

# The Long Road Down: How the Party of Lincoln became the Party of Trump

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*This article explains why America's Republican Party traded its original values for completely opposing ones, creating a moral vacuum that allowed the party of Lincoln to decline into the party of Trump. It claims that the issue of race was at the core of a complex history, and that the long road up from slavery for Black Americans was systematically paralleled by the long road down for Republicans. This descent involved a politically opportunistic courting of racially regressive sentiment, hypocritically masked by professed 'conservative' values. But the abandonment of genuine principle made the party vulnerable to takeover by a fascistically-inclined showman who exposed its dark underbelly and turned it into a resentful cult, endangering American democracy itself.*

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## Introduction

At some point in Donald J. Trump's presidency, someone seems to have informed him that Abraham Lincoln was a Republican. His surprise was betrayed in the way he relayed the fact to others: 'Did you know Lincoln was a Republican? A lot of people don't know that'.<sup>1</sup> This supposedly novel intelligence was often imparted in the context of his claiming that he, Trump, had done more for Black people than anyone else — 'except possibly Lincoln' (as time went by the 'possibly' became more strongly stressed to intimate doubt). The claim was preposterous, but not especially noted amidst the showman's continuous torrent of hyperbolic self-acclamation.

The Lincolnian heritage was also embraced, though with contrary intent, by a group of current and former Republicans who formed a political action committee to produce sharply pointed TV ads attacking Trump and his allies. Their label, 'The Lincoln Project', intimated a hope for party reclamation, but it also raised an important historical question: how on earth did the party of Lincoln become, after 150 years, the party of Trump? To be more specific: how did a party founded in moral opposition to slavery and dedicated to defending the civil and political rights of free Black people become a haven for white supremacists with drastically diminished appeal among African-American voters; how did a party that shed patriotic blood defending national union and expected active central government to help develop America devolve into a party of states' rights suspicious of, and indeed hostile to, central government; how did a party which, under Theodore Roosevelt, sought environmental preservation and the welfare of workers become the

party of wilderness despoliation and harsh anti-unionism; how did a party that legislated for the capacity to tax under certain conditions turn into the party committed to cutting taxes under all conditions; how did a party that once regarded conservatism as quite compatible with abortion rights and family-planning turn into a 'pro-life' anti-abortionist party hoping eventually to overturn the landmark Roe v. Wade case; and how did a party led by 'Honest Abe' fall under the domination of an obsessively habitual liar? Above all, how did the party that fought a bitter civil war to preserve the principle of democratic government — a 'fiery trial' to save 'the last best hope of earth' — become an anti-democratic party ready to overturn a presidential election to re-install a would-be 'strong man' with authoritarian inclinations?

There are, I believe, three main parts to the explanation of the great Republican reversal: 1. the peculiar constitutional-institutional arrangement of American politics; 2. the issue of race; and, within the parameters set by the first two, 3. the blatant pursuit of political advantage whatever the cost in terms of principle. I want to emphasise particularly the issue of race, because of the way it interweaves so consequentially with American institutions and party histories.

Broadly speaking, the reversal was accomplished within, and as a response to, long-term economic, social and political changes in the United States and parallel transformations within the opposing Democratic Party. Indeed, what we might term the 'dance of the parties' involved a certain switching of roles over time. Democrats

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after the Civil War were often portrayed by Republicans as the party of 'treason', crucially tied to the segregationist 'Jim Crow' South where Republicanism was synonymous (for white southerners) with Northern Yankee oppression. But the Democratic Party ultimately became, under pressure of Progressive persuasion and especially the Great Depression, the party of social welfare, workers' rights and, eventually, civil rights for African-Americans. Meanwhile the Republican Party became an increasingly 'conservative'-tending-to-reactionary party ever more firmly tied to big business and 'dog-whistling' racism. Conservative Republicans achieved political successes in the 1970s and 1980s that pushed Democrats away from their 'liberal' base and toward the right (now redefined as the 'new centre').

The Black educator Booker T. Washington, born a slave in 1856, published a famous autobiography in 1900 entitled *Up from Slavery* (Washington 2018), and it has often been observed that the road up from slavery for Black Americans generally has been long indeed, and as yet untermiated. And it is a sad fact that this long road up has been paralleled in somewhat systematic fashion by the long road down of the Republican Party, from high principle and moral purpose to the abandonment of all principle in the simple pursuit of power. Before tracing this road, however, I must set the scene by appraising the current crisis of the party — a genuinely revelatory crisis — after the most bizarre presidential term in United States history.

### **The Crisis of Republicanism**

Now that Trump's presidency has ended (*pace* QAnon), the party that both he and Lincoln led must address his legacy, either to affirm or deny. This is shaping to be a longer and more difficult process than old-style Republicans like Mitch McConnell (now reduced by the election from Senate Majority to Senate Minority Leader) would like it to be. McConnell, though he despised Trump, was an arch-realist who played along for whatever gains he might reap — tax cuts, deregulation, conservative judges in federal courts and in the Supreme Court. But Trump's fall left him with a dilemma. He hoped that Trump, once he left office and after the disgraceful assault he provoked on the Capitol (which McConnell himself *eventually* roundly denounced), would deflate like a used party balloon, leaving Republicans free to resume their former posture as 'respectable' conservative obstructionists.

But Trump did not immediately deflate. His stature among the far right of the party remained such that he was invited as principal speaker to the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in February 2021. Meanwhile, his big lie about election fraud (repeated at CPAC) became the excuse for Republican administrations at state and

local level all over the country to introduce hundreds of bills aimed at restricting voting rights, particularly those of minorities, ostensibly to eliminate 'irregularities' (Brennan Center for Justice 2021a).<sup>2</sup>

The January 6 Capitol invasion had aimed at halting the formal counting of electoral college votes and somehow handing the victory to Trump, and 139 Republican members of the House of Representatives and eight Republican senators later voted in support of this seditious effort. Some corporate donors thereafter vowed to cease funding them, at least for a while, but any shortfall was more than replaced by a flood of small, grassroots donations. Meanwhile, Republican hopefuls scrambled to secure Trump's blessing for 2022 congressional and state elections, and Donald Trump Jr. set up a formal vetting process to consider who his father should support (Layne et al. 2021). This naturally made McConnell (and other 'mainstream' Republicans) worry that primary victories for extremist, pro-Trump candidates would alienate moderates and independent voters in general elections and cause avoidable losses.

McConnell could therefore not anticipate a swift return to Republican 'normalcy'. This was a contest between two different forms of power: institutional power, of which McConnell was a past-master; and popular power, which Trump had proved himself adept at amassing (Last 2021). So long as Trump remained convincingly in the field, and while polls continued to show that up to 70 percent of Republicans remained loyal, McConnell was playing a losing hand. Trump's popular power translated into institutional power through the base's hold over a supine majority of the party in both Congress and in state governments. Members remained cowed by the threat of being 'primaried' — that is, ousted as candidates in primary elections — because of perceived disloyalty to the great leader. Trump's leverage arose because primaries with low voter turnout are liable to domination by fanatical minorities who force candidates toward extreme policy positions on pain of expulsion (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018).

The cannily ruthless McConnell (the 'grim reaper' as he gleefully styled himself) was able, under Obama's presidency, to corral Senate Republicans into unyielding opposition to the policies of the nation's first Black president. Under the Trump presidency this turned into general (though not invariable) complaisance with an unpredictable Republican administration. But under Biden, McConnell lost effective control to an outside agent who insisted on remaining party leader, partly by encouraging his base with the tantalising possibility of another tilt at the presidency in 2024. McConnell could purge neither Senate nor party of Trumpism

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partly because some Republicans had experienced the frightening consequences of crossing Trump. Others, like Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz, could not be disciplined because they had their own presidential ambitions and hoped to ride shamelessly to power on the white nationalist, xenophobic passions Trump had inflamed.

It may be doubted whether 'Trumpism' is heritable in this fashion (neither Hawley nor Cruz possesses a skerrick of whatever weird charisma Trump exudes). But that it even seemed possible betrayed the parlous state of the so-called Grand Old Party (GOP), which was now described as 'fractured', and 'in existential crisis' (Cobb 2021). Many life-long members after January 6 left a party they no longer recognised because, as Don Jr. triumphantly proclaimed at the rally preceding the riots, this was 'no longer the Republican Party, but the *Trump* Republican Party' (Luscombe 2021). And Trump in his speech to CPAC shot down speculation that he would form a separate MAGA party on the grounds that he already had a Republican Party and any split would ensure Democrat victories (Clench 2021).

But what did the party of Trump (derisively designated 'Retrumpicans') stand for? Nothing, it seemed, apart from Trump, and Trump stood for nothing but his own ego. This was made plain at the Republican National Convention in late August 2020 which, lacking any positive program, merely recycled the platform of 2016 and elevated Trump under a bizarre contemporary version of the *Führerprinzip*. Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, in an interview with Bob Woodward in April 2020, had described the Trumpian ascension as a 'hostile takeover' of the party (Solender 2020), but only a party that was already a mere shell of its former self could have been so readily taken over by an inveterate con-man.

For Trump was not, in fact, an aberration of Republican politics but rather a logical terminus of processes long underway. His empty bluster had — first in the primary contests of 2015 and then during his presidential tenure — glaringly exposed the hollowness and hypocrisy of the party's much-vaunted 'values' and 'principles'. But worse than the lies and hypocrisy was the exposure of an enduring, so-called populist, strain within Republicanism that had long been suppressed by 'respectable' or 'moderate' Republicans and that Trump blatantly exploited and encouraged. At the heart of this was the enduring issue of race.

### **American Nationalism and Race**

The Republican Party was founded in Ripon, Wisconsin, in March 1854 in response to a crisis provoked in that year by the passage of a Kansas-Nebraska Act, which aimed at opening territories to westward settlement and

railroads while leaving the question of slavery in them up to 'popular sovereignty', that is, to a territorial vote. The crisis destroyed the existing two-party system of Whigs — who supported business interests, infrastructure investment and protective tariffs but had no clear policy on slavery — and Democrats — who were dedicated to the 'sovereignty of the people', strong states' rights and limited government but were split into pro- and anti-slavery factions.<sup>3</sup>

Like all American parties, the new Republican Party was not ideologically coherent but rather an odd assortment of abolitionists, anti-abolitionists, German republicans, western farmers, eastern businessmen, radicals, conservatives, former anti-slavery Whigs and former free-soil Democrats. Though it adopted much of the Whig economic program, its essential glue was opposition to expansion of the Southern 'slave power'. Anti-slavery did not, however, imply anti-racism. The party's loose alliance included the 'nativist' American Party ('Know-Nothings')<sup>4</sup> which, though anti-slavery and economically progressive, was fiercely xenophobic, anti-immigrant, antisemitic and anti-Catholic. Lincoln, a former Whig who became the party's most effective exponent, despised the Know-Nothings but was willing to 'fuse' with them on some 'ground of right', which he determined to be a 'moderate' policy of maintaining the Union plus containment of slavery. It could not include abolition, since the problem of what to do with a large Black population of emancipated slaves greatly troubled whites everywhere.

Lincoln was acutely conscious of the contradiction between the Declaration of Independence (with its 'self-evident' truth that all men are created equal) and a Constitution which, for political and economic reasons, had tacitly condoned slavery, leaving the question of its continuance to the States (with an implication of no federal authority to interfere). Lincoln wrote that directly attacking slavery threatened the Union, making it the paramount duty of free states, 'and perhaps to liberty itself (paradox though it may seem) to let the slavery of the other states alone'.<sup>5</sup> The 'paradox' lay in Lincoln's belief, shared by many Americans, that the Union must be preserved in order to prove the viability of free democratic government on earth, the 'exceptionalist' myth on which the United States was founded.

The endurance of this myth made America a paradoxical nation (Kane 2007). On the one hand, a 'transcendent' nationalism holds that an individual person becomes an American, not by dint of birth, blood, origin or history, but by adherence to the universalistic creed of liberal freedom and opportunity (this strain is often designated simply 'Americanism', and questioning its creed usually denotes 'Un-Americanism'). On the other hand, a strong ethno-

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cultural nationalism formed very early around a Protestant Anglo-Saxon identity that resisted alien creeds and races.

The acute tension between these two strains has never been resolved.<sup>6</sup> For perhaps a majority of American citizens over history, the United States has been a presumptively white nation. This often presented as the political problem of what to do about non-white peoples encountered within or beyond their borders, a category that encompassed not just free Blacks and former slaves but Irish Catholics, Jews, Hispanics, Native Americans, Chinese, Japanese and East or Southern Europeans. When supporters of Andrew Jackson formed the Democratic Party in 1828 — a party of the ‘common man’ — the common man was inevitably white. Jackson was a Southern slave-owner for whom white supremacy was a given, but he also had a life-long obsession with combatting what he called the ‘triple-headed’ menace plaguing frontier settlers — England, Spain and their Indian allies. His muscular attitude was often echoed in the nation’s expansion Westward against the resistance of Spaniards and Indians, in which the racist element was evident. In expounding the famous doctrine of ‘Manifest Destiny’ in 1845, John O’Sullivan spoke of an ‘irresistible army of Anglo-Saxon emigration... armed with the plough and the rifle’ descending on California (then a Spanish colony) (O’Sullivan 1845).

When President James Polk pursued what Lincoln called a ‘most unrighteous’ war against Mexico over the annexation of Texas in 1846-48, he gained a vast region that would contain the future States of California, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, Colorado and Wyoming. But his conquest also included Mexico, where statehood was not contemplated because annexing a Latin American country raised the question of what to do with its non-white population. There seemed only two possible answers: either to admit them as citizens, or to rule over them as subject populations. Southern plantation owners may (and did) dream of thus expanding their slave empire southward, but to most Northerners these were equally unpalatable options. The first was unthinkable because it was assumed that inferior peoples of non-white or mixed blood lacked the virtues necessary for free government. The second option offended the Union’s principles of liberty and anti-imperialism. This dilemma would recur when America later acquired, after the Spanish-American war of 1898, its own little formal empire in the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico. The dilemma was assuaged then by adopting the British imperial doctrine of the ‘white man’s burden’, a presumed obligation to educate and elevate ‘our little brown brothers’ (Kane 2008: 123 -143).

The reference to Britain here should remind us that such attitudes and arguments were not peculiarly American.

They were almost universally shared by white people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, largely because the age of European imperialism coincided with the rise and promulgation of allegedly ‘scientific’ theories of colour-coded racial hierarchies. White Americans could thus combine concern for liberty and republican equality with sincere belief in racial categories of superiority and inferiority — though generally with debate over how far inferiority was cultural, thus improvable, and how far inherited, thus permanent. This made it possible to reach the seemingly paradoxical conclusion that the unequal must be excluded for the sake of preserving political equality and that political liberty could be saved only by refusing to extend it to those incapable of sustaining it. Egalitarian Australians might note that their own White Australia policy, which lasted from 1901 to 1972, was founded on exactly the same reasoning (see Kane 1997).

Racist doctrine, with its accompanying concern for ‘racial purity’, became deeply ingrained among white people everywhere, giving rise to a variety of phenomena including the eugenics movement, segregationism, apartheid and, at the farthest extreme, Aryanism, murderously pursued by Nazi Germany. But after World War II, a reactive emphasis on human rights inevitably challenged social hierarchies in liberal democracies. The challenge to racial hierarchy was most sharply and painfully felt, perhaps, in America because of the combination of its universalistic founding myth and the unfortunate legacy of slavery and the Civil War. In this story, the changing character of both major parties was central.

### **The Long Road Down**

The sectional crisis of the 1850s climaxed with Lincoln’s election to the presidency in 1860, after which eleven Southern states seceded from the Union precipitating a civil war that ended, as Lincoln stated, with a result more ‘fundamental and astounding’ than either protagonist had anticipated:<sup>7</sup> general emancipation and a Thirteenth Amendment prohibiting slavery in the United States forever. After Lincoln’s assassination and with secessionist Southern senators absent from the chamber, the Senate belonged to ‘Radical’ Republicans dedicated to the equal treatment, integration and enfranchisement of freed Blacks. Congress passed both the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and a Fourteenth Amendment granting all citizens civil rights and equal protection under the law.

With the election in 1868 of war-hero Ulysses S. Grant, and with Republicans and the army in occupation of Southern states, Black citizens increasingly gained election to local, state and federal offices. Their progress was furiously opposed, however, by former slaveowners and so-called Southern ‘Redeemer Democrats’ determined to regain

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political power and enforce white supremacy, as well as by vigilante groups like the Ku Klux Klan pursuing the same goals through threats, violence and the murder of Republicans and prominent freedmen. Grant's Congress nevertheless ratified a Fifteenth Amendment prohibiting the denial of a citizen's right to vote based on their 'race, colour, or previous condition of servitude', and passed various enforcement acts and finally the Civil Rights Act of 1875. The last was designed to protect all citizens in their civil and legal rights and to provide equal treatment in public accommodations and transport but was never effectively implemented (there would not be another like it until 1964). In 1883, the Supreme Court would anyway declare sections of the Act unconstitutional,<sup>8</sup> but by then the struggle for Black civil rights in the South was effectively over.

Republican Reconstruction policies were undermined by distractions over corruption in Grant's administration and by a general waning of the moral appetite for policies requiring continued military supervision of the South. The death blow came with a disputed presidential election in 1876, when a congressional compromise awarded the presidency to Republican Rutherford B. Hayes over Democrat Samuel Tilden on the condition that US troops be withdrawn from the three Southern states where they remained. With this deal, Reconstruction ended, leaving Black Republicans feeling betrayed and abandoned to white supremacist violence and intimidation.

One might say that the confederate South lost the war but somehow contrived to win the peace. It did so in part by promulgating a widely accepted myth of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, which minimised or denied the central role of slavery in the civil conflict and reinterpreted the war as the protection of 'states' rights', a gallant resistance to 'Northern aggression' against the chivalrous 'Southern way of life'.<sup>9</sup> White reactionaries were also assisted by the Supreme Court, whose narrow interpretations of the Fifteenth Amendment permitted Southern states to adopt constitutions and enact laws which, after 1890, increasingly disenfranchised Black voters. And in the 1896 case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 'equal protection' clause of the Fourteenth Amendment was interpreted on a 'separate but equal' principle that gave constitutional blessing to racially segregated public services and facilities. By 1905, Black men were denied the vote in every Southern State and the 'Jim Crow'<sup>10</sup> era of segregation was firmly established.

Slavery was thus replaced by a rigid caste system wholly devoted to the political suppression and social control of Black people, a legal tyranny bolstered by extra-legal violence and lynching, sometimes on a mass scale. Its longevity was due not only to Supreme Court

constitutional interpretation but to the fact that one of the two major American parties, the Democratic, had a 'solid' base there. 'Deep South' states indeed became sites of Democratic one-party rule for much of the twentieth century.

As for Republicans, though they could still win occasional elections by patriotically 'waving the bloody shirt' against supposedly treasonous Democrats, their ardour for Black civil rights cooled steadily. Indeed, their greatest challenge in the late nineteenth century came from the People's Party, a broad populist coalition of economically small farmers and labourers, suffering in the midst of a long depression, that regarded both Republicans and Democrats of the so-called Gilded Age as anti-democratic forces equally in the thrall of financial interests and big-business plutocrats. The Populists disappeared after the decisive defeat of their Democratic champion, William Jennings Bryan, to Republican William McKinley in the presidential election of 1896, but the image of Republicans as 'big-business conservatives,' was by then indelible.

This image was somewhat complicated by the era's middle-class Progressive reform movement, which had proponents in both parties. McKinley's successor, Theodore Roosevelt, was a Progressive leader who, as well as being an enthusiastic conservationist, promised a 'Square Deal' for ordinary Americans and moved increasingly in a social democratic direction during his presidency, causing a clash with economic conservatives in party and in Congress. This eventually led to a split in the presidential election of 1912, with Roosevelt fighting under the aegis of a new Progressive Party<sup>11</sup> against his former protégé William Howard Taft, a Republican division that ensured the victory of Democrat Woodrow Wilson who also ran on a progressive platform. Roosevelt's defeat signalled the eclipse of left-leaning Progressivism in the Republican Party and the dominance of economic laissez-faire conservatism in the decades following (Gould 2008).

As for the issue of race, this remained a point of ambivalence for Progressivism generally. Though Roosevelt, for example, supported voting rights for women, he had little to say about the civil rights of Blacks who, faithful to the memory of Lincoln, remained overwhelmingly Republican. Roosevelt was, to be sure, a long-time devotee and purveyor of the dominant racialist mythology of the era that claimed the general superiority of Anglo-Saxon 'civilisation', though his attitude and actions toward Black Americans, however paternalistic, was more complex than the frank racism of many of his contemporaries.<sup>12</sup> As for the saintly, moralistic Democrat Wilson, who took America into a European war to make the world safe for democracy, his record was marred by the overt racism exposed in his administration's

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resegregation of many agencies of the federal government that had been extensively integrated since Reconstruction. Ironically, many Black voters had taken Wilson's campaign assurances of 'wholehearted support to the Negro race' at face value and were, inevitably, bitterly disappointed (Wolgemuth 1959), for Wilson was a Southerner who held to the 'lost cause' myth and even expressed sympathy for the Ku Klux Klan in his *History of the American People* (1918).<sup>13</sup>

Violence against Blacks rose to horrifying levels in both Northern and Southern cities during the 'Red Scare' of 1919<sup>14</sup> and, after Republicans swept the 1920 Presidential, House and Senate elections, Representative Leonidas Dyer of Missouri seized the opportunity to introduce an ambitious anti-lynching bill that passed the House in January 1922. But in the Senate, it faced determined Southern Democrat filibusters — an ancient stonewalling technique of 'talking a bill to death' — to prevent it coming to a vote, and at last Republicans capitulated.<sup>15</sup> Southern Democrats had learned what a valuable weapon the filibuster could be in halting or at least delaying Black civil rights and would use it repeatedly and melodramatically from the 1930s through to the 1960s. The ability of an arbitrary procedural rule with no constitutional grounding (Binder 2010) to prevent the Dyer legislation shocked the public and outraged civil rights activists, especially the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) which blamed the Republican majority for the failure as much as the 'lynching tactics of Democrats'.

This failure signalled both the last gasp of Lincolnian Republicanism and the historic shift of Black allegiance toward the Democrats, one accelerated by the policies of Progressive Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) in the depths of the Great Depression. FDR's Republican predecessor, Herbert Hoover, had been hamstrung by his party's low-tax, laissez-faire conservatism, which forbade the active government policies to relieve economic distress and promote employment that FDR vigorously deployed, in the process forging his famous New Deal coalition. This included an extraordinary array of groups — unions, workers, minorities (Jews and Catholics as well as Blacks), farmers, rural white Southerners and urban intellectuals, and it would last until fractured by the strains of the 1960s. Though FDR remained dependent on the votes of Southern Democrats, making his New Deal decidedly 'white', his Works Progress Administration, providing employment through public works, nevertheless benefitted Black workers generally. Moreover, specific innovations, particularly the Fair Employment Practices Committee which prohibited racial and religious discrimination in the defence industry, opened up more Black employment opportunities. As a consequence, a sizable Black voting bloc became permanently attached

to the Democrats. This generated tension within the Democratic Party and created a political opening in the South for Republicans.

FDR, accused of betraying the liberal laissez-faire values taken to embody traditional Americanism, reinterpreted 'liberal' to mean 'generous', with the consequence that the term increasingly came to denote (in America uniquely) a left-wing (social democratic) position. Meanwhile the term 'conservative' had, with the decline of Progressivism, shifted from a traditional emphasis on individualistic American self-reliance and enterprise (with the government doing only, as Lincoln said, what individuals could not do for themselves) to a libertarian defence of big business interests through a permissive regulatory environment. In the South, however, conservatism meant primarily 'social conservatism', the continuation of segregationist policy and racial hierarchy. The potential for a fusion of interests was already evident in Congress, where Southern Democrats allied with conservative Northern Republicans to form a voting bloc that repeatedly prevented the passage of bills to secure Black civil rights during the 1950s. But as the Democratic Party, with its now significant Black constituency, moved ever closer toward securing these rights, a long-rumbling white backlash made its Southern branch susceptible to opportunistic Republican incursion.

This structural temptation existed as background to a long-running, often bitter internecine contest in Republican ranks for control of identity and policy during the Democratic ascendancy after 1933. The problem for a severely weakened Republican Party was whether to accommodate or repudiate New Deal policies. If they chose accommodation, they faced the problem of how to differentiate themselves politically from Democrats. If they sought repudiation, as did a faction of 'Old Guard' mid-Westerners, they risked alienating large numbers of voters for whom New Deal policies were very popular. Threading this needle came to seem possible during the Republican presidency of Dwight ('Ike') Eisenhower (1953-1961), an immensely popular war leader who accepted the New Deal settlement and resisted takeover of the GOP by the Old Guard by deploying what he called a 'dynamic' or 'progressive' conservatism (see Kabaservice 2012). During the ensuing presidency of Democrat John F. Kennedy, a group of self-conscious Republican 'moderates' formed the Ripon Society in Washington, a think-tank that tried to give philosophical grounding to Ike's modern conservatism by devising policies aimed at achieving progressive goals through less intrusive governmental direction than typically employed by the Democrats.

The moderates appeared to triumph in the 1960s but were defeated in the long run by a more ideologically

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motivated and organisationally adept set of Republicans who founded what became known as 'movement conservatism', whose success was highly dependent on the anti-communism of the era. Traditional Americanism is, of course, automatically anti-communist, but the onset of the Cold War gave conservatives (whether Democrat or Republican) a convenient club with which to beat New Deal liberals whose positive view of governmental action was clearly 'collectivist' and thus a mere step away from evil communism. The potential virulence of anti-communist critique had already been demonstrated by Wisconsin Republican Senator Joe McCarthy who, with his alleged lists of communist infiltrators in government, universities and the film industry, gave his name to a brief but very destructive era of American politics (1950-1954). But as well as a political weapon to suppress 'Un-American activities', anti-communism was an essential instrument for creating a cohesive alliance of contradictory forces, economic and social conservatives, capable of capturing the GOP. Thus corporate libertarians, opposed to government regulation of business and economic redistribution, could 'fuse' with moral traditionalists who despised 'godless communism' and wanted to forcibly maintain existing class, race and gender hierarchies (Diamond 1995).

The fortunes of 'fusionist' conservatives seemed bleak, however, after the abject failure of their prime representative, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, in his challenge to Lyndon Johnson in the presidential campaign of 1964. But though Goldwater lost the election, his challenge proved to be a harbinger of Right-wing Republican revival (the emergent star at the convention which nominated Goldwater was Governor Ronald Reagan of California). Goldwater carried five Deep South states that had been Democratic since the Civil War, thus foreshadowing the Republican 'Southern strategy' that George Wallace's powerful third-party challenge in 1968 would further encourage (Reinhard 1983; Rusher 1984). Moderate Republicans, who strongly supported Johnson's Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 had their own, more liberal Southern strategy, which was to extend their outreach and appeal to newly enfranchised Blacks in the South to reinstate the old Lincolnian legacy (see Kabaservice 2012: 188). But their conservative opponents rode the inevitable white backlash to eventual triumph. Ironically, it was a Republican moderate, Richard Nixon, who first succumbed to the temptation to lure traditionally Democratic but socially conservative white Southerners to the party by semi-tacit appeals to racial prejudice (the notorious 'dog-whistling'), a strategy consolidated by Ronald Reagan in 1980. The outcome was an enduring political realignment that saw the formerly 'solid' Democratic South become a 'red' Republican redoubt.

Though Reagan mixed deep conservatism with a genial style that seemed to accommodate and placate moderate

Republicans, in truth the latter were on a long-distance route to annihilation. Fusion conservatism had laid the essential foundation of an increasingly dominant 'New Right' which, after the 1970s, saw white evangelicals, a hitherto untapped political resource, welcomed to the fold. A large cohort of white evangelicals had intentionally withdrawn from public life after the Scopes ('Monkey') Trial of 1925 to protect their 'fundamentalist' belief in the Bible's inerrancy from the corrosive influence of modern science, particularly Darwinian evolution. What pulled these apolitical Christians out of their self-imposed spiritual isolation and into politics was not so much the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* abortion case, but the long-term consequences of its 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling to desegregate public schools. In 1978 the Internal Revenue Service removed the tax-exempt status of all segregated private schools in the South, forcing what became known as the Religious Right into common cause with anti-government conservatives (Kidd 2019).

But the New Right message resonated in Northern and Western states too. Lisa McGirr (2015) has traced its evolution in her own Orange County, California, where thousands of middle-class suburbanites, stirred initially by Goldwater, took the virulent anti-communism of anti-establishment groups like the John Birch Society and forged it into a political philosophy anchored in a fusion of Christian fundamentalism, xenophobic (white) nationalism, and western libertarianism.<sup>16</sup> Their mobilisation helped bring Reagan to power in 1980, and what had previously been regarded as a lunatic fringe of the Right thus secured a solid berth in the party's mainstream.

The die was now cast. Electoral alliances with segregationists and white evangelicals inevitably gave a powerfully reactionary cast to modern American conservatism. A party that had once defended family planning and a woman's right to choose ('The government isn't supposed to enter your home, never mind your body') was obliged to become the 'pro-life' anti-abortionist party to maintain the evangelical vote. Economic libertarians, though they could press the anti-government agenda to argue against taxation in all its forms, found themselves having to defer to racist sentiment.<sup>17</sup> Conservative Republicans after Reagan would consistently present their party as one of clear, easily expressed and highly interrelated 'principles': limited government (trending toward anti-government, viz. Reagan's 'government is not the solution, government is the problem'); defence of individual responsibility and private enterprise (especially through cutting taxes); and fiscal responsibility (i.e. balanced budgets, implying reduced government spending save for defence purposes, always implying an attack on New Deal social programs that significantly benefited coloured people). But, as the foregoing parentheses indicate, subterraneously they would lean on

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regressive policies of (at the upper end) redistribution of income toward corporations and their directors, and (at the lower) an appeal to white racist fears and resentments.

### Descent into Darkness

Kabaservice (2012) observes that each new Republican impulse after the 1970s pushed the party ever further toward the Right, but Congressman Newt Gingrich (who would become Speaker of the House) was a crucial figure in the party's final transformation. Gingrich saw that shifts in American politics around race and civil rights had caused an ideological sorting of the parties, leading to the steady disappearance of liberal Republicans on one side and conservative Democrats on the other. But he also saw that this fact was not reflected in a Congress still devoted to legislating through old-fashioned 'gentlemanly' bipartisan coalitions. A social Darwinist by inclination, Gingrich argued that Republicans would never take back the House through such 'moderation' but must 'raise hell' in a life-and-death struggle for power. Gingrich is remembered today for his 'Contract with America', a conservative legislative program only minimally enacted, but his true legacy was to inaugurate a hyper-partisan political culture of obstructionism, conspiracy theorising and name-calling. He even issued a memo to Republican candidates recommending words to describe Democrats — 'sick', 'pathetic', 'traitors', 'radical' and so on (Salzer 2016).

The problem for American politics was that intransigent opposition effectively paralyses 'separated' presidential systems where weak parties are obliged to make deals across the aisle to get anything done. The Congressional revolution Gingrich engineered was precisely intended to create gridlock that could be blamed on the Democrats — a tactic that impressed up-and-coming Senator Mitch McConnell, who noted that opposing the Democrat agenda 'gives gridlock a good name' (cited in Coppins 2018: NP). And the worst thing about Gingrich's plan was that it seemed to work. Polls during President Bill Clinton's first term revealed a public deeply disillusioned with Congress, and in the mid-term elections of 1994 Republicans won historic victories across the nation, gaining control of both houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years. The victories seemed to confirm, for Republicans, the validity of a style of politics that would reach an apotheosis a quarter of a century later under Donald Trump.

In this new GOP, traditionally moderate Republicans came under increasing pressure. A clear example was provided when John McCain, a respected stalwart of the old-fashioned GOP, was persuaded to accept former Alaskan governor Sarah Palin ('Mamma grizzly') as his running mate. Palin had an ability to enthuse grassroots

Republicans through her outspoken defence of 'real (implicitly white) Americans'. Despite McCain's loss, she became a prominent advocate of the Tea Party movement which, hardly accidentally, arose in virulent opposition to the nation's first Black president, Barack Obama. The Tea Party phenomenon was, in many ways, a perfect expression of fusionist conservatism, being a genuinely 'grassroots' movement whose regressive, anti-governmental cause was amplified by a burgeoning Right-wing media and supported by funding from Right-wing billionaires like the libertarian Koch brothers (Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

Meanwhile in the Senate, McConnell as Republican leader was perfecting the art of obstructionist politics by directing his troops to 'just say No' to any Obama initiative. In the House, however, GOP leaders were finding that the politics of obstruction had a downside, namely loss of effective control of the party. The grassroots mobilisation effected by contemporary conservatism had turned into the revenge of the footsoldiers against an established elite that had for long courted them during elections only to ignore their wishes once in office (budgets were never really balanced, welfare was never really cut, *Roe v. Wade* was never overturned). 'Moderate' Republicans have been virtually annihilated precisely by those base elements they both cultivated and suppressed. The Tea Party, in its strict constitutionalism, took seriously the conservative principles to which most elected Republicans merely paid lip service. When Tea Party allies in the House formed a small but vociferous group called the Freedom Caucus to press for purist policies, they rendered the leadership of House Speakers — first John Boehner then Paul Ryan — impossible.

After his retirement, Boehner in interview said of the Freedom Caucus: 'They can't tell you what they're for. They can tell you everything they're against. They're anarchists. They want total chaos. Tear it all down and start over' (cited Nguyen 2017: NP). In his later book (Boehner 2021), he described his position as being 'Mayor of Crazytown'. But Boehner was being disingenuous, for what indeed did the whole party now really stand for? Its modern trajectory had tied it to a fundamentally negative policy role, defined more by what it was against (anything Democratic) than what it was for. Gingrich in interview had claimed there had been four great conservative political 'waves' in the past half century: 'Goldwater, Reagan, Gingrich, then Trump'. But when pressed to explain what connected the four 'waves' philosophically, the best he could do was say they were all 'anti-liberal' (cited Coppins: NP 2018). 'But', as one conservative commentator notes, 'anti-liberalism is not conservatism' (Stephens 2020).

What might a genuine conservatism look like in an age when the concept had come to rest on a basis of falsity?



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The party that had always stood for limited government had once also insisted on *good* government; now it was an outright anti-governmental party that sought to 'starve the beast' (Federal government) by slashing taxes. When an anti-governmental party comes to power, it can hardly be expected to govern positively or well. The absurdity was demonstrated by the farcical attempt by a Republican Congress to repeal Obamacare in 2017, as Trump had promised, and install another health plan; it failed because Republicans had failed over a decade to devise an alternative. Even the policies the party claimed to be positively *for* (excluding defence) seemed either spurious (tax breaks for their rich sponsors on the basis of a 'trickle down' distribution theory) or insincere (fiscal responsibility through balanced budgets, except when Reagan declared deficits didn't matter, or when Trump's 2017 tax breaks to corporations produced massive deficits). Moreover, some of the real bases of its appeal to white and religious constituencies could not be explicitly stated, merely implied.

### Conclusion

The title of a book by a former Republican strategist put the case of the party starkly but truly: *It Was All a Lie* (Stevens 2020). The Republican Party had pursued electoral advantage at the cost of its own soul and, lacking a soul, had left itself vulnerable to takeover by a con-man whose soul, if he had one, was indistinguishable from his ego. Trump correctly divined the essential hollowness of 'principled' Republicanism and, in the 2015 primaries, battered its hypocritical defenders with 'populist' policies of anti-globalisation, anti-immigration, protectionism and anti-international alliances. Worst of all, he tapped explicitly into the racism that, though an essential feature of modern Republicanism, had been soft-pedalled through elite management and 'dog-whistling'. Whereas his great predecessor Lincoln had famously appealed to 'the better angels of our nature', Trump deliberately appealed to the worst. In the process, he basically blew the Republicans' cover by turning the dog-whistle into a white supremacist foghorn. Republicans reviled him for it, as well as for his mysogyny, vulgarity and general offensiveness — until, of course, he won. Then they were persuaded by the fanaticism of his base, whipped up in quasi-fascist rallies and amplified by a cynical right-wing media, that their own political fortunes depended on subservience to the dear leader. This conviction was not shaken even by the shattering denouement of the attempted Trumpian overthrow of American democracy.

The Republican Party may be a largely white, middle-aged party out of step with many policy positions that, according to polls, a majority of Americans support, and one that changing demographics suggest is ultimately doomed unless it can make genuine outreach to more diverse

constituencies. But even in its current state of poverty it cynically knows it has an essentially undemocratic path to power by virtue of peculiar deficiencies of American politics that include: the primary system of choosing delegates that gives extremist factions exaggerated influence; the power and deeply unrepresentative nature of the Senate (including its filibuster threat); the bias implicit in the antiquated electoral college system; the egregious gerrymandering of districts by state governments; and the constantly evolving mechanisms to suppress the vote of coloured people. The American system of government was consciously engineered through checking and balancing to prevent tyranny, and it is an irony of its evolution that it may potentially be manipulated to enable government by a minority.

When House Republicans voted in May 2021 to remove Wyoming Representative Liz Cheney — in all respects a deep-dyed conservative — as conference chair because she had supported Trump's second impeachment and loudly condemned the 'big lie' of a stolen election, 500 Republicans from various parts of the country threatened to form a new conservative party, one based on honest principle and policy. The majority of Republicans in office remained unmoved, knowing that third parties traditionally fare badly in American politics. Nevertheless, the profound divisions within the party seemed to indicate a real crisis, one occurring at an end-point of the history that I have recounted here, a crisis not just of the Republican Party but of the whole American republic. For what was at issue was, as Biden declared, a contest over the soul of America, and that was a contest that had been at issue in one form or another since the nation's founding.

### End Notes

1. If Trump had been capable of irony, he might have wryly appreciated the fact that his declared favourite as past president, Andrew Jackson, was the founder of the Democratic Party.
2. To be sure, it also prompted Democratic administrations in over forty states to introduce bills *expanding* voting access (Brennan Center for Justice 2021b).
3. The Whigs were named after a British political party opposed to absolute monarchy, a jibe directed at Democratic Party founder Andrew Jackson who was lampooned as 'King Andrew the First' for his allegedly unconstitutional use of the veto power (Remini 1981: 363-369; Wilentz 2005: 369-370).
4. So-called because members were instructed, when quizzed by outsiders, to say 'I know nothing' (Anbinder 1992).
5. 'Letter to Williamson Durlay', Oct 3, 1845 (in Basler et al. 1953-55: 2, 348).
6. Thus Fanny Trollope, visiting from England in the 1820s, declared that she might have respected Americans but,  
... it is impossible for any mind of common honesty not to be revolted by the contradictions in their principles and practice... You will see them with one hand hoisting the cap of liberty and with the other flogging the slaves. You will see them one hour lecturing... on the indefeasible rights of man, and the next driving from their homes the children of the soil [Indians] (Trollope 1949 [1832]: 132).
7. From Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address (Basler et al. 1953-55, 7: 281-282).
8. The 8-1 decision declared that, though provisions of the 13th and 14th amendments prohibited discrimination by state and local governments, they did not provide authority for federal government to prohibit discrimination by private individuals or organisations

(see Friedlander and Gerber 2020).

9. This version of history enjoyed remarkable success even in the North until dismantled by modern historians (see Davis 1996).
10. The 'Jim Crow' appellation went back to a Black-face singer, Jump Jim Crow, of the Jacksonian era. Usage turned it into a pejorative general term for 'negro' (Woodward 1955: 7).
11. Popularly called the 'Bull Moose Party' because Roosevelt had proclaimed himself 'as fit as a bull moose'.
12. When he became the first president ever to invite a Black leader, Booker T. Washington, to dine at the White House the outrage was general (and horrifically and graphically expressed by Democrat Senator Benjamin Tillman of South Carolina: see Morris 2001: 55).
13. Wilson very much admired the movie *Birth of a Nation*, which was responsible for a rebirth of the KKK.
14. The worst massacre, of more than 200 people with associated atrocities, occurred in Elaine, Arkansas, in September 1919 (see Woodruff 2019; Wells-Barnett 1920).
15. In 2017, to end the spoiling tactics of minorities, the Senate had passed a 'cloture' rule by which a filibuster could be ended by a two-thirds vote of the chamber. The Dyer bill was its first test, which it failed spectacularly.
16. For this reason, Robert P. Jones of the Public Religion Research Institute explains the modern alliance between the Republican Party and white evangelicals thus: 'The new culture war is not abortion or same-sex marriage, the new culture war is about preserving a white, Christian America' (cited in Lerer et al. 2020).
17. Thus arch-individualist William F. Buckley, Jr., a leading figure in the fusion experiment (by virtue of his book *God and Man at Yale*, 1951, and his founding of the conservative journal *National Review* in 1955), defended existing political arrangements in the South using nineteenth century white supremacist arguments that placed the claims of 'civilization' above those of universal suffrage.

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Kinder gardens to grow in, fingerling buds: Dare-to-Hopes, the purpling fronds of Almost-There stirring the mulch of Dream-Too-Much, over watered plots of Forget-Me-Knots, Squandered-Hour flowering as the summer herbals nonchalantly drown. Season of misses and fitfulness. A cooldown period, after expectation rots and the walk is all. To breathe as grass does; to be trampled tall, sprung from the indifferent violence of sunlight, thriving on the seed-spread of traffic. Night as womb-time; as tomb to old dreads, spent brags in the bloat of high mouths. Instead of flags, plant flowers, thorny ones. Let neat yield to muss, green surprise; dead certainty to wild surmise

ALVIN PANG

**Almond**

you are old school  
 tough  
 no-nonsense  
 wooden skinned

sealed in your kernel  
 while lies within another  
 outer kernel

you are not a true nut  
 your fruit-like qualities  
 a kissing cousin to the peach

when blanched you make a milk  
 a cake a tart and a sauce

you were unnamed  
 for centuries  
 while living a long culinary life  
 in the Mediterranean

before popping up  
 in Tutankhamen's tomb

then years later  
 you appear in the bible  
 as a well known  
 symbol of resurrection

being the first tree  
 each spring to flower

in Greek weddings  
 five candied almonds  
 are placed in a *bonboniere*

representing health wealth fertility  
 happiness and longevity  
 are given away

with the bride

JULES LEIGH KOCH