for raising taxes) are waiting in the wings" if Reagan's bill failed. The legislation – which became the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act or TEFRA – passed the House by 226 votes to 207 on 19 August 1982. The Boll Weevils had again proved critical in providing a legislative victory for the Reagan administration, albeit one that was largely driven by economic circumstances. The vote demonstrated, however, just how far Boll Weevil support for the administration had diminished since its high point the previous year, as well as how volatile the southern political landscape was becoming as the 1982 midterm elections approached.[179]

A number of midterm contests illustrated the increasing fragmentation of partisan loyalties in the South. Bill Chappell, a Boll Weevil from northeastern Florida, faced a strong primary challenge from a moderate fellow Democrat who condemned him for his support of the president. Despite his voting record showing 80 percent of his votes favoured the Reagan administration, Chappell made awkward attempts to distance himself from the White House: "I vote with the president when I think he's right, and I vote against him when I think he's wrong." Given that Chappell's re-election was viewed by the media as "a good test of the electorate's attitude towards the Reagan economic program", the narrowness of his victory indicated the ambivalence with which many southern conservatives regarded Reagan's

[179] Details of House votes on H.R. 4961 (TEFRA), 19 August 1982, Govtrack website; Christopher Bonner, "Delegation Mostly Opposes Tax Hike", *MT*, 19 August 1982; Henry Eason, "'Reaganomics' critic Fowler supports president's tax hike", *AC*, 19 August 1982; Cragg Hines, "'Boll Weevils' split on Reagan tax bill", *HC*, 19 August 1982.

economic record in late 1982. In Georgia's 7th district, Boll Weevil Lawrence McDonald received the support of many of the state's leading conservative Republicans in his re-election, while his moderate Republican opponent was endorsed by large numbers of Democrats but not, notably, by President Reagan. McDonald's fellow Georgian, Billy Lee Evans, became the only major casualty among the Boll Weevils when he lost a Democratic primary race in which he described his own party as "irrelevant" and received the active support of the Republican mayor of Macon. Ultimately, though, few Boll Weevils found their campaigns for re-election problematic, advantaged as they were by incumbency and the unfavourable economic climate for Republicans. By returning the vast majority of the Boll Weevils to Congress, conservative southern voters were, paradoxically, able to register a protest at the state of the economy and re-elect trusted incumbents whilst at the same time acting in concert with their abiding personal affection for Reagan by returning to Congress those Democrats who had provided him with crucial support. Reagan's popularity in the South was scrambling the region's political landscape, making white southern conservatives question their voting behaviour and encouraging several Democratic candidates to become further detached from their own party and begin a gradual migration towards the GOP.[180]

The wider success of the Democrats in the 1982 midterms – gaining 26 House seats nationwide – altered the political equation and ended the South's brief return to the centre of legislative power in Washington. The Boll Weevils' initial hope was that newly-elected Democrats from southern districts would be a fresh batch of recruits for their group, but this hope was misplaced. Most of the new southern Democrats were not conservatives but

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[180] Steven Roberts, "'Boll Weevil' Faces 'Real Democrat' in Florida Runoff Contest", *NYT*, 3 October, 1982; "Chappell survives tough Florida race", *AC*, 6 October 1982; Maggie Willis, "The 7th District", *MJ*, 31 October 1982; Jay Barrow, "Macon's Republican Mayor Supports Billy Evans", *MT*, 3 September 1982; Dick Pettys, "Career at stake in Tuesday vote", *AC*, 19 September 1982; "Evans, defeated in runoff, says he may try again", *AC*, 23 September 1982.

moderates elected with the help of increased African-American turnout. Conservative southern Democrats were now no longer a large enough bloc to provide the swing vote in Reagan's favour. "While they won their own battles," the *Washington Post* reported, "the nature of the war in the House has changed". The future for individual Boll Weevils appeared uncertain. As the *Post* put it, "Now, as the old song goes, the Boll Weevils are 'lookin' for a home.'"[181]

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In the short term, most Boll Weevils returned to the Democratic fold. Kent Hance, for example, had for weeks been "in the vanguard of those seeking reconciliation" with party leaders and had been raising funds for Democratic candidates in the South as well as voting with his party's leadership in order to rebuild bridges. Consequently, he retained his seat on the House Ways and Means Committee. Louisianans Jerry Huckaby and Buddy Roemer also tried to ingratiate themselves with Tip O'Neill and the Democratic House leadership, joining in their party's calls for Reagan to curb his administration's defence spending. Media reports had suggested Roemer might switch parties as early as the spring of 1981, and he openly speculated that he might defect to the GOP if he was refused a position on the Banking Committee. Roemer was one of several Boll Weevils regarded by House Republicans as potential defectors – Louisiana Republican Henson Moore told him "he'd be more at home with us, philosophically, than he is in the Democratic Party." Yet once Roemer was granted

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[181] "Democrats swell majority by about two dozen seats", *CR*, 3 November 1982; Joan McKinney, "Did the election kill the Boll Weevils?", *Advocate*, 7 November 1982; David Maraniss, "'Boll Weevil' Winners Feel Lost", *WP*, 21 November 1982.

his preferred committee assignment, he declared his loyalty to the Democrats and claimed there had only ever been a "slim chance" of him switching parties. Most Boll Weevils likewise went unpunished by the Democratic leadership, but it was made clear that much greater loyalty was expected of them in future. Sonny Montgomery, who was re-elected as chair of the Veterans Affairs Committee despite many Democrats voting against him, told reporters he had "got the message." Similarly, Charlie Rose of North Carolina joked, "I will probably have more activity in my high school alumni association than I will in the Boll Weevil association this year."[182]

Though Jim Wright claimed the Democrats would "welcome the sinners back", some Boll Weevils were denied seats on their preferred committees. After Doug Barnard was refused a position on the House Appropriations Committee, an angry editorial in the *Augusta Chronicle* praised him as "a conscientious 'Boll Weevil'". It claimed that "[Tip] O'Neill stabbed the Augustan in the back" because he "wouldn't play along with the Democratic leadership and its blind anti-Reagan strategy." Unsurprisingly, the Boll Weevil who faced the harshest punishment was Phil Gramm. Leading Democrats regarded Gramm as particularly treacherous, not simply for his co-sponsorship of Reagan's budget bill, but because he had, according to the Texas Democratic Party chairman, acted as a "double agent" by providing information to the White House regarding Democratic strategy. Gramm had relished working on Reagan's budget bill, telling journalists "Was it hard for me? Bull---. It was the easiest thing I've ever done." His notable lack of regret, and his refusal to campaign for fellow Democrats in the 1982 midterms, meant few were surprised when Gramm was voted off the House

[182] Maraniss, "'Boll Weevil' Winners Feel Lost"; Joan McKinney, "Roemer confirms he has discussed switch to GOP", *Advocate*, 4 Jan 1983; Joan McKinney, "Roemer gets Banking", *Advocate*, 5 January 1983; "'Boll Weevils' get message", *RTD*, 5 January 1983; Bill Arthur, "Carolinas' Lawmakers Disclaim 'Boll Weevil' Label", *CO*, 10 February 1983.

Budget Committee, nor when he subsequently resigned from Congress and announced he was switching parties. In February 1983, Gramm returned to Congress as a Republican after comfortably winning a special election in his district.[183]

Gramm's move to the GOP had been predicted for months. In October 1982, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* reported that he had been "written off as an undefendable casualty by some Boll Weevils", and his abrasive demeanour meant he had few friends in his party, even among fellow southern Democrats. President Reagan, on the other hand, eagerly welcomed Gramm into the GOP. After all, Gramm had been a more loyal supporter of the administration than many congressmen in the president's own party. Reagan had written to him in December, saying "I know what trying times these last few months have been for you and what a difficult political decision you face." But, Reagan reassured him, "I would welcome you into the Republican Party, where I believe you could more effectively continue your important leadership role in the rebuilding of our country's fiscal integrity." At the time, Gramm appeared to be an isolated case. Most Boll Weevils returned to the backbench position they had occupied prior to Reagan's election, maintaining their opposition to the liberal Democratic leadership, particularly on budget issues. For some, however, the feeling of detachment from their own party deepened over the following months.[184]

In March 1984, Florida Representative Andy Ireland announced his own switch to the GOP, telling his conservative supporters that, in the Democratic Party, "our views are not heard, not heeded and not wanted". The strength of the conservative vote in his district saw

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[183] Smith, 528; "'Tip' knifes Doug", *Augusta Chronicle*, 16 January 1983; Maraniss, "'Boll Weevil' Winners Feel Lost"; Nene Foxhall and Cragg Hines, "Unlike Gramm, 2nd 'boll weevil' able to keep House assignment", *HC*, 5 January 1983.

[184] Dave Montgomery, "Boll Weevils' sting less potent", *FWST*, 3 October 1982; Mark Thompson, "C'mon over, Reagan writes Gramm", *FWST*, 23 December 1982.

him easily win re-election later that year. Kent Hance would also ultimately join the GOP. After resigning his House seat to seek the Democratic nomination for senator in 1984, Hance discovered that, even in Texas, a conservative voting record was a hindrance when fighting a state-wide Democratic primary. His loss to a liberal, Lloyd Doggett, would spur him to change parties in May 1985, while Doggett went on to lose the Senate election to Phil Gramm. It is noteworthy that Gramm, Ireland, and Hance were closer philosophically to Reagan's anti-statism than many of their Boll Weevil peers. In his career as a GOP congressman and senator, Phil Gramm would mark himself out as more ideologically committed to the aims of Reaganism than even Reagan himself. "An ardent champion of the purity of free-market economics", was how Gramm was described in 1987. "He is out to shrink the whole concept of American government." Moreover, all three men represented largely suburban districts in Texas and Florida that had grown wealthy in the Sunbelt boom of the mid-twentieth century. As previously noted, affluent residents of such districts often shared a greater affinity with the economic agenda of Reaganite conservatism – particularly on the issue of tax cuts – than lower-income voters in rural Georgia or Alabama.[185]

When interviewed by Nicol Rae in 1990, other Boll Weevils offered a variety of reasons for remaining in the Democratic Party. Ed Jenkins, for example, decided "to stay within the party and fight it out." Likewise, Marvin Leath argued, "it's important that the Democratic Party have a conservative wing to counterbalance the ultraliberal wing", while Doug Barnard claimed he would "never be tempted to switch" because "I'd lose my seniority and my subcommittee chairmanship". For some, switching to the GOP became less likely as they grew

[185] Alan Ehrenhalt, *Politics in America: The 100th Congress*, (Washington, Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1987), 317-318, 1435-1437; "Election Statistics", US House History website; William Murchison, "Meet Kent Hance, Republican", *DMN*, 7 May 1985.

increasingly disillusioned with Reagan's inattention to the budget deficit, particularly during the latter years of his presidency. It was not until Reagan had left office, and the partisan trend among white southerners was moving inexorably in the GOP's favour, that other Boll Weevil defections occurred. Buddy Roemer became Republican Governor of Louisiana, defecting in 1991 after originally winning the governorship as a Democrat. Richard Shelby and Billy Tauzin were among several southern Democrats who switched to the GOP in the wake of the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, while Ralph Hall finally became a Republican in 2004. Nonetheless, their support for Reagan's agenda during the first year of his presidency had signposted their future political direction, just as it did for millions of their fellow conservative southerners. Even those who remained Democrats throughout their careers found themselves swimming against the partisan tide. When Sonny Montgomery announced his retirement in 1996, for example, the GOP won his Mississippi seat in the subsequent election. In Georgia, Ed Jenkins' successor, Nathan Deal, won election in 1992 as a Democrat but within months was already considering switching parties, eventually doing so in 1995. Like Montgomery and Jenkins, many Boll Weevils would see their former districts turn Republican within a few years of leaving Congress.[186]

The most obvious legacy of the Boll Weevils' rise to prominence in 1981 lies in their importance to the success of Ronald Reagan's presidency. Their votes proved decisive in enabling Reagan to enact his economic programme and keep his administration on track. Failure to enact the centrepiece of his political platform would have severely undermined the remainder of Reagan's time in office. Instead, the Reaganite agenda of cutting taxes and

[186] Rae, 71-72, 90; Roberto Suro, "Louisiana's Governor Shifts To G.O.P. in Career Gamble", *NYT*, 12 March 1991; Eric Pianin, "GOP Extols Rep. Tauzin's Party Switch", *WP*, 8 August 1995; Christy Hoppe, "Hall on GOP's roll now", *DMN*, 3 January 2004; "Sonny Montgomery Says Goodbye to Washington", *Commercial Appeal*, 29 December 1996; Mike Christensen, "No perks for switch, Deal says", *AC*, 11 April 1995.

curbing the growth of federal programmes would become a dominant trend in domestic US politics. The Boll Weevils were at the heart of this transformation, playing a crucial role in pushing the centre ground in a markedly more conservative direction and demonstrating that the South could still wield significant influence over the political trajectory of the United States. Furthermore, Reagan's coalition with the Boll Weevils arguably helped to reinforce his southern popularity. It demonstrated that, by allying with Reagan, the interests of the conservative South could be returned to the top of the political agenda in Congress after years of being disregarded by the liberal Democratic leadership. Not since the late 1950s had southern conservatives been 'the fulcrum of political power'. The coalition they formed with the Reagan administration and House Republicans acted as an important stepping-stone in pulling southern conservatives towards the GOP and aided Republican attempts to loosen the Democrats' century-long grip on the region at the congressional level. It not only gave many Boll Weevils cause to reconsider their own party allegiance, but also challenged the longstanding belief among southern voters that their interests were best served by sending Democrats to Washington. Once the Boll Weevil-GOP coalition had demonstrated that the economic priorities of southern conservatism – whether it was shrinking federal welfare programmes, increasing funding for the military, or simply winning concessions for regional industries – could be better advanced by allying with the national Republican Party, electing Republicans became a more logical and appealing option.

The coalition also highlighted, however, the divergence in economic priorities between the anti-statist conservatism embodied by Ronald Reagan and the more populist conservatism of the white South. The former was ideological, radical, and often idealistic about shrinking the size and scope of the federal government. The latter, despite generations of overt antagonism towards federal power, was prepared to scale back government only

when it did not have a negative impact on the economic interests of white southerners or important regional industries. As the Boll Weevils' negotiations with the Reagan administration illustrated, southern conservatives were willing to be openly transactional, even cynical, in advancing their region's priorities. In other areas of economic and trade policy, the populism of southern conservatives in both parties – and their determined defence of their region's interests – would bring them to a point of outright opposition to the Reagan White House.

Chapter Four

"Free trade will destroy America!": Reaganism meets southern economic interests

Even as conservative southerners were supporting the 'Reagan Revolution' in 1981, many were also fighting to prevent cuts to agriculture subsidies for southern crops and pushing for restrictions on textile imports. Throughout Reagan's presidency, debates over agriculture and trade repeatedly revealed the divergence between Reaganism and southern conservatism. This chapter begins by exploring the administration's efforts to reform US agriculture and the bipartisan resistance it faced from conservative southerners in Congress. Southern opposition ultimately scuppered two administration attempts to drastically reduce federal support for American farmers and undermined an important part of Reagan's legislative agenda. The chapter then examines the confrontation between the Reagan White House and southern conservatives over the issue of textiles. Years of rising imports had led to thousands of job losses across the South. After Reagan failed to fulfil a campaign commitment to help the industry, a bipartisan alliance of conservative southerners launched a drive to reduce imports against the wishes of the administration. Despite coming within a few votes of passing a deeply protectionist trade bill, they were ultimately defeated. These legislative battles demonstrated the significant economic differences between Reagan and his southern allies and illustrated the continued congressional strength of southern conservatism and its populist, protectionist instincts.

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At the same time as they were helping to drive the 'Reagan Revolution' through Congress, southern conservatives were opposing the Reagan White House in a different legislative struggle. As part of its budget reductions, the Reagan administration proposed the elimination of nearly all federal agricultural subsidies. The 1981 farm bill would see federal spending on agriculture reduced to less than $10 billion over five years, from approximately $30 billion spent under President Jimmy Carter. Given the importance of agriculture to their region's economy – particularly peanuts, tobacco, cotton, and sugar – this proposal met with unsurprising hostility from congressional southerners. Boll Weevils who backed Reagan's budget and tax-cutting legislation simultaneously joined forces with southern Republicans to oppose his plan to expose American agriculture to market forces. David Stockman, Reagan's OMB director, recalled leading Boll Weevil Charles Stenholm telling him, "We'll hit your low budget numbers, but we're going to flush your free market ideology right down the commode."[187]

In Reagan's view, American farmers had become "too dependent on handouts and artificial price supports" and were "[harvesting] money from the federal pocketbook". Indeed, federal assistance had been critically important to southern farmers in the years before Reagan came to office. The *Atlanta Constitution* reported in early 1981 that droughts, increased cost of production, and a "massive credit squeeze" had hit southern agriculture extremely hard. Over the previous decade, farm incomes across the region had plummeted, by 25 percent in Tennessee, 30 percent in both Florida and South Carolina, 32 percent in Georgia and 36 percent in Alabama. North Carolina's farm income had fallen furthest, down by 45 percent, largely because tobacco and peanuts, the state's most important crops, were

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[187] Stockman, 163.

particularly vulnerable to drought. Largely due to the heat-resistant nature of cotton, incomes in Mississippi were comparatively unscathed, falling only 16 percent. Similar issues were bringing farmers across the US to crisis point. Reagan's solution was, he later explained, "to return farming to the free market…the answer is unfettered free competition".[188]

However, conservative southerners in both parties were prepared to resist any significant reduction in subsidies to their region. This was apparent when the Reagan administration proposed to force the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) to seek funding in the commercial marketplace. Established in the New Deal era with the aim of providing electricity to rural America, by the early 1980s the REA had morphed into a network of local co-operatives covering 46 states and huge swathes of the rural South. Supported by federal loans and subsidies, it provided services to 98 percent of American farms and had branched out into building power stations, operating telephone systems, and providing cable television. Strom Thurmond was one southerner who resolutely opposed any changes to the REA. David Stockman recalled the South Carolina senator offering some advice: "Now, we're all behind the President's program, yuh heah? But you take good care of those REAs…Them's some real *fine* people." This dichotomy between Reaganite conservatives' faith in free markets on one side and the economic populism of southern conservatives on the other became an ongoing divide in the debate over agricultural policy. As the official primarily charged with identifying specific cuts to the federal budget, Stockman became increasingly exasperated: "Even the most blatant boondoggles we proposed to cut or eliminate were producing stout champions".[189]

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[188] Reagan, *An American Life*, 343-345; Rob Chambers, "Drought, tight credit hurt farmer", *AC*, 11 January 1981.
[189] Seth King, "They Lighted Up the Family Farm", *NYT*, 29 March 1981; Stockman, 162.

Senator Jesse Helms – the incoming chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee – emerged as the stoutest champion of federal subsidies for peanuts and tobacco. Helms had influenced Ronald Reagan's views on tobacco even prior to the 1980 election. Contradicting his stated belief in unfettered free competition, Reagan had written to a North Carolina tobacco farmer in September 1980 describing tobacco subsidies as "an unqualified success" and assuring him, "I fully support this nation's tobacco price support program." He further pledged, "I will seek Senator Helms' views on any decision my Administration makes concerning federal tobacco policy." During Reagan's presidential transition, his nominee for Secretary of Agriculture, John Block, met with Helms and leaders of local farming organisations in North Carolina. Block declared afterwards that "the trend and direction need to be profit through the marketplace." Paradoxically, he also expressed approval of the tobacco price support programme, suggesting it was "not a big user of federal money. The tobacco program stands on its own." In the *Atlanta Constitution*'s words, the episode served notice that Helms would "holler his lungs out if Reagan touches a leaf of the tobacco program". Reagan's compromise with Helms frustrated David Stockman, who later wrote, "I had to chomp down on my tongue whenever its defenders said in public that the program didn't cost the budget 'anything much'".[190]

In March 1981, North Carolina's Democratic Governor Jim Hunt and Boll Weevil Charlie Rose joined Helms at an event in Raleigh to assure local farmers and businessmen they were united in fighting to preserve the tobacco programme. Rose introduced Helms and praised him for his conservatism and influence in the Senate. In return, Helms described Rose as "a remarkable young man" and "thoroughly dedicated to our people". Helms also declared

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[190] Ronald Reagan to J.C. Galloway, 24 September 1980, Box 67, EMF; Mary McGrory, "Why Tobacco Subsidies Ride High", *AC*, 2 March 1981; "Food Stamps Targeted For Cuts", *AC*, 31 December 1980; Stockman, 154.

that "the protection of the economic security of our tobacco growers, and all others who make their livings in tobacco, will always occupy a top priority with me – far above and beyond any partisan considerations." As William Link observes, "the tobacco program had long been an article of faith" in North Carolina's eastern counties, Helms' political stronghold and home to most of the state's tobacco growers. To these North Carolinians, Helms asserted, "tobacco isn't a commodity, it's a religion". In the face of strong resistance among congressional southerners, led vocally by Helms, it was little surprise that when John Block outlined the Reagan administration's aims for US agriculture, tobacco supports were left largely untouched. Instead, Block proposed the abolition of a federal anti-smoking campaign.[191]

The tobacco programme had long been governed by specific legislation and was not part of the farm bill due before Congress. Instead, the bill unveiled by John Block in late March focused on other commodities, and provoked immediate anger among US farmers and their congressional representatives. Several southern crops came under attack. Drastic proposed changes to the peanut industry aimed to make prices more competitive by ending both the allotment system (which licenced peanut production) and restrictions on price supports. Charlie Rose complained that "the old peanut has been singled out for some special treatment", while Alabama's Democratic Senator Howell Heflin condemned the proposals as "almost killing the peanut folks." Louisianans were angered by the administration's refusal to establish a sugar support programme, while other southern conservatives, including Mississippi Republican Senator Thad Cochran, criticised the proposal to eliminate deficiency payments for cotton producers. Deficiency payments – a system which directly subsidised

[191] Address by Jesse Helms in Raleigh, North Carolina, 20 March 1981, Record Group 2, Box 241, JHP; Mark Pinsky, "Helms Exhorts Tobacco Bloc to Fight Budget Cuts", *NYT*, 21 March 1981; Sonja Hillgren, "On The Farm Front", *UPI*, 13 March 1981, Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 218-219.

farmers by compensating them if crop prices fell below a certain level – were regarded by the White House as particularly incompatible with a market-driven approach to agriculture.[192]

The food stamp programme, despite coming under the auspices of the Department of Agriculture and consuming almost half the department's budget in 1981, was separated from the farm bill in the legislative process. Previously, a "relationship of mutual dependency" had existed between urban representatives of food stamp recipients and congressmen from rural regions benefiting from agricultural subsidies, but the political protection this afforded to farmers was now gone. Moreover, in a climate of hostility towards federal spending, the once "rock-solid political coalition" of farm state representatives from the South and Midwest showed signs of fragility. Southern conservatives demonstrated a greater willingness to prioritise their own region's crops at the expense of midwestern farmers. In March, for example, Jesse Helms and other conservative southerners opposed an increase in milk price supports that would have aided dairy farmers in states such as Wisconsin. "Under the pressure of budget cuts", William Link observes, "the agricultural coalition backing the federal farm programs threatened to collapse."[193]

When it came to southern commodities, Helms took a different approach. Though he had extolled Reagan's conservative values countless times on the campaign trail, in early April Helms announced a plan which differed strikingly from the aims of Reaganite conservatism. He proposed raising the peanut price support level substantially to $650 per ton – $200 per ton higher than the Reagan administration's desired level – and spoke vehemently in support of peanut subsidies in principle. "To do away with any program because of a fine-line

[192] Ward Sinclair, "Farm Program Unveiled on Hill", *WP*, 1 April 1981; "Farm Price Support Boost Planned", *AC*, 1 April 1981; Sonja Hillgren, "Senate panel calls for protection for farmers against embargoes", *UPI*, 1 April 1981.
[193] "Food Stamps Out Of the Farm Bill", *WP*, 10 April 1981; Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 219-223; Seth King, "Senate Vote Gives Reagan Key Victory on Price Supports", *NYT*, 26 March 1981.

philosophical point would throw thousands of hardworking peanut farmers out of business", Helms argued. "I am not in favor of such a purist approach at the heavy expense of our farmers." Helms' proposals triggered weeks of debate in congressional agriculture committees, with Georgia Boll Weevils Charles Hatcher and Bo Ginn adding their condemnation of the administration's assault on the peanut allotment system. Hatcher told John Block, "it's a shame to disrupt the economy down there simply to meet some philosophical need", while Ginn claimed the abolition of allotments would create a "calamitous situation" for southern farmers.[194]

Reagan's proposed changes shocked many in the southern agricultural industry. "The economy of south Georgia as well as many other areas has its life blood in the success of the farmer", a Georgia constituent wrote to Bo Ginn. "I feel that the abolishment of peanut allotments would cause further degradation of an already ill-healthed [*sic*] south Georgia economy." Georgia's agriculture commissioner wrote to Republican Senator Mack Mattingly, "If we lose our peanut program, what's next???" Similar concerns were expressed about other southern crops. Alongside worries over the farm bill, fears for the future of the tobacco programme remained widespread in the rural South. One South Carolina tobacco farmer wrote to Strom Thurmond urging him to "make whatever compromises…necessary with Northern and Western Senators in order to save our program." In response, Thurmond told him, "You may be assured that I shall do all I can to defeat any efforts to destroy the tobacco price support program."[195]

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[194] Sonja Hillgren, "House Agriculture subcommittee has rejected an administration proposal", *UPI*, 9 April 1981; Henry Eason, "Helms Jousting For Peanut Barons", *AC*, 16 April 1981; Henry Eason, "Peanut 'Lords' Go To The Barricades", *AC*, 2 April 1981.

[195] Julian Morgan to Bo Ginn, 30 April 1981, and Thomas Irvin to Mack Mattingly, 7 May 1981, both in Box 215, BGC; David Bomar Smith to Strom Thurmond, 3 August 1981, and Strom Thurmond to David Bomar Smith, 12 August 1981, both in Box 1, Correspondence Management Service Series, STC.

In the Senate, conservative southerners worked together to produce an alternative to Reagan's plans. During the spring of 1981, Mississippi Republican Thad Cochran and Alabama Democrat Howell Heflin were among members of the Senate Agriculture Committee who, in the words of one commentator, "[have] been doing more violence to Reagan's budget than just about all the House Democrats put together." In late April, the committee produced a bill that cost $6 billion more than Reagan's proposals, with most commodities receiving sizeable increases in price supports. Midwestern Republicans on the committee were alarmed at the result. Kansan Bob Dole complained, "We can't report out this monster", while Indiana Senator Richard Lugar – a lone voice in support of Reagan's approach – warned his colleagues they were playing "a very dangerous game" by allowing farmers to believe the final farm bill would be so generous. Southern committee members were notably more relaxed. Helms dismissed Lugar as pessimistic and Heflin suggested the proposals were simply "preliminary". Though some reversals would be made over the coming weeks, southern conservatives of both parties, and in both chambers of Congress, had staked out their positions in defence of their region's agricultural economy.[196]

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Haggling over the farm bill continued throughout the summer of 1981, with congressional committees showing a "bipartisan disregard" for Reagan's proposals. As noted, conservative Boll Weevils shrewdly used their leverage over Reagan's budget and tax cut legislation to win

[196] Raymond Coffey, "Plumping the agriculture budget", *CT*, 7 May 1981; Robert Kaiser, "Senate's Multibillion Farm Bill Still Sprouting", *WP*, 1 May 1981.

concessions for southern agriculture. In late June, the president dropped his previously adamant resistance to sugar price supports to win the votes of Boll Weevils from Louisiana and Florida. Five weeks later, he reluctantly approved a significant increase in peanut price supports in return for Georgia Boll Weevils backing his tax cut legislation. As the summer progressed, John Block began to talk of a presidential veto if the farm bill's enormous cost was not reduced. His threat, along with Reagan's deals with various Boll Weevils, placed further strain on the already brittle congressional farm coalition.[197]

When the agriculture bill came up for Senate debate in September, divisions widened over where reductions should be made in order to avoid a Reagan veto. Midwestern senators attacked the deals that had been struck during the bill's development. Angered that southern commodities were receiving preferential treatment, Minnesota Republican Rudy Boschwitz argued, "the administration's opposition to sugar and peanuts was traded away for the votes of Southern Democrats…[while] farmers of the Midwest who had supported the administration at the ballot box watched their crop support situation erode away." The Reagan administration's spending cuts and horse-trading for southern votes had created an environment in which farm state senators, formerly united in defence of each other's interests, were now mutually hostile. "We all know…that the shape of the present farm bill that is before this body was shaped after the deals that the President made with certain people", complained Nebraska Democrat James Exon. "The President did not have to make deals with Northern State Senators. He did not have to make deals with Congressmen from the North because most of them are Republican and they were locked in. Not so with the boll

[197] Seth King, "Not Just Peanuts", *NYT*, 12 July 1981; Joan McKinney, "Breaux and Tauzin traded votes for Reagan aid for sugar", *Advocate*, 28 June 1981; Ward Sinclair and Art Harris, "In Tax Crunch, Reagan Flipped for Peanut Bill", *WP*, 1 August 1981.

weevil Democrats from the South. I think that this bill is a bad bill." Richard Lugar likewise described the Agriculture Committee's bill as "big, fat and ready to be shot down". Lugar may also have been the anonymous midwestern Republican committee member who criticised Jesse Helms's chairmanship to journalists, saying "all he really cared about was peanuts and tobacco".[198]

Helms certainly mounted vigorous efforts to protect the crops most critical to his home state. Tobacco subsidies had been largely untouched by the Reagan administration, but the growing prominence of anti-smoking groups and repeated attacks by congressional liberals made the tobacco industry nervous. After one legislative assault on the programme, Helms and John East circulated a letter to colleagues requesting their support for tobacco whilst also noting the amount of federal aid that farmers in their states received. It was widely interpreted, and probably intended, as a thinly veiled threat to reduce such aid if support for tobacco was not forthcoming. On the Senate floor, Helms returned to a familiar refrain: "I just want to say over and over again, there is no tobacco subsidy." Strom Thurmond also implored his colleagues, "how can Congress repeal a program that is costing so little and reaping such benefits to the economy, allowing small farmers to exist on the farm and make a living and allowing them to support their families?" After various attempts to force its elimination were thwarted – one by just a single vote – both House and Senate voted to maintain the programme. Running counter to their overt opposition to big government, Helms, Thurmond, East, and a significant number of conservative southern Democrats had succeeded in protecting federal support for a crop that was crucial to the South's agricultural economy.[199]

[198] Ward Sinclair, "GOP Senators Argue Over Farm Bill", *WP*, 15 September 1981; Remarks by James Exon, *Congressional Record*, 15 September 1981, 20567; Ward Sinclair, "Not A Good Week", *WP*, 22 September 1981.
[199] Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 218-225; Furgurson, 154-158; Remarks by Jesse Helms, *Congressional Record*, 17 September 1981, 21016; Remarks by Strom Thurmond, *Congressional Record*, 17 September 1981, 21029;

Helms achieved similar success in protecting peanut subsidies. Working closely with Boll Weevil Charlie Rose, he conducted a rear-guard action against legislative attacks on the peanut programme led by Richard Lugar, who criticised it as "special interest agriculture policy at its least defensible." Numerous southerners rose to the programme's defence, including Strom Thurmond, John East, and Democratic Senators Sam Nunn of Georgia, William Huddleston of Kentucky, and Howell Heflin of Alabama. East condemned what he regarded as "a frontal assault upon one of the vital commodity programs", while Heflin spoke in defence of the programme's allotment system, a target of pro-free market senators. In Heflin's view, peanut allotments epitomised American enterprise: "What is an allotment? It is a franchise. Is there something un-American about franchises? Is there something un-American about McDonalds?" Though the allotment system was technically abolished, senators voted to replace it with an amended peanut programme which included higher price supports and offered farmers continued protection from competition. In the House, the peanut programme faced an even greater challenge: a broad coalition of Reaganite free market Republicans and liberal Democrats seeking revenge against the Boll Weevils. To the alarm of southern conservatives in both parties, an amendment abolishing the peanut programme passed by a vote of 250-159. Not coincidentally, the sugar programme suffered a similar defeat. The process then moved to a House-Senate conference in which the farm bills of both chambers would be combined, and compromises made. In that conference, the *New York Times* reported, "the South rose again". Both peanut and sugar programmes were restored with only minor alterations.[200]

Wesley Pippert, "Senate votes to retain tobacco supports", *UPI*, 18 September 1981; William Welch, "Democrats trying to even tobacco score", *GR*, 21 September 1981.

[200] Bo Emerson, "N.C. peanut growers fear support program changes", *NO*, 14 September 1981; Charles Madigan, "Peanut Lobby Wins D.C. Shell Game", *AC*, 23 September 1981; Remarks by John East, *Congressional Record*, 16 September 1981, 20772; Remarks by Howell Heflin, *Congressional Record*, 16 September 1981,

The final farm bill was quickly approved by the Senate, but debate in the House was again heated. Iowa's Tom Harkin argued that midwestern farmers had been "left out in the cold" while the Reagan White House had accepted "sweetened price supports for sugar, cotton, peanuts and other Southern crops." Fellow Iowan Neal Smith accused southern congressmen of "helping stick a knife in the back of principal commodities" such as grain and wheat. A commentator in the *Lexington Herald* reflected the view of many on Capitol Hill that the outcome "amounted to a Southern farm bill." Most of the region's commodities received sizeable increases in their federal supports, yet few southerners were entirely happy. Despite having supported Reagan's budget cutting agenda, leading Boll Weevils including Charles Stenholm and Kent Hance believed the subsidies in the farm bill were not generous enough. Tennessee Democrat Ed Jones opposed the bill because, he told Marvin Leath, it "does next to nothing" to solve what he regarded as a "farm sector depression". Although Boll Weevil Bill Nichols supported the legislation he too was scathing about it, writing to a constituent, "The bill does virtually nothing for our Alabama farmers; however, it does contain the sections on tobacco, peanuts and sugar, all of which are skating on thin ice". He also admitted, "I am fearful that, if we came back in January to attempt to write a better bill, one or all of these commodities could be completely eliminated". Similarly, Jesse Helms would have preferred even greater increases in southern crop subsidies but viewed the bill as "the best that could be hammered out" against a backdrop of budget constraints.[201]

20774; Steven Roberts, "Farm Bloc Facing Unusual Coalition", *NYT*, 13 October 1981; "House defeats peanut, sugar price supports", *BS*, 16 October 1981; Seth King, "Conferees Agree on Keeping Peanut Supports", *NYT*, 11 November 1981.

[201] "Reagan Wins A Squeaker On Farm Bill", *AC*, 17 December 1981; Remarks by Neal Smith, *Congressional Record*, 16 December 1981, 31801; H. Carlisle Besuden, "Some legislators say '81 farm bill partial to South", *LH*, 20 December 1981; Phil Swann, "3 key Texans likely to vote against farm bill", *SAE*, 16 December 1981; Ed Jones to Marvin Leath, 14 December 1981, Box 289, MLP; Bill Nichols to James Wible, 17 December 1981, Accession 82-003, Box 1, WNP; "Compromise farm bill is voted by Senate", *RTD*, 11 December 1981.

The bill narrowly passed the House by 205 votes to 203 on 16 December, and Reagan reluctantly signed it into law. While Reagan was able to say that the bill "recognizes the importance of the marketplace", it bore little resemblance to the proposals Agriculture Secretary John Block had announced the previous March. A sugar price support programme had been established, subsidies for cotton remained broadly unchanged and, although the peanut programme had seen alterations, farmers were still effectively protected from free market competition. Tobacco, in the words of the *News and Observer*, survived a "long and bloody fight" in Congress and came through similarly unscathed. The cuts which brought the farm bill more closely into line with Reagan's budget-cutting agenda fell predominantly on non-southern commodities, demonstrating the shrewd and determined exercise of political leverage by congressional southerners. The contrast between southern conservatives' anti-government rhetoric and their willingness to fight tooth and nail in defence of federal subsidies to their region was striking and did not go unnoticed. It was wryly remarked upon by Massachusetts Democrat Paul Tsongas during the Senate's farm bill debate: "It must be, I would suggest, difficult for some people to get up and make these arguments, given a long history of arguing for less Government, less interference, less cost…But there is something to be said for fascinating turnarounds."[202]

The 1981 farm bill was a testament to the priorities of southern conservatives. For them, the South's interests took precedence over congressional alliances, personal affection for the president, and even reducing the size and scope of the federal government. Led by Jesse Helms, they angered many midwesterners in the formerly unified congressional farm

[202] "Reagan signs farm bill", *CT*, 23 December 1981; Ronald Reagan, "Statement on Signing the Agriculture and Food Act of 1981", 22 December 1981, *Public Papers of the President*; Joan McKinney, "Sugar supports placed in farm bill for first time", *Advocate*, 17 December 1981; Dan Lohwasser, "Pressed leaf farmers study change", *NO*, 14 December 1981; Remarks by Paul Tsongas, *Congressional Record*, 16 September 1981, 20773.

coalition by creating a bill that was, as David Stockman put it, "a smorgasbord of everything". They also severely undermined the president's drive for a free market in agriculture. "Not only did the Reagan administration end up supporting a huge expansion of most of the existing farm programs," Larry Schwab writes, "his administration even added new ones."[203]

Nonetheless, over the following years US farmers continued to endure their deepest crisis since the 1930s. Their plight increasingly touched the national consciousness. In 1984, Hollywood produced three films – *River*, *Places in the Heart*, and *Country* – depicting the struggles of life on a family farm in hard times. Particularly in the Midwest, but also across the South, farmers suffered from droughts, high loan interest rates, spiralling debts, and falling property values, with farm foreclosures reaching record levels. Farm programmes which had been expanded or introduced in 1981 did little to alleviate the crisis. In some cases, they exacerbated it. By maintaining a high sugar price, for example, federal assistance triggered a steady fall in consumption during the early 1980s. By December 1984 the entire industry was "in trouble", as one producer told the *New York Times*. High price levels maintained by the tobacco programme, combined with the strong dollar, also meant that the southern tobacco industry struggled to compete with foreign producers and America's share of the global market shrank. Programmes that had been vigorously defended by southern conservatives with the aim of protecting their region's farmers were proving increasingly counterproductive to the agricultural economy. A vicious circle had developed. Placing US farmers at the mercy of the marketplace would result in many losing their livelihoods, yet the federal subsidies they needed to survive were gradually crippling their industries. Consequently, when a new farm bill was required in 1985, many southern conservatives broadly accepted that price support

[203] "Reagan signs farm bill", *CT*; Stockman, 164; Larry Schwab, *The Illusion of a Conservative Reagan Revolution*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991), 86.

reductions were needed. Again, though, they fought hard to keep the programmes in place, fearing that fully opening agriculture to market forces could put large numbers of southern farmers out of business for good.[204]

Speaking at a press conference in February 1985, Ronald Reagan's view of agriculture was unchanged from the start of his presidency: "Many of the problems [farmers] face today are the result of government's involvement." Once again, his administration would be "taking up proposals for, hopefully, getting the farm economy back into the free marketplace and government out of the agricultural business." When the plans were revealed, they sparked outrage among farm state congressmen and senators. A proposal to abolish the allotment system which licenced the production of tobacco was quickly condemned by Jesse Helms and other southern conservatives. The *News and Observer* reported that Helms reacted with "contempt" when shown the plan, theatrically "holding the page by one corner away from his body as if it were an object of disgust." Helms had turned down the chairmanship of the prestigious Senate Foreign Relations Committee to remain chair of the Agriculture Committee. In doing so, he fulfilled a campaign promise that had helped him to win re-election in 1984 and prevented Richard Lugar, a vocal opponent of the tobacco programme, from replacing him as chair of Agriculture. Though Helms accepted some reductions in tobacco price support levels were necessary, ending the allotment system was beyond the pale. The Reagan administration would need to drop their tobacco proposals "if they want a farm bill approved. I'm still chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, I'll put it that way." Siding with Helms were Kentucky Republicans Mitch McConnell (newly elected to the Senate)

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[204] Schwab, 86; Ward Sinclair, "Farm Failures Threaten To Reshape Rural U.S.", *WP*, 25 January 1985; Pamela Hollie, "The Sugar Industry's Slide", *NYT*, 7 December 1984; William Schmidt, "Future of 2 Southern Industries Raises Concern", *NYT*, 9 December 1984.

and Larry Hopkins as well as North Carolina Democrat Charlie Rose. The latter described the plan as "stupid" and a "cock and bull set-up", while Hopkins declared, "The trenches have been dug…if they persist in this then it's war."[205]

The administration's plans for the rest of US agriculture provoked a similar response. As part of a 15-year bill designed to guide US farmers through to the end of the 20th century, all price support programmes would be eliminated after a five-year transition. The aim, John Block said, was to ensure that "farmers can make a profit out of the marketplace and are not dependent on the government for their income." Farm state congressmen and senators disparaged the notion that US farmers could make a profit in the marketplace when competing against farmers in other countries who received subsidies. The resistance among both southerners and midwesterners was such that the administration's bill stood little chance of surviving without substantial alterations. The subsequent ten month-long congressional debate produced, as it had in 1981, a bill that was virtually unrecognisable from the Reagan administration's original proposals.[206]

Midwesterners again argued that the final farm bill favoured the South. Led by Helms, southern conservatives forced the administration to back down over the tobacco allotment system but permitted small reductions in price support levels. The administration's plan to phase out other price supports was also rejected, with cotton, peanut, and sugar supports remaining in place, albeit at a lower level. Instead of pushing American farmers towards the

[205] "The President's News Conference", 21 February 1985, *Public Papers of the President*; "Block: Reagan plans sweeping changes in farm policy", *AC*, 16 January 1985; A.L. May, "Block indicates leaf plan not final", *NO*, 31 January 1985; A.L. May, "Helms vows to use clout in leaf program's defence", *NO*, 29 January 1985; Michael York and Bill Arthur, "Allotments could end next year", *LH*, 30 January 1985; Ward Sinclair, "Proposal to End Tobacco Program Has Congressional Backers Smoking", *WP*, 5 February 1985.

[206] Don Kendall, "Reagan's farm plan draws fire", *Advocate*, 23 February 1985; "Block: Farm cuts will be accepted", *GR*, 23 February 1985; "Lawmakers reluctant to introduce farm bill", *LH*, 13 February 1985.

free market, what eventually emerged from Congress was – in terms of federal spending – the biggest farm bill in US history, costing at least $52 billion over the following three years. Though Reagan had threatened to veto any farm bill which exceeded $50 billion, fears of a political backlash in the 1986 midterm elections pushed him into signing it. But Reagan did little to gloss over his "serious reservations" about the bill, stating pointedly that it "did not make all of the reforms we requested." The best argument he could muster for signing the bill was that it "represents a step in the right direction toward a sound agricultural policy." Nevertheless, his frustration was apparent when he described major aspects of the bill as "[representing] the worst in the way of policy".[207]

The Reagan administration's two attempts to reform US agriculture can only be regarded as outright failures. "Farm policy did not shift from a period of more government involvement to less government involvement during the 1980s. Just the reverse was true," observes Larry Schwab. "What happened was the opposite of what should have happened in a fundamental conservative change in policy." Ultimately, political interests defeated ideology. Reagan's plan to remove the federal government from US agriculture met determined resistance from southern conservatives who were beginning to re-assert their influence on Capitol Hill. A bipartisan group of southerners manned a legislative barricade around federal assistance to their region's farmers, against which the administration's attempts at fundamental reform repeatedly foundered. Their efforts ensured that the South's major commodities – tobacco, sugar, peanuts, and cotton – faced only minor reductions in federal subsidies and that their price support programmes remained inviolate. These

[207] Keith Schneider, "Farm Bill Passes Senate, 61 to 28", *NYT*, 24 November 1985; John Hoke, "Tobacco Growers Laud Compromise", *RTD*, 15 December 1985; Ward Sinclair, "Reagan Signs 5-year Farm Bill", *WP*, 24 December 1985; Ronald Reagan, "Statement on Signing the Food Security Act of 1985", 23 December 1985, *Public Papers of the President*.

conservative southerners oversaw passage of farm legislation that was vastly more expensive than the Reagan administration's proposals and unquestionably favourable to the South. Yet they were the same southerners who had previously expressed support for the president and his small government, budget cutting agenda – Boll Weevil Democrats who were crucial in passing his spending and tax cuts, or southern Republicans who had lauded Reagan as a conservative saviour on the campaign trail. Confrontations over agricultural reform showed that, if faced with a hard choice, southern conservatives would prioritise defending the economic interests and traditions of the South over their political loyalties and personal affection for Ronald Reagan.[208]

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Agriculture was not the only major southern industry to struggle during the 1970s and 1980s. Textile mills across the region were laying off workers in their thousands. Originally heavily concentrated in New England, much of the US textile industry had migrated to the South between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries, as mill owners were attracted by the prospect of a cheaper workforce (wages were around one-third lower than in the Northeast) and weaker labour unions. By 1968, over a million workers were employed in textile and apparel production across eight southern states: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Textile mills were often the major employer in their local towns and were the lifeblood of thousands of rural communities. The *New York*

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[208] Schwab, 88-93.

Times reported in 1984 that mills remained "the dominant life force in many small towns, the source not only of paychecks but of civic energy". The same year, the *Atlanta Constitution* observed that the textile industry "has knitted the entire economic, social and political fabric of towns like Burlington, Spring Mills and West Point – the names of which are more often spotted in white sale catalogs than on road maps." In the mid-1980s, the South accounted for around 75 percent of all textile jobs in the US, and the industry was still the largest employer in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia.[209]

After weathering several turbulent periods since World War II, however, the industry appeared to be in an irrevocable decline. Sales of American-made textiles had been falling steadily and the 1970s had seen the closure of 604 textile mills with the loss of over 113,000 jobs. Though a majority of these closures occurred at less profitable Northeastern mills, the South was also badly affected. By 1984, textile employment in the Carolinas was at its lowest for 37 years, with South Carolina having lost 50,000 textile jobs over the previous decade. Mill closures were having a devastating impact on communities throughout the region. According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, when the local mill in Graniteville, South Carolina was closed, over 600 jobs were lost and the entire local economy suffered. A mill closure in Ware Shoals, also in South Carolina, left around half the town's population unemployed. Few residents were confident of finding new jobs now that the foremost employer in the area had been

[209] Michael Schulman and Jeffrey Leiter, "Southern Textiles: Contested Puzzles and Continuing Paradoxes," in *Hanging by a Thread: Social Change in Southern Textiles*, Jeffrey Leiter, Michael Schulman and Rhonda Zingraff (eds.), (Ithaca, ILR Press: 1991), 3-17; "Textiles Trail in Job Gains", *AC*, 19 October 1969; Schmidt, "Future of 2 Southern Industries"; Bob Deans, "Have imported textiles become America's new boll weevil?", *AC*, 26 August 1984.

liquidated. Even in a larger city such as Augusta, Georgia, the closure of the Enterprise textile mill after 100 years of operation "shattered" the order of the local community.[210]

Many in the industry, both workers and management, believed these closures were the direct result of a surge in textile imports that had begun in the early 1970s. Anger at the level of imports was widespread, with one mill worker in Augusta accusing overseas governments of "just [letting] us starve to death." Emerging economies in Asia had established textile industries as a major element of their rapid industrialisation. By the late 1970s, Asian textile production was expanding by 25 percent each year and US imports from Asia increased by 223 percent between 1973 and 1980. Global trade in textiles was governed by the Multi-fiber Arrangement (MFA) established in 1974 to regulate exports by developing nations. However, representatives and political allies of the US textile industry repeatedly decried the MFA as ineffectual and accused their competitor nations in Asia of engaging in unfair trade practices. Both complaints were justified, but ultimately the issue facing American textile mills was a familiar one: Asian countries were producing textiles at a much cheaper cost. The same undercutting which helped the South draw textile manufacturing away from the Northeast was now hurting the southern economy. As historian James Cobb told the *New York Times*, "The third world has out-Southed the South". The sharp decline of the textile industry quickly became a political issue. The industry and its congressional allies mounted a campaign demanding "regulatory relief" – legislation aimed at stemming the flood of textiles entering the United States. A bill designed to prevent the US from lowering trade

[210] Timothy Minchin, *Empty Mills: The Fight Against Imports and the Decline of the US Textile Industry*, (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), 69; Robert Press, "Southern textile-mill blues", *CSM*, 31 March 1983; "Future of 2 Southern Industries", *NYT*; William Schmidt, "Town Built by Textile Mill Faces Future Without It", *NYT*, 22 December 1984; Robin Toner, "Closing of a mill is like a funeral", *AC*, 27 February 1983.

tariffs on textiles was vetoed by President Jimmy Carter in November 1978, on the grounds that such legislation would encourage other industries to seek similar protection.[211]

On the 1980 campaign trail Ronald Reagan had pledged – albeit in vague terms – to protect American textile jobs and tackle the issue of imports. Such a protectionist commitment clearly ran counter to his faith in free markets and free trade. Nevertheless, appearing alongside Strom Thurmond in Columbia, South Carolina, Reagan declared that the textile industry provided "vitally needed American jobs…As President, I want to make sure these jobs stay in this country, and are not exported overseas". He would work to "renew and strengthen" the MFA, as well as "[negotiating] aggressively with our trading partners". In letters to both Thurmond and his fellow South Carolinian Carroll Campbell, Reagan had been more specific. Noting that the MFA was due to expire at the end of 1981, he said it should be "strengthened by relating import growth from all sources to domestic market growth. I shall work to achieve that goal." This was a move strongly advocated across the textile industry, and southern conservatives expected Reagan to stay true to his commitment. They would be sorely disappointed.[212]

During 1981 and 1982, the administration gave repeated assurances it would meet its target. Reagan's Chief of Staff, James Baker, told Carroll Campbell, "This Administration will make every effort to satisfactorily conclude an MFA that will allow us to relate total import growth to growth in the domestic textile and apparel market." Reagan personally reassured Thurmond, "I have instructed all agencies and departments which have responsibilities

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[211] Toner, "Closing of a mill"; Minchin, 67-70; Deans, "Have imported textiles become America's new boll weevil?"; "Future of 2 Southern Industries", *NYT*; Craig Hume, "Textile Import Curb Sought", *AC*, 30 June 1978; Lee Egerstrom, "Carter Vetoes Bills on Imports", *BG*, 12 November 1978.

[212] Ronald Reagan Speech in Columbia, South Carolina, 10 October 1980, Box 434, 1980 CP; Ronald Reagan to Strom Thurmond, 3 September 1980, Box 3, Legislative Assistant Series, STC; Ronald Reagan to Carroll Campbell, 18 January 1980, OA12242, MDF.

related to the textile program to continue their efforts to work vigorously towards that goal." Yet little was achieved. The strong dollar (a consequence of funding federal deficits with foreign borrowing) made importing cheaper and exporting more expensive, and so textile imports continued to increase. In late 1983, Secretary of Commerce Malcolm Baldrige bluntly informed Reagan how far short of his commitment the administration had fallen. "You have pledged to Senator Thurmond and others to relate the growth of textile imports to growth in the domestic market", wrote Baldrige. "However, import growth continues at unprecedented levels. Since the beginning of your Administration, imports have grown by 49 percent while domestic production has grown only 1 percent".[213]

Relations between the White House and textile industry advocates – primarily southerners both inside and outside Congress – unsurprisingly soured. William Klopman, a textile magnate in North Carolina and loyal Reagan backer, wrote to the president: "I cannot help but think that the inconsistency between your commitment to our industry and your support of free trade…is being resolved in favour of the free trade advocates." Demands for action also came from Roger Milliken, owner of one of South Carolina's largest textile companies. Milliken was, in his own words, "a strong supporter of the Reagan administration" and a prominent Republican donor. He was also a consequential figure in the development of the southern GOP during the mid-20th century, having funded the expansion of the Republican Party in South Carolina and persuaded Strom Thurmond to switch parties in 1964. Writing in May 1983, however, Milliken expressed his anger to Reagan aide Ed Meese. The levels of imported textiles, he declared, were "catastrophic" and "staggering compared with the

[213] James Baker to Carroll Campbell, 11 December 1981, Box 12, MOF; Ronald Reagan to Strom Thurmond, 4 October 1982, Box 3, Legislative Assistant Series, STC; Memo from Malcolm Baldridge to Ronald Reagan, undated 1983, Box 12, MOF.

President's oft-repeated commitment of an import growth of not more than the growth of our market". Unless action was taken, "the Republican Party in that part of the country which relies on jobs in the apparel and textile industries will have no remaining credibility." Four months later, after attending a fundraising dinner in Columbia with Reagan, Milliken described the president's assurances to the textile industry as "very weak and totally unsupported…there was a significant dead silence following his remarks on textiles". He also wrote to James Baker of his increasing perception that "the Administration places a very low priority on the problem that has caused 140,000 people not to have jobs this year that would otherwise have been available had the President lived up to his written and oft-restated commitment".[214]

Milliken's complaints reflected increasing fury across the industry. After meeting with him in November 1983, a Reagan aide described Milliken's demeanour as "belligerent" and wrote of a widespread feeling that the administration had "abandoned" the textile industry. Many of Reagan's most prominent southern supporters shared this view. Strom Thurmond wrote to remind the president of the "vitally important commitment you made to me during the 1980 presidential campaign" but also said he felt that Reagan was using "phraseology [that] creates a loophole which will essentially nullify your commitment". Carroll Campbell warned Ed Meese that Republicans would "run into a buzzsaw in the South in 1984." He continued, "Unfortunately, the President's commitment is being viewed as empty political rhetoric in the face of skyrocketing imports. It can hurt us, and badly." A Republican member of the South Carolina state legislature also told Reagan, "the alienation of the 'textile' South

[214] William Klopman to the President, 17 May 1983, OA12242, MDF; Roger Milliken to Ed Meese, 31 May 1983, Box 66, EMF; Jonathan Katz, "Roger Milliken: The Man Who Launched the GOP's Civil War", *Politico*, 1 October 2015; Roger Milliken to James Baker, Michael Deaver, and Ed Meese, 27 September 1983, Box 12, MOF; Roger Milliken to James Baker, 3 November 1983; Box 66, EMF.

might conceivably destroy your solid base of support…I urge and implore you to take immediate steps to protect your 'southern flanks' by protecting the textile industry." Jesse Helms and Republican Congressman James Broyhill, from neighbouring North Carolina, also wrote to the White House. The latter cautioned that "the situation is bad and getting worse. This issue can be politically damaging to all those seeking reelection in 1984 if something is not done – and done quickly." Some in the administration began to fear a damaging political confrontation over Reagan's broken pledges. In an internal memo, US Trade Representative William Brock wrote of the potential for an "unavoidable conflict" with the textile industry in the coming year.[215]

As Roger Milliken suspected, much of the counsel Reagan received on the textile issue opposed restricting imports and argued instead that textile supporters' demands were "protectionist". Secretary of Commerce Malcolm Baldrige put it to Reagan in late 1983 that rejecting a proposal to impose quotas would "underscore our willingness to resist industry desires for protection." In May 1984, a meeting of administration trade advisors reported its conclusions in a memo to the White House: "Acquiescing in a legislated solution involving quotas or some other restraint would simply make resisting similar measures for steel, footwear, and copper more difficult". There was, though, an awareness of the potential political damage. "We can't simply leave our supporters with nothing to cling to," the group acknowledged, before recommending possible short-term measures designed to "buy us sufficient time to get past the November election". During Reagan's first term, his

[215] Memo from Walter Lenahan to Ed Meese, 17 November 1983, Box 66, EMF; Memo from John Richardson to Kenneth Cribb, 14 November 1983, Box 66, EMF; Strom Thurmond to Ronald Reagan, 14 October 1983, Box 12, MOF; Carroll Campbell to Ed Meese, 8 November 1983, Box 66, EMF; Ben Thrailkill Jr. to Ronald Reagan, 6 May 1984, Box 29, CCP; Jesse Helms to Ronald Reagan, 12 December 1983, Box 12, MOF; James Broyhill to M. B. Oglesby, 7 December 1983, Box 12, MOF; Memo from William Brock to Ed Meese, 17 November 1983, Box 67, EMF.

administration clearly understood the dangers the textile issue represented. But, like the president himself, Reagan's advisors were deeply resistant to employing protectionist measures to solve the problem. Despite the lack of White House action and the ongoing surge in textile imports, the issue seemingly did little electoral damage to Reagan in 1984. As will be examined, other factors – notably Christian Right support and an unpopular Democratic opponent – helped him win every southern state on his way to a landslide national victory. The biggest confrontations over textile imports, however, still lay ahead.[216]

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Early in Reagan's second term, the campaign to limit textile imports brought together an unlikely national coalition of union leaders and industry bosses, while in Congress it created a bipartisan alliance across both House and Senate. Strom Thurmond led the charge in the Senate, backed by fellow Republicans Jesse Helms and John East of North Carolina, Mack Mattingly of Georgia and Thad Cochran of Mississippi, as well as Democrats Ernest Hollings of South Carolina and Sam Nunn of Georgia. The scope of the pro-textile grouping in the House was even broader. In June 1985, a letter protesting the administration's failure to help the industry was signed by southern conservatives from the GOP such as James Broyhill of North Carolina, Carroll Campbell of South Carolina, and Trent Lott of Mississippi, numerous Boll Weevil Democrats, including Marvin Leath of Texas, Doug Barnard of Georgia, and Bill Nichols of Alabama, and non-southerners such as Connecticut Democrat Barbara Kennelly and

[216] Baldrige to Reagan, undated 1983; Memo from Roger Porter to John Svahn, 10 May 1984, Box 66, EMF.

Republican Bud Shuster of Pennsylvania. Southern conservatives predominated, therefore, but the alliance also encompassed a smaller number of moderate southern Democrats and representatives from the Northeast, whose districts relied on what remained of that region's textile industry.[217]

The influential chair of the Congressional Textile Caucus, conservative Georgia Democrat Ed Jenkins, became the central figure in the congressional campaign to limit imports. Jenkins had acquired the nickname 'Mr. Textiles' in his home state – his own mother had been a textile worker and his largely rural district was heavily dependent on the industry. He was also in "a particularly advantageous position" to forge a congressional coalition, as the *New York Times* observed. "As a senior member of the Ways and Means Committee…he can do many favors for many friends." A shrewd political operator, Jenkins was described in *Politics in America* as "a quiet conservative Democrat who does his politicking behind the scenes" and someone regarded by senior Democrats as a "conservative the leadership can turn to for counsel, if not necessarily for a liberal vote." The textile legislation Jenkins introduced triggered one of the toughest congressional battles of Ronald Reagan's presidency.[218]

H.R. 1562, also known as the Textile and Apparel Trade Enforcement Act, was introduced to the House on 19 March 1985. Seeking to dramatically limit imports from twelve major textile-producing countries, mainly in Asia, it eventually garnered 291 co-sponsors. Demonstrating that the campaign was a bipartisan effort led chiefly by southern conservatives, the House bill was co-authored by North Carolina Republican James Broyhill

[217] Stephen Roberts, "'Funny Kind of Coalition' on Textiles", *NYT*, 25 September 1985; James Broyhill, Ed Jenkins, Carroll Campbell et al. to James Baker, 28 June 1985, Series 2, Box 8, EJP.
[218] Emily Langer, "Ed Jenkins, former Democratic congressman from Georgia, dies at 78", *WP*, 3 January 2012; "'Funny Kind of Coalition'", *NYT*; Ehrenhalt, 376-377.

and its primary sponsor in the Senate was Strom Thurmond. Nonetheless, the bill faced an uphill battle even to reach President Reagan's desk. Democratic Party leaders in the House – including Ways and Means Committee Chairman Dan Rostenkowski – were opposed, leading Ed Jenkins to admit he was "not overly optimistic." Needing a broad range of support for his legislation, Jenkins carefully avoided the language of protectionism, instead preferring to describe himself as an "orderly marketeer" who believed in fair trade. However, not everyone in the textile coalition was quite so nuanced – North Carolina Republican Bill Hendon told journalists starkly that the United States was "bleeding from a self-inflicted wound called free trade". Significantly, passing Jenkins' legislation was not necessarily crucial to the broader goals of textile supporters in Congress. As labour historian Timothy Minchin has written, "Aware that passage of the bill would be difficult, [Jenkins] reasoned that a strong campaign would at least pressure the Reagan administration to strengthen the MFA."[219]

While free-trade advocates and business groups were vehemently critical of the bill, the White House's response was surprisingly subdued. As the *Wall Street Journal* noted in late May, "to many, the Reagan administration has seemed adrift on trade issues." Ronald Reagan was certainly not as outspoken on textile imports as he had been in his opposition to agricultural subsidies. This was partly because his own trade advisors accepted that high import levels were indeed harming the industry and that the administration bore some responsibility. William Brock and Malcolm Baldrige informed the President, "Imports have continued to increase despite our quota actions and bilateral agreements because only 60 percent of current trade is covered by quotas. Additionally, the strong dollar has impeded

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[219] Details of H.R.1562 – Textile and Apparel Trade Enforcement Act of 1985, Congress.gov website; Sarah Avery, "Bill limiting textile imports being offered", *GNR*, 19 March 1985; "Textile Aid Package Introduced, Challenged", *MH*, 20 March 1985; Minchin, 96-97.

exports at the same time that it has attracted imports." Moreover, they warned, the issue carried "sharp political significance due to your commitment to relate import growth to growth in the domestic market." Outspoken opposition to the Jenkins bill would make the administration seem uncaring to the hundreds of thousands of workers whose futures were in jeopardy – a majority of whom lived in deeply conservative, rural areas of the South. Such a response could damage Reagan's popularity in the region and, as Roger Milliken had warned, severely hurt the GOP's credibility at a time when the partisan loyalties of conservative southerners were in flux. Therefore, while making clear it did not favour legislation to limit imports, the Reagan administration was initially wary of pushing back too forcefully against the bill. "Relations with Capitol Hill are at a standstill", the *Journal* observed, "Nobody from the White House has gone to lobby for the administration's point of view on the textile legislation".[220]

The Reagan administration finally set out its opposition explicitly in mid-June. In a letter to all members of Congress, James Baker, Malcolm Baldrige, and other White House officials claimed the legislation would "impose a very high cost on U.S. consumers, invite retaliation against U.S. exports, spur inflation, violate our international obligations, and provide the domestic textile and apparel industry with an unprecedented level of protection." In response, the textile bill's supporters intensified a campaign of letter-writing. James Broyhill and two of his constituents personally delivered 7,000 letters written by textile supporters in his district to the White House. But this campaign only served to strengthen Reagan's resolve. In mid-September the president told a news conference, "A mindless

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[220] Stuart Auerbach, "Retailers to Combat Import Quotas", *WP*, 24 May 1985; Art Pine and Ellen Hume, "Protectionist Sentiment Grows in Congress In Face of Inaction by Reagan Administration", *WSJ*, 29 May 1985; Memo from William Brock and Malcolm Baldrige to the President, 12 March 1985, Box 12, MOF.

stampede toward protectionism will be a one-way trip to economic disaster”. A week later, without discussing the textile bill directly, Reagan reiterated that “our trade policy rests firmly on the foundation of free and open markets – free trade.” His tough language on free trade, however, masked occasional pragmatism and flexibility. In 1985, for example, the Reagan administration negotiated a multinational agreement – the Plaza Accord – to bring down the value of the dollar by purchasing Japanese yen and German marks. Two years later, it placed tariffs on selected Japanese imports in retaliation for perceived breaches of a US-Japanese trade agreement. Neither action was consistent with a trade policy founded on free and open markets.[221]

Yet the administration was unwavering on the textile issue. Throughout 1985 it became clear that little further action on textile imports would be forthcoming. In September, the *Greensboro News and Record* reported on the anger among textile bosses in North Carolina, many of whom had strongly backed Reagan in 1980. “From my standpoint it (support for Reagan) has gone from 100 percent to zero”, said one executive from Gastonia. “His record on textiles is pretty damn dismal.” Similar feelings prevailed among southerners in Congress. When Ed Jenkins’ bill passed the House on 10 October by a majority of 262-159, the entire delegations from Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee voted in favour, as did many other southern congressmen and every representative from Massachusetts. Several longstanding allies of Reagan – including Newt Gingrich of Georgia and Trent Lott of Mississippi, both of whom had worked on his election campaigns – voted for the bill. Though Jenkins demonstrated his political skill in guiding the

[221] James Baker, George Schultz, Malcolm Baldrige et al., to Ed Jenkins, 19 June 1985, Box 10, EJP; Memo from ‘AMK’ to ‘BK’, 25 September 1985, Box 9, LAF; Ronald Reagan, “The President’s News Conference”, 17 September 1985 and “Remarks at a White House Meeting With Business and Trade Leaders”, 23 September 1985, *Public Papers of the President*; Eduardo Porter, “Whoops! It's 1985 All Over Again”, *NYT*, 19 December 2004; David Wilman, “Despite plea from Japan, Reagan sets new tariffs”, *BG*, 18 April 1987.

legislation through, the margin of victory was short of the two-thirds majority required to override a likely presidential veto. The same was true in the Senate, where it passed by a majority of 60-39. Though many of the bill's supporters framed their rhetoric in terms of fairness rather than protectionism, some southerners were more overt in their opposition to free trade. Strom Thurmond highlighted the distance between his own southern conservatism and the ideology of Reaganism when, after casting his vote, he told the assembled media "Free trade will destroy America!" After the Senate vote, Roger Milliken wrote to Thurmond, "if he [President Reagan] vetos [*sic*], he will be denying what he wrote to you when he was campaigning for the Presidency and made a commitment…It would be devastating for the Republican Party and the control of the United States Senate if he vetos this bill."[222]

Nevertheless, a presidential veto appeared inevitable. The textile industry's supporters publicly called on Reagan to change his position. William Klopman told journalists "It would be stupid to do it (veto the bill)", while Thurmond declared he was "hopeful that the president will see the light of day here and approve the bill…It will enable the textile industry to survive." On 5 December a group of southern Republicans, led by James Broyhill, Georgia Senator Mack Mattingly, and Alabama Senator Jeremiah Denton, were granted a meeting with Reagan to plead their case. Afterwards, Broyhill told reporters "We were given a very cordial audience…He did not make any type of comment with respect to which direction he's leaning." In private, Reagan was more certain. After the meeting he noted in his diary, "I listened but feel I must veto it. It is pure protectionism". Reagan sent the bill back to Congress unsigned on 17 December with a message stating he was "deeply sympathetic

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[222] "Textile executives express disappointment with Reagan", *GNR*, 23 September 1985; Details of House vote on H.R. 1562, 10 October 1985, Govtrack website; Details of H.R.1562, Congress.gov website; "Senate defies veto threat with approval of trade bill", *HC*, 14 November 1985; Roger Milliken to Strom Thurmond, 14 November 1985, Box 75, Correspondence Management Service Series, STC.

about the job layoffs and plant closings that have affected many workers". However, it was also "my firm conviction that the economic and human costs of such a bill run far too high…We want to open markets abroad, not close them at home."[223]

The veto provoked consternation in the textile caucus, but also a resolve to continue the fight. "Congress has lost the battle but not the war," Strom Thurmond declared. Ed Jenkins, a Boll Weevil who had backed Reagan's budget cuts in 1981, noted that the President had not returned the favour. "I gave one to the Gipper, but he didn't give one to me." Jenkins was determined to override Reagan's veto, but announced that an override vote would be delayed until the following August. The MFA was due for renewal in July 1986 and the textile caucus decided to give the administration a chance to "aggressively renegotiate" the agreement as Reagan had repeatedly pledged to do. But the delay was also a strategic one. "If they don't do what they say they will do at those talks," Carroll Campbell told reporters, "we'll probably be able to pick up additional votes and win the veto fight."[224]

The relationship between the Reagan administration and textile supporters both inside and outside Congress remained antagonistic. Suspicions among the industry's allies that the administration was offering little more than rhetoric were well founded. White House aide Haley Barbour (a future Republican Governor of Mississippi) made the case for action in an internal memo: "The most important point is there must be some action actually taken. The textile industry's line is that Reagan has betrayed the industry because he has broken his word on enforcing the MFA. They are extremely cynical…Some demonstrable action is critical

[223] Bill Arthur, "Textile Bill OK'D in Senate", *CO*, 14 November 1985; David Pace, "Southern Republicans plead textile bill's case", *MT*, 6 December 1985; Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries Unabridged: Vol. 2*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 17; Ronald Reagan, "Message to the House of Representatives Returning Without Approval the Textile and Apparel Industries Bill", 17 December 1985, *Public Papers of the President.*

[224] Robert Rosenblatt, "Congressmen Pledge to Attempt Textile Veto Override in August", *LAT*, 19 December 1985.

to reviving any credibility". From the congressional perspective, James Broyhill told the administration that Reagan's veto was "a severe blow" and the GOP risked losing the trust of southern voters. "I am having a hard time convincing North Carolina textile workers that I can do more for them than my opponents, that I can get the President to help them." He added that "continued, aggressive action by the President" was required to "contain the political damage". However, another White House advisor, Ed Stucky, was dismissive of textile supporters, complaining in a memo about "the textile and apparel people [coming] in bitching and moaning about their economic well-being". As the date of a potential override vote neared, disagreements over textile imports remained bitter.[225]

In early August, the administration proclaimed victory in its efforts to renegotiate the MFA. The agreement was extended to cover a broader range of textiles and fibres, and now allowed the US to negotiate stricter bilateral trade deals with major textile exporting countries. President Reagan hailed the new MFA as "stronger and more comprehensive", but the textile industry's congressional allies were less convinced. Strom Thurmond was "disgusted and disappointed", while an industry spokesman accused the Reagan administration of "shameful deceit" in "attempting to disguise their failure as a success." The House override vote was scheduled for 6 August, and the days prior were filled with bargaining and pleading from both sides. Southern conservatives implored their fellow congressmen to vote against the president. Writing to Texas Republican Tom DeLay, Carroll Campbell noted that DeLay shared "my support for President Reagan and his programs" but argued that the GOP needed to show solidarity with textile workers. "By hanging in with the

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[225] Memo from Haley Barbour to Mitchell Daniels Jr., 31 January 1986, and Talking Points for James Broyhill meeting with James Baker, 16 January 1986, both in Box 3, WLF; Memo from Edward Stucky to Haley Barbour, 15 May 1986, Box 11, ESF.

worker on this vote, we can turn a political negative into a plus…by forcing the Administration legislatively to do what it should have been doing all the time."[226]

Ronald Reagan again called Boll Weevil Democrats in an attempt to persuade them, but this time his appeals to Charles Stenholm and Buddy Roemer proved fruitless. Reagan noted after the calls that Roemer had changed his mind – initially unsure about the Jenkins bill, he had now decided to back it. About Stenholm, Reagan simply wrote, "I'm afraid the cotton lobby has him." Carroll Campbell called for southern House delegations to remain united. "The president cannot peel a vote away in North Carolina or South Carolina or Georgia or Tennessee or throughout our part of the country", Campbell said. "This thing is life or death, so as much as we admire and respect the president, we must be opposed." Southern Republicans like Campbell found it particularly hard to oppose their president. In a letter to fellow Republicans rallying support for overriding the veto, Campbell wrote of his "reluctance to go against our President". However, he concluded, "I strongly believe that the Administration…has unnecessarily sacrificed jobs and plants on the altar of free trade." Speaking in the House, Newt Gingrich similarly accused the White House of "fundamentally mishandling our trade policies" and argued it had shown "a record of indifference to American jobs that we must change. We must vote to override." South Carolinian Thomas Hartnett directed some remarks at Reagan himself: "I think that your political consistency is wrong, Mr. President, and I, who have considered myself to be one of your most loyal soldiers, will leave you and urge my colleagues to vote to override your veto". Mississippi Democrat Sonny Montgomery, once a key supporter of Reagan's budget cuts, described the effect the textile issue was having on the South: "Small textile plants are the life-blood of many small

[226] Stuart Auerbach, "New Textile Pact Entangled in Veto Battle", *WP*, 2 August 1986; Carroll Campbell to Tom DeLay, 22 July 1986, Box 32, CCP.

communities in Mississippi. Layoffs and plant closures have a devastating impact on the economy of the entire region."[227]

In the end, the Jenkins bill fell short of the required two-thirds majority by just eight votes, as the House supported overriding Reagan's veto by 276-149. Ed Jenkins had worked hard to win support for the override vote, but subsequently acknowledged the White House's superior bargaining power: "The President has a lot of power and a lot of chips. He had to play them all on this vote." According to the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, the Reagan administration offered beneficial trade deals to midwestern grain farmers and West Coast computer manufacturers, thereby shoring up support from their congressional representatives. Ultimately, "Reagan had more chips to cash." The congressmen and industry leaders who had fought hardest for the textile legislation understood that Reagan personally had made the decisive difference. Roger Milliken observed, "We had it won in the House of Representatives until the full force of the Administration and President Reagan himself came in and peeled off votes that we had during the last 24 hours".[228]

The narrow defeat of H.R. 1562 was a body blow to the campaign to limit textile imports. Further attempts to pass legislation were undertaken, but none came as close to success as the Jenkins bill. The next, in February 1987, was directed by South Carolina Democrat Butler Derrick. Though a skilled politician, Derrick's quiet southern drawl and repeated references to the concerns of workers in his own district made it easy for opponents

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[227] Records of telephone calls to Buddy Roemer and Charles Stenholm, both 4 August 1986, Box 9, PTC; "Override of import bill veto will shatter global markets, Reagan warns", *AG*, 6 August 1986; Carroll Campbell to Republican Colleagues, 23 July 1986, Box 32, CCP; Remarks by Newt Gingrich, *Congressional Record*, 6 August 1986, 19341; Remarks by Thomas Hartnett, *Congressional Record*, 6 August 1986, 19342; Remarks by Sonny Montgomery, *Congressional Record*, 6 August 1986, 19378.

[228] Julia Malone, "House Vote is Signal on Trade Policy", *FWST*, 10 August 1986; Nolan Walters, "House vote sustains Reagan's veto on textile imports", *FWST*, 7 August 1986.

to characterise him as acting purely out of regional interest. “Very much a product of the industry’s heartland in the Carolinas”, Timothy Minchin writes, “Derrick was perhaps not the best leader to build a national coalition.” Moreover, as the wider economy improved during 1987 and 1988, it became harder to mount a powerful argument to rescue one industry. Persuading Americans that low-wage textile jobs were worth saving at a time when higher paid job opportunities in the service sector were increasing proved a difficult task. Nonetheless, Derrick’s bill attracted enough support to pass the House and Senate in September 1988 before being quickly vetoed by President Reagan, who described the legislation as “protectionism at its worst”. Again, the bill was defeated in the override vote – this time falling eleven votes short.[229]

In purely legislative terms, the administration successfully fought off two attempts to impose textile import quotas it regarded as damaging and protectionist. But the issue had been a constant strain on the relationship between the White House and southern conservatives in Congress. During its first term, many southerners felt the administration was ignoring an industry that was critical to their region’s economy and, moreover, believed Reagan was betraying a commitment made to them in 1980. In Reagan’s second term, as the trigger for two heated legislative battles, the textile issue created a division between Reagan and southern congressmen that lasted until the end of his presidency. However, his personal popularity in the South – as well as the electoral prospects of the Republican Party – suffered remarkably little. There were, of course, other factors in the GOP’s increasing popularity among white conservative southerners, encompassing issues of cultural conservatism, race

[229] Minchin, 126-136; “Reagan vetoes textile bill”, *AG*, 29 September 1988; “Reagan vetoes textile, shoe bill as 'protectionism at its worst'”, *Hartford Courant*, 29 September 1986; Details of vote on H.R.1154 – Textile Apparel and Footwear Trade Act of 1988, 4 October 1988, Govtrack website.

and religion. Yet the extent to which Reagan was seemingly immune to personal blame over textile imports is surprising. Some southerners even wrote to their congressmen urging both support for the president and a vote in favour of imposing import quotas. "On the ground, Reagan remained popular with voters," Minchin writes, "including mill workers who seemed unaware of the president's opposition to the textile bills."[230]

Leading industry figures likewise preferred to believe Reagan had been led astray by his advisors. A director of the North Carolina Textile Manufacturers Association remarked that the ability of many southern textile bosses to separate Ronald Reagan from the policies of his administration was "an interesting phenomenon." "A lot of folks blame Reagan, but they are more critical of his advisers," he continued. "They feel like he is a good fellow, and on many things, they agree with him. But on (textile trade issues) they are 180 degrees apart." In his many pleas to the administration for action on textiles, Roger Milliken often directed his anger towards White House staff rather than towards Ronald Reagan himself. After one meeting, a presidential aide reported that Milliken had "indicated that he personally believes that the White House inner circle is being too heavily insulated by staff on the textile and apparel issue" and Reagan was personally unaware of its "magnitude". Strom Thurmond also preferred to think that Reagan had "heeded bad advice". As noted, with Ronald Reagan in the White House, many conservative southerners believed that their priorities – be they cultural or economic – would return to the top of the political agenda. The confrontations over textiles suggested that such faith may have been misplaced, yet Reagan himself continued to escape significant criticism. In large part, this was a result of the deep affinity he had built with white conservatives in the South over several decades. Reagan's personal standing in the region

[230] Minchin, 137-138.

could seemingly outweigh policy matters, even when those policies jeopardised thousands of southern jobs. The textile issue certainly did not appear to hinder the Republican Party at the ballot box in 1986 and 1988. As Minchin observes, "It was clear that the GOP could make a few concessions, rebuff the industry's core demands, and still carry the region where the textile industry remained the biggest employer".[231]

Legislative struggles over agriculture and textiles highlighted the economic differences between Reaganite conservatism and southern conservatism. The Reagan administration's tortuous and largely futile attempts to transform US agriculture demonstrated that the protectionist economic impulses of southern conservatives were regularly in direct opposition to the free market ideology of Reaganism. While its efforts to thwart the southern-led campaign on textiles were more successful, they also sparked intense struggles with conservative southerners. Though Reaganism was seemingly ascendant during this period, the issues examined in this chapter highlight the continued strength of a typically southern strand of politics – one that prioritised the regional status quo above all else. Conservative southerners, united in a bipartisan coalition, fought for and won concessions for their region's farmers in the face of opposition from free marketeers, and came within eight votes of passing the most protectionist legislation the US had seen in decades. These southerners, for all their professed admiration of Reagan's political philosophy, were frequently angered when he stuck to that philosophy, particularly if it threatened to damage their region's economy. This divide has been obscured by the mythology that has built up around the Reagan-era and by the hagiographic way in which many conservatives have perceived Reagan himself. Yet it

[231] "Textile executives express disappointment", *GNR*; Lenahan to Meese, 17 November 1983; Lee Bandy, "Reagan ready to veto import limits", *State*, 18 December 1985; Brandt Ayers, "Reagan cracks the South, but it's not a party victory", *AC*, 18 November 1984; Minchin 138.

was a divide which went beyond the politics of trade and economics. In the realm of cultural conservatism too, Reagan often failed to meet southern expectations.

Chapter Five

"It was Jesus that gave us this victory": Ronald Reagan and southern evangelicals

Though the Christian Right was regularly portrayed by the media as an influential part of Ronald Reagan's political coalition, the relationship between the Reagan White House and Christian Right leaders was often fraught. The priorities of conservative evangelicals, particularly regarding social issues such as abortion and school prayer, exemplified the cultural traditionalism of the white South. However, they rarely aligned with Reagan's economic and foreign policy focused agenda. At both leadership and grassroots levels, the Christian Right repeatedly voiced frustration at his administration's reluctance to expend political capital pursuing social issue legislation. This chapter examines the reasons for the Christian Right's disenchantment with the Reagan White House and considers what this complex relationship meant for the Republican Party, for the Christian Right's influence in Washington, and for the political futures of millions of southern evangelicals. While Reagan ultimately offered them little more than rhetorical backing, many Christian Right leaders understood that even this limited support was critical to their nascent movement and that their loyalty to him increased their access to the corridors of power. Hence, Reagan's personal popularity among conservative evangelicals remained high, despite a lack of legislative success. For the GOP, embracing the Christian Right brought millions of conservative southern evangelicals into the party's base. These voters proved decisive in congressional races in the 1980s and beyond, ultimately helping turn the white South into a Republican bastion.

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In the eyes of prominent Southern Baptist preachers, and millions of their followers, Ronald Reagan's 1980 election victory heralded a moral rebirth in the United States. "God has used us in awakening the conscience of Americans", declared Texan pastor James Robison. "God has allowed us to touch millions of lives – like I've never seen before in my lifetime – and make them more aware of moral issues and their responsibility for voting." Reverend Jerry Falwell, a Virginia pastor and leader of the Moral Majority, believed Reagan's election was "the greatest day for the cause of conservatism and American morality in my adult life." As noted, during the late 1970s Reagan's deliberate use of pious language on matters such as abortion had enabled him to convince Christian Right leaders that he shared their values and concerns. By the time he won the presidency, Reagan – a divorced former Hollywood actor who had not been a regular churchgoer since his youth and who had liberalised abortion laws as Governor of California – was seen by conservative evangelicals as something of a spiritual saviour.[232]

Electorally, the importance of evangelical voters to Reagan's victory is hard to discern. At the very least, as Daniel Williams has suggested, the Christian Right had become "a Republican voting bloc that party strategists could not afford to ignore". Jerry Falwell claimed Reagan owed him no political debt, saying simply, "I share many of his philosophical views, but I am just one citizen who voted for him and I don't expect anything from him." This was disingenuous. Reagan's evangelical supporters, Falwell included, believed they had helped him win the White House and expected an administration aligned with their agenda. That agenda was peculiarly southern, promoted chiefly by conservative Southern Baptists. As Rozell and Smith have observed, "the major themes that define the Christian Right evolved

[232] Jim Jones, "Robison says evangelicals deserve some of the credit for Reagan's win", *FWST*, 5 November 1980; Adam Clymer, "Bush Says No Single Group Gave Reagan His Victory", *NYT*, 18 November 1980.

out of the South's unique place in American history", in particular "the desire to preserve an imagined culture under external assault and a mistrust of concentrated federal power." As much as it was guided by adherence to scripture, the Christian Right was driven by a determination to reverse the social transformation the US had undergone in the preceding two decades. Its characteristics reflected those of the white South: a deeply conservative view of morality, a close intertwining of religion and politics, and a populist targeting of the federal government as the main threat to a traditional way of life.[233]

Christian Right leaders repeatedly linked federal efforts to protect abortion and promote equal rights for women with a wider sense of moral and political decline. "They saw opposition to these movements as essential to restoring America's strength", as Seth Dowland writes. The evangelical agenda also demonstrated an intense commitment to a "gendered order", laying out strictly defined social roles for men and women. Essentially, the Christian Right sought to spread the traditionalism of the white South, overturning many of the social gains made by women and imposing the region's restrictive definition of society on the wider US. Thus, newspapers reported a day after Reagan's election victory that "a human life amendment will be the Moral Majority's first legislative objective in 1981, followed by a war on pornography and drugs and a push for a return to traditional family values." Reports also quoted evangelical leaders as warning the President-elect against any "backsliding from their demands". James Robison, for example, declared that unless the new administration was staffed with "strong, competent, godly men", Reagan would "join the ranks of mediocrity".[234]

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[233] Williams, *God's Own Party*, 193; "No Advice for Reagan, Falwell Says", *RTD*, 7 November 1980; Rozell and Smith, "Religious Conservatives", 135-137.

[234] Seth Dowland, "'Family Values' and the Formation of a Christian Right Agenda", *Church History*, Vol.78, September 2009, 628-629; "Falwell Says Effort Paid Off", *RTD*, 5 November 1980; David Nyhan, "New Right

Just days after Reagan's inauguration, a gathering of conservative evangelical leaders declared his victory to be "not only the answer to their prayers but the judgment of God." Bobbie James, wife of Alabama's Democratic Governor Fob James and one of the most prominent women in Southern Baptist circles, claimed "It was Jesus that gave us this victory in November." Faith in the new president remained strong. Yet some appointments to his administration were causing concern – as a Mormon, Education Secretary Terrel Bell was viewed with particular suspicion – and there was a feeling of disgruntlement that no leading evangelical had been offered a White House position. Though evangelical groups "generally tried to smooth over their disappointment at not being included in the Reagan administration", signs of disillusionment with Reagan's actions were already starting to appear.[235]

The first major divide between Reagan and his Christian Right supporters occurred in June 1981. When Associate Justice Potter Stewart retired, it gave Reagan the opportunity to fulfil a campaign pledge and appoint the first female justice to the US Supreme Court. His choice of nominee, however, enraged many evangelicals and caused disquiet among conservative southerners in Congress. Judge Sandra Day O'Connor sat on the Arizona Court of Appeals and was described by Reagan as displaying "unique qualities of temperament, fairness, intellectual capacity and devotion to the public good". O'Connor's history of judicial opinions displayed a tendency towards caution rather than activism. Accordingly, to better understand her views it was necessary to study her voting record from her time as a Republican member of the Arizona state legislature. Elements of this record caused alarm on

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leaders warn Reagan", *BG*, 7 November 1980; Bruce Buursma, "Moral Majority: Crusade has just begun", *CT*, 6 November 1980.

[235] Marjorie Hyer, "Evangelical Christians Meet to Develop Strategy for 1980s", *WP*, 30 January 1981; Megan Rosenfeld, "For Whom Bell Tolls", *WP*, 5 April 1981.

the Christian Right. Alongside a reliably conservative voting history on issues like the death penalty, she had supported the introduction of the Equal Rights Amendment into the Arizona legislature in 1972. More worryingly for evangelicals, in 1974 she had voted in favour of the continued use of federal tax funds for abortions and opposed a resolution calling for an anti-abortion amendment to the Constitution. Essentially, O'Connor's record evinced an attitude towards social issues that was broadly typical of Sunbelt Republicans. An Arizona Democrat described her as "not your far-out Republican…She might just surprise some people because I don't think she's out of the knee-jerk mold."[236]

In Congress, southern conservatives were at best noncommittal about Reagan's choice. Strom Thurmond, chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, declined to comment. Jesse Helms, after speaking with Reagan, said, "The information he has about the lady and the information I have are not consistent." Helms's fellow North Carolinian John East and Jeremiah Denton of Alabama also refused to offer their support. Outside Washington, opposition from southern evangelicals was more explicit. An anti-O'Connor rally was organised in Dallas by James Robison and Ed McAteer, a Memphis businessman and founder of the Religious Roundtable. Robison told journalists that O'Connor was "not a good choice" because "[all] evidence indicates that she stood for pro-abortion and was for the ERA". He later recalled that he had "hollered and screamed" about the nomination to senior Reagan advisor Ed Meese. Anticipating a Christian Right backlash, Reagan telephoned Jerry Falwell prior to the O'Connor announcement and persuaded Falwell not to publicly condemn her selection. The call was indicative of how Falwell's relationship with the White House differed from that of other Southern Baptist leaders. Falwell was personally closer to Reagan than

[236] George Skelton, "Reagan Names First Woman to High Court", *LAT*, 8 July 1981; "O'Connor: Long On Experience", *BG*, 8 July 1981; Drummond Ayres, "'A Reputation for Excelling'", *NYT*, 8 July 1981.

most and sought to maintain what he regarded as an advisory role to the administration, working with the White House to further the Christian Right agenda rather than loudly protesting from the sidelines. As Daniel Williams puts it, unlike the firebrand Robison, Falwell decided "it was best not to sacrifice his influence with the president" over O'Connor's nomination.[237]

Just six months into Reagan's presidency, *Chicago Tribune* columnist Jon Margolis noted the already sizeable divergence between predominantly southern conservative evangelicals and Reaganites who were "either indifferent or hostile to…moralist concerns." Notably, Sandra Day O'Connor's biggest advocate in the Senate was her fellow Arizonan Barry Goldwater, whose antipathy towards the Christian Right garnered considerable news coverage – particularly his remark that "every good Christian ought to kick Falwell right in the ass." His comments underlined the divisions between economic and cultural conservatives revealed by the O'Connor nomination. "I am probably one of the most conservative members of Congress, and I don't like to get kicked around by people who call themselves conservative on a non-conservative matter", Goldwater said. "This abortion issue has gotten to be the biggest humbug issue in the United States…The country is going to pot economically, militarily and every other way, and we spend all our time talking about busing and abortions."[238]

Many in the White House shared Goldwater's views. One unnamed Reagan advisor was dismissive of the Christian Right's anger, saying, "a little backlash from the kooks is good politics." The potential scale of the backlash, however, was made clear to Reagan aide Morton

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[237] "Reagan Draws Criticism On Justice Choice", *AC*, 8 July 1981; Martin, 228; Jim Jones, "Robison denies backing O'Connor", *FWST*, 17 July 1981; "2 church papers criticize Reagan over Falwell call", *HC*, 15 July 1981; Williams, *God's Own Party*, 195.

[238] Jon Margolis, "The 2 faces of American conservatives", *CT*, 12 July 1981; Fred Barbash, "Conservatives Feud in Wake of O'Connor Choice", *WP*, 9 July 1981; "Reagan Pushing O'Connor", *CO*, 9 July 1981.

Blackwell at a meeting with prominent conservative evangelicals. Blackwell reported in a memo that those present threatened to campaign against Reagan's tax cut legislation, "feeling that only a defeat of the tax package will force the Administration to take social issues seriously." More specifically, they warned Blackwell that "only we can hold wavering Boll Weevils in line because only we can put grass roots heat on them." A handwritten note in the margin of the memo pointed out that pro-life groups had endorsed a large majority of Boll Weevil Democrats. The threat proved to be an empty one, but it nevertheless illustrated the influence Christian Right leaders felt they had over both southern politics and the Reagan administration.[239]

Conservative southern voters voiced similar anger with Reagan. One woman from Arkansas wrote to say he had "betrayed the people who trusted you and worked so hard for you" and rather fancifully described Sandra Day O'Connor as a "Feminist-Atheist-Communist". "You made a fool of us", she concluded. A correspondent from Tennessee called the nomination "a shock" and implored Reagan to "please reconsider it." Southern senators also received enraged correspondence demanding they oppose O'Connor's nomination. A Baptist pastor in South Carolina told Strom Thurmond, "those of us who have looked to President Reagan for moral leadership are stunned by this inconsistency." Likewise, a North Carolinian wrote to Jesse Helms to complain that Reagan's decision was "a slap in the face at those of us…who worked diligently to secure votes for this man who we thought was pro-life." This grassroots anger led James Robison to call the White House and warn, according to Reagan aide Ed Thomas, that "there is a real likelihood that this is going to grow into a major issue, whereby the President will lose the support of those people who have backed him for

[239] Saul Friedman, "O'Connor seen as political plus", *MH*, 9 July 1981; Susan Page, "Selection master stroke", *GR*, 8 July 1981; Memo from Morton Blackwell to Elizabeth Dole, 8 July 1981, Box 20, EDF.

years." As Jon Margolis pointed out, however, most Christian Right leaders – and their allies in Congress – were more realistic. "As politicians they know they need Reagan more than he needs them, and that if they break with him they don't have anywhere to go." As the White House was aware, the rage over the O'Connor nomination did not extend far beyond conservative Southern Baptist circles. "All they can do is moan and swear," said an unnamed Reagan advisor. "They can lead their troops but no one else will follow."[240]

Evangelical opposition did not derail Sandra Day O'Connor's nomination. In meetings with 39 senators, O'Connor assuaged enough doubts among southern conservatives to smooth her passage to confirmation. Strom Thurmond, according to a White House memo, "raised the question of O'Connor being 'alright as long as Reagan is in,' implying she would vote liberal afterwards." O'Connor replied that she was "a conservative judge from a conservative state". Reassured, Thurmond later stated his confidence that O'Connor would be confirmed to the Supreme Court, declaring "I expect to support her" and adding that he believed "she stands by the Constitution". Jesse Helms also toned down his opposition, telling journalists after a 40-minute meeting with O'Connor, "I look forward to following this lady's career with great interest". Weeks later, he still believed it was "disturbing that her legislative record is in direct opposition to the personal views which she expressed". Proclaiming his "faith in President Reagan's word", however, Helms voted in favour of confirmation.[241]

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[240] L.G. Graham to President Reagan, 8 July 1981, Mary Jane Kimball to President Reagan, 8 July 1981, both in Box 70, AHF; E. Wayne Wall to Strom Thurmond, 13 July 1981, Box 10, Volume Mail Series, STC; Sam Thielman to Jesse Helms, 7 July 1981, Record Group 2, Box 2084, JHP; Memo from Ed Thomas to Ed Meese, 27 July 1981, Box 7 EMF; Margolis, "The 2 faces of American conservatives".

[241] Memo from Max Friedersdorf to Jim Baker, Ed Meese et al, 14 July 1981, Box 7, EMF; Carol Giacomo, "O'Connor, Calling on Congressmen, Hears Assurances of Confirmation", *HC*, 15 July 1981; Fred Barbash, "O'Connor, Helms meet 40 minutes", *WP*, 17 July 1981; Rob Christensen, "Helms troubled about O'Connor", *NO*, 22 September 1981.

The most intransigent southern conservative was Alabama Republican Jeremiah Denton. During O'Connor's testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Denton subjected her to a "tense and prolonged" period of questioning, before telling the nominee he could not determine "where you're coming from philosophically" on abortion rights. He was the only committee member who refused to support O'Connor, instead voting 'present'. Yet even Denton supported O'Connor in the Senate's unanimous confirmation vote on 21 September. President Reagan called Denton prior to the vote to allow him to express his concerns in person and ultimately won him over. Reagan noted after the call: "He's with us." Denton told journalists that his doubts about O'Connor's views on abortion were outweighed by pressure from fellow senators. "Some colleagues said I'd be laughed out of the Senate if I voted against her…I kept wondering, what would the President think of me, what would my colleagues think of me." Personal loyalty to Reagan – along with a desire to afford him a historic political achievement early in his presidency – had acted to focus the minds of Denton and other southern conservatives on Capitol Hill.[242]

Outside Washington though, evangelical anger continued to simmer. A Religious Roundtable event in Dallas in early September was conducted with an air of "underlying fury", as praise for Reagan was mixed with condemnation of O'Connor. Pamphlets distributed to attendees described the nomination as a "broken promise", while James Robison warned that the US risked approving a "death ethic" by appointing O'Connor. "I love and admire Mister Reagan", he continued. "I will be greatly surprised – shocked – if he doesn't help Americans to protect the unborn." Yet by the time the Senate voted to confirm O'Connor, evangelical

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[242] "O'Connor ends testimony on nomination", *BG*, 11 September 1981; Record of telephone call to Jeremiah Denton, 16 September 1981, Box 7, EMF; Jim Mann, "O'Connor OK'd by Unanimous Vote in Senate", *LAT*, 22 September 1981.

leaders' outrage had begun to abate. Jerry Falwell continued to shy away from overt criticism of the administration, but later maintained that the O'Connor hearings left him with "concerns regarding how she views the law relating to unborn life". Falwell's Moral Majority released a guarded statement of neutrality on O'Connor. "Because of his [Reagan's] integrity, and because of his and the Republican platform's commitment to preserving unborn human life, and also because we do not believe the president would knowingly select a judge who did not share his own position on abortion," the statement read, "the Moral Majority has decided neither to support or oppose the confirmation of Judge O'Connor."[243]

At her confirmation hearings, O'Connor had been ambiguous on abortion. After admitting to supporting the decriminalisation of abortion in 1970 (prior to the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* judgement), she described that vote as a "mistake" and stated, "my own knowledge and awareness of the issues and concerns have increased since those days". She claimed a personal "abhorrence of abortion" but refused to express a view on the *Roe* decision, simply stating, "my personal views and beliefs have no place in the resolution of any issue". Her subsequent Supreme Court career, however, showed that Christian Right concerns were justified, as she repeatedly blocked efforts by conservative justices to restrict abortion rights. As the *Washington Post* noted after O'Connor announced her retirement in 2005, her independent streak made her the swing vote on the Court, "a strategic role she deployed to moderate the extremes, in case after controversial case." Yet, at the time of her confirmation, few of those with reservations about O'Connor believed it was a wise battle to fight. Blocking her nomination would have placed both Christian Right leaders and conservative southerners

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[243] Charles Madigan, "Abortion, O'Connor on agenda of Christian Right convention", *CT*, 4 September 1981; "National Sin Is Abortion, Falwell Tells Dallas Audience", *AG*, 6 September 1981; "Falwell says Goldwater has chosen not to run", *HC*, 17 September 1981; "Neutral stance slated", *Advocate*, 18 September 1981.

in Congress in outright opposition to the Reagan White House, and for many social conservatives the administration still represented an exceptional opportunity to further their agenda at the national level.[244]

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During Reagan's first year in office, Christian Right leaders largely acquiesced to his focus on economic issues, even helping to bring about the 'Reagan Revolution' by lobbying Boll Weevil Democrats. Reagan aide Elizabeth Dole noted in a memo, "They went all out for Gramm-Latta and Hance-Conable although most of their hot button issues were not vitally affected by the economic bills." But by the autumn, Christian Right demands for action were becoming harder to ignore. In a letter to James Baker, Reagan's Chief of Staff, Moral Majority Vice President Cal Thomas wrote, "The President said during the campaign, 'ask yourself if you are better off today than you were four years ago'. If we clean up the economy, but are still allowing the slaughter of one and one-half million unborn babies a year, I will not be able to say that we are better off at all." Thomas warned there would be a price to pay for inaction. "If a timetable hasn't been developed, it urgently needs to be developed. Without one, without something to share with our people, serious political consequences will develop, I assure you."[245]

[244] Fred Barbash, "Abortion Vote Called Mistake by O'Connor", *WP*, 10 September 1981; William Branigin, Fred Barbash, and Daniela Deane, "Supreme Court Justice O'Connor Resigns", *WP*, 1 July 2005.
[245] Memo from Elizabeth Dole to Michael Deaver, 16 December 1981, Box 20, EDF; "Falwell praises Reagan", *Advocate*, 20 April 1981; Adam Clymer, "Right Wing Seeks a Shift by Reagan", *NYT*, 6 September 1981; Cal Thomas to James Baker, 9 October 1981, Box 13, MBF.

As the year ended, there was relief among Reagan's advisors that they had delayed becoming embroiled in controversial issues such as abortion. Elizabeth Dole observed, "In 1981 we managed to avoid major, national battles over most of the wide variety of issues which are near-and-dear to the hearts of grassroots conservative activists." However, with midterm elections approaching, the need to act was becoming more pressing. "We have just about reached the point where our passive support will be unable to hold many major conservative groups in line". Dole concluded, "activists now require some signs from the Administration that it's worth continuing the fight in the next elections." Even before Congress returned the following January, evangelical leaders and southern conservatives were setting out their expectations. Strom Thurmond's press secretary told journalists: "We went along and spent most of 1981 on the economic issues. In return for that now, it is assumed that we'll be dealing with some of these social issues in 1982." A Moral Majority spokesman argued they had "waited patiently for a year" and now wanted to see movement from the White House: "we believe that all of our concerns, including the social issues, can be addressed by the administration at once." [246]

Rhetoric alone was no longer enough for Christian Right leaders. In March 1982, Morton Blackwell received a transcript of a forthcoming Moral Majority radio commentary from Cal Thomas, in which Thomas claimed the Reagan administration did not "seem to understand that our people are not motivated by Party, but by principle. Whether one wears a Republican or Democrat label is of less concern to us than the position the candidate or incumbent takes on important issues." Echoing Jesse Helms and Stanton Evans from the mid-1970s, Thomas warned, "we could form a third party so that we might still be able to vote

[246] Dole to Deaver, Box 20, EDF; Benjamin Taylor, "Social Issues Come Center Stage", *BG*, 10 January 1982; "'Jilted' Conservatives Plotting Course to Regain Reagan's Ear", *State*, 22 January 1982.

and express our principles…We need to change [the administration's] thinking to something more like this: "If we don't do something soon for these conservatives, we're going to lose them and the back of the newly acquired Republican power will be broken."" But still the administration sought to delay. Blackwell replied to Thomas three weeks later, saying, "it's vital that we all keep the faith…and recognize that major progress can be made only through the accumulation of incremental gains." After witnessing the urgency with which Reagan and his advisors had tackled their economic agenda, it is understandable that many southern conservatives viewed their advocacy of incrementalism as somewhat disingenuous.[247]

The issue of greatest urgency for the Christian Right was abortion, but the broader pro-life campaign also incorporated conservative Catholic and Mormon groups. The multi-denominational movement was, according to historian Neil Young, "at best a loose coalition of religious conservatives, frequently fraught with dissension, disagreement, and the possibility of dispersion." These tensions reflected the increasing political power of conservative evangelicals. Before the late 1970s, Catholic groups had dominated the pro-life movement in the US. However, the visibility of the Christian Right during Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign – and its work to elect anti-abortion candidates like Jeremiah Denton in Alabama – enabled Southern Baptist evangelicals to overtake the Catholic Church as the leading force in the movement by the start of the 1980s.[248]

During 1981, divisions in the pro-life movement prompted the emergence of two separate legislative attempts to roll back abortion rights. The first was introduced to the Senate Judiciary Committee by Jesse Helms, Congress's most high-profile champion of the

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[247] Cal Thomas to Morton Blackwell, 1 March 1982, and Morton Blackwell to Cal Thomas, 25 March 1982, both in Box 13, MBF.

[248] Neil Young, *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 211-214.

Christian Right agenda. The 'Human Rights Bill' (known as the Helms bill) defined life as beginning at conception, effectively granting full legal rights to unborn babies and making anyone involved in conducting an abortion liable to prosecution for murder. Unsurprisingly, the Christian Right regarded Helms' uncompromising legislation as the ideal way to achieve one of its foremost political priorities – the absolute reversal of *Roe v. Wade*. A second, more moderate, bill was a constitutional amendment designed to allow each state the right to formulate its own abortion laws. The Hatch Amendment (named after Utah Republican Orrin Hatch) was supported by a range of Catholic organisations. In the view of one cardinal from New York, it was the option most likely to attract public support and seemed "capable of passage in Congress". However, to conservative Southern Baptists the Hatch Amendment was half-hearted and would allow abortion to remain legal in most states. It is ironic, of course, that a denomination predominantly consisting of conservative southerners should favour federal government action ahead of the devolution of rights to the state level. This incongruity, though, demonstrated the inflexibility of many white southerners when it came to issues of social and cultural traditionalism.[249]

Neither the Helms bill nor the Hatch Amendment had made any substantial progress by early 1982. Divisions within the pro-life movement proved beneficial for the Reagan administration, allowing it to further delay its involvement. In January, for instance, Reagan sent a supportive statement to an anti-abortion rally outside the White House, demanding "greater protection for the most defenceless and innocent among us – the unborn child". Yet, at the same time, his press secretary claimed that pro-life disagreements were preventing the

[249] Vera Glaser, "Senators Push for Legislation Defining Embryo as Person", *LH*, 15 April 1981; "New anti-abortion proposal would leave policy to states", *FWST*, 3 September 1981; Marjorie Hyer, "Catholics Criticized for Supporting Hatch Antiabortion Amendments", *WP*, 17 November 1981; Carol Giacomo, "Pro-Lifers' Squabbling Jeopardizes Legislative Drive", *Hartford Courant*, 22 January 1982.

administration from acting: "Everyone agrees on the goal. They just don't agree on the way to get there". A constituent of Kentucky Republican Larry Hopkins wrote to demand that he "contact President Reagan and ask him to concretely demonstrate his pro-life position by lobbying for this [Helms] bill with the same fervor with which he worked for his economic package." Instead, the administration equivocated throughout the spring and summer. On 5 April, Reagan wrote a letter to Jesse Helms which was released to the media. The president acknowledged, "there are sharp differences of opinions as to which action is the best one…most important, it seems to me, is that the Congress consider one or more of the proposals in the near future." But besides offering lukewarm encouragement, Reagan did little to help resolve the differences of opinion. Many pro-life campaigners suspected this was deliberate. An internal memo from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops observed that Reagan was "all too willing to seize on pro-life disunity as an excuse for inaction."[250]

In legislative terms, both measures were flawed. Jesse Helms's bill ostensibly required only a simple majority in both chambers. However, after Bob Packwood, a moderate Republican from Oregon, announced he would filibuster the legislation on the grounds that it was "a key civil liberties issue", 60 votes were required to break the filibuster – an unlikely target given the opposition of liberals and moderates in both parties. Even if Helms' bill were to pass, many legal commentators (including critics of abortion such as Robert Bork) predicted that a federal court would deem it unconstitutional. As a proposed amendment to the Constitution, Orrin Hatch's legislation faced the seemingly insurmountable task of winning two-thirds majorities in both House and Senate and then being approved by three quarters

[250] "Reagan Reaffirms His Opposition To Abortion", *AC*, 23 January 1982; David Zerhusen to Larry Hopkins, 26 January 1982, Box 154, LHP; President Reagan to Jesse Helms, 5 April 1982, Presidential Letters, JHP; Memo from Richard Doerflinger to Pro-Life Coordinators, 17 September 1982, Box 20, EDF.

of all state legislatures. With polls showing popular support for abortion rights at almost 75 percent nationally, the chances of ratification were almost zero.[251]

By late summer, pro-life advocates had largely united behind a diluted Helms bill, after Jesse Helms removed definitions of life as beginning at conception and instead sought to end government funding for abortions. The subsequent Senate debate was "a contest of political wits and parliamentary manoeuvring", as Helms attached his legislation to a debt ceiling bill and then attempted to win over enough senators to overcome Bob Packwood's filibuster. The pro-life movement now looked to Ronald Reagan to find out if he would push for a cloture vote (ending debate and thereby defeating the filibuster). The administration had reached "a critical moment in the relationship between the President and the pro-life activists", Morton Blackwell wrote in a memo. "Now that they are united, their attention is riveted on the White House to see if the President's actions speak as loudly as his words."[252]

Reagan and his senior advisors remained circumspect about committing to an almost certainly unwinnable fight over a highly contentious issue. Publicly, the White House was equivocal in the extreme: "the President supports the Hatch Amendment, but not at the expense of, or in relation to, or instead of Cloture on the Helms Amendment." As Neil Young puts it, this reflected the administration's "indifference to either measure." But there was no longer any viable excuse not to work in support of the Helms legislation. Reagan's powers of persuasion could prove crucial in encouraging 60 senators to vote for cloture. Administration officials suggested that "several Senators would probably be susceptible to quiet, private

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[251] Ernest Furgurson, "Senator may filibuster antiabortion measure", *BS*, 22 April 1981; Giacomo, "Pro-Lifers Squabbling"; Martin, 227; Bill Peterson, "In the Administration, a Pattern Develops on Conservatives' Agenda", *WP*, 22 February, 1982.

[252] Bill Peterson, "Parliamentary Jockeys Maneuver for Lead on Anti-Abortion Bill", *WP*, 18 August 1982; Memo from Morton Blackwell to Elizabeth Dole, 20 August 1982, Box 25, SGF.

persuasion by the President on the merits of the measure." Moreover, with midterm elections a few months away, this was opportune timing for White House strategists who were, according to media reports, keen "to re-establish [President Reagan's] ties to the social-issue constituency".[253]

The debate over Helms' legislation came to a head during late summer, as the Reagan administration's ties to the Christian Right showed signs of fraying. The *Atlanta Constitution* reported that conservative evangelicals were doubting Reagan's commitment to their cause, with the administration's "lack of movement" being viewed as "immoral compromise and crass political expediency." Again, Cal Thomas of the Moral Majority voiced his organisation's discontent. "There are no monuments in Washington to budget balancers; there are monuments to those who took a stand on principles," said Thomas. "I don't think he [Reagan] has come through at all for us." As was often the case, Thomas's boss, Jerry Falwell, struck a more encouraging tone, saying he retained "personal confidence" in Reagan. Still, even Falwell hinted at increasing disillusionment, admitting, "I'm a little anxious we haven't had some aggressive support."[254]

Reagan intervened in support of Helms' legislation only at the eleventh hour, and his lobbying was perfunctory when compared to his efforts on behalf of his budget and tax bills. In total, he telephoned seven senators and wrote a letter to six others which called on them to "stand and be counted on this issue…it is vitally important for the Congress to affirm, as this amendment does, the fundamental principle that all human life has intrinsic value." The president's half-hearted intervention was not enough to convince the Senate to vote for

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[253] White House 'Talking Points' memo, undated 1982, Box 1, JEJF; Young, *We Gather Together*, 214; Memo from Michael Uhlmann and Stephen Galebach to Edwin Harper, 23 August 1982, Box 25, SGF; Howell Raines, "Reagan harks back to the campaign", *NYT*, 13 September 1982.
[254] Charles Austin, "Religious right begins losing faith in Reagan", *AC*, 22 August 1982.

cloture. After three votes failed during mid-September, with none coming close to the 60-vote target, the Helms legislation was effectively dead. With an eye clearly on the midterms, Reagan's spokesman claimed the president's efforts had demonstrated he was "very serious about the abortion issue". But Jesse Helms was blunt in his assessment of Reagan's lobbying, telling a journalist, "I'm not aware of any votes he picked up for us." Though the Helms legislation fell a long way short of success, the probability of Democratic gains in the upcoming elections meant the chances of passing a pro-life measure in the next Congress were even more remote. Helms' bill proved to be the closest anti-abortion campaigners came to achieving their goal at any point during Reagan's presidency.[255]

Orrin Hatch's proposed constitutional amendment also failed when it came up for a vote in the Senate in June 1983. The legislation was defeated 50-49, well short of the required two-thirds majority. Though most supporters of the Hatch amendment had given their backing to Jesse Helms, Helms did not return the favour. He ultimately refused to support the amendment, instead voting 'present' and arguing that giving states the right to set abortion laws "does not advance the principle that human life is inviolable…it surrenders forever this principle in the illusory hope that some lives may be saved." Once again, Ronald Reagan's token lobbying had little effect on the outcome, with Hatch himself admitting he doubted Reagan's efforts "had much to do with it".[256]

The failure of both measures prompted a shift in strategy for pro-life campaigners, as they moved away from attempting to reverse the *Roe* decision through Congress and directed

[255] Memo, "Administration efforts in behalf of the Abortion Amendment", 24 September 1982, and President Reagan letter to senators, 7 September 1982, both in Box 2, FMF; "Abortion filibuster survives Senate vote", *Advocate*, 10 September 1982; "Senate Kills Helms Proposal Restricting Right To Abortion", *CQ*, 16 September 1982.
[256] Tom Seppy, "Senate defeats abortion issue", *Advocate*, 29 June 1983.

their focus towards the Supreme Court. In the short term, this was a factor in the resilience of southern evangelical support for Reagan during his re-election campaign, despite his administration's obvious lack of enthusiasm for the anti-abortion cause. After the Hatch Amendment's defeat, a spokesman for a pro-life campaign group argued that it "makes abortion a key issue in the 1984 election…President Reagan alone can add the fifth and decisive justice to the Supreme Court." Similarly, Jerry Falwell declared his belief that a second Reagan term would see the appointment of at least two anti-abortion justices who would "make the court safe for the strict interpretation of the Constitution into the 21st century". In the longer term, the appointment of conservative Supreme Court justices would become the chief political priority of the Christian Right, reinforcing its loyalty to the GOP well into the 21st century.[257]

After the Hatch Amendment failed, southern conservatives criticised Reagan for his reluctance to become involved. Stanton Evans derided the Reagan White House as "business as usual, not much different from any other Republican administration of our lifetime. It has been an Administration populated by corporate executive types." Evans concluded that "people used to the decorum of the boardroom back off from controversy." His criticism was not far from the truth. Certainly, fears of a negative reaction from either side of the abortion fight weighed heavily on an administration which placed far greater emphasis on economic priorities than on social issues. The White House's wary and detached attitude towards the anti-abortion campaign left the Christian Right with a feeling, as William Martin puts it, "of having been beguiled and betrayed". Ultimately, Reagan failed to live up to the promises he had made to his southern conservative supporters. His administration was extremely hesitant

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[257] Seppy, "Senate defeats abortion issue"; "Falwell expects reshaped court would outlaw most abortions", *BG*, 11 October 1984.

to expend political capital on an issue it knew would be deeply contentious and which did not rank highly on the Reaganite agenda.[258]

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Alongside abortion, the issue of prayer in public schools was high on the Christian Right's list of political priorities. The battle over school prayer had profound constitutional implications. 1982 marked the twentieth anniversary of the *Engel v. Vitale* Supreme Court ruling, which deemed government mandated prayer in public schools to be a violation of the establishment clause of the First Amendment. Though it had surprised many in 1962, the decision was nonetheless accepted by a broad spectrum of Christian organisations. But as the political activism of conservative evangelicals increased during the late 1970s, so too did calls for *Engel* to be overturned and prayer restored to public schools. Action on school prayer, like the rest of the Christian Right agenda, was largely side-lined during the early months of Reagan's presidency. Unsurprisingly, it was Jesse Helms who ultimately triggered the legislative fight over school prayer by introducing a bill to the Senate which, by means of a simple majority vote, sought to remove the issue from the jurisdiction of US federal courts. Opponents condemned the measure as "court stripping", with Democratic Senator Max Baucus of Montana saying the bill did "an end run around the constitutional-amendment process and thereby undermines the Constitution itself." Though Reagan had declared his backing for a school prayer amendment, the White House refused to publicly support the legislation after

[258] Phil Gailey, "Conservative Study Gives Reagan a Mixed Rating", *NYT*, 25 November 1983; Martin 227.

the Justice Department expressed concerns it would prove unconstitutional. In the end, Helms' bill was voted down by the Senate in September 1982.[259]

Reagan had announced the previous May that he would submit a constitutional amendment to Congress reversing the *Engel* decision. At a Rose Garden ceremony to mark the National Day of Prayer, he said "The law of this land has effectively removed prayer from our classrooms…The amendment we'll propose will restore the right to pray." Jerry Falwell was delighted by the announcement, declaring it to be "the light at the end of the tunnel we have all worked and hoped and prayed for." A Reagan aide told reporters that, unlike anti-abortion legislation, a school prayer amendment would be the "easiest" way to keep conservative evangelicals happy. This was a widely held view in the White House. As another aide explained in an internal memo, "Unlike several of the other social issues, it has very little downside – there is not a large segment of the population likely to mobilize against us on the issue." Moreover, he argued, Christian Right groups "need our action on some issue to activate their members for the Congressional elections and for 1984." While public opinion was firmly opposed to reversing *Roe v. Wade*, support for a constitutional amendment permitting prayer in public schools stood at 76 percent in 1980 and had remained largely constant for a decade. Previous attempts at passing an amendment had failed during the 1970s, but with Republicans controlling the Senate and increased pressure from evangelical groups, a school prayer amendment now appeared to have a greater chance of success. Although public support had dropped slightly to 69 percent by March 1982, polling still

[259] "Facts and Case Summary – Engel v. Vitale", US Courts website; Young, *We Gather Together*, 217; Tom Wicker, "A Small 'C' Victory", *NYT*, 26 September 1982; Max Baucus, "Court-stripping bill must be defeated", *AC*, 9 September 1982; Steven Weisman, "Reagan Neutral On Bid to Curb Court on Prayer", *NYT*, 9 September 1982; David Rogers, "Helms loses his fight on school prayer bill", *BG*, 24 September 1982.

indicated that it was politically safer ground for the Reagan administration than any form of anti-abortion legislation.[260]

Nonetheless, moderate Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, and Jewish organisations released a joint statement opposing Reagan's proposal on the grounds it would "violate the constitutional separation of church and state and heighten religious tensions in the schools." For Reagan's Christian Right supporters, the strength of this opposition emphasised the need for a powerful, unified campaign in favour of the prayer amendment. Religious Roundtable founder Ed McAteer – an influential figure in numerous evangelical groups – therefore spent the early months of 1982 working to win the support of the Southern Baptist Convention. The SBC, representing a denomination which amounted to 6 percent of the US population, was the largest Protestant organisation in the US and the second-largest religious body behind the Catholic Church. Historically, as Frances FitzGerald observes, the SBC "reigned supreme as the arbiter of morals, the social order, and the truth of the Gospel" throughout the South. It had been, moreover, "a bastion against social change, championing states' rights, white supremacy, and the existing economic order." If McAteer won the SBC's backing for Reagan's amendment, it would add enormous weight to the campaign for school prayer.[261]

An internal power struggle during the late 1970s and early 1980s had resulted in fundamentalist evangelicals regaining control of the Southern Baptist Convention. Despite a mid-century period of moderate leadership – during which the SBC had supported not only

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[260] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a White House Ceremony in Observance of National Day of Prayer", 6 May 1982, *Public Papers of the President*; George Skelton, "Reagan Urges School Prayer Amendment", *LAT*, 7 May 1982; Saul Friedman, "Reagan calls for prayer in schools", *MH*, 8 May 1982; Memo from Gary Bauer to Edwin Harper, 8 March 1982, Box 44, EMF; George Gallup, "People Favor Prayers in Public Schools", *WP*, 16 May 1980; School Prayer Polling Summary, 1982, Box 44, EMF.

[261] Kenneth Briggs, "Doubts on School Prayer", *NYT*, 8 May 1982; Williams, *God's Own Party*, 200-201; *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1982-1983*, (Washington DC: US Census Bureau, 1982); Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 6-7.

the Supreme Court's 1962 *Engel* ruling but also the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 and *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 – many of the organisation's grassroots members remained deeply traditionalist on social issues. Culturally conservative white southerners remained its core demographic. In 1979, fundamentalist Memphis preacher Adrian Rogers was elected SBC president, riding the same conservative evangelical wave that brought Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority to prominence. Rogers' election signified that the SBC's longstanding adherence to the separation of church and state was over. Rogers and his successors during the 1980s – Bailey Smith, James Draper and Charles Stanley – sought to follow Falwell's example by advancing their socially conservative agenda on the national stage. By early 1982, the SBC was fervently and vocally opposed to both abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment.[262]

For some members though, as Daniel Williams notes, "school prayer was a different matter, because many pastors in the denomination had long opposed school prayer amendments and defended the separation of church and state." A proposed resolution supporting a school prayer amendment had been defeated at the 1980 SBC convention. However, at the organisation's June 1982 gathering in New Orleans, Ed McAteer worked to place conservative supporters of school prayer on the SBC's resolutions committee and directed them to frame their arguments in the context of religious liberty. Charles Stanley, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Atlanta, board member of the Moral Majority, and future SBC president, told the convention that the *Engel* ruling had been "one step in the demoralizing of America". Reagan's amendment would "protect our religious freedom", he

[262] Michael Berryhill, "The Baptist Schism", *NYT*, 9 June 1985; George Vecsey, "Southern Baptists Choose a Conservative President", *NYT*, 13 June 1979; Young, *We Gather Together*, 217-218.

argued. “If we continue to remain silent we will one day lose our freedom in our church houses as well as the school houses.”[263]

McAteer’s tactical manoeuvring worked. On 17 June, SBC members voted by a margin of 3 to 1 to endorse Reagan’s proposed constitutional amendment on the basis that it contained “no violation of those ideals inherent in the separation of church and state.” This was a radical shift. Once committed to the separation of church and state, the Southern Baptist Convention was now backing an amendment that would effectively imbue the legal and constitutional framework of the US with the cultural traditionalism of the conservative South. According to Tom Wicker in the *New York Times*, “theology – which was traditionally separational – now is being sacrificed to the political (I refrain from saying secular) goal of a constitutional underpinning for religion.” Furthermore, following the SBC’s endorsement, the campaign in support of Reagan’s amendment came to be dominated by Southern Baptists – operating largely under the umbrella of the Project Prayer Coalition – and was therefore able to avoid the interdenominational disputes that handicapped the pro-life movement.[264]

The Christian Right’s dominance of the campaign also gave rise to reports that Ed McAteer had collaborated with the White House to shift the SBC’s stance on school prayer. Morton Blackwell, Reagan’s liaison to religious groups, strongly denied any administration involvement. Writing to a Kentucky pastor, Blackwell claimed, “neither I nor anyone else at the White House asked anyone to take any action regarding the New Orleans convention.” Still, the vote was a boost for Reagan’s amendment. As a White House aide observed, “This is extremely significant and could be a major factor in the eventual passage of the proposal.

[263] Williams, *God’s Own Party*, 200-202; “McAteer Had White House Backing To Seek SBC Act”, *Baptist Press*, 1 July 1982.
[264] Jim Jones, “Prayers in school endorsed”, *FWST*, 18 June 1982; Tom Wicker, “The Baptist Switch”, *NYT*, 22 June 1982; Young, *We Gather Together*, 218-219.

(The Baptists have 13.7 million members and are a significant voting bloc throughout the South.)" Tom Wicker also noted the importance of the SBC's reversal. "It's hard to imagine…Congress passing the school prayer amendment with the Southern Baptists opposing it, as they have in the past." SBC members could exert substantial pressure on Democrats "in Southern states or Congressional districts they need to hang on to or regain, but in which the Southern Baptists are a formidable force."[265]

Ultimately, though Reagan aides understood that the school prayer amendment was a comparatively safe way to demonstrate support for the Christian Right agenda, the White House remained hesitant to expend political capital on social issues. As Matthew Moen observes, Reagan had waited "seventeen months from the time he took office to express genuine interest in a measure", a delay that "virtually ensured that the issue was going nowhere in the 97th Congress." Reagan's announcement of the school prayer amendment in May 1982 was far later than many of his supporters had hoped, leaving little more than three months to pass the legislation before midterm campaigning started in earnest. A vote in the Senate was likely, but a lack of time made the Project Prayer Coalition's efforts to lobby House members much more difficult. Gary Jarmin of Project Prayer told Morton Blackwell, "The primary reason we are in this predicament is because the White House waited much too long to get this legislation introduced…without some major backing from the White House, there will be no vote in the House."[266]

Throughout the summer of 1982, Reagan and his advisors were once again preoccupied by economic issues, particularly the passage of TEFRA. The school prayer

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[265] Morton Blackwell to Reverend Richard Bridges, 21 July 1982, Box 19, MBF; Memo from Gary Bauer to Edwin Harper, 22 June 1982, Box 2, WHORM; Wicker, "The Baptist Switch".

[266] Matthew Moen, *The Christian Right and Congress*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 102; Gary Jarmin to Morton Blackwell, 20 July 1982, Box 18, MBF.

amendment received scant consideration from either the administration or the Senate. Three sporadic days of committee hearings (poorly attended by senators) brought the issue some media attention, but little action followed. In August, Moral Majority executive Richard Godwin demanded to know, "If Reagan thought that his support for [social] issues would get him into office, why does he now think that only symbolic gesturing will keep him in office?" Godwin warned that the upcoming two years "could be the last two years of the Reagan administration." By late 1982, with Jesse Helms's legislation defeated and the school prayer amendment stuck in committee, the issue was essentially moribund on Capitol Hill. Yet Reagan continued to make rhetorical gestures towards the Christian Right agenda. In a radio address in January 1983 he declared, "I strongly support an amendment that will permit our children to hold prayer in our schools…We didn't get that amendment through the last Congress, but I'll continue to push for it in the next Congress." However, Reagan's State of the Union address three days later suggested his priorities lay in economics and foreign policy. In a speech of over 5,500 words, school prayer was dispensed with in just 21 words and mentioned as merely one element of the administration's education plan.[267]

The 98th Congress was scarcely more productive for the Christian Right. Wrangling over a school prayer amendment intensified after other versions were introduced to the Senate. One, proposing a form of silent group meditation or prayer, was viewed with deep suspicion by conservative evangelicals and was voted down after the administration opposed it. According to White House memos, the Moral Majority mounted a "substantial mailgram campaign" in support of Reagan's amendment, while the SBC undertook "large amounts of

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[267] Moen, 102; "Support from Moral Majority Not Automatic, President Told", *AG*, 8 August 1982; Bill Petersen, "Senate Kills School Prayer Legislation for Session", *WP*, 24 September 1982; Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on Domestic Social Issues," 22 January 1983, and "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union", 25 January 1983, both in *Public Papers of the President*.

local activity directed at the Senators". But the issue suffered from what Neil Young describes as an "absence of strong presidential leadership". The amendment finally died after a Senate vote on 20 March 1984. Despite being approved by 56 votes to 44 and winning the backing of every southern senator, the bill failed to gain the required two-thirds majority. A greater effort from Reagan might conceivably have helped his amendment reach the required 67 votes in the Senate, but the chances of success in the House – particularly after Democrats increased their majority in 1982 – were slim.[268]

Nonetheless, both senators and the media noted the lack of effort on the part of the president. In the view of Arizona Democrat Dennis DeConcini, "President Reagan was not willing to really get a prayer amendment." Christian Right leaders increasingly shared this view, as they repeatedly witnessed the Reagan administration fail to pursue social issue legislation with any great determination. This might simply have been inattentiveness on the part of a White House which preferred to focus on economic and foreign policy issues. Over time though, it started to seem like a deliberate strategy. When it came to Christian Right legislation, William Martin writes that the aim was to "give support to versions of their bills which would ultimately fail, or to support constitutional amendments that were sure to fail but would rally the troops." These tactics were deployed once again prior to the 1984 presidential election. The 1984 GOP platform contained some of the most socially conservative language of any in the party's history, notably in calling for a "human life amendment" to ensure that unborn babies were protected by the 14th Amendment. Similarly, passage of the Equal Access Act in August 1984, which enforced the right of students to

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[268] Memo from Ken Duberstein to Faith Whittlesey, 20 June 1983, Box 19, MBF; Memo from Faith Whittlesey to James Baker and Ed Meese, 11 October 1983, Box 11, MOF; Young, *We Gather Together*, 219-222; Details of Senate votes on S.J. Res.73, 20 March 1984, Govtrack website; Bill Stall, "Prayer Proposal Defeated", *Hartford Courant*, 21 March 1984.

assemble on public school grounds for religious gatherings, helped to rally Christian Right support. Jerry Falwell optimistically claimed that "'equal access' gets us what we wanted all along", though in reality the legislation's practical impact was minimal. Still, after the failure of anti-abortion and school prayer legislation, the Equal Access Act was a small victory for the Christian Right. Importantly for the Reagan White House, it was something tangible they could point to when seeking to reassure conservative evangelicals.[269]

Despite the reservations of Christian Right leaders, support for Reagan among southern evangelical voters remained solid as the election neared. In part, this was because the Democratic ticket consisted of Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro. The white conservative South viewed Mondale – Jimmy Carter's vice-president and a former senator from Minnesota who was campaigning on a moderate platform – as a representative of the Democratic Party's untrustworthy elite. Likewise, as a liberal, a Catholic, and the first woman on a major party's presidential ticket, Geraldine Ferraro was not suited to winning over traditionalist Southern Baptists. Reagan did not, therefore, need to fear his opponents in the South. Rather, the president's concern was whether disenchantment over his lack of attention to social issues meant that conservative southerners and evangelicals might not vote at all. Yet in the weeks before the election, Southern Baptist preachers were again urging their congregations to vote for Reagan. With few legislative successes to show for their support during his first term, they focused instead on Reagan's rhetorical embrace of their agenda. (In March, for example, Reagan had declared that under his leadership, "America has begun a spiritual awakening. Faith and hope are being restored. Americans are turning back to God.")

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[269] Martin Tolchin, "Amendment Drive on School Prayer Loses Senate Vote", *NYT*, 21 March 1984; Martin, 234; "Republican Party Platform of 1984", American Presidency Project website; "This Time On Tipping Toes, Religion Heads To Schools", *PI*, 27 April 1984.

"I think he's taken stands on some issues that have showed some Christian integrity", one pastor from Dallas told the *Boston Globe*. "He's been sensitive to religious groups…I feel good about what he's done."[270]

After Reagan's re-election, Jesse Helms again introduced legislation to remove school prayer from the jurisdiction of the federal courts, but his second attempt at 'court stripping' was quickly defeated. The issue fell by the wayside once the Democrats regained control of the Senate in 1986. While Reagan's amendment was a legislative failure, the debate over prayer in schools acted as an important unifying factor between conservative southern evangelicals and the Republican Party. Thanks to Ed McAteer, the issue finalised the Southern Baptist Convention's switch from an officially non-partisan (but historically southern Democrat-leaning) organisation into a loyal part of the Republican base. The GOP gained a valuable political weapon, as the SBC became a powerful force in organising and encouraging white southern conservatives to turn out in support of Republican candidates. As Daniel Williams notes, "After 1982, Southern Baptist Convention leaders never again supported a Democrat for president."[271]

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[270] "Poll shows Moral Majority whites give Reagan Southern advantage", *AC*, 3 October 1984; Tom Barnes, "South's Leaders Not Optimistic About Mondale", *Hartford Courant*, 31 July 1984; Robert Press, "Ferraro moves into Dixie spotlight", *CSM*, 2 August 1984; Young, *We Gather Together*, 222; Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Columbus, Ohio", *Public Papers of the President*; Ben Bradlee Jr., "Southern Baptist preachers mix religion, campaigning for Reagan", *BG*, 19 October 1984.

[271] Helen Dewar, "Senate Kills Measure on School Prayer", *WP*, 11 September 1985; Williams, *God's Own Party*, 202.

After Reagan's landslide victory in 1984, it appeared the political power of conservative evangelicals was on an upward trajectory. Jerry Falwell claimed the Moral Majority and its Christian Right allies registered an additional three million voters in 1984 alone. While it is hard to determine how important the Christian Right's registration drive was to Reagan's success, it played a significant role in several Republican victories further down the ballot. The Moral Majority worked particularly hard in North Carolina, where Senator Jesse Helms – whom Falwell described as "a national treasure" – narrowly won re-election, beating Democrat Jim Hunt by 52 percent to 48 after a record turnout. Helms' campaign was undeniably helped by Ronald Reagan's own popularity in the state, as the relieved senator underscored by thanking the president in his victory speech. But the Moral Majority's work to register 150,000 new voters for Helms also proved critical in a race decided by fewer than 90,000 votes. Across the South, there were similar stories of the Christian Right's impact on congressional races. In Texas, Republicans won five House seats regarded as priorities by evangelicals, after Christian Right volunteers distributed tens of thousands of anti-abortion leaflets. Such efforts also helped to increase the number of conservative Republicans in the state legislature.[272]

However, the influence of the Christian Right was already starting to wane, and debates over abortion and school prayer would effectively be side-lined during Reagan's second term. Arguably, the Christian Right's declining influence had been apparent even before his re-election. Reagan had sparked fury among conservative evangelicals when he proposed the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Vatican in late 1983. The

[272] "Role of Moral Majority in Conservative Victories Significant, Falwell Says", *AG*, 9 November 1984; Ashley Halsey, "Reagan's Coattails Called Difference in Helms Victory", *PI*, 8 November 1984; Kevin Mirada, "Right Claims Results", *DMN*, 10 November 1984.

Southern Baptist Convention condemned the proposal, while Jerry Falwell – somewhat ironically given his support for school prayer – decried it as "a clear violation of the separation of church and state". The most vociferous opposition came in an extraordinary letter Reagan received from Bob Jones Jr., the chancellor of Bob Jones University in South Carolina. Though not as media friendly as Falwell, Jones had long been one of the most zealous voices among conservative Southern Baptists. He was scathing about Reagan's lack of attention to the Christian Right agenda. "Just exactly what has your administration accomplished toward fulfilling your election promises?", he asked, "where have you lifted your hand to help God's people who are under attack?" The proposed appointment of an ambassador to the Vatican was, according to Jones, "a deliberate violation of your oath to uphold the Constitution" and "an insult to every Protestant church and every non-Catholic American. It will bring a curse upon our nation and make us, as a nation, the servant of Antichrist."[273]

But this outcry went unheeded, and by the time the Reagan administration established diplomatic relations with the Vatican on 10 January 1984, evangelical anger had largely subsided. Paradoxically, the Christian Right's ardent support for Reagan had left it with little leverage over the administration's actions. It had become so apparent that conservative evangelicals had no other political home to go to that they had left themselves limited room for manoeuvre. The furore over relations with the Vatican demonstrated that Christian Right leaders would forgive almost any disloyalty Reagan showed to their cause. Their cries of betrayal gradually lost impact. Once Reagan won re-election, his administration felt able to

[273] "U.S. exploring stronger ties to Vatican", *HC*, 9 December 1983; Bob Jones Jr. to Ronald Reagan, 30 December 1983, Box 1, CSF.

push aside social issues and focus on foreign and economic priorities without fear of losing substantial support from southern evangelicals.[274]

Internal power struggles and financial difficulties also damaged the Christian Right during the late 1980s, while personal scandals involving high-profile televangelists such as Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart tarnished the popular image of evangelicalism. Nevertheless, the Christian Right still had opportunities to advance its agenda. Reagan's appointment of Antonin Scalia to the Supreme Court in 1986, for example, was broadly welcomed. Despite his Catholicism, Scalia's originalist interpretation of the Constitution, particularly his opposition to abortion and dislike of gender or race-based affirmative action, chimed with the views of southern conservatives. Reagan's nomination of Robert Bork a year later, however, proved more problematic. Bork believed *Roe v. Wade* was unconstitutional, was a longstanding critic of an activist judiciary when it came to civil rights, and his appointment would have tilted the Court rightwards on social issues. Unsurprisingly, conservatives in the Southern Baptist Convention were quick to support his nomination and Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority distributed a letter calling on evangelicals to contact their senators to demand that Bork be appointed. Falwell declared that evangelicals were "standing at the edge of history" and that fighting for Bork's confirmation "may be our last chance to influence this most important body." The SBC and Moral Majority both kept the White House regularly informed of their intensive lobbying efforts.[275]

[274] "U.S., Vatican reopen relations", *Advocate*, 11 January 1984.
[275] "Scandals Bring Hard Times For Nation's TV Evangelists", *NYT*, 6 October 1989; Moen, 164-167; Ruth Marcus, "Judge a Favorite With Conservative Lawyers, Activists", *WP*, 18 June 1986; Stuart Taylor, "Bork Could Tilt Law at Once if Seated", *NYT*, 6 July 1987; Kathy Palen, "Senate Gets Mixed Messages on SBC Endorsement of Bork", *Baptist Press*, 22 September 1987; Ruth Marcus, "Groups Unlimber Media Campaigns Over Bork", *WP*, 4 August 1987.

However, on 23 October 1987, the Senate rejected Bork by 58 votes to 42. His views on civil rights law, emphasised by his opponents in their own lobbying campaign, decided the outcome. Even conservative southern Democrats voted against Bork's confirmation, wary of appointing a Supreme Court justice who appeared keen to refight painful civil rights battles. Louisiana Democrat J. Bennett Johnston told journalists, "Maybe this is unfair to Judge Bork…But we just cannot take a chance." White conservatives in Louisiana were quick to condemn Johnston's view. "A vote against Bork is a vote against the mandate President Reagan received in Louisiana," wrote one constituent. Moreover, it was a vote against "an overwhelming majority that rejected the outmoded policies of the liberal Democrat Party in favor of a return to the family values we Southerners cherish." Still, Johnston and his fellow southern Democrats were cognisant of the increasing importance of African-Americans to the Democratic Party in their region, and were wary of alienating a potentially crucial primary demographic. This certainly seemed to be at the forefront of Johnston's mind. Responding to another disgruntled constituent, Johnston stated his fear that Bork's nomination could "reopen wounds that have long since healed" and said his preference was for a "Supreme Court nominee who maintains conservative principles yet does not prove so abhorrent to such a large segment of our society."[276]

Even Strom Thurmond, who voted in Bork's favour, told the media that next time "I would recommend [the White House] not send somebody as controversial". The Bork defeat showed that the Christian Right's ability to exert political pressure was dissipating. The man ultimately confirmed to the vacant Supreme Court seat, Anthony Kennedy, was regarded as

[276] Details of Senate vote to confirm the nomination of Robert H. Bork, 23 October 1987, Govtrack website; Edward Walsh, "Bork's Foes Build Strategy on South", *WP*, 4 October 1987; Jeffrey Giles to J. Bennett Johnston, 1 October 1987 and J. Bennett Johnston to Robert Boh, 15 October 1987, both in Box 161, JBJP.

more moderate than Bork and, though he remained conservative on many issues, he often proved to be a swing vote on the Court alongside Sandra Day O'Connor, siding with her on abortion, school prayer, and marriage rights. Overall, Reagan's record of appointing conservative justices to lower courts led Jerry Falwell to declare that his "chief legacy is what he has done with the federal judiciary". But of Reagan's three appointees to the Supreme Court, only Scalia would prove a reliable ally for conservative evangelicals. The legal opinions of both Sandra Day O'Connor and Anthony Kennedy would regularly come to frustrate the Christian Right agenda.[277]

As Daniel Williams notes, with their influence in Washington diminishing during Reagan's second term, "the Moral Majority and other evangelical political organizations spent much of their time lobbying for the White House's objectives" rather than their own social conservative agenda. This was particularly true when it came to the administration's foreign policy initiatives. As conservative southerners, Christian Right leaders had been closely aligned with Reagan's anti-Communist rhetoric throughout his first term and had enthusiastically supported his nuclear build-up and increases in defence spending. Whereas liberal religious organisations condemned Reagan for encouraging an arms race, the Christian Right publicly promoted administration foreign policy. "Realizing that evangelicals might be the only religious group that would endorse his policy," Williams observes, "Reagan made a concerted effort to use them as publicists." While Reagan was denouncing the USSR as an 'evil empire' to an audience of evangelicals in Florida in March 1983, for instance, the Moral Majority was holding a 'Peace Through Strength' rally in Washington to counter the campaign

[277] Kevin Mirada, "Senate Rejects Bork", *DMN*, 24 October 1987; Stuart Taylor, "Which Way Will Kennedy Tilt the Bench?", *NYT*, 7 February 1988; Robert Barnes, "Justice Kennedy to retire from Supreme Court", *WP*, 27 June 2018; "Bork nomination sparks debate on place of religion in politics", *St. Petersburg Times*, 15 August 1987.

for a nuclear freeze. But during his second term, Reagan pursued compromise with the Soviet Union and a global reduction in nuclear weapons – alarming many conservative evangelicals. Still, as Williams points out, the Moral Majority's 'Liberty Report' newsletter preferred to criticise the Democratic-controlled Senate for ratifying the INF Treaty in 1988 rather than reproach Reagan for negotiating it. As seen in the debate over textile imports, southern conservatives repeatedly absolved Reagan of personal responsibility for policies they did not support.[278]

It is not immediately obvious why Christian Right support for Reagan remained so strong throughout the 1980s, given the lack of administration effort when it came to social issues. As David Marley has written, for the Christian Right, "the Reagan era was a time of photo opportunities, kind words and little else." Even Jerry Falwell eventually realised that, in Marley's words, "access to the powerful was not necessarily equal to having power". Yet Christian Right leaders' proximity to power during the Reagan administration, combined with rhetorical support given by the president himself, moved southern evangelicalism to the foreground of US politics. Reagan was, as a *Wall Street Journal* article suggested, the Christian Right's "entrée into the halls of political respect and power". To many Southern Baptists, this was a substantial victory. The Christian Right's visibility during the Reagan presidency paved the way for more tangible successes – both in terms of electing allies to Congress and in pushing for the appointment of socially conservative justices to the Supreme Court. It also enabled the movement to develop into the most prominent vehicle for southern conservative identity on the national political stage.[279]

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[278] Williams, *God's Own Party*, 203-211; Gary Geipel, "5,000 Rally in Capital to Urge Nuclear Freeze", *LAT*, 9 March 1983.

[279] David John Marley, "Ronald Reagan and the Splintering of the Christian Right", *Journal of Church and State*, Vol.48, Autumn 2006, 851-855; Rich Jaroslovsky, "Politics '84 - Bible Is Battle Cry", *WSJ*, 18 September 1984.

In the late 1980s, however, the Moral Majority became embroiled in legal and financial difficulties, and the broader Christian Right appeared beleaguered and riven by internal disagreements. Jerry Falwell gradually withdrew from political activity as Reagan's presidency ended. In the summer of 1989, he announced the dissolution of the Moral Majority, claiming "Our mission has been accomplished". It was a clear indication of the decline in the Christian Right's political power. Nonetheless, it is unquestionable that the Christian Right's backing for Ronald Reagan was an extremely important factor in the political ascendancy of conservative evangelicals – and thus crucial to the South becoming a Republican electoral stronghold. Reagan's popularity among Southern Baptists filtered down to the congressional level, playing a decisive role in the campaigns of men such as Jesse Helms and Jeremiah Denton and helping to make GOP candidates across the region more competitive.[280]

The conservative mythology that developed around Reagan after he left the White House has often portrayed his presidency as something of a golden age for southern evangelicals. This was far from the reality. After Reagan's death in 2004, Terry Mattingly, a commentator on religion and politics, summed up Reagan's relationship with the Christian Right. "Millions of Southern Baptists saw Reagan as a near-messiah", Mattingly wrote. "For Southern Baptist conservatives, Reagan offered hope that the cultural revolution of the Woodstock-Roe era might be overturned. They were wrong. Nevertheless, these conservative Baptists lost their historic fear of politics and jumped into the public square." The Reagan administration was wary of expending political capital on social issues. Yet because he was the first president to openly embrace the Christian Right agenda, at least rhetorically,

[280] Barbara White, "Falwell Folds Group", *AC*, 12 June 1989.

Reagan's status as a hero to conservative evangelicals was assured. Though it failed to make legislative progress and still lacked substantial congressional support, the Christian Right agenda became a crucial element of Republican Party policymaking during the Reagan era. It moved into the mainstream of American politics and, in the case of abortion, would remain there for decades to come. But the Christian Right looked to Ronald Reagan for active support in other areas too. When it came to issues of racial politics – be it school busing or civil rights legislation – southern conservatives and evangelicals viewed him as an ally in the White House.[281]

[281] Terry Mattingly, "Reagan boosted political, religious conservatives", *KN*, 12 June 2004.

Chapter 6

"Affirmative action is un-American": Southern racial conservatism and the Reagan White House

Throughout Ronald Reagan's presidency, his handling of issues of race and civil rights proved repeatedly controversial. His personal hostility to federal involvement in education, for instance, led his administration to side with southern conservatives over issues such as removing racial quotas from university campuses, fighting against busing orders to integrate public schools, and opposing attempts by the IRS to revoke tax exemptions from discriminatory private colleges. The Reagan White House was repeatedly criticised by civil rights organisations and the perception steadily increased that Reagan personally cared little for the interests of African-Americans. This chapter examines the contentious debates over voting rights, desegregation, and affirmative action that surfaced periodically during Reagan's presidency and demonstrated that racial tensions continued to run high in the South. To white southerners who had felt persecuted by previous administrations and countless Supreme Court decisions, Reagan's rhetoric on race-related issues reinforced their perception of him as an ally. Though at times his administration – distracted by its economic agenda – displayed a lack of urgency that provoked consternation among his southern supporters, overall his opposition to affirmative action policies found a receptive audience in the white South.

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In the spring of 1985, the *New York Times* ran six articles on race relations in "The Changing South". They served as a damning indictment of the region's failure to tackle racial injustice and inequality. In rural Georgia, reporters found that "an unwritten code perpetuates what was once enshrined in law". Informal segregation persisted in many public restrooms, African-Americans avoided certain restaurants, bars, or motels in which they knew they would not be served or allowed to rent a room, and one woman told of medical clinics which used separate entrances for blacks and whites. Similar stories were uncovered in Mississippi, Alabama, North Carolina, and many parts of the rural South. Other forms of racial inequality were rife. In Mississippi, where all citizens were significantly poorer than the rest of the nation, the average white income was almost double that of African-Americans. Though the 1965 Voting Rights Act had increased black electoral participation, the race-based gerrymandering of districts and the manipulation of voting laws remained commonplace, as white conservatives sought to maintain their political power. White flight had left some public school districts in Little Rock, Arkansas almost entirely African-American, while thousands of white students attended private, all-white academies. Little Rock, the *Times* reported, was "not the only place in the South facing school resegregation. The phenomenon is widespread."[282]

Black and white southerners existed warily side by side with relatively little social interaction. In Selma, Alabama a black lawyer explained, "there is a separation of black and white here to an extent almost as widespread as it was 20 years ago." Likewise, an African-American council member in Greensboro, North Carolina claimed that, although significant progress had been made since the time of Jim Crow, "that doesn't mean that white resistance

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[282] E.R. Schipp, "Across the Rural South, Segregation as Usual", *NYT*, 27 April 1985; William Schmidt, "Selma, 20 Years After the Rights March", *NYT*, 1 March 1985; E.R. Schipp, "The Races in Mississippi", *NYT*, 2 April 1985; Roy Reed, "Little Rock a Symbol Again", *NYT*, 23 March 1985.

has gone away. In many ways, it has just become more subtle, more institutionalized." Sometimes, white resistance was still overt. In March 1981, Ku Klux Klan members in Mobile, Alabama lynched a young black man – the first lynching in the South for 22 years. In 1982, the *Christian Science Monitor* described Emory Folmar, the Mayor of Montgomery, Alabama: "With a pistol strapped to his belt to symbolize his commitment to law and order, he defends 'honest, hard-working white men' against 'welfare blacks.' 'Affirmative action,' he concludes, 'is un-American.'" Southerners' contrasting perceptions of race relations also carried echoes of the 1950s. "Many whites say people want to stick with their own kind; blacks say they are discriminated against," the *Times* reported. "Whites also feel that race relations are good and that there are no racial problems; blacks say the opposite is true." Many white southerners had yet to reconcile themselves either to racial integration or to increased black political strength. Millions more, even those accepting of integration, resented what they saw as excessive federal activism on behalf of African-Americans.[283]

Reagan's declaration of support for "states' rights" at the Neshoba County Fair in 1980 had encouraged the white South to believe he would be a powerful ally in Washington. He generated similar optimism with his declaration, two weeks after winning the presidency, that the longstanding use of court-ordered busing to integrate public schools was a "failure" and he would sign anti-busing legislation as soon as possible. Likewise, the Republican platform had been unequivocal in its opposition to affirmative action: "equal opportunity should not be jeopardized by bureaucratic regulations and decisions which rely on quotas, ratios, and numerical requirements to exclude some individuals in favor of others". As he entered the

[283] William Schmidt, "Jim Crow Is Gone, but White Resistance Remains", *NYT*, 6 April 1985; Art Harris, "Three White Men Arrested In Slaying of Black Youth", *WP*, 26 March 1981; Judith Paterson, "The 'New Republican' South", *CSM*, 23 July 1982; Schipp, "Across the Rural South".

White House, southern conservatives expected Reagan's administration to take their side in a number of ongoing, racially-charged, political and legal battles.[284]

Early White House actions seemed to confirm these hopes. For example, the administration inherited a legal dispute between the Department of Education and the state of North Carolina over the speed at which the University of North Carolina (UNC) was desegregating its college system. In a state where 22 percent of the population was black, African-Americans comprised just 8 percent of students on historically white campuses and the number of white students attending the state's traditionally black colleges was similarly small. Since 1970, the Department of Education had maintained that UNC had failed to sufficiently integrate its colleges. During the Carter presidency, Health, Education, and Welfare Secretary Joseph Califano threatened to cut $90 million from UNC's federal funding if the situation was not rectified. University officials, backed by the state GOP's newly dominant conservatives, repeatedly condemned the legal action. Highlighting the white South's paradoxical attitude towards the federal government, they decried the threat to cut UNC's federal funding whilst also defending North Carolina's right to run its education system free from Washington interference.[285]

With Reagan in the White House, UNC's supporters were optimistic the federal government would soften its stance. John East, North Carolina's recently elected Republican senator, raised the subject at confirmation hearings for incoming Education Secretary, Terrel Bell. East argued that North Carolinians felt "badgered" and "humiliated" by the legal case

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[284] William Endicott, "Reagan Opens Campaign at a Dixie County Fair", *LAT*, 4 August 1980; Rachelle Patterson, "Reagan calls busing failure", *BG*, 19 November 1980; "Republican Party Platform of 1980", American Presidency Project website.

[285] "US Hearing on UNC System Will Resume", *CO*, 24 February 1981; Spencer Rich, "Califano Acts to Cut N.C. University Aid Over Bias", *WP*, 27 March 1979; Steven Roberts, "What Is the Difference Between Califano and Carolina? Plenty!", *NYT*, 15 April 1979.

against UNC. In response, Bell promised "a dramatic change" in the federal government's approach. The White House, the Education Department, and UNC undertook quiet negotiations, resulting in a compromise that reflected the new administration's relaxed stance on enforcing civil rights legislation. Guidelines were announced in June for UNC to increase white enrolment at black colleges and black enrolment at white colleges, but these encompassed lower targets than the Department of Education had previously demanded and set no firm quotas. The Reagan administration also declared that UNC had not been in violation of desegregation laws and the threat to its funding was dropped. Civil rights organisations were quick to criticise the deal. A lawyer for the NAACP claimed the administration had "sold out civil rights", while a former Carter official argued that it showed Reagan and his cabinet were "not interested in enforcing the civil rights laws that prohibit segregation in education." In contrast, Jesse Helms and John East were delighted. Helms – who had helped to instigate the negotiations – declared it "the end of a long ordeal that should never have occurred in the first place", while East credited Reagan's election to the presidency with bringing about a "dramatic change in attitude" at the Department of Education.[286]

In part, the swift end to the UNC case resulted from the White House's desire to prioritise its economic agenda and the wariness of Reagan's senior aides about becoming entangled in potentially controversial non-economic issues. Yet the resolution of the case so clearly in UNC's favour was indicative of Reagan's own interpretation of 'states' rights'. As

[286] "Friday hopes new view coming on UNC position", *GR*, 4 February 1981; "Education Nominee To Discuss UNC Case", *CO*, 17 January 1981; Rob Christensen, "Bell vows less federal intervention", *NO*, 16 January 1981; Steve Goldberg, "College Desegregation Efforts Have Been Turned Around", *RTD*, 12 July 1981; Rob Christensen, "UNC desegregation agreement signed", *NO*, 3 July 1981; "NAACP Fight Is Expected In UNC Case", *GDN*, 22 June 1981; Charles Babcock, "U.S. Accepted Desegregation Plan Once Rejected for N.C. Colleges", *WP*, 11 July 1981; "Praise, criticism greet accord", *NO*, 21 June 1981; "East gives credit to administration", *GR*, 4 July 1981.

discussed earlier in this thesis, this owed far more to his philosophical hostility towards the concept of big government than to a deep-rooted racial conservatism. Control of education policy, he believed, should lie with the states and not with the federal government. In his memoirs, Reagan referred to officials in the Department of Education as "elite bureaucrats" who forced "ultimatums" onto schools and colleges about what should and should not be taught. His strength of feeling was such that on the campaign trail in 1980 he pledged to abolish the Department of Education entirely. This objective never came close to being achieved, but Reagan's opposition to federal involvement in education undoubtedly set the tone for the reversal over integration at UNC.[287]

The administration's handling of the UNC case also illustrated the disconnect between the way Reagan perceived his own approach to civil rights and the way he was viewed by African-Americans. Reagan's personal views echoed colour-blind conservative notions of equality of opportunity and a belief that civil rights laws should protect everyone regardless of race. From the outset of his presidency, many African-Americans regarded Reagan with deep scepticism. They suspected that his rhetoric of equal opportunity and personal liberty cloaked an intent to reverse years of progress in minority rights. The UNC deal – along with a similar case in which the Department of Education dropped a challenge to the Florida state university system – did little to quell those concerns. In contrast to the Nixon administration, during which the Justice Department pursued a pragmatic, moderate approach towards civil rights and affirmative action (one rather at odds with Nixon's private views), it appeared the Reagan White House intended to withdraw the federal government from involvement in long-running legal battles to enforce civil rights laws. At his confirmation hearing, Terrel Bell had

[287] Reagan, *An American Life*, 198; Howell Raines, "Reagan Reiterates Warning on Schools", *NYT*, 14 October 1980; Fred Hechinger, "The Department That Would Not Die", *NYT*, 14 November 1982.

suggested the Department of Education's new approach was representative of a shift in attitude right across the administration. The change was happening, he said, "not only because of my beliefs, but also because of the views of this administration and the views of President-elect Reagan".[288]

Alongside Bell, other administration appointees held similar Reaganite views. Prominent among them was new Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, William Bradford Reynolds. Not long after his Senate confirmation, Reynolds told a conference on equal opportunity, "racial and sexual preferences are at war with the American ideal of equal opportunity for each person to achieve whatever his or her industry and talents warrant." His statements alarmed civil rights groups. Weeks later, their concerns were compounded when Reagan appointed William Bell, a black conservative who opposed affirmative action, as chairman of the Commission on Civil Rights. The ousted chairman, Arthur Flemming – a liberal veteran of Eisenhower's cabinet who had been appointed to head the commission by President Nixon – charged that the new administration had "as an objective the weakening of civil rights laws". Throughout 1981, statements by Reagan appointees appeared to justify Flemming's condemnation. They also served to strengthen the hopes of Reagan's southern conservative supporters. The Reaganites' colourblind conservatism was, at first sight, a far cry from the unreconstructed racial attitudes historically associated with white southerners. But over the coming years, the White House repeatedly found itself siding with conservative

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[288] Herbert Denton, "Reagan Assures Blacks He'll Defend Civil Rights", *WP*, 12 December 1980; Hugh Davis Graham, "Nixon and Civil Rights: Explaining an Enigma", *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1, (Winter, 1996), 93-106; "Push is on for further university system integration", *AC*, 7 June 1981; Christensen, "Bell vows less federal intervention".

southerners in civil rights debates, thereby provoking critics to accuse it of callousness and insensitivity towards black Americans.[289]

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The debate over renewal of the Voting Rights Act reinforced this perception. Conservative southern senators regarded the enforcement sections of the Act as particularly unfair to their region. Under 'preclearance' rules, for example, nine southern states (and parts of thirteen others, including non-southern states such as California and Wyoming) required Justice Department approval for any change in their voting laws. Jesse Helms opposed renewal of the Act outright, but other southern conservatives – including Strom Thurmond, chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee – pledged to support renewal if the preclearance requirements were extended to the entire nation. Civil rights groups dismissed their stance as an attempt to undermine the law by making it too onerous to enforce. There was, moreover, a clear majority in the House – as demonstrated by an overwhelming 389-24 vote in October 1981 – for extending the Voting Rights Act without changes.[290]

The House vote placed pressure on the administration to clarify the president's views. As Laurence Barrett has written, simply supporting extension would allow Reagan "to make an inexpensive show of sympathy for the liberal side of the civil rights cause". Instead, he sat

[289] Robert Pear, "Reagan's Choice for Civil Rights Post", *NYT*, 8 June 1981; "Remarks by William Bradford Reynolds to The Fourth Annual Conference on Equal Employment Opportunity", 20 October 1981, Education Resources Information Center website; "Reagan Fires Chief Of Civil Rights Board", *AC*, 17 November 1981; Vernon Jordan, "Reagan Hurting Civil Rights Program", *AC*, 16 December 1981.
[290] "House Heads Toward Voting Rights Showdown, Certain to Affect the South", *AG*, 27 July 1981; Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America*, 291-292; Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 259-260; Steven Roberts, "House Vote Backs Keeping Key Parts Of 1965 Voting Act", *NYT*, 6 October 1981.

on the fence, an ambiguity that suggested he shared the reservations of southern conservative senators. Though he repeatedly asserted his support for voting rights, Reagan hinted his agreement with Strom Thurmond that enforcement provisions should cover every state. His instinct remained that civil rights protections must apply to every American. Shortly before his inauguration, Reagan had told *Time* magazine: "I was opposed to the Voting Rights Act from the very beginning, but not because I was opposed to the right to vote. I was opposed to the act being applied only to several states. I say make it apply to everybody." But as recently as 1980, he had framed his opposition in rather less virtuous language, claiming that the original Voting Rights Act had been "humiliating to the South".[291]

According to a June 1981 memo, several administration advisors were worried about potential political costs. Morton Blackwell felt that "a wrong decision here could be very damaging to the President and virtually all of his southern political support". At the same time, it was "highly unlikely to increase support for the President among groups which are already militantly opposed", namely African-Americans and civil rights organisations. There were also concerns that the administration's economic agenda could suffer. "A wrong decision here would not only antagonize those conservative Republican leaders we have in the South, such as Trent Lott," Blackwell believed, "but it would also deal a devastating blow to our southern Democratic allies who are the key to most of our past and hoped for victories in the U.S. House." Fears of alienating Boll Weevils proved unfounded – all but a handful backed renewal of the Voting Rights Act in October – but even the legislation's enormous margin of victory in the House did little to encourage the administration to overtly support it.

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[291] Barrett, 421-426; Lou Cannon, "Reagan Dodges Voting Rights Issue", *WP*, 30 June 1981; "An Interview with Ronald Reagan", *Time*, 5 January 1981.

After the vote, White House aide Elizabeth Dole argued that Reagan should continue to avoid discussing the "nuts and bolts" of the bill and maintain a "take the high road" approach.[292]

Concerns that Reagan could lose southern support were not without foundation. The Voting Rights Act remained an egregious injustice to many conservatives across the South. One Mississippian told Jesse Helms that blocking renewal would "prevent a Second Reconstruction", "reverse the leftward drift of national politics", and "save freedom and Americanism". At the heart of white southern opposition to renewal was the belief that the law itself was prejudiced. Residents of Louisiana and Alabama respectively described it as "discriminatory against the South" and "the worst discrimination against the South by our government since the disgraceful treatment inflicted upon us during Reconstruction". Likewise, a resident of Dalton, Georgia asked "how can anyone justify application to only certain states?" A constituent of Alabama Democrat Bill Nichols announced he was "sickened by the black attitude that their rights must be won – even at the expense of others! They feel…that their rights are tantamount to the rights of others. This is open, blatant discrimination". Another demanded that Nichols oppose renewal of the Voting Rights Act and told him, "I appreciate your support of President Reagan…I voted for President Reagan [because] of his promise to try to cure our country of too much FEDERAL interference". Nichols ultimately voted against renewal on the grounds that the Act should apply nationwide.[293]

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[292] Memo from Diana Lozano to Elizabeth Dole, 10 June 1981, Box 60, EDF; Details of House vote on H.R. 3112, 5 October 1981, Govtrack website; Roberts, "House Vote"; Memo from Elizabeth Dole to Richard Darman, 7 October 1981, Box 60, EDF.

[293] Richard Barrett to Jesse Helms, 30 April 1982 and Marjorie Gervin to Jesse Helms, 6 May 1982, both in Box 2152, Record Group 2, JHP; J.H. Killebrew, to Bill Nichols, 11 September 1981, Box 5, WNP; H. O. Cochran to Ed Jenkins, 11 November 1981, Box 30, EJP; Gene L. Howard to Bill Nichols, 3 December 1981 and William Perdue to Bill Nichols, 14 October 1981, both in Box 5, WNP.

While the House's renewal legislation sought to make the preclearance requirements – still chiefly directed at southern states – permanent, it also included a mechanism for states to 'bail out' of the provisions under certain circumstances. To conservative southern senators, however, the House bill reinforced the Voting Rights Act's unfairness, and their objections led to a lengthy legislative struggle. On 4 November 1981, junior policy advisor Mel Bradley, one of the few African-Americans on Reagan's staff, argued that the politically wise course of action was to simply back the House bill. "A supportive position on the voting rights bill <u>as is</u> will gain for the president the good will and respect of many Americans who now question our agenda", Bradley wrote. "Technical reservations…will be viewed as a signal that this administration is trying to avoid protecting the voting rights of all." Bradley's advice went unheeded. The White House's eventual stance on the legislation – advocating a 10-year extension of the Act and arguing for a simpler mechanism for bailing out of the enforcement provisions – largely sided with southern conservative senators.[294]

The Reagan administration quickly found itself in troubled waters. A *Boston Globe* editorial argued, "opponents of a strong Voting Rights Act see in President Reagan a possible ally, or at worst, a non-objector of efforts to seriously weaken the voting rights law." The White House faced opposition from civil rights groups, a huge majority of Representatives, and around two-thirds of senators who supported the House bill. In the end, the Senate compromised on a version of the House bill with a 25-year limit which passed by 85 votes to 8 in June 1982. Among those voting against were Jesse Helms and John East – who both staged a futile filibuster – Jeremiah Denton of Alabama, and independent Virginia Senator (and former Democrat) Harry F. Byrd Jr. Significantly, Strom Thurmond supported the bill. As

[294] Memo from Mel Bradley to Martin Anderson, 4 November 1981, Box 15, MLBF; Ronald Reagan, "Statement About Extension of the Voting Rights Act", 6 November 1981; *Public Papers of the President*.

his biographer Joseph Crespino writes, Thurmond's vote represented "cold calculus". Given the increased importance of black voters in South Carolina, where they comprised a larger portion of the electorate than in Helms' North Carolina, there was "simply no political advantage…in playing the heavy."[295]

The Reagan administration ultimately reached the same conclusion. As Laurence Barrett observes, because the legislation included a modest concession to conservatives (the 25-year limit), Reagan even made a public show of "[accepting] the whole package as if it had been his from the beginning". The Voting Rights Act Extension was signed on 29 June 1982 "at a formal ceremony of the kind usually reserved for major administration victories." Undoubtedly, this was an attempt to alleviate some of the criticism Reagan had endured. The *Washington Post* reported that he "used the occasion to declare himself an unswerving defender of the right to vote…and to diminish the significance of his widely heralded differences with civil rights groups". But the ceremony also hinted at anxiety among Reagan's advisors that accusations of racism were taking a political toll.[296]

The previous March, aide Edwin Harper had written to the president arguing that the administration's ambiguity on the Voting Rights Act, its stance on integration in education, a lack of minority appointments to government positions, and budget cutbacks which disproportionately hurt black Americans were having a "cumulative effect". In aggregate, these had "created distrust and bitterness within the minority community" and had led to "a widespread sentiment that the Administration is "anti-black" or engaged in a systematic

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[295] "A strong voting shield for blacks?", *BG*, 2 March 1982; Aaron Epstein, "Administration Would Weaken Voting Act", *Hartford Courant*, 28 January 1982; Reginald Stuart, "March Is Begun in Alabama To Back Voting Rights Law", *NYT*, 7 February 1982; Details of Senate vote on H.R. 3112, 18 June 1982, Govtrack website; "The Voting Rights Victory", *AG*, 23 June 1982; Claude Sitton, "Helms' filibuster gives state a black eye", *NO*, 20 June 1982; Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America*, 296-297.

[296] Barrett, 422; Herbert Denton, "Reagan Signs Voting Rights Act Extension", *WP*, 30 June 1982.

effort to roll back civil rights achievements of the past." Harper added, "we have not helped ourselves. We have not put our best foot forward rhetorically, and a series of mishaps in timing and tactical judgment have strengthened the impression of insensitivity."[297]

The White House merely reinforced these perceptions in its response to the campaign for a national holiday in memory of Martin Luther King Jr. Despite overwhelming black support, the campaign had made little progress since King's assassination in 1968. Southern conservatives had been vocally opposed, arguing that the only men previously honoured by a national holiday, Christopher Columbus and George Washington, were crucial to the nation's existence in a way that King was not. But by 1981, King's birthday was established as a holiday in seventeen states and renewed debate over the Voting Rights Act gave the campaign further momentum. Additionally, a strong African-American turnout in the 1982 midterms demonstrated that the wishes of black voters could not be ignored. As William Link writes, "for African Americans, honoring King in this way became a part of the legitimization of the civil rights heritage." By 1983, twenty states observed a King holiday, including several in the South. Recognising the prevailing mood, even Strom Thurmond had quietly accepted the idea. Legislation to create a federal holiday appeared increasingly likely.[298]

The House voted in favour of a King federal holiday by 338 votes to 90 in August 1983. In response, Jesse Helms – its most vocal opponent on Capitol Hill – vowed to filibuster and defeat the legislation in the Senate. In the chamber on 3 October, he condemned King's "calculated use of nonviolence as a provocative act" designed to trigger "overreaction by authorities", argued that "the legacy of Dr. King was really a division, not love" and asserted

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[297] Memo from Edwin Harper to the President, 5 March 1982, Box 18, EDF.

[298] Clyde Penn, "Holiday for King: Shall It Overcome?", *LAT*, 11 August 1981; Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America*, 296; "Voting: The New Black Power", *NYT*, 27 November 1983; Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 261.

that King's "political views were those of a radical political minority that had little to do with racial minorities." King's opposition to the Vietnam War, Helms claimed, had sprung from his "Marxist" beliefs: "he and his principal vehicle, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, were subject to influence and manipulation by Communists." After his filibuster failed, Helms took legal action in vain to unseal documents from the FBI's surveillance of King. The bill finally passed the Senate on 19 October 1983 by 78 votes to 22.[299]

Though Helms denied his actions were motivated by racism – claiming "I'm not a racist, I'm not a bigot" – an aide later admitted the senator had been "playing the race card". It certainly played well in North Carolina, where 83 percent of whites supported Helms's stance. Racial overtones were apparent in the views of many white southerners opposed to the King holiday. Some wrote to commend Helms for trying to block the legislation. Praising his "most gallant stand", one correspondent went on to claim, "Dr. King brought violence, hatred and division on a par unseen since Reconstruction". Another described King as an "infamous negro [*sic*]" and a "known Communist". Strom Thurmond was condemned for supporting the bill, with one South Carolina resident claiming he had "sold out to the blacks". Illustrating that race was a crucial factor in many white southerners switching to the GOP, the constituent added, "there is a good possibility you will lose much of the white vote…I have supported the Republican Party for many years, but if they are going to turn their backs on what we've stood for through the years, perhaps I will take another look." Thurmond was accused by another constituent of being so concerned about the black vote that he was "afraid to vote your true feelings". The segregationist Democrat and former Governor of

[299] "Helms set to filibuster King holiday bill", *BG*, 3 October 1983; Remarks by Jesse Helms, 3 October 1983, *Congressional Record*, 26866-26878.

Georgia, Lester Maddox, chimed in to condemn the bill, saying the "cowards" who supported it should "give serious consideration to leaving the country on a permanent basis."[300]

Given its broad national backing, supporting the legislation was the wisest course of action for the White House, yet Reagan personally opposed it. He believed the economic cost of a King federal holiday was prohibitively expensive and warned, "We could have an awful lot of holidays if we start down that road." Reagan also shared some of Helms's views on King himself. Even in the days after King's assassination in 1968, he had been suspicious of the motives of civil rights campaigners and demonstrated a lack of understanding of King's importance to African-Americans. King's death, he said, was "a great tragedy that began when we began compromising with law and order and people started choosing which laws they'd break." Fifteen years later, when former Governor of New Hampshire Meldrim Thompson wrote to demand a veto of the King holiday legislation, Reagan replied, "I have the reservations you have but here the perception of too many people is based on an image not reality. Indeed to them the perception is reality." Asked at a press conference whether he agreed with the claims made by Helms, he responded "We'll know in about 25 years, won't we?" before adding, "I don't fault Senator Helms' sincerity with regard to wanting the records opened up." Yet Reagan grudgingly announced he would sign the bill: "I would have preferred a day of recognition for his accomplishments…but since they seem bent on making it a national holiday, I believe the symbolism of that day is important enough that I'll sign that legislation when it reaches my desk."[301]

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[300] Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 265-269; Larry Greene to Jesse Helms, 24 October 1983 and Donald Buck to Jesse Helms, 23 October 1983, both in Box 2171, Record Group 2, JHP; John Boswell to Strom Thurmond, 18 September 1983 and Chester Kirkevold to Strom Thurmond, 19 September 1983, both in Box 11, Volume Mail Series, STC; Bob Dart, Maddox virulently fights King holiday", *AC*, 6 October 1983.

[301] "Reagan Sympathetic, but Cautious on a King Holiday", *NYT*, 11 May 1982; Memo from Mel Bradley to Ed Harper, 28 January 1983, Box 27, EMF; Francis Clines, "Reagan's Doubts on Dr King Disclosed", *NYT*, 22 October

At the signing ceremony, Reagan's reservations about King were nowhere to be seen. Instead, his remarks artfully linked King's legacy to his own administration's approach to civil rights and affirmative action. He claimed King "had awakened something strong and true, a sense that true justice must be colorblind." In a similar vein, Reagan suggested that King's civil rights campaigning had fundamentally redeemed the US from racial prejudice: "Across the land, people had begun to treat each other not as blacks and whites, but as fellow Americans." On more than one occasion during his presidency, Reagan cited King's legacy to argue that affirmative action programmes and federal protections for black rights were no longer necessary and that civil rights laws should guarantee equality of opportunity for all. In 1986, Reagan criticised the use of racial quotas in employment, saying, "We want what I think Martin Luther King asked for: We want a colorblind society." This was, of course, a selective reading of King's rhetoric, chiefly focusing on his 'I Have A Dream' speech of 1963 while ignoring his later, more radical critiques of structural inequalities in American society.[302]

Certainly, African-American leaders were not convinced by Reagan's attempts to co-opt King into the cause of colourblind conservatism. To them, his initial stance on the King holiday legislation was further evidence of a callous approach towards civil rights. His lack of enthusiasm for the bill effectively offered tacit support to Jesse Helms' racially-tinged condemnations of King. In multiple civil rights debates, the Reagan administration found itself on the side of white southern conservatives, though this alignment came about for varied reasons. Reagan's ingrained anti-communism meant he was quick to believe the worst

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1983; Morgan, "In Black and White", 183; Ronald Reagan to Meldrim Thompson, 3 October 1983, *Reagan: A Life in Letters*, 634; Ronald Reagan, "The President's News Conference", 19 October 1983, *Public Papers of the President*.

[302] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks on Signing the Bill Making the Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., a National Holiday", 2 November 1983 and "The President's News Conference", 11 February 1986, both in *Public Papers of the President*.

accusations about Martin Luther King. The anti-statist conservatism of senior administration officials had led Reagan's Education Department to side with both North Carolina and Florida in disputes over racial integration in their university systems. When it came to Voting Rights Act renewal, political calculations had clearly been to the fore – the administration's fear of alienating white southerners engendered a cautious approach widely perceived as racially insensitive. Yet these were far from the only race-related issues facing the Reagan administration. During its first term in office, it was also drawn into a legal dispute involving Bob Jones University that spoke even more viscerally to the South's history of racial prejudice.

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Bob Jones University (BJU) in Greenville, South Carolina was one of the most conservative colleges in the South, both in terms of religious teaching (alumni included numerous fundamentalist preachers) and, most controversially, in terms of race. During the 1960s, BJU conferred honorary degrees upon ardent segregationists including Strom Thurmond, Lester Maddox, and George Wallace. Citing scripture as a moral basis for racial separation, the university refused to admit black students until 1971, when it acquiesced after years of pressure from the federal government. The reversal was prompted by the Nixon administration's decision in 1970 to overturn longstanding rules relating to tax exemptions for independent educational institutions. Under new guidelines, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) could deny tax exemptions to organisations not deemed to be 'charitable'. To have charitable status, organisations were now required to abide by federal public policy – including the policy of non-discrimination. Threatened with the loss of its tax exemptions, BJU

opened its doors to African-American students. Yet it still maintained a strict ban on interracial dating. In 1976, after years of legal wrangling, this ban prompted an effort by the IRS to revoke Bob Jones University's tax-exempt status. BJU stood accused of having continued to practice racial discrimination after the 1970 rule change and was therefore liable for payment of taxes dating back six years. After Bob Jones University challenged the IRS's case, the dispute gradually made its way through various tiers of the US legal system during the late 1970s.[303]

It was still doing so when Ronald Reagan made a campaign stop at BJU in January 1980. Declaring he was "delighted to be here" at a "great institution", he described the 6,000 white students and staff in attendance as a "most impressive audience". A subsequent Harvard University report into the BJU case observed, "Whether Reagan knew that BJU practiced and advocated racial separation is unclear, but he seemed quite impressed by the University." Bob Jones III, chancellor of BJU and grandson of the university's founder, did not offer an explicit endorsement, but multiple standing ovations attested to Reagan's popularity on the campus. Four years earlier, it is worth noting, activists from Bob Jones University had taken control of the Greenville County Republican Party to aid Reagan's primary challenge to Gerald Ford. The 1980 Republican Party platform also gave BJU's supporters cause to believe that, if elected, Reagan would end the IRS's pursuit of the case. It declared unambiguously, "We will halt the unconstitutional regulatory vendetta launched by Mr. Carter's IRS Commissioner against

[303] Cindy Landrum, "A Brief History of the World's Most Unusual University", *Greenville Journal*, 12 April 2017; "Bob Jones University Apologizes for its Racist Past", *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No.62, (Winter, 2008/2009), 22-23; Aaron Haberman, "Into the Wilderness: Ronald Reagan, Bob Jones University, and the Political Education of the Christian Right", *The Historian*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Summer 2005), 237-238; David Whitman, "Ronald Reagan and Tax Exemptions for Racist Schools", John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1984, Box 60, MDF.

independent schools" – conveniently ignoring the fact that the 'vendetta' had begun under Richard Nixon and was continued by the Ford administration.[304]

Still, the Reagan administration largely ignored the issue during 1981. This aroused the anger of southern conservatives in Congress, particularly Republican Congressman Trent Lott of Mississippi, whose interest arose because several colleges in Mississippi had been granted similar tax exemptions. On 30 October 1981, Lott told Treasury Secretary Don Regan that administration support for the IRS against Bob Jones University was "both legally and politically indefensible." Writing to Reagan's Solicitor General, Rex Lee, he declared himself "more than a little disturbed" that the White House's ambivalence conflicted with "a specific pledge of the President's platform." He continued, "Mississippians and many of their fellow citizens supported President Reagan simply to end this kind of unwarranted interference." Lott was not alone in making such arguments. In December, Strom Thurmond – a trustee of Bob Jones University – also met with the IRS commissioner to underline his own objections.[305]

Apparently unrelated to these communications, the Reagan Justice Department undertook a review of the federal government's position in anticipation of the case reaching the Supreme Court in early 1982. BJU's argument had now been combined with a similar case involving Goldsboro Christian School in North Carolina, which still refused to admit black students. Both colleges claimed that because their racial policies were founded in religious belief, the actions of the IRS were a violation of the First Amendment. Justice Department

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[304] Robert Lindsey, "Reagan to Debate His G.O.P. Rivals in South Carolina", *NYT*, 31 January 1980; Whitman, "Ronald Reagan and Tax Exemptions", MDF; James Guth, "South Carolina: The Christian Right Wins One", *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (March, 1995), 8-11; "Republican Party Platform of 1980".

[305] Trent Lott to Donald Regan, 30 October 1981 and Trent Lott to Rex Lee, 30 October 1981, in "Legislation to deny tax exemption to racially discriminatory private schools", *Senate Committee on Finance Hearings*, 1 February 1982, Google Books website, 48, 51-52; Barrett, 419; "Talking Points: Meeting with Senator Thurmond, 17 December 1981" in "Administration's change in federal policy regarding the tax status of racially discriminatory private schools", *House Committee on Ways and Means Hearings*, 4 February 1982, Google Books website, 440-442.

officials were initially inclined to maintain government support for the IRS, but the involvement of more senior figures prompted a policy reversal. Deputy Attorney General William Bradford Reynolds believed the Nixon administration's 1970 decision had been misguided, and unelected bureaucrats (namely the IRS) did not have the power to determine whether an organisation was conforming to public policy. However, there was also a second, more political, line of thinking. If the administration supported the IRS in a Supreme Court battle against BJU and Goldsboro, it would be reneging on Reagan's campaign pledge to end federal interference in the affairs of private Christian schools. The Justice Department settled on its position by early January: it was outside the remit of the IRS to judge whether organisations were abiding by public policy. The administration would therefore ask the Supreme Court to render the case moot.[306]

Ronald Reagan was intentionally absent from this debate. In December, a memo written by Peter Wallison, General Counsel in the Treasury Department, indicated the administration's desire to "preserve the President's position of non-involvement in this matter, whichever way it goes." Reagan's personal view was, however, jotted succinctly on an aide's log of incoming mail. Next to an entry informing him of Trent Lott's view that the White House must intervene in the Bob Jones University case, Reagan wrote, "I think we should." His note would prove important in finalising the administration's position. The Justice Department's eventual decision that the administration should no longer support the

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[306] Whitman, "Ronald Reagan and Tax Exemptions", MDF; Julia Malone, "Racial Bias v. Religious Freedom", *CSM*, 23 November 1981.

IRS chimed with the instincts of the president and the relatively few senior White House aides who had considered the issue.[307]

When the administration's new stance was announced on 8 January 1982 – at 4pm on a Friday to keep it "low key" – civil rights groups and much of the national press were immediately hostile. According to the national NAACP leader, the shift was "nothing short of criminal" and gave "encouragement to racist and reactionary groups in this country". The head of the organisation's Georgia branch accused the White House of "attempting to turn back the clock by instituting segregation of the races." The administration's decision was "not in the tradition of conservatism, nor in the tradition of Republicanism", claimed the *Baltimore Sun*. "It is in the tradition of racism." Likewise, the *Los Angeles Times* called it a "reprehensible reversal" which "shows contempt for the attempts of minorities to participate fully and freely in American society." *Boston Globe* columnist Robert A. Jordan argued the White House's "deliberately weak posture on civil rights enforcement has given a clear signal to certain constituents that efforts to keep some blacks out of the mainstream of American society may draw nothing more than a blink from the Administration's eye."[308]

The reaction among conservative southerners – foremost among the 'certain constituents' Jordan had in mind – bordered on delight. The Moral Majority claimed, "BJU has every right to operate according to religious convictions, whether they are unpopular or not." The administration's reversal was therefore "a vindication of the correct position." Bob Jones

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[307] Memo from Peter Wallison to Donald Regan, 17 December 1981, in "Administration's change in federal policy", *House Committee on Ways and Means*, 443; "Presidential Log of Selected House Mail", December 1981, Box 1, DNF.

[308] Memo from Ann Dore McLaughlin to Dave Gergen, 7 January 1982, in "Legislation to deny tax exemption", *Senate Committee on Finance*, 91; Eliot Brenner, "Democrats, Liberals Assail Tax Decision on Biased Schools", *Hartford Courant*, 10 January 1982; "Biased Schools' Tax Breaks OK'd", *CT*, 9 January 1982; "Reagan's Reversal on Racism", *BS*, 12 January 1982; "The Rewarding of Bias", *LAT*, 12 January 1982; Robert A. Jordan, "Tax-exempt decision gives a wrong signal to school segregationists", *BG*, 12 January 1982.

III said the decision “in effect gives us a clean bill of health.” It was, he believed, “the answer of the prayers of God’s people. Nobody has put any pressure on the administration.” BJU’s congressional allies enjoyed what was, in their view, a major victory. For Strom Thurmond, the administration had brought “an end to a decade of trampling on religious and private civil rights by the Internal Revenue Service”. He concluded, “freedom of religion will no longer have to take a back seat to bureaucratic determinations of public policies. President Reagan has kept another campaign promise.”[309]

The administration’s decision was both legal and political. Southern conservatives like Trent Lott had undoubtedly pushed the White House into action, but at the same time the case was already being considered by the Justice Department. Still, when details of Lott’s communications and President Reagan’s handwritten note leaked to the media, the dominant narrative became one of cynical political calculation. As the Harvard report into the episode notes, the Reagan White House appeared to have shifted policy as “a political sop” to conservative southerners. The Reagan administration again found itself aligned with southern conservatives in an apparent rejection of African-American rights, and some political opponents seized upon the president’s note as evidence that he personally approved of the racial discrimination at BJU and Goldsboro. Reagan felt it necessary to defend himself at a press conference on 19 January. “I am opposed with every fiber of my being to discrimination,” he declared. “I have been on the side of opposition to bigotry and discrimination and prejudice -- and long before it ever became a kind of national issue under the title of civil rights.” He took personal responsibility for the political firestorm, saying, “I'm the originator of the whole thing, and I'm not going to deny that it wasn't handled as well as

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[309] Hal Gulliver, “Trying to Turn Back the Clock”, *AC*, 12 January 1982; “Exemptions from IRS Restored”, *AC*, 9 January 1982.

it could be." Yet Reagan also disingenuously claimed that the administration's intention had simply been to encourage Congress to act. In a convoluted justification, Reagan insisted, "what we set out to do was to change that procedure and stop the Internal Revenue Service from doing this and then to have Congress implement with law the proper procedure…and to have set in law the fact that tax exemptions could be denied to schools that – and educational institutions that practiced discrimination."[310]

This had clearly not been the motivation of Lott or Thurmond. However, it did now become administration policy. After a White House meeting in which two black policy advisors outlined African-American perceptions of Reagan as personally racist, a strategy was devised to defuse the issue. The administration introduced hastily drafted legislation to Congress that gave the IRS authority to withdraw tax exemptions from discriminatory schools and colleges. Despite Reagan's claim, this had never been the original intention. As Laurence Barrett writes, administration officials privately acknowledged "there had been no plan at all to introduce any legislation when the policy change was decided." The move failed to assuage the anger of liberals and civil rights campaigners, who correctly saw it as an attempt to escape a political crisis of the administration's own making.[311]

Although BJU and Goldsboro would both keep their tax exemptions until the bill passed, the proposed legislation angered southern conservatives. Jesse Helms told journalists, "If President Reagan or anybody else proposes to confer on some bureaucrat the power to decide whether a tax-payer is violating the law, then I shall oppose." Bob Jones III urged BJU students to campaign against the bill, telling them, "You know very well there is no

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[310] Whitman, "Ronald Reagan and Tax Exemptions", MDF; Ronald Reagan, "The President's News Conference", 19 January 1982, *Public Papers of the President*.
[311] Barrett, 415-420.

discrimination at this school. There is absolute racial harmony at this school." Ten days later, Jones described Reagan's proposal as "an abomination and a sell-out." Anger was also widespread among grassroots southern conservatives and evangelicals. A correspondent from the Church of God in Lexington, Kentucky protested to Republican Larry Hopkins that the bill was "a contradiction to the division of rights between church and state." In a similar vein, a member of Smyrna Baptist Church in Union, Mississippi told Morton Blackwell the bill was "a 'green light' for the IRS to commit flagrant abuses of power against all churches." A couple from Georgia wrote to Democrat Ed Jenkins, "We do not consider a school that prohibits inter-racial dating and marriage to be racially discriminatory, but to be a matter of religious conviction." Others directed their ire towards Reagan personally. "Mr. Reagan has a funny way of getting government off our backs", wrote one North Carolinian. "He's turning the IRS loose to plunder and destroy our churches. Mr. Reagan has betrayed some of his best friends." A member of the Moral Majority wrote that they had been "delighted" by Reagan's original decision but described the new legislation as "a tragic threat" to religious freedom. "Mr. President," he concluded, "this is not a racial issue, but a 'freedom of religion' issue. I sincerely hope that you will again rise to the occasion and 'get the government off the people's backs' as you so often stated during the campaign."[312]

In Congress, the legislation was doomed. Christian Right organisations vowed to lobby against it, and they were joined in opposition by congressional liberals who claimed the IRS already had the authority to withdraw tax exemptions. According to records of White House

[312] Mark Pinsky, "Publicity has left some at Christian schools 'gun shy'", *BG*, 10 February 1982; "Students Asked to Lobby for Tax Policy", *CO*, 16 January 1982; "Bob Jones says Reagan's change on tax exemptions was 'a sell-out', *CR*, 27 January 1982; Delbert Rose to Larry Hopkins, 26 February 1982, Box 151, LHP; Betty Ferguson to Morton Blackwell, 9 February 1982, Box 64, MBF; Steve and Gwen Jones to Ed Jenkins, 8 February 1982, Box 38, EJP; Emmett Dickens to Jesse Helms, 19 February 1982, Box 2121, Record Group 2, JHP; John J. Bourn to President Reagan, 6 February 1982, Box 64, MBF.

phone calls, even supportive congressmen had reservations. Georgia Republican Newt Gingrich's response was cautious at best: "Have we talked with Christian conservatives? [He is] with us but doesn't want to offend our friends." His fellow Republican Bill Dickinson of Alabama was more critical: "Matter handled poorly…from our point of view it hurt us." Few in Congress wanted to get involved in such a contentious issue. "Bipartisan opposition to pursuing any legislation is still strong," Reagan aide Nancy Risque noted in mid-February 1982. "It seems that many on the Hill are hoping that the Administration will file a second brief that would allow the Supreme Court to pursue the issue."[313]

After the bill quickly died in both chambers of Congress, the issue returned to the Supreme Court. When hearings began in April 1982, the administration maintained its view that the IRS did not have authority to withdraw tax exemptions to BJU and Goldsboro. The White House was now in legal opposition to the IRS. When the court ruled a year later, however, it concluded that the IRS did have the necessary authority. By a margin of 8-1, the Supreme Court rejected the arguments put forward by Bob Jones University, Goldsboro and the federal government in what the *Los Angeles Times* called "a stinging rebuke to the Reagan Administration". Chief Justice Warren Burger's majority opinion declared that "racial discrimination in education violates deep and widely accepted views of elementary justice." The Supreme Court also rejected arguments by BJU and Goldsboro that the IRS was infringing on their religious freedom.[314]

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[313] Leonard Apcar, "Reagan's Bill on Racial Bias Faces Trouble", *WSJ*, 1 February 1982; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "The private school fiasco raises friends' ire", *Augusta Chronicle*, 30 January 1982; "Summary of House Calls Regarding Tax Exemption Bill", 18 January 1982 and Memo from Nancy Risque to M.B. Oglesby, 16 February 1982, both in Box 4, MOF.

[314] "Bob Jones: We're guinea pigs", *AC*, 10 October 1982; Jim Mann, "Court Upholds Tax on Biased Schools", *LAT*, 25 May 1983.

President Reagan responded to the humiliating outcome by telling journalists simply, "We will obey the law." Unsurprisingly, Bob Jones III was less docile, expressing "pity for the heathens who sit on the Supreme Court, pity for their damned souls and their blighted minds". The justices were, moreover, "eight evil old men and one vain and foolish woman". Since the case began, relations between the White House and Bob Jones University had deteriorated. By December 1983, Jones was writing to tell Reagan he felt "betrayed, deceived, and used by a man in whom he put his confidence…you have not fulfilled your promises to your Christian supporters, and you have been a party to the betrayal of religious freedom in America." Accusing Reagan of being a president who "while promising much, basically does nothing at all", Jones concluded, "why should we vote to reelect a man who has broken every promise he has made to protect and preserve religious freedoms and Christian schools?"[315]

A memo written by White House aide (and future Chief Justice of the Supreme Court) John Roberts illustrates the administration's increasing exasperation with southern conservatives. In Roberts' view, the "audacity" of Jones was "truly remarkable, given the political costs this Administration has incurred in promoting the interests of Fundamental Christians in general and Bob Jones University in particular." In response, Roberts prepared a "restrained reply to his petulant paranoia…telling Jones, in essence, to go soak his head." The BJU episode highlighted the Reagan administration's difficulties in satisfying some of the more extreme elements of its southern conservative support. It also illustrated the pitfalls involved in pursuing the Reaganite conservative aim of reducing federal involvement in education, particularly when the issue involved is as profound as racial segregation. A combination of misguided legal thinking, a desire to appease congressional southern

[315] Phil Gailey, "Bob Jones, in Sermon, Assails Supreme Court", *NYT*, 25 May 1983; Bob Jones III to Ronald Reagan 30 December 1983, Box 1, CSF.

conservatives, and a simple lack of political acuity created a significant humiliation for the Reagan administration. The episode demonstrated, too, that education continued to be a vital battleground in the struggle over the rights of black southerners.[316]

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One of the most divisive domestic issues in US politics during the 1970s, the debate over using court mandated busing to desegregate public schools reared its head once again during Reagan's first term. In late 1980, a federal judge had ordered the imposition of busing to desegregate the school system in Rapides Parish in central Louisiana, an area with a long history of resisting desegregation. The defiant response of white residents – particularly local Louisiana State Judge Richard Earl Lee – received national media attention. Among hundreds of children affected by the busing order, three white girls from the rural community of Buckeye became the focus of the dispute after their parents challenged the order and their case developed into a cause celebre.[317]

The three were pupils at an all-white high school but were among those instructed to attend a predominantly black school fifteen miles away, with black students being bused in the opposite direction. Their parents petitioned Judge Lee, who vowed to defy the court busing order. The families maintained their complaint was solely about their daughters' right to attend the local school. Nonetheless, the issue was inextricably bound up in the racial

[316] Memo from John Roberts to Fred Fielding, 4 January 1984, Box 6, JRF.
[317] John Crewdson, "Judge's Stand on Busing Divides Louisiana Town on Racial Lines", *NYT*, 9 January 1981; Art Harris, "Louisiana Busing Face-Off Defused as State Judge Accepts U.S. Plan", *WP*, 16 January 1981.

politics of the South. The Ku Klux Klan declared their intention to protest outside Buckeye school and, some months earlier, a burning cross had been placed opposite the offices of a black attorney campaigning for the integration of local schools. Judge Lee became a "regional hero" to the local white population by escorting the girls to school on several occasions – passing crowds of journalists and photographers on the way. Ultimately, the dispute was resolved when Lee accepted the busing order under threat of legal action for contempt of court. Instead of attending the black school, however, the three girls and many other white pupils from Buckeye eventually enrolled in a local, all-white, private academy. Georgia Democrat Lawrence McDonald later demanded the impeachment of the federal judge who imposed the busing order on Rapides Parish, but his crusade was short-lived.[318]

The day before Reagan's inauguration, the principal of Buckeye high school, Charles Waite, wrote to the president-elect calling for action to curb the power of federal judges. Telling Reagan it was "imperative that this letter be read by you personally", he said, "I can think of no more important a matter than the one of which I am writing you – that of the threat of lost rights of the majority of individuals in this country." Waite declared, "we are losing control over local government more and more each year…if something isn't done to stop this abuse of power, the idea of 'government of the people, by the people, and for the people' will be a thing of the past." Few busing disputes received the widespread media coverage given to events in Louisiana, but the Buckeye case showed that school desegregation remained a source of anger in the white South. For many white southerners who had helped make Reagan president, busing remained an intolerable federal incursion

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[318] Crewdson, "Judge's Stand on Busing"; Sharon Thompson, "The 'Buckeye 3' crossfire", *AC*, 18 January 1981; "La. Girls Skip School While Judges Duel", *AC*, 9 January 1981; Harris, "Louisiana Busing Face-Off"; "McDonald Move Called Meddling", *AC*, 7 February 1981.

into their lives and communities. One couple from Louisville, Kentucky reflected the views of millions of conservatives in the South: "We think forced busing should be done away with since it was forced on our community by the Supreme Court…To us this looks like dictatorship." Having listened approvingly to Reagan's states' rights rhetoric on the campaign trail, southern conservatives hoped to see quick action to end court busing orders.[319]

To Reagan's aides, the issue appeared politically advantageous. Polling suggested large numbers of Americans – even African-Americans – believed the policy had outlived its usefulness. In March 1981, around half of black respondents agreed that the policy "has caused more difficulties than it is worth". Later that year, an unattributed White House memo advised, "Of all the highly emotional so-called social issues, busing is probably the most universally attractive from the standpoint of this Administration." With some exaggeration, the memo asserted, "A majority of blacks and a whopping majority of whites agree with the President on this issue." Yet, with Reagan showing scant interest in the subject, the Justice Department did little to alter its stance on busing. As noted, the head of the Civil Rights Division, William Bradford Reynolds, shared Reagan's scepticism of affirmative action. But the department was staffed largely by long serving attorneys reluctant to oppose busing orders that had been imposed under the Carter or Ford administrations. Southern state governments became increasingly agitated by the new administration's lack of action. The Democratic Attorney General of Texas, Mark White, wrote to tell Reagan of his "extreme disappointment that your administration is continuing to request that court-ordered busing be used as a vehicle for desegregation in the public schools." Texan conservatives had been angered when the Reagan administration advocated mandatory busing in the school systems in Portland and

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[319] Charles Waite to Ronald Reagan, 19 January 1981, Box 55, JBJP; Carolyn and Harold Boblitt to Larry Hopkins, 28 January 1982, Box 154, LHP.

Port Arthur. "I had hoped that when you took office," White continued, "the country would see a new policy in the Justice Department in which busing was no longer recommended by our highest leaders in government."[320]

In the Senate, Jesse Helms and Louisiana Democrat J. Bennett Johnston – a prominent opponent of busing in the 1970s – crafted a stringent anti-busing amendment to the Justice Department's appropriations bill. Co-sponsored by Judiciary Committee chair Strom Thurmond, it prevented courts from adding over five miles to a child's journey to school and permitted the re-opening of cases in which a court had imposed a journey greater than five miles. Furthermore, it forbade the Justice Department from initiating any case in which it intended to impose mandatory busing. Though Johnston claimed it was "not the intention of this bill to turn back the clock", Alabama Democrat Howell Heflin later added a provision allowing the Justice Department to seek the repeal of existing busing orders. Media reports observed that Heflin's addition was "intended primarily for the South". Richard Earl Lee, the state judge in the Buckeye case, wrote to praise Johnston's efforts: "the people are certainly proud of you for the action you have taken to abolish busing". Similarly, the Superintendent of Schools in Charleston, South Carolina wanted "to commend you for taking this initiative…it certainly should have the effect of minimizing busing".[321]

After overcoming filibuster attempts by liberal senators, the amendment was approved in March 1982 by 57 votes to 37. However, it received only lacklustre public support

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[320] "An Ignoble Retreat on Busing", *NYT*, 1 November 1980; "Half of Blacks in a Poll Question Busing's Value", *NYT*, 2 March 1981; "Busing Issue Forecast" memo, 28 September 1981, Box 16, EDF; Lawrence J. McAndrews, *The Era of Education: The Presidents and the Schools, 1965-2001*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 168-170; Mark White to President Reagan, 6 May 1981, Box 1, DWF.

[321] Joan McKinney, "Bills aim at limit on busing", *Advocate*, 25 February 1981; Robert Hodierne, "New Day for Anti-Busing Bill", *CO*, 28 April 1981; "Statement by J. Bennett Johnston on 'The Neighborhood School Act'", Richard E. Lee to J. Bennett Johnston, 25 February 1981, and Lawrence Derthick Jr. to J. Bennett Johnston, 23 March 1981, all in Box 55, JBJP.

from the Reagan administration and instead highlighted divisions between the Justice Department and some of the more conservative White House advisors. After Assistant Attorney General Theodore Olson gave ambivalent testimony on the legislation to a House committee, Reagan aide Morton Blackwell was outraged. “This testimony could have been expected from the Justice Department during the Ford and Carter administrations”, Blackwell fumed. “He suggests misleadingly that the current widespread practice of forced school busing is an old wound which is healing and must be left alone…The opponents of busing worked hard to elect President Reagan and surely have reason to expect some leadership from his Administration in their behalf.” But little leadership was forthcoming. The more stringent anti-busing measures were rejected by the Democrat-controlled House, although an amendment was approved which prevented federal funds being used on legal cases that sought to impose busing.[322]

After the Johnston-Helms amendment failed, southern conservatives again pinned their hopes on the White House, but once more in vain. In November 1983, Moral Majority leader Jerry Falwell offered his advice: “President has not spoken out strongly on busing legislation. Strategy appears to hinge on begging the Courts to reconsider. President did not support Johnston-Helms Amendment in time for any action.” He concluded that Reagan “must have a higher profile on busing.” But it was not until Reagan was seeking re-election that he and his Justice Department showed greater urgency. Campaigning in Charlotte, North Carolina in October 1984, Reagan gave his most explicit denunciation of busing since 1980. Democrats, he claimed, “favor busing that takes innocent children out of the neighborhood

[322] Wesley Pippert, “Anti-busing legislation passes Senate”, *UPI*, 2 March 1982; Ruth Marcus, “Justice Supports Bill to Curb Court-Ordered Busing”, *WP*, 23 July 1982; Memo from Morton Blackwell to Elizabeth Dole, 22 July 1982, Box 16, EDF; “House prohibits spending for school busing litigation”, *AC*, 10 December 1982.

school and makes them pawns in a social experiment that nobody wants. We've found out it failed." In fact, as a *Charlotte Observer* editorial pointed out, Charlotte had been one of the first cities required to employ busing to desegregate its school system in the 1960s, and for many the policy's success was a source of local pride. Nonetheless, the president finally appeared to be showing interest in the issue, even if it was largely for electoral reasons.[323]

At the same time, Reagan's Justice Department was gradually shifting from legal neutrality on busing towards outright opposition, most obviously in cases concerning schools in St. Louis, Missouri and Bakersfield, California. The shift came about partly, William Bradford Reynolds later claimed, because long-serving attorneys "either left or got on board". It was also likely spurred by the upcoming election, particularly given the Reagan administration had largely failed to act on his 1980 campaign pledge to bring busing to an end. Following Reagan's re-election, Attorney General William French Smith – a somewhat passive leader of the Justice Department with a "quiet and undramatic manner" – was replaced by Ed Meese. Previously one of Reagan's most bullish senior aides, Meese's arrival gave the Justice Department greater impetus, and William Bradford Reynolds found himself newly empowered to tackle busing cases. "While Smith had kept Reynolds at a distance," writes Lawrence McAndrews, "Meese would work closely with his assistant to execute the department's new strategy."[324]

Reagan's southern conservative supporters even began to see legal efforts to overturn existing busing orders, something his administration had previously been highly reluctant to

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[323] "Issues to rebuild the winning Reagan coalition of 1980", Jerry Falwell to Ronald Reagan, 13 November 1983, Box 28, EMF; Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a Reagan-Bush Rally in Charlotte, North Carolina", 8 October 1984, *Public Papers of the President*; Tom Wicker, "Fighting the Last War", *NYT*, 7 June 1985; "You Were Wrong, Mr. President", *CO*, 9 October 1984.

[324] McAndrews, 173-174; Judith Cummings, "Voluntary Desegregation of Schools Divides Bakersfield, Calif.", *NYT*, 12 February 1984; Martin Weil, "Wm. French Smith, Attorney General Under Reagan, Dies", *WP*, 30 October 1990; "Meese Doubts Value of Busing", *Hartford Courant*, 16 March 1985.

attempt. The most prominent case related to the school system in Norfolk, Virginia. Like Rapides Parish, Norfolk was an area that fought hard against desegregation during the 1950s and 1960s. After the imposition of busing in the early 1970s, Norfolk's schools had gradually integrated, to the point that the city began a legal case arguing the order was redundant. For the first time, a legal judgment was required to decide how long busing should continue after a school system had been desegregated. Given that many school systems across the US could potentially make a similar argument, the case had enormous significance. However, civil rights groups and local African-American leaders were sceptical, viewing the case as attempting to "reverse Brown v. Board of Education" and to safeguard white political power in the city. Media reports also noted that the integration of Norfolk's school system would likely be undone by ending busing, because "10 of 35 elementary schools would become more than 96 percent black."[325]

Still, under Meese's leadership, the Justice Department view was that busing in Norfolk should stop. After a lengthy legal struggle, in November 1986 the Supreme Court decided not to rule on the case, instead allowing an Appeals Court judgment to stand and effectively permitting education officials in Norfolk to end school busing. According to William Bradford Reynolds, the decision suggested "the Court was comfortable" with an end to mandatory busing. The case proved to be a high-water mark in the Reagan administration's belated push to overturn court ordered busing. As the Justice Department, and Ed Meese in particular, became distracted by the Iran-Contra scandal in the last years of Reagan's presidency, the issue slid back down the political agenda. The administration had gone some way to fulfilling the GOP's 1980 platform pledge and appeasing the demands of southern

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[325] Stephen Engelberg, "Norfolk Busing Case Viewed as Key To Keeping U.S. Schools Integrated", *NYT*, 3 February 1985; Ashley Halsey, "A Crucial Court Case Challenges School Busing", *PI*, 7 January 1985.

conservatives. At the end of Reagan's presidency, over six hundred public school systems remained under court busing orders. But after more than two decades in which liberals had led the way on busing – making it a vital tool in federal efforts to integrate public schools – his administration had tilted the debate in a conservative direction. While many Americans were already uneasy about the policy at the start of the 1980s, as Lawrence McAndrews writes, Reagan's "ritualistic denunciation of forced busing had helped persuade a majority of blacks as well as whites". The Reagan administration also pushed Washington's perception of busing closer to that of public opinion. It remained a feature of life in numerous school districts across the country, but where possible the federal government's priority was now to end busing orders. What had been an intense civil rights battleground in the 1970s had largely ceased to be an issue by the end of Reagan's presidency. As was the case with so much of the southern conservative agenda, "Reagan's greatest influence on busing and school desegregation was in transforming the dialogue."[326]

More practically, Reagan's judicial appointments altered the legal landscape when it came to busing and other affirmative action programmes. In his eight years as president, Reagan made 346 appointments to the federal judiciary, around 47 percent of all judges. These appointees were overwhelmingly aligned with Reagan's anti-statism and, as Sheldon Goldman observed in 1989, "compatible with the president's judicial philosophy". During Reagan's second term, Ed Meese sought to appoint younger judges who would push the federal judiciary in a conservative direction for decades to come. As Goldman wrote, "the potential is there for the bulk of the Reagan appointees to help bring about a fundamental change in civil liberties law." When it came to busing, southern conservatives were initially

[326] Donald Baker, "Supreme Court Says Norfolk Can Abandon School Busing", *WP*, 17 June 1986; Stuart Taylor, "The Court Sees No Evil in Ending a Busing Plan", *NYT*, 9 November 1986; McAndrews, 175-177.

frustrated by Reagan's non-existent leadership. As with other racial issues, his administration's position generated anger on both sides of the argument. Reagan's personal lack of involvement was deeply unsatisfactory to southern conservatives, while the Justice Department's anti-busing rhetoric alienated civil rights groups. As McAndrews' puts it, "these issues, which inflamed his most ardent supporters and his most fervent critics, hardly seemed to interest the president at all." Yet his administration's impact on the issue was substantial. It was apparent in a Justice Department that eventually supported the repeal of existing busing orders and in a federal judiciary that became more hostile to affirmative action policies. Both transformations would endure long after Reagan left office.[327]

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"Whites are not afraid because they're not under any Federal pressure. It used to be Federal this and Federal that, but where's the Federal Government now? We're slowly going back to where we were." The views of an African-American civil rights worker in Mississippi in April 1985 summed up perceptions of Reagan among black southerners. They had witnessed his reluctance to renew the Voting Rights Act and to honour Martin Luther King Jr., as well as his administration's acceptance of racial separation in Christian colleges and attempts to end the use of busing to desegregate schools. When added to spending cuts that disproportionately affected African-Americans nationwide, and increased racial disparities in poverty and employment, it seemed clear the Reagan administration was instinctively aligned with the

[327] Sheldon Goldman, "Reagan's Judicial Legacy: Completing the Puzzle and Summing Up", *Judicature*, Vol.72, No.6, (April-May 1989), 327-329; McAndrews, 168.

wishes of the white South and cared little for those of the black South. Many southern whites shared this perception, something which helped Reagan to sweep the southern states in 1984 and to receive a higher portion of the white vote in the South – almost three quarters – than he did in any other region. As a Duke University professor told the *New York Times,* whites in the South had for years "bought the argument of reverse discrimination, that blacks have gotten more than they deserve". Reagan's opponent, Walter Mondale, won 90 percent of the South's black vote as the southern electorate split along starkly racial lines.[328]

Voting rights and busing fell down the political agenda during Reagan's second term. However, arguments over diplomatic relations with South Africa and a Supreme Court judgment on civil rights kept racial issues close to the centre of political debate. By 1984, it was clear the administration's strategy of 'constructive engagement' with the white South African government was failing. Designed to encourage the moderation of apartheid, constructive engagement had, according to Sanford Ungar and Peter Vale, only "exacerbated the situation inside South Africa by encouraging and indulging the white regime's divide-and-rule tactics". The world perceived that "American prestige is on the side of the Pretoria government." Reagan rejected pleas from anti-apartheid campaigners – including Nobel Peace Prize recipient Archbishop Desmond Tutu – to impose economic sanctions. When a bipartisan group of congressmen and senators proposed sanctions legislation in early 1985, Reagan vowed to veto the bill.[329]

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[328] Schipp, "The Races in Mississippi"; David Cook, "'State of Black America' paints grim picture", *CSM*, 24 January 1986; Alfreda Madison, "Reagan's Record Contradicts Praise For King", *Washington Informer*, 5 February 1986; Schmidt, "Jim Crow Is Gone"; Ronald Smothers, "Election Results Troubling Blacks", *NYT*, 9 November 1984.

[329] Sanford J. Ungar and Peter Vale, "South Africa: Why Constructive Engagement Failed", *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1985/86; George Moffatt, "US lawmakers propose sanctions against South Africa", *CSM*, 8 March 1985; Lou Cannon, "Reagan Expected to Veto South African Sanctions But Adopt Other Action", *WP*, 22 August 1985.

Prominent southern conservatives joined Reagan in opposing sanctions. Jesse Helms announced he would filibuster the sanctions bill, claiming it would be "very harmful to blacks in South Africa…They don't need fewer jobs. They need more jobs." California's Democratic Senator Alan Cranston condemned Helms' argument as "like suggesting we shouldn't have abolished slavery in the South because it would result in some unemployment." Other conservative southerners, such as Strom Thurmond, argued sanctions would undermine US interests. "South Africa is a government friendly to the United States in a troubled area of the world," he contended, "this country should take care to ensure that it does nothing that would jeopardize its own security interest in that region." Returning from a five-day visit, Moral Majority leader Jerry Falwell maintained Americans were being misled about South Africa and that apartheid was being reformed. Falwell described Archbishop Tutu as "a phony…as far as representing the black people of South Africa" and warned of civil strife and a communist takeover if the country's social order was disrupted.[330]

For some, Falwell's claims of communist influence in the anti-apartheid movement recalled segregationist denunciations of the civil rights campaign as a communist conspiracy. But Ronald Reagan agreed, saying it was "innocent, naïve" not to think that communists were "stirring the pot" and stoking opposition to apartheid in South Africa. After Congress passed sanctions legislation, Reagan vetoed the bill on 26 September 1986. While acknowledging that apartheid was "an affront to human rights and human dignity", Reagan argued in his veto statement, "America's power to deepen the economic crisis in this tortured country is not the way to reconciliation and peace." However, Reagan's veto was overridden by large majorities

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[330] Bob Seeter, "Helms Stalls Vote on Anti-Apartheid Moves", *LAT*, 9 July 1985; "How Congress Voted", *Morning Call*, 14 July 1985; "Back From South Africa, Falwell Called Part of 'Immoral Minority'", *Hartford Courant*, 21 August 1985.

in both houses of Congress, 313-83 in the House and 78-21 in the Senate. Prominent southern Republicans, including Senators Jesse Helms, Strom Thurmond, Jeremiah Denton, Thad Cochran and James Broyhill, voted to sustain the president's veto. Helms again argued that imposing sanctions through "absurd legislation" would stir "violent, revolutionary change and, following that, lasting [Communist] tyranny" in South Africa. Helms's hyperbolic language – and the presence of Martin Luther King's widow, Coretta Scott King, watching the Senate debate from the public gallery – emphasised how the campaign for black freedom in South Africa carried resonances of the civil rights struggle in the Jim Crow South.[331]

Civil rights once again came to the fore during Reagan's final year in office. Eight years after declaring his support for states' rights to a cheering white audience in Mississippi, he became the first president to veto a civil rights bill since Andrew Johnson in 1866. In the 1984 case of *Grove City College v. Bell*, the Supreme Court had decided that anti-discrimination laws applied only to programmes and departments in receipt of federal funding, and not to the wider institution in which the discrimination had occurred. The case centred on sex discrimination, but the decision also encompassed discrimination against the disabled and minority groups. Congress passed legislation in early 1988 which sought to reverse *Grove City* and apply discrimination laws to whole institutions. Reagan vetoed the bill, making the anti-statist argument that it would "vastly and unjustifiably expand the power of the Federal government over the decisions and affairs of private organizations." Numerous southern conservatives supported Reagan, but on rather more culturally traditionalist grounds. Jesse

[331] Mary McGrory, "Falwell, Reagan stumbling on South Africa", *BG*, 28 August 1985; Ronald Reagan, "Message to the House of Representatives Returning Without Approval a Bill Concerning Apartheid in South Africa", 26 September 1986, *Public Papers of the President*; David Shribman and Robert Greenberger, "Senate, Joining House, Overrides Veto By Reagan of South Africa Sanctions", *WSJ*, 3 October 1986; Details of Senate vote to adopt, over the President's veto, HR 4868, 2 October 1986, Govtrack website; Remarks by Jesse Helms, *Congressional Record*, 2 October 1986, 27849; Nancy Schwerzler, "Senate, 78-21, overrides veto on sanctions", *BS*, 3 October 1986.

Helms raised the spectre of transvestites demanding to work with children in federally subsidised day care centres, while the Moral Majority described the bill as "perverted" and claimed it would leave churches at the mercy of "militant gays, feminists and others who have no respect for God's laws." Their opposition, however, did not prevent Congress from overriding Reagan's veto. The Civil Rights Restoration Act became law on 22 March 1988.[332]

During his second term, Reagan's record deepened the conviction among African-Americans that he was not serving their interests. His administration's internal decision-making was often convoluted when it came to issues of race and civil rights. Its positions resulted from a mixture of Reaganite commitment to anti-statism, the president's own personal beliefs and suspicions, and sometimes simply an absence of wise political judgment. President Reagan frequently tried to convince the public – as he had convinced himself – that he lacked any form of racial prejudice, whether by co-opting the legacy of Martin Luther King or repeatedly insisting that his vision of the US was entirely colourblind. But, overall, the evidence suggested a presidency that instinctively sided with the views of white conservative southerners and, at the very least, had no understanding of the acute problems facing black America. This applied not only to issues directly affecting the South, such as voting rights or the integration of schools and colleges, but also to those which were symbolic for all black Americans, like apartheid in South Africa or the commemoration of Martin Luther King's birthday. African-Americans certainly did not perceive Reagan as an ally. In 1984, he received only 11 percent of black votes nationwide. In 1986, polls showed that 56 percent of black Americans believed Reagan was personally racist, while 49 percent felt his administration's

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[332] Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), 462-463; Ronald Reagan, "Message to the Senate Returning Without Approval the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987", 16 March 1988, *Public Papers of the President*; "An Indecent Veto", *St. Petersburg Times*, 20 March 1988; George Curry, "Civil rights veto overridden", *CT*, 23 March 1988.

anti-statist policies had actively held them back. Shortly before Reagan left office, African-American commentator Juan Williams wrote, "Eight years of Ronald Reagan as president have left many blacks feeling scorned and many neglected, and whites feeling far less inclined – or morally obliged – to lend a helping hand to the black community."[333]

As Williams implied, white conservatives, particularly in the South, viewed Reagan's record rather differently. His administration's conservative rhetoric on affirmative action and civil rights met with approval from those southerners who were yet to fully accept the changes their region had undergone. Reagan had often demonstrated a lack of consideration for the economic and social priorities of white southerners, whether in his opposition to agricultural subsidies or his inattention to the demands of the Christian Right. But during his presidency the white South had gravitated steadily towards the Republican Party. Reagan's own popularity among white southerners remained high, something which benefitted his Vice President, George Bush, in the 1988 presidential election. "Pulling the lever for Bush was a sentimental action", observed one journalist during the primary campaign. "It was the closest Southerners could come to voting for Mr. Reagan." Arguably, Reagan's record on race and civil rights encouraged white southern conservatives to forgive, or at least to overlook, his lack of action on other parts of their agenda. From the Ed Brooke leaflet in 1976, to his Neshoba speech in 1980, and through to his veto of a civil rights bill in 1988, Reagan had repeatedly signalled an instinctive alignment with racially conservative southerners. Their affection only grew for a man who appeared to share their reservations about the changes wrought by the civil rights revolution. Yet, politically, Reagan often succeeded in having it both ways. As his landslide national victory in 1984 suggested, moderate voters did not view

[333] Milton Coleman, "Reagan Rating Falls In Poll of Blacks", *WP*, 18 January 1986; Juan Williams, "The Reagan era ends with our nation even more racially divided", *St. Petersburg Times*, 27 November 1988.

him as a bigot. His colourblind rhetoric, focus on equality of opportunity for all, and insistence on his own racial innocence largely insulated Reagan against charges of personal prejudice. Nevertheless, in a region still marked by historical, and often overt, racial tensions, millions of white southerners regarded him as a man who was on their side.[334]

[334] John Dillin, "As dust settles, campaigns take shape", *CSM*, 10 March 1988.

Conclusion

Towards the end of Ronald Reagan's presidency, former Democratic Governor of Mississippi William Winter acknowledged, "Reagan remains personally very popular despite his failure to perform to the benefit of many in the South." His comments encapsulated a paradox about Reagan's political relationship with the conservative South. Support for Reagan among white southerners remained robust throughout his presidency. Indeed, his strong performance in the region in the 1984 presidential election suggests it increased during his time in office. Yet, as this thesis has illustrated, in many policy areas those same white southerners saw relatively little practical benefit in return for backing him. For the millions who lived in rural areas and small towns, for instance, the impact of the 'Reagan Revolution' of 1981 was far from positive. During Reagan's last year in office, journalist Jerry Hagstrom observed that the South "is now so divided between its prospering metropolises and its poor countryside that it is impossible to reach a conclusion about the effects of Reagan policies in the region."[335]

For residents of cities and suburbs that had flourished as part of the Sunbelt boom, Reagan's economic policies brought further prosperity, chiefly in terms of lower taxes and reduced inflation. Similarly, his administration's massive increases in military spending proved a boon for some southern states, most notably Georgia, Florida, and Virginia. But as Hagstrom notes, in 1988 the rural South remained "the nation's poorest area, with the lowest income, the lowest educational level, [and] the lowest wages". For many already poor communities in the region, Reagan's cuts to federal programmes were damaging. Government services such as education and healthcare suffered, for example, when "Reagan's budget cutters took a

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[335] Reginald Stuart, "Democrats Resurging in South?", *Philadelphia Daily News*, 2 March 1988; Jerry Hagstrom, *Beyond Reagan: The New Landscape of American Politics*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 202-207.

meat ax to the Appalachian Regional Commission". Consequently, underfunding and unemployment increased markedly across Appalachia, a region encompassing large parts of several southern states. Though many Boll Weevil Democrats gave their support to Reagan in exchange for concessions designed to assist or protect southern industries, the policies they worked to enact appear to have done as much to harm their region's economy as to help it.[336]

More broadly, the Reagan Revolution of 1981 precipitated a rightward shift in US political and economic discourse. The Reaganite agenda of small government and low taxes was adopted, to varying degrees, by subsequent administrations of both parties. In 1996, Democratic President Bill Clinton's declaration that "the era of big government is over" highlighted Reagan's effectiveness in moving the centre ground of US politics to the right. As a result, the US economy became increasingly globalised and deregulated, which further widened the already substantial urban-rural divide in the South and cemented its status as America's poorest region. Though the early 21st century saw limited growth across the South as a whole, these gains were quickly reversed when the region suffered disproportionately because of the 2008 financial crisis which brought the wider US economy to the brink of collapse. In 2010, the US census showed that every southern state except Virginia had a median household income below the national average. Every southern state, again barring Virginia, also had at least 16 percent of its population living below the poverty level. Between 2006 and 2010, for example, the percentage of people in poverty in South Carolina had risen from 15 percent to over 18 percent. In Mississippi, almost a quarter of the population lived in poverty.[337]

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[336] Hagstrom, 241-243; Lyson, 32-47.

[337] "Household Income for States: 2009 and 2010", "Income, Earnings, and Poverty Data From the 2006 American Community Survey", and "Poverty: 2009 and 2010", all on US Census Bureau website; Chris Kromm, "The South's Economic Crisis", *Facing South*, 18 October 2011.

In the years since, as the *Wall Street Journal* reported in June 2019, "Automization and globalization have wiped out millions of good-paying factory jobs around the country…But these trends have fallen especially hard on the South, which is more rural than the rest of the country and has fewer big cities." Around a third of southerners still live in small towns and rural communities, areas which have absorbed a disproportionate number of the region's manufacturing job losses. The service sector jobs which came to the region in their stead have gravitated to the South's prosperous metropolitan areas, chiefly due to the greater proportion of college-educated residents. The loss of local manufacturing plants, meanwhile, sent thousands of small southern communities into inexorable decline. Consequently, the South continues to have the lowest level of workforce participation and the slowest wage growth of any region in the US. As the *Journal* report observed, "Much of the region consists of smaller towns and rural communities whose fortunes rose, then often fell with that of a single local industry."[338]

The fate of the textile industry exemplified the decaying of the South's rural economy. Though the industry had been facing difficulties since the 1970s, Reagan's vetoing of two attempts to impose stricter limits on textile imports accelerated its decline. In 1990, southern congressmen made one final attempt to protect their region's textile industry. The Congressional Textile Caucus, now chaired by conservative Arkansas Democrat Marilyn Lloyd, led the drive for passage of the Textile, Apparel, and Footwear Trade Act. Again, the legislation was vetoed – this time by President George H. W. Bush – and failed to reach the two-thirds majority in the House required to override. The defeat effectively marked the end of the congressional struggle to stem the flow of textile imports. During the early 1990s, supporters

[338] Seth Herald, "The South's Economy is Falling Behind", *WSJ*, 9 June 2019.

of the southern textile industry instead focused on attempting to prevent passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Democrat Ernest Hollings and Republican Strom Thurmond were united against the pact, fearing it would further imperil the already ailing textile industry in their home state of South Carolina. Jesse Helms and his fellow North Carolina Republican Lauch Faircloth joined them in opposition, along with Democrats Howell Heflin and Richard Shelby of Alabama.[339]

These southern-led efforts to defeat NAFTA failed. After its implementation in 1994, the treaty did indeed prove detrimental to textile workers in the South, as outsourcing and the removal of import barriers between the US and Mexico hastened the downfall of the industry even further. As Timothy Minchin writes, “In the wake of NAFTA, the industry’s decline was particularly noticeable in the South, where it had the most to lose.” One report estimated that “between 1986 and 2000, textile employment in the Southern states fell from 549,000 to 418,000”. In North Carolina, “a third of layoffs during 2001 were in textiles, and 69 percent of these were in the state’s rural counties.” Despite occasional foreign investment, the South continued to haemorrhage textile jobs in the 21st century, to the point that the industry is now a fraction of its previous scale. For example, 2018 employment data indicated that around 20,000 South Carolinians were directly employed in textile production, less than one percent of the state’s total workforce. The loss of textile jobs has exacerbated the South’s urban-rural divide. This trend is, of course, not solely a consequence of Reaganite policies or ideology – technological advances and an increasingly globalised marketplace led to a significant drop in manufacturing employment in most western nations during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. But the tax cuts and spending reductions implemented by the Reagan

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[339] Minchin, 140-150; Details of Senate votes on H.R. 3450 (103rd): North American Free Trade Agreement Implementation Act, 20 November 1994, Govtrack website.

Revolution had the overall effect of aiding wealthier metropolitan southerners and hurting those in rural areas. Likewise, in the case of the textile industry, the Reagan administration's adherence to free market principles accelerated the decline of small-town communities. America's subsequent rightward shift in economic discourse – effectively turning the Reaganite ideology of small government and free markets into the new centre ground of politics – has only entrenched the poverty of millions of rural southerners.[340]

Though they failed in their attempts to protect the region's textile industry, congressional southerners had greater success in defending federal support for southern farmers. The Reaganite aim of reducing federal involvement in American agriculture and pushing it towards the free market met with outright failure during the 1980s. It has remained unfulfilled thereafter. The only notable subsequent attempt to end farm subsidies was the 1996 farm bill, labelled the 'Freedom to Farm Act' by its supporters. It eliminated farm subsidies, replacing them with a system of fixed payments that would gradually decline over the next seven years, and largely abolished crop planting restrictions. Some southern senators who had fought bitterly against Reagan's attempts at agricultural reform backed the Freedom to Farm Act, indicating that – as conservative critics of the legislation claimed – the bill still bore the hallmarks of big government. One free market advocate derided it as "'Freedom to Farm' – with other people's money". Following passage of the 1996 Act, American farmers took advantage of the reduced restrictions on planting and flooded the market with crops, leading prices to collapse. As the 2000 presidential election approached, low crop prices led Congress to pass several farm bailout packages and restore many agricultural subsidies. By May 2002, when President George W. Bush signed a new farm bill, electoral considerations

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[340] Minchin, 186; "State of the South 2002: Shadows in the Sunbelt Revisited" MDC report, State of the South website, 16; 'South Carolina', Data USA website.

and congressional pressure had forced the reinstatement of most of the farm subsidies eliminated six years earlier. Even accounting for inflation, the cost of federal support for agriculture has remained high. According to the Congressional Research Service, the cost of the 2002 bill was around $273 billion over six years. The most recent farm legislation, passed with bipartisan support in December 2018, was estimated to cost $428 billion over five years. Notably, pressure from southerners in Congress meant that the 2018 bill still retained costly federal subsidy programmes for peanuts, sugar, and cotton.[341]

In the arena of social conservatism, by the end of Reagan's presidency the political power of southern evangelicals appeared to be on the wane. Following repeated failures to pass school prayer or anti-abortion legislation, Jerry Falwell's decision to disband the Moral Majority suggested the Christian Right's time in the spotlight had passed. This impression was reinforced when southern evangelicals supported Vice President George H. W. Bush in 1988 only to discover he was even more reluctant to pursue social issue legislation than Reagan. The Christian Right endured, in historian Neil Young's phrase, several "years in the desert" during which the movement's priorities largely disappeared from the agenda in Washington. However, it "wasn't retreating so much as it was reorganizing", and southern evangelicalism staged a resurgence on the national political stage during the 1990s.[342]

Pat Buchanan's challenge to President Bush in the 1992 Republican primaries provided an enormous boost to the Christian Right's revival, particularly Buchanan's claim that the US

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[341] Guy Gugliotta, "Hill Conferees Clear Major Farm Changes", *WP*, 22 March 1996; Details of Senate votes on H.R. 2854, 28 March 1996, Govtrack website; Llewellyn Rockwell, "Freedom to Farm – Thanks to the Taxpayer", *LAT*, 9 April 1996; Michael Grunwald, "Record Farm Bailout Nears Hill Approval", *WP*, 13 October 1999; Dan Morgan, "Farm Bill Gains Senate Approval", *WP*, 9 May 2002; "The 2002 Farm Bill: Overview and Status", Congressional Research Service, Every CRS Report website; "The 2018 Farm Bill: Summary and Side-by-Side Comparison", Congressional Research Service, CRS website; Cindy Morley, "2018 Farm Bill Includes Southern Agriculture Priorities", *Southern Political Report*, 5 July 2018.

[342] Neil Young, "How George H.W. Bush enabled the rise of the religious right", *WP*, 6 December 2018.

was experiencing a "cultural war" in which white Christian identity and values were under attack. It was a declaration that placed social issues back near the top of the political agenda and forced a reluctant George Bush to embrace evangelical conservatism in his unsuccessful re-election campaign. Two years later, voter turnout efforts by the Christian Right played an important role in the GOP takeover of the House of Representatives, as the party won a majority of southern House seats for the first time since Reconstruction and conservative southern Republicans assumed senior leadership positions in Congress. According to Frances FitzGerald, a study conducted around this time found the Christian Right "held a dominant influence" over the GOP in every southern state. At the same time as the Republican Party's hold on the white southern electorate was becoming ever stronger, southern evangelicals were in a position – using the political experience they had acquired as allies of the Reagan administration – to begin acquiring a "a controlling interest in the Republican Party".[343]

Over the next two decades, the influence of the Christian Right agenda moved beyond the southern GOP and came to guide the priorities of the national Republican Party, reinforcing its draconian stances on social issues. After the failures of the mid-1980s, both school prayer and abortion slipped down the list of legislative priorities for southern conservatives in Congress. But while the public debate over school prayer had largely subsided by the early 21st century, abortion became one of the most divisive cultural issues in the US. When the Republican takeover of the House of Representatives in 1994 failed to generate any new impetus on Capitol Hill for anti-abortion legislation, conservative evangelicals shifted their focus completely towards the Supreme Court, recognising that the appointment of pro-life justices was now their most likely route to overturning *Roe v. Wade*.

[343] Williams, *God's Own Party*, 213, 231-235; Tim Rutten, "Capt. Buchanan's Loose Canon", *LAT*, 20 August 1992; FitzGerald, 331-332.

In this regard, the presidential candidacy of George W. Bush offered renewed hope. Though his father's presidency had disappointed the Christian Right, Bush Jr. was an evangelical Christian and would talk proudly of his own born-again experience. He won election in 2000 with the backing of 80 percent of Christian Right activists and 68 percent of the entire evangelical vote. The latter figure rose to 78 percent in his 2004 re-election campaign. Bush's Supreme Court appointments brought substantial reward for this evangelical support. Of the five justices appointed by Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, only Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas proved to be reliable allies for the anti-abortion cause. In contrast, both of George W. Bush's appointees – John Roberts and Samuel Alito – have been consistently pro-life since joining the court.[344]

Around the turn of the 21st century, the abortion issue bonded socially conservative southern evangelicals even more closely to the GOP. Republican Party platforms came to advocate the kind of uncompromising anti-abortion stances that had been well outside the mainstream of the party during the 1970s and were still regarded as politically unpalatable by the Reagan White House in the 1980s. In the words of Ralph Reed, head of the Christian Coalition (effectively a successor organisation to the Moral Majority), by the mid-1990s conservative evangelicals had become "thoroughly integrated and enmeshed into the machinery of the Republican Party." A commentator in the *Atlantic* argued that, in turn, national Republican leaders had "narrowly defined 'values' as the folkways of one regional subculture [the white South], and have urged their imposition on the rest of the country." Still, a measure of political pragmatism has also motivated the Christian Right's loyalty to the

[344] "Gingrich: Don't rush on abortion", *CT*, 8 May 1995; FitzGerald, 434-437; Al Kamen, "Center-Right Coalition Asserts Itself: Moderates O'Connor, Kennedy, Souter Are Reagan-Bush Appointees", *WP*, 30 June 1992; Brent Kendall, "Without Scalia, Roles Change for Supreme Court Justices", *WSJ*, 28 June 2016.

GOP. Southern evangelicals' faith in Ronald Reagan during the 1980s, despite his lack of action on their behalf, and their recent unflinching support for Donald Trump, a man not renowned as a beacon of moral or religious probity, both demonstrate as much. When the alternative is a Democratic Party that has developed an ever more liberal social agenda, voting Republican in presidential elections is ultimately the only way for the Christian Right to get anti-abortion justices – or at the very least justices who are not pro-choice – appointed to the Supreme Court.[345]

Issues of race and civil rights have similarly served to strengthen the alliance between southern conservatives and the national GOP in the decades since Reagan left office. For instance, the renewal of the Voting Rights Act in 2006 followed weeks of debate in which conservative southern Republicans once again opposed the preclearance section of the law. Seven years later, in the case of *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), the Supreme Court struck down the preclearance section as outdated and therefore unconstitutional. In a 5-4 decision, justices appointed by Republican presidents formed the majority. The onus was now on Congress to pass a restored Voting Rights Act incorporating an updated preclearance process. However, with both House and Senate under Republican control following the 2014 midterms, no legislation was forthcoming. Instead, the 2016 elections became the first since 1964 to take place without federal protection of the right to vote in many southern states. Under the guise of preventing voter fraud, Republican-controlled legislatures in Alabama, North Carolina, and Texas, among other states, purged voter registration lists and passed laws imposing stringent ID requirements on voters. Such laws would previously have required federal preclearance prior to their implementation. Federal appeals courts subsequently

[345] FitzGerald, 422; Christopher Caldwell, "The Southern Captivity of the GOP", *The Atlantic*, June 1998; "Why Donald Trump has become a pro-life Crusader", *The Economist*, 25 January 2018.

overturned a number of these voting provisions on the grounds they were discriminatory – new laws in North Carolina were said to have targeted African-Americans "with almost surgical precision". Still, the passage of such laws marked the beginning of a new and concerted effort on the part of numerous state Republican parties across the US, but particularly in the South, to restrict the voting rights of minorities. Reminiscent of the Reagan era, they did so with the tacit, and sometimes explicit, support of the party's national leadership. Ronald Reagan's reluctance to renew the Voting Rights Act – alongside Jesse Helms' fervent opposition to renewal – enabled a southern-led resistance to the protection of minority voting rights to take root in the GOP. In December 2019, a Democratic majority in the House of Representatives passed a restored Voting Rights Act, including a new preclearance process. The Republican Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, refused to bring the legislation to a vote, and President Trump vowed to veto the bill even if it were to pass Congress.[346]

Similarly, just as it was when Ronald Reagan made a campaign stop there in 1980, Bob Jones University remains a bastion of white southern conservatism. Following the 1983 Supreme Court ruling, BJU did accept liability for tax payments, but its ban on interracial dating remained in place and would not be relaxed until 2000. Two years later, it started a drive to attract minority students – though not specifically African-Americans. Finally, in 2008 BJU apologised for its history of racial discrimination, with the university's president acknowledging that "for far too long, we allowed institutional policies regarding race to be shaped more directly by that ethos [segregation]…We conformed to the culture rather than

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[346] Raymond Hernandez, "After Challenges, House Approves Renewal of Voting Act", *NYT*, 14 July 2006; Sean Sullivan, "Everything you need to know about the Supreme Court Voting Rights Act decision", *WP*, 25 June 2013; Matt Ford, "The Entirely Preventable Battles Raging Over Voting Rights", *The Atlantic*, 14 April 2017; Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "House Passes Voting Rights Bill Despite Near Unanimous Republican Opposition", *NYT*, 6 December 2019.

provide a clear Christian counterpoint to it." Nevertheless, the character of Bob Jones University has changed little. As of 2017, the student body was 79 percent white and only 2 percent African-American. Though the university remains officially non-partisan, a 2018 survey showed that identification with the GOP stood at 77 percent among its faculty, students, and alumni. Less than 2 percent identified as Democrats. Personal approval of President Donald Trump – whose rhetoric has been repeatedly condemned for stoking racial division – was also over 70 percent. Correspondingly high levels of support for Donald Trump and the GOP can be found among conservatives across the white South. Echoing the way that Reagan's anti-statist rhetoric appealed to white southerners fearful of changes to their region's racial and social status quo, one junior BJU faculty member described southern conservatives' backing for Trump as "a wholesome desire to restore American society based on our political and religious convictions."[347]

As illustrated by recent efforts to restrict minority voting, these convictions continue to incorporate both a desire to maintain white control in the South and a significant element of racial conservatism. Just as the national GOP has adopted ever more rigid stances on abortion over the previous three decades, it has also become increasingly strident in its opposition to affirmative action. It was a shift propelled, in part, by the influence of its white southern base. In office, Ronald Reagan expended relatively little energy on trying to overturn federal policies such as those imposing minority employee quotas on government contractors. Yet, within a few years, Republicans had become more openly hostile to such affirmative action programmes. An important turning point arguably came in 1990, with Jesse

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[347] "Good Luck! Bob Jones University Looks to Recruit Black Students", *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No.35, (Spring, 2002), 65-66; "Bob Jones University Apologizes for its Racist Past", *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*; 'Bob Jones University', Data USA website; "BJU Reports 2018 Political Survey Results", BJU Today website; "A Recent Bob Jones University History Major Explains Why He Voted for Trump", History News Network website.

Helms' use of a campaign advertisement depicting a white man being rejected for a job because of racial quotas. The ad, clearly designed to energise racially conservative white voters in North Carolina, helped Helms to win re-election to the Senate against a black Democratic challenger, Harvey Gantt. Following the success of Helms' tactic, and the rise of southern Republicans to positions of power in the House, the *Los Angeles Times* noted that by the mid-1990s leading Republicans had become "much less squeamish" about the prospect of reversing federal affirmative action programmes. Though Reagan's opposition had manifested itself predominantly in conservative judicial appointments, his colour-blind, anti-statist language provided impetus and legitimacy for later, more direct Republican attacks on affirmative action. Subsequent Republican presidents and presidential candidates, including George W. Bush, Bob Dole, and Mitt Romney, spoke out forcefully against racial quotas both in education and the workplace. Indeed, Romney had eliminated state-level affirmative action policies just six months after becoming Governor of Massachusetts before being forced to reverse course following criticism from the NAACP.[348]

Ironically, during the 2016 campaign Donald Trump rarely spoke directly about affirmative action programmes. From the perspective of winning white votes, it was not required. Trump's history of controversial comments clearly indicated his racial views. With him as its leader, the Republican Party no longer had much need for the kind of racially tinged, yet still relatively subtle, campaigning previously employed by Reagan, Nixon, and Goldwater to attract racially conservative white voters. Events such as Reagan's 1980 Neshoba appearance – with its subtextual appeal to "George Wallace inclined voters" – effectively

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[348] Peter Applebome, "Subtly and Not, Race Bubbles Up As Issue in North Carolina Contest", *NYT*, 2 November 1990; David Lauter, "Affirmative Action Poised to Become Political Divide", *LAT*, 21 February 1995; "Bush's Statement on Affirmative Action", *NYT*, 15 January 2003; "As Massachusetts governor, Romney tried to scuttle affirmative action policies", *Tampa Bay Times*, 3 June 2012.

became redundant in an era when Donald Trump described most Mexican immigrants as "rapists" and "criminals" and claimed that President Barack Obama had lied about his birthplace. In 2016, racially conservative whites, in the South and elsewhere, did not need to read between the lines to understand that the GOP's presidential nominee shared their views.[349]

After his inauguration, Trump's Justice Department, under the leadership of former Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions, set about overturning affirmative action policies. In 2017, the Justice Department announced plans to sue universities and colleges that undertook "intentional race-based discrimination", effectively challenging any institution that employed affirmative action in recruiting students. A year later, it rescinded guidelines instigated by the Obama administration that encouraged the consideration of racial diversity in the makeup of student bodies in both schools and universities. Along with similarly conservative policy shifts on civil rights and voting rights, these actions led minority groups to fear Trump's Justice Department was seeking to undo the progress that had been made on issues of racial equality over the previous decade. At the same time, it was becoming a common feature of American political life to see a Republican president addressing rallies using provocative and reactionary language about minorities and immigrants to energise the party's overwhelmingly white base. Donald Trump's emergence as a GOP leader epitomised the extent to which the ascendance of southern conservatism over the previous four decades had transformed the identity of the Republican Party.[350]

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[349] Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 1; Katie Reilly, "Here Are All the Times Donald Trump Insulted Mexico", *Time*, 31 August 2016; Adam Serwer, "Birtherism of a Nation", *The Atlantic*, 13 May 2020.
[350] Charlie Savage, "Justice Dept. to Take On Affirmative Action in College Admissions", *NYT*, 1 August 2017; Erica L. Green, "Trump Officials Reverse Obama's Policy on Affirmative Action in Schools", *NYT*, 3 July 2018.

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Ronald Reagan's time in the White House saw a significant increase in the number of white conservative southerners moving away from the Democratic Party and towards the GOP. Polling in 1988 showed that 60 percent of southern conservatives identified as Republican, up from 40 percent in 1980. The growing influence of southern conservatism in the GOP was evident in the campaign to be Reagan's successor in the Oval Office. In 1988, Republican strategists sought ways to compensate for both an uncertain economic climate and a candidate – Vice President George H. W. Bush – who was viewed by grassroots conservatives, especially southerners, as a moderate establishment figure. Bush's loyalty to Reagan had been enough to win him southern primary contests and to secure the nomination, but more was required to energise white conservative voters in the presidential election. His national campaign manager was Lee Atwater, the South Carolinian whose 'southern blitz' had been instrumental in persuading Boll Weevils to vote for Reagan's budget in 1981 and a strategist steeped in the often brutal political culture of the Deep South.[351]

Atwater's plan was to use cultural and social issues to paint Bush's Democratic opponent, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, as an extremist liberal. After accusing Dukakis of lacking patriotism for vetoing a bill which would have required students in Massachusetts to recite the pledge of allegiance, the Bush campaign released an advertisement blaming him for the crimes committed by convicted murderer Willie Horton. As Governor, Dukakis had supported a rehabilitation programme under which Horton had

[351] James Cobb, *The South and America Since World War II*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 179; Rossinow, 242-244.

been granted a weekend furlough from prison. Horton subsequently absconded and went on to commit further violent crimes including assault, rape, and robbery. While the political considerations were far more complex than the accusations suggested, the Horton ad was critical to the course of the 1988 election. It became one of the most controversial in presidential campaign history. Willie Horton was an African-American who had raped a white woman and the implications were not hard to discern. It was, an anonymous Republican campaign official said, "a wonderful mix of liberalism and a big black rapist." Lee Atwater even publicly joked that Dukakis might "put this Willie Horton guy on the ticket after all is said and done." The Horton story effectively became the core of the Bush election message. Along with the strategic decision to focus on cultural issues and further personal attacks on the character of Dukakis and his wife, it exemplified Lee Atwater's influence on the Republican Party's campaign – as well as the increasing influence of southern conservatism on the party more broadly. George H. W. Bush went on to a resounding victory in November, including winning every southern state, as his campaign's fearmongering about Dukakis' liberalism hit home with voters who had previously regarded Bush himself with scepticism. Despite his declared aim to create "a kinder, gentler nation", Bush's campaign illustrated a new reality for the GOP: mobilising an emerging base of culturally and racially conservative whites, particularly in the South, was crucial to winning a national election. As Doug Rossinow has written, there was no evidence to suggest Lee Atwater or George H. W. Bush were personally racist, but the campaign they led was "a monument to political cynicism". In taking Ronald Reagan's willingness to venture into the political swamps several steps further, Atwater's plan reflected

the exploitation of racial fear and grievance that had long been central to southern conservative campaign strategy.[352]

Further evidence of the white South's influence in the GOP came in early 1995. Following midterm elections in which the Republican Party won the House of Representatives for the first time since the 1950s, conservative southerners came to occupy some of the most influential leadership positions on Capitol Hill. The composition of the new Congress marked a significant watershed in US political history. Not only were both House and Senate under Republican control for the first time in four decades, but the midterms elections had also, as an editorial in the *Atlanta Journal* stated, "swept into power the governing philosophy of Southern conservatives," making it "an extraordinary moment for a Southerner." In the House, southern Republicans now held the roles of Speaker, Majority Leader, Majority Whip, and Chair of the Appropriations Committee. Conservative southerners also occupied important positions in the Senate, including Majority Whip, President Pro Tempore, and the Chairs of both the Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees. The *Journal* editorial declared the swearing-in of the 104th Congress on 5 January 1995 to be "a momentous and happy day." Viewing the shift in a more sceptical light, political commentator Michael Lind lamented, "the South [has] finally conquered Washington…the stereotypical reactionary Southern senator with a drawl is more likely to be a member of the Republican congressional leadership than a Dixie Democrat."[353]

However, Reaganism remained the GOP's dominant ideology, and these southerners were elected on a programme that largely resembled a Reaganite agenda. Labelled the

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[352] Roger Simon, "How a Murderer and Rapist Became Bush's Most Valuable Player", *BS*, 11 November 1990; Rossinow, 244-255.

[353] Wooten, "The South is Back"; Michael Lind, "The Southern Coup", *New Republic*, 19 June 1995.

‘Contract with America’, it laid out legislative aims that included tax cuts, welfare reform, and a balanced budget amendment. Though many of the newly powerful Republicans were deeply socially conservative – especially those from the South – the abortion issue was not a legislative priority. Instead their social conservatism chiefly manifested itself in tougher policies to tackle crime and child pornography. Most of this legislation passed the House during 1995, only to then be voted down in the Senate, where Republicans were rather less committed to enacting the Contract with America platform. The so-called ‘Republican Revolution’ of the mid-1990s arguably had a much greater impact in changing the tenor of political debate, particularly in the House of Representatives. Led by Newt Gingrich, the Georgia congressman who became Speaker of the House, the newly ascendant southern Republicans brought an aggressive and antagonistic style to the GOP leadership. In doing so, they exemplified the shift that had transformed the party into the political home of southern conservatism. In 1996, historian Alan Draper contended that the Republican House leadership was now “nothing more than Dixiecrats in drag.” Ultimately, these southern House Republicans overreached, most obviously in forcing government shutdowns during late 1995 and early 1996 that subsequently backfired and boosted President Bill Clinton’s re-election prospects. Similarly, their push to impeach Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky scandal reinforced a perception of reckless partisanship that alienated moderate voters in the 1998 midterms.[354]

Nevertheless, by 1998 the *Atlantic Monthly* was claiming that “Southerners now wag the Republican dog.” The rise to power of southern Republicans in the mid to late 1990s

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[354] “The Republican ‘Contract With America’ (1994)”, Oxford University Press website; “Gingrich: Don’t rush on abortion”, *CT*; David Broder, “When Unity Becomes Division”, *WP*, 1 March 1996; Alan Draper, “Congress is Dominated by Southern Dixiecrats Using Republican Front”, *Buffalo News*, 16th June 1996; Richard Berke, “The 1998 Elections: The Nation – The Overview”, *NYT*, 4 November 1998.

certainly demonstrated how the locus of power in the party was steadily moving south, both in terms of its electoral base and its party leadership. Several of these southern GOP leaders owed a significant debt to Ronald Reagan and his popularity in the region. In 1981, Newt Gingrich had been asked to lead a House task force designed to help push Reagan's tax cuts through Congress, while Dick Armey and Tom Delay – House Majority Leader and House Majority Whip respectively – had won their Texas congressional seats in the Reagan landslide of 1984. In the Senate, two of Reagan's longstanding southern allies, Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond, became chairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations and the Armed Services Committee, with Thurmond also acting as President Pro Tempore. Reagan's Mississippi campaign chairman in 1980, Trent Lott, had risen to become Senate Majority Whip.[355]

Trent Lott's ascent in the GOP would continue – by early 2001 he had become Senate Majority Leader. As political scientist Stephen Schaffer told the *New York Times* in 1994, Lott's story "represents as well as anything how the conservative element in the South has moved firmly into the Republican Party". As a young man he had been a segregationist Democrat, before switching parties in 1972 and winning election to Congress. After encouraging Reagan to appear at the Neshoba County Fair in 1980, Lott would later tell a Sons of Confederate Veterans convention that the 1984 Republican platform contained "the spirit of [Confederate President] Jefferson Davis". He also proudly declared, in a subsequent interview, that "the South's sons, Jefferson Davis' descendants, direct or indirect, are becoming involved with the Republican Party." Throughout the 1990s, he maintained links to groups that promoted racial separation, particularly the Council of Conservative Citizens, a successor organisation to the

[355] Christopher Caldwell, "The Southern Captivity of the GOP", *The Atlantic*, June 1998; "Gingrich Sees Passage of Multiyear Tax Cut," *AC*, 13 May 1981; "Southern House Races", *AC*, 7 November 1984; Norman Kempster, "Helms Watchers Disquieted by the Quiet", *LAT*, 6 February 1995; Melissa Healy, "At 92, Thurmond Can Still Fend Off Ouster Attempt", *LAT*, 14 February 1995; Neil Lewis, "Trent Lott", *NYT*, 3 December 1994.

segregationist Citizens Councils of the 1960s. In 2002, a speech Lott gave in honour of Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday sparked a national furore. He declared, "I want to say this about my state. When Strom Thurmond ran for president [on a segregationist platform in 1948], we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years either." Though Lott apologised and claimed the comments were "lighthearted", he was forced to resign as Senate Majority Leader. Nonetheless, the way Trent Lott had risen to become one of the most powerful figures in Washington indicated the shift in identity the GOP had undergone by the turn of the 21st century. Lott's politics embodied southern conservatism. In addition to his record on race, he was deeply illiberal on social issues and had "fought strenuously and effectively to bring federal money to Mississippi". As the GOP's base of southern conservatives expanded, they brought into the party an identity that incorporated an aggressive political style, a legacy of racial resentment and division, a strong inclination towards economic populism, and a resistance to social change. This identity would go on to fuel an angry insurgency within the Republican Party during the early 21st century.[356]

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In the decades since Ronald Reagan left office, Republican leaders have frequently misread the motivations and priorities of their party's new southern base. Repeatedly, they have acted under the misapprehension that the millions of southern whites drawn to the party during

[356] Lewis, "Trent Lott"; Robin Toner, "A Sanitized Past Comes Back to Haunt Trent Lott – and America", *NYT*, 15 December 2002; John Nichols, "Trent Lott's "Uptown Klan"", *The Nation*, 12 December 2002; Adam Clymer, "30-Year Dream of Leadership Is Undone by a Lack of Allies", *NYT*, 21 December 2002.

the Reagan era were ideological, Reaganite conservatives. This has proven not to be the case. Writing in 1996, Godfrey Hodgson noted, "Much of the steam behind the Republican victories [in the 1994 midterms] came not from converts to conservative ideas, but from those who wanted to punish insiders and Washington politicians generally." Even as they adopted southern conservative stances on social issues and sought to exploit the anti-establishment resentment of working-class white voters, those at the top of the GOP have often been disconnected from the reactionary populism that has pervaded the party's grassroots – originating in the South but gradually spreading to rural whites across the nation. For many years, this philosophical divide in the Republican Party, between a Reaganite mainstream and southern conservative base, went largely unacknowledged. That changed when a populist insurgency took over the party during the 2010s.[357]

During his first term as president, former Texas Governor George W. Bush was viewed favourably in the white South. As noted, his appointment of conservative, pro-life justices met with approval from southern evangelicals. But dissatisfaction in the GOP base grew during his second term. As his national approval declined due to the quagmire in Iraq and the administration's poor response to Hurricane Katrina, Republican discontent began to manifest itself through so-called Tea Party groups – gatherings of grassroots activists across the US who believed Bush had diverged from conservative economic principles. The early Tea Party movement was an inchoate, predominantly libertarian entity, its anger chiefly directed at the economic rescue packages enacted during the last days of the Bush administration. By mid-2010, however, the Tea Party had morphed into a vehicle for white rage, its identity closely resembling the southern conservatism that had entered the GOP during the 1970s and

[357] Hodgson, 286.

1980s. Eighteen months into the administration of Barack Obama, the first black US president, the issues that most stirred the anger of Tea Party members were deeply entwined with white identity and racial resentment, including supposed voter fraud among ethnic minorities and conspiracy theories claiming that Obama had been born in Kenya. Far from being Reaganites, if Tea Party activists had a coherent political agenda, then that too was strongly reminiscent of southern conservatism. Traditionalist cultural and social priorities, including opposition to gun control, abortion, and immigration, were combined with often inconsistent views on federal spending. Echoing the traditionally southern approach to economic policy, Tea Partiers condemned government welfare as “handouts” while at the same time demanding protection for Social Security, Medicare, and other federal programmes from which they personally benefitted.[358]

In the 2010 midterms, the GOP leadership harnessed this grassroots anger for electoral gain. Scores of right-wing Republicans were elected to both House and Senate. However, these newcomers had often defeated not only Democrats but incumbent Republicans on their way to victory, and they now formed the congressional arm of a populist insurgency within the GOP. The divide between Reaganism and southern conservatism erupted into intraparty civil war. Republican leaders who were broadly in the Reaganite tradition, such as House Majority Leader Eric Cantor of Virginia and Speaker of the House John Boehner of Ohio, were ultimately brought down by the movement they had encouraged. Cantor was accused of pursuing immigration reform and “open borders”, while Boehner’s efforts to win Democratic support for legislation were viewed as treacherous by belligerent,

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[358] Vanessa Williamson, Theda Skocpol, and John Coggin, “The Tea Party and the Remaking of American Conservatism”, *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 1, (March 2011), 26, 32-35; Chris Good, “On Social Issues, Tea Partiers Are Not Libertarians”, *The Atlantic*, 6 October 2010.

Tea Party-backed congressmen. Cantor was defeated in a 2014 primary election, and a year later John Boehner resigned from office after five years of battling Republican colleagues he regarded as "legislative terrorists". A senior aide to Boehner perceptively observed, "We fed the beast that ate us." Writing for *Politico* in 2015, columnist Michael Lind argued that Republicans in the Goldwater and Reagan mould had, over recent decades, "been swamped in Southern Republican parties by a wave of working-class white Southerners who are heirs to paranoid and sullen Dixiecrat conservatism". These were the southerners whose partisan loyalties had shifted at an increasing rate throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, transforming the region into a Republican stronghold. In the 2010s, by which time the white South had become the geographic core of the party's base, southern conservatives acted as the driving force of a populist Republican insurgency. In 2016 they found a new national leader.[359]

After New York property developer and media celebrity Donald Trump won the Republican presidential nomination, and then the presidency itself, political journalists frequently drew comparisons between him and Ronald Reagan. Some similarities were apparent. Before Trump, Reagan was the only man with a background in the entertainment industry to become president. Moreover, particularly for voters in the white South, both men appealed to a deep desire to maintain or restore the status quo and an antipathy towards a distant, untrustworthy Washington establishment. While there was very little of Reagan's innate optimism to be found in Trump's exploitation of white anger and grievance, both men were regarded by conservative southerners as allies in the fight against social and cultural

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[359] Mark Arsenault, "Tea Party brews mixed results", *BG*, 3 November 2010; Tim Alberta, *American Carnage: On the Front Lines of the Republican Civil War and the Rise of President Trump*, (New York: Harper, 2019), 200-205, 240-255; Michael Lind, "How the South Skews America", *Politico*, 3 July 2015.

change. Trump's 'Make America Great Again' slogan epitomised this. Though it was adapted from a phrase Reagan had used in 1980 – 'Let's Make America Great Again' – it lacked the positivity of Reagan's message. Instead Trump's version was, as Tim Alberta writes, "a canopy of discontent under which the grudging masses could congregate to air their grievances about a nation they no longer recognized and a government they no longer trusted." Nonetheless, to white southerners, the status quo appeal of both men was essentially the same. As one Trump supporter in North Carolina argued, "People say it's just a changing of the times. But why do we need to change at all?"[360]

Beyond these similarities, however, the two men had little in common. As this thesis has shown, Reagan espoused an anti-statist ideology that white southerners regularly interpreted as being aligned with their innate hostility to federal interference and social change. In contrast, Trump spoke directly to voters' basest instincts. More than any other major political figure since the 1960s he personified the aggression, anti-establishment anger, and willingness to stir racial resentment that had been key elements of southern conservative politics since the 19th century. Rather than offer a positive agenda, Trump followed the southern campaigning tradition of defining himself and his candidacy in opposition to external forces. In Trump's case, these included a weak GOP leadership, Mexican migrants, the corruption of the Democratic Party, and Wall Street elites. He resembled an old-style Dixiecrat in other ways too. His anti-intellectualism ("I love the poorly educated"), his less than subtle hints about violence towards protesters at his rallies, and his economic populism – including pledging to bring back blue-collar jobs and claiming that foreign nations were taking advantage of the United States – would all have been familiar to those who attended George

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[360] Susan Glasser, "Is Trump the Second Coming of Reagan?", *New Yorker*, 18 May 2018; Daniel Drezner, "How Donald Trump is like Ronald Reagan", *WP*, 8 February 2018; Alberta, 260-261.

Wallace events in the late 1960s. But it was Trump's divisive rhetoric on race and immigration that recalled the darker periods of southern history. He was, as a former Republican strategist suggested in 2019, "the rightful heir to Lester Maddox's ax handles and George Wallace standing in the schoolhouse door."[361]

It is unsurprising, therefore, that support for Donald Trump has been strongest in the white, rural South and in those parts of neighbouring states – such as western Pennsylvania and southern Ohio – that have long been influenced by the South's conservative politics. After observing Trump's campaigning style in 2016, a number of southern academics were asked to place him in the context of their region's political culture. Speaking to *USA Today*, one described his excoriation of corrupt politicians and dishonest journalists as "music to a lot of Southern ears", while another noted that Trump spoke to the white South's "fighter ethos and an anti-establishment mentality". In addition, the kind of "entertainment value" Trump provided on the campaign trail was a "staple of Southern politics" going back to the days of 'Pitchfork' Ben Tillman in the late 19th century and Huey Long in the early 20th century. Ultimately, Trump was "screaming at people in power, which is what they [conservative white southerners] would like to do."[362]

Rather than uniting differing strands of conservatism in the Republican Party – as Ronald Reagan had done by bringing southern conservatives and Reaganites together in his 1980 campaign – Trump led the populist, southern conservative insurgency in its war against

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[361] Dan Carter, "What Donald Trump Owes George Wallace", *NYT*, 10 January 2016; Josh Hafner, "Donald Trump loves the 'poorly educated' – and they love him", *USA Today*, 24 February 2016; Debbie Elliott, "Is Donald Trump a Modern Day George Wallace?", *NPR*, 22 April 2016; Stuart Stevens, "Trump chooses open racism. What does his party choose?", *WP*, 18 July 2019.

[362] "Tracking Trump: The President's Standing Across America", Morning Consult website; Dareh Gregorian, "NBC News poll of the South", *NBC News*, 20 July 2019; David Jackson, "Why the South likes Donald Trump", *USA Today*, 29 February 2016.

the Reaganite GOP mainstream. The insurgency now became more closely identified with Trump than with its earlier 'Tea Party' label. Indeed, the manner of Trump's rise and his fervent support surprised even some congressmen elected in the Tea Party wave of the early 2010s, most of whom had coalesced into the House Freedom Caucus. It convinced them that the movement's visceral anger had been cultural and anti-establishment in nature rather than rooted in economic principle or anti-statist ideology. Given the predominantly white, working-class constituents these congressmen represented, this was understandable. On average, their districts were 75 percent white and only 27 percent college educated. One Tea Party congressman elected in 2012 observed, "after some soul searching I realized…they weren't voting for libertarian ideas – they were voting for the craziest son of a bitch in the race. And Donald Trump won best in class." Trump's emergence as the leader of the right-wing GOP insurgency confirmed that it was predominantly southern conservative in character: culturally and racially focused, economically populist, and rooted in white grievance. Notably, in June 2020 polling found that 75 percent of Trump supporters across the US regarded the Confederate flag as a symbol of heritage and pride.[363]

American conservatism itself was being redefined, with the southern brand in the ascendance and Reaganism – and the Reaganite policy agenda – pushed to the margins. At the 2017 Conservative Political Action Conference, Trump received a rapturous response with a speech that, as Tim Alberta observes, "made no mention of 'liberty' or 'constitution'" and instead championed "'our movement' as one that would embrace protectionist, cronyist, big spending policies in the name of shielding Americans from the menace of a global economy." 80 percent of those in attendance believed that Trump was "realigning" conservatism.

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[363] Alberta, 345-346; Ewan Palmer, "More People See the Confederate Flag as a Sign of Southern Pride Than as a Symbol of Racism", *Newsweek*, 10 June 2020.

Certainly, his actions as president have been aligned far more with southern conservatism than with Reaganism, be it enforcing draconian anti-immigration policies, imposing import tariffs and launching damaging trade wars with China (which created the need for a huge bailout for US farmers), or attacking globalist institutions such as the World Trade Organisation. Reaganites in the congressional GOP have found themselves having to compromise with Trump, and refrain from criticising his erratic and controversial behaviour, to stand any chance of pursuing their preferred policies. Yet even when they have succeeded, as they did in passing a significant reduction in corporate tax rates in November 2017, polls have shown that such policies generate little approval – or even interest – among Trump-supporting Republicans. "All the polling we get back shows the fiscal issues are a complete wasteland", remarked the director of the conservative lobbying group Heritage Action in 2018.[364]

Consequently, Reaganite conservatives have steadily drifted away from the GOP. Republican registration has declined and yet support for Trump among Republicans is remarkably high, suggesting that voters who disapprove of his actions are simply leaving the party. Likewise, a prominent 'Never Trump' campaign has emerged, led by numerous former Republican strategists. On a broader scale, polling and election results show that affluent white suburbanites in the West and Southwest – the very voters who triggered the rise of 'cowboy conservatism' in the 1950s and 1960s – are no longer the loyal Republicans they once were. In 2018, Democrats recorded their first Senate victory for 30 years in Arizona, once a bastion of Goldwater-Reagan conservatism. In the summer of 2020, polling indicated the state's other Senate seat would also soon be won by a Democrat. An increase in Hispanic

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[364] Alberta, 457-458, 495-496, 504.

voters partly explains this trend in Arizona, but the partisan shift among white voters is a more significant factor. Other suburban areas are showing similar movement away from the GOP. In Orange County, the heartland of Reagan's California support in the mid-1960s and a Republican stronghold for half a century, white suburbanites have increasingly abandoned the GOP as its identity has become more aggressively conservative on social and cultural issues. This process culminated in the 2018 midterms, when Orange County did not elect a single Republican congressman. Similarly, early polling ahead of the 2020 presidential election showed that, under Trump's leadership, the GOP was haemorrhaging white suburban voters in most parts of the US.[365]

Arguably, this partisan shift was in part driven by the success of Reaganism during the 1980s and 1990s. In the South and elsewhere, rural voters suffered disproportionately from Reaganite cuts to government programmes and a federal emphasis on free trade and free markets. The political disenchantment and anti-establishment rage of these rural whites fed into the GOP's populist insurgency and was expertly tapped by Donald Trump. In contrast, affluent, college-educated suburbanites often benefitted most from Reaganite tax cuts and deregulation, but these more economically focused voters have been turned off by the belligerent southern conservatism of Trump's Republican Party. The urban-rural economic divide in the US, which Reaganite conservatism did so much to exacerbate, thereby created unforeseen political consequences for the GOP. It is far from certain that Reaganite conservative voters will become loyal Democrats – many appear to have registered as

[365] Douglas Perry, "GOP shrinks as young and 'Never Trumpers' walk away, increasing Donald Trump's power in the party", *Oregon Live*, 21 February 2019; Nathaniel Rakich, "How Arizona Became a Swing State", *FiveThirtyEight*, 29 June 2020; Tamara Keith, "Democrats Demolish The 'Orange Curtain' In Orange County", *NPR*, 20 November 2018; John Harwood, "How the GOP morphed from the party of Reagan to the party of Trump", *CNBC*, 20 June 2020; Ronald Brownstein, "Trump could sink the House GOP in suburbia", *CNN*, 7 July 2020.

independents – but they clearly no longer feel comfortable as Republicans. Ultimately, this is the result of the transformation in the GOP's identity: by the end of the 2010s it had become, in essence, the party of rural white America. The southern conservative insurgency won the Republican civil war. As Reaganite conservative and former House Speaker Paul Ryan puts it, "The Reagan Republican wing beat the Rockefeller Republican wing. And now the Trump wing beat the Reagan wing."[366]

Ryan's comments suggest, as many Never Trump Republicans have argued, that once Donald Trump is no longer head of the party, the GOP might revert to its previous, Reaganite incarnation. This appears optimistic. In many ways, the white South and the Republican Party have a grip on each other that will outlast the Trump presidency. As Reaganites have left the GOP, so the influence of southern conservatism on the party's identity has increased. After the 2016 elections numerous southern Republicans were appointed to the Trump cabinet, while southerners have also filled some of the most important party leadership positions in both houses of Congress. Since 2015, for instance, Kentuckian Mitch McConnell has proved to be one of the most influential and ruthless Senate Majority Leaders of recent decades. If southern conservatism has come to be the guiding force in the GOP in the 2010s, then the party's hold on the white South is similarly powerful. The continued unity and strength of the white conservative vote, and its overwhelming loyalty to the Republican Party, have created a GOP ascendancy in the South reminiscent of the regional power once enjoyed by southern Democrats. In 1956, Democrats controlled 105 of the 114 southern House seats, 92 percent of the total. After the 2016 elections, Republicans controlled 104 of the 144 southern House seats, 72 percent of the total. The disparity is explained, in large part, by the increase in the

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[366] Matt Ford, "The Incredible Shrinking GOP", *New Republic*, 5 August 2019; Brooke Seipel, "There are fewer registered Republicans than independents for the first time ever", *The Hill*, 28 February 2020; Alberta, 596.

southern black vote that followed the civil rights revolution of the 1960s and by congressional redistricting that took place in the late 20th century, leading to the creation of predominantly African-American congressional districts that elect Democrats with little opposition. In the Senate, Republican dominance in the white South is even more evident. In 1956, 22 of the 24 southern Senate seats were in Democratic hands. By the end of 2016, Republicans controlled 21 of the 24 southern Senate seats. While demographic shifts may soon give Democratic presidential and Senate candidates a greater chance of winning some southern states – Virginia is often blue in presidential elections and Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina are trending in the same direction – the white conservative South seems set to remain solidly Republican.[367]

Although it was not until 2016 that "the palace gates were finally broken down", in Tim Alberta's phrase, the transformation of the GOP into a party of populist southern conservatism was decades in the making. As this thesis has shown, southern conservatism gained a foothold in the Republican Party thanks to Ronald Reagan's 1976 presidential campaign and began to transform the national GOP's identity by imposing changes on the party's platform. Four years later, Reagan's election victory was perceived as a breakthrough for southern conservatism. According to Joseph Crespino, after Reagan's win, an aide to Strom Thurmond observed that he had long believed that "someday, somebody's going to run for president on the platform that this is a white man's country". While acknowledging "I never heard Reagan saying that", he concluded, "the election turned out that way didn't it?" Not since the late 1950s had the white South wielded such influence on the direction of

[367] Chris Kromm, "South Rising: Region's political clout growing under Trump", *Facing South*, 21 April 2017; Ross Baker, "Trump is right: Mitch McConnell is one of the greatest Senate leaders of all time", *WP*, 25 October 2018; "Election Statistics", US House History website.

national politics. More than any previous Republican, Reagan offered southern conservatives a political home and a route to power in Washington.[368]

During Reagan's presidency, southerners were determined to exploit their power to further their region's interests and maintain its status quo. Their record was one of moderate success. In economic terms, many of their populist aims were achieved – particularly ensuring federal spending in their region was protected or increased. While keenly supporting Reaganite cuts to welfare and other federal programmes, southerners defended agricultural price supports and other regional subsidies, often through bartering with the administration, obstructing legislation, and occasionally threatening their fellow congressmen. These methods failed, however, to protect the textile industry, whose decline dealt a heavy blow to the rural southern economy. When it came to social conservative legislation southerners were largely unsuccessful, often hindered by a lack of effort on the part of the Reagan administration. Frequently, Reagan's lack of interest in social issues created a sense of rancour among his southern supporters. But in a broader sense, conservative southerners made crucial gains in this area. Social issues were thrust from the margins of political debate to the centre. Abortion, in particular, remains a bitterly divisive issue in American politics and continues to underpin conservative evangelical loyalty to the GOP. Likewise, in the arena of race and civil rights, legislative victories were relatively scarce for racially conservative southerners during the Reagan era. But thanks to their support for Reagan and his anti-statist ideology, southerners were able to push back against liberal affirmative action programmes. Largely due to Reagan's conservative judicial appointments, white southerners began to see a change in climate when it came to integration and voting rights, gradually reversing some

[368] Alberta, 610; Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America*, 289.

of the advances made by minorities over previous decades. Most importantly, through their support for Reagan as both candidate and president, millions of white southerners became convinced that the GOP was a viable home for their racial, social, and cultural conservatism.

"In the South the Reagan realignment of the 1980s was a momentous achievement", observed Earl and Merle Black in 2002. "By transforming the region's white electorate, Ronald Reagan's presidency made possible the Republicans' congressional breakthrough in the 1990s." From there, the white South was on the way to becoming an electoral heartland for the GOP. In numerous ways, the importance of the relationship between Ronald Reagan and the conservative South is, in Philip Adorf's phrase, "virtually impossible to overstate". For Reagan personally, it was repeatedly critical to his success. His southern support rescued his career in 1976, propelled him to the presidency in 1980, and enabled him to become one of the most transformational presidents of the 20th century. Thereafter, Reaganite conservatism became the mainstream of the Republican Party during the late 20th century and shifted the centre ground of American politics significantly rightwards. Reagan's complex relationship with southern conservatives, lasting from the early 1950s to the late 1980s, ultimately changed the political landscape of both the South and the United States.[369]

As Adorf suggests, however, Reagan's appeal to white southerners proved to be "a double-edged sword" for the Republican Party, with unforeseen consequences. Though a civil war between Reaganism and southern conservatism did not break out in the party until the early 21st century, this thesis has shown that a clear divide between the two strands of conservatism was already apparent throughout the 1980s. Reagan's personal popularity in

[369] Earl Black and Merle Black, *The Rise of Southern Republicans*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), 205; Adorf, 177.

the South helped to unite what was a frequently awkward and fractious political coalition. Since he left office, many of the core characteristics of southern conservatism – economic populism, tribalism, white insecurity and racial resentment, and a hatred of elites and the establishment – have steadily risen to prominence in the GOP base. As Jesse Helms and other southerners demonstrated during the Reagan era, the southern strand of conservatism has long prioritised its own identity and interests over party affiliation. It has always been, as journalist Jonathan Rauch notes, "a political third force – anti-establishment in its credo, disruptive in its influence, and opportunistic in its partisan attachments." Yet, as affluent, college educated suburban voters have drifted away from the GOP, the power of southern conservatism in the party has only become more entrenched.[370]

In the late 1990s, therefore, it would have been arguable that Reagan and Reaganism were the main beneficiaries of his relationship with southern conservatives. But twenty years later, the picture looked rather different. For better or worse, southern conservatives had essentially gained control of one of America's two major parties, and Reaganite conservatism – at least temporarily – had been eclipsed as a political force. The Republican Party of the late 2010s would likely have been far more recognisable to Jesse Helms than to Ronald Reagan. Indeed, it is questionable whether Reagan, with his displays of political pragmatism and his dedication to free markets and free trade, would have felt at home in such a party. Little more than a decade after his death in 2004, the Republican Party of Ronald Reagan had become the party of the white conservative South.

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[370] Adorf, 176; Jonathan Rauch, "It's George Wallace's World Now", *The Atlantic*, 26 April 2020.

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Baylor University, Waco, Texas

MLP	Marvin Leath Papers

Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina

CCP	Carroll Campbell Papers
STC	Strom Thurmond Collection

Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, Georgia

BGC	Bo Ginn Collection

Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan

JJF	Jerry Jones Files

Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California

CFR	Citizens for Reagan Collection
DHR	Deaver and Hannaford Inc. Records
PHP	Peter Hannaford Papers

Jesse Helms Center Archives, Wingate, North Carolina

JHP	Jesse Helms Papers

Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana

CLP	Charlton H. Lyons Papers
JBJP	J. Bennett Johnston Papers

Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California

1966 GCF	1966 Gubernatorial Campaign Files
1980 PCP	1980 Presidential Campaign Papers
AHF	Anne Higgins Files
CSF	Carolyn Sundseth Files
DNF	David Neuman Files
DWF	David Waller Files
EDF	Elizabeth Dole Files
EMF	Ed Meese Files
ESF	Edward Stucky Files
FMF	Frederick McClure Files
JEJF	James E. Jenkins Files
JPF	Jim Pinkerton Files
JRF	John Roberts Files
LAF	Legislative Affairs Files
MBF	Morton Blackwell Files
MLBF	Melvin L. Bradley Files
MOF	M. B. Oglesby Files
MDF	Michael Driggs Files
PTC	Presidential Telephone Calls
RDF	Richard Darman Files
SGF	Stephen Galebach Files
WHORM	White House Office of Records Management Files
WLF	William Lacy Files

University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia

CHC	Charles Hatcher Collection
EJP	Ed Jenkins Papers

University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky

LHP	Larry Hopkins Papers

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WBA	Warner Brothers Archives

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Chicago Daily Defender

Chicago Tribune (CT)

Christian Science Monitor (CSM)

CNBC

CNN

Columbia Record (CR)

Commentary

Commercial Appeal

Dallas Morning News (DMN)

Facing South

FiveThirtyEight

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Fort Worth Star-Telegram (FWST)

Greensboro Daily News (GDN)

Greensboro News and Record (GNR)

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Greenville Journal

Greenville News

Hartford Courant

Houston Chronicle (HC)

Knoxville News-Sentinel (KN)

Lexington Herald-Leader (LH)

Los Angeles Times (LAT)

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