

Forgotten Republicans: African Americans and the Party of Lincoln, 1948-1972

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I was awarded a Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) grant-in-aid for my researcher dissertation. Despite the popular narrative that African Americans have voted solidly Democratic since the rise of the New Deal, I argue that the Republican Party remained a viable option for African American voters through the 1960s. Moreover, even after the Goldwater debacle of 1964, where over ninety percent of the African American vote went to Lyndon Johnson, many black Republicans became even more vocal in trying to reshape the image of their party. Rather than being statistical anomalies or naive supporters of a mythologized “Party of Lincoln” that does not warrant significant historical inquiry, African American Republicans throughout the 1950s and 1960s were pragmatists, and despite their partisan affiliation, were by-and-large within the mainstream of African American political thought.

While there is an abundance of contemporary scholarship surrounding African American voters, the civil rights movement, and politics during the 1950s through the 1970s, there is a remarkable absence of this vocal and active constituency. My dissertation seeks to fill this historiographic void. Since Nancy Weiss’s seminal *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln* was first published in 1983, and with a concurrent historiographic shift in the 1980s, away from politics and towards the social and cultural ramifications of the civil rights movement, there has been an underlying assumption on the part of many historians that African Americans have been solidly

Democratic since 1936. African American Republicans have been dismissed as an aberration, a statistical anomaly, or worse – traitors to their race and the civil rights movement.

Similarly, it is equally difficult to find the African American voice in the recent scholarship of the Republican “Southern Strategy.” Within the past decade historians such as Matthew Lassiter and Lisa McGirr have challenged traditional interpretations of the Southern Strategy that emphasize its roots in racially coded language.¹ While these works serve as a needed corrective of a strictly race-based interpretation of the rise of the modern right, they go to the other extreme of minimizing the role of race, and ignore it as an important category of analysis. Rhetorically, the language of Goldwater in 1964 and Nixon in 1968 implicitly demonstrated solidarity with white, racially motivated Southerners. Lassiter convincingly demonstrates that white “moderates” of the Sunbelt South, who purposefully distanced themselves from the more rabid racists of the Deep South, served as the core constituency of the new Republican Party of the late 1960s. What Lassiter leaves out, and what is left out of much of the historiography of the Southern Strategy, is how African American Republicans responded to the message of fiscal conservatism, “law and order,” and the ideology of neo-conservatism.

I contend that African American Republicans were joint members and participants of the civil rights movement. While their methods may have differed from the direct action protests of Martin Luther King, and their rhetoric was more conservative than young radical dissenters, their ultimate objectives paralleled that of the civil rights movement. Working within the apparatus of the Republican Party, these men and women believed that a two-party system, where both parties were forced to compete for the African American vote, was the best way to obtain stronger civil rights legislation. Moreover, while this group was often pushed to the sidelines, their continuous and vocal inner-party dissent helped moderate the message and platforms of the Republican

Party in the 1950s and 1960s. They also formed a major constituency of progressive Republicans like George Romney, William Scranton, John Sherman Cooper, and Nelson A. Rockefeller (NAR).

Prior to conducting research at the RAC, I spent the previous two years at the Dwight D. Eisenhower, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, and Gerald R. Ford Presidential libraries, the Library of Congress Manuscript Division, and over a dozen university archives across the country. The collections of African Americans like Clarence L. Townes Jr., who served as the director of the Republican National Committee's Minority's Division during the late 1960s, reveal a deep admiration and support for NAR. From his emergence on the national political spotlight in the 1960 presidential election, through the rest of the decade, Rockefeller was consistently the example pointed to by black Republicans as the type of leader their party needed. Sharply rejecting the conservatism espoused by Barry Goldwater and the growing right-wing of the Republican Party, black Republicans were among the most vocal intra-party supporters of the progressive wing of the Grand Old Party.

The George Hinman Files in NAR's personal papers contain many documents relating to African Americans that I have not seen at any other archival repository. Of particular value to my research was a large folder relating to Grant Reynolds, an influential black Republican activist from White Plains, New York. Throughout the early 1960s, Reynolds was on the front lines of progressive Republicans rallying against the encroaching conservatism of Barry Goldwater and the far-right. He was joined by his close friend, Jackie Robinson, who frequently warned of "the danger of the Republican Party being taken over by the 'lily-white-ist' conservatives."² To black Republicans like Reynolds and Robinson, NAR was the ideal candidate to stop the sudden surge of conservative Republicanism during the early 1960s.

Throughout the early Kennedy years, Rockefeller was one of the most vocal critics of the administration's initially slow handling of civil rights. An internal report written by Rockefeller's staff – who were more than aware of his desire to run for the presidency in 1964 – argued emphatically that “The Kennedy Administration should be criticized for its lack of initiative in the field of integration . . . Such an important goal as integration should not be sacrificed to the desire for victory in other fields.”³ After Martin Luther King, Jr.'s arrest in Albany, Georgia, NAR publicly pleaded with Attorney General Robert Kennedy to intervene on King's behalf and for the Justice Department to “take every precaution to assure the personal safety of Dr. King and his associates.”⁴ Using Jackie Robinson as his conduit, Rockefeller also donated tens of thousands of dollars to black churches that were burned by white supremacists in the summer of 1962.⁵ He also was one of the largest single contributors to King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference throughout the 1960s. In 1963, as it became obvious that Republican voters had a clear choice between two polarized visions of the party represented by Goldwater and NAR in the forthcoming presidential primaries, Rockefeller's campaign consistently emphasized their candidate's superior record on civil rights. Press aide Harry O'Donnell wrote in a private memo that “the die obviously is cast for NR to go aggressively all-out on the civil rights issue--and, probably, rightly so consistent with his strong personal feelings on the matter as well as his position and record in the past.”⁶ Throughout the spring campaign of 1964, NAR was adamant in his opposition to anti-union “right to work laws,” and fully supported a national ban on discrimination in public accommodations, employment, and the sale/rental of private housing.⁷ His campaign literature often featured pictures of him shaking hands with Martin Luther King, Jr., and touted the candidate as an “uncompromising fighter for racial equality and human rights.”⁸

Despite his convictions, NAR failed to create momentum that could rival Goldwater's grassroots movement that united previously unaffiliated and non-partisan right-wing factions. During the 1964 Republican National Convention, NAR was relegated to a 3:00 a.m. televised speech, and was booed off the stage by rowdy Goldwater conservatives. Black delegates faced similar treatment. Many recall being referred to as "niggers" by other attendants, and one delegate from Pennsylvania had his coat set on fire after a Goldwater supporter placed a lit cigar in its pocket.

Immediately following the Republican National Convention, the handful of black delegates in attendance joined former baseball star and future NAR aide, Jackie Robinson in forming the National Negro Republican Assembly (NNRA) to protest the nomination of Barry Goldwater. While the Republican National Committee distanced itself from the NNRA, NAR was one of the few national Republican politicians to openly embrace the committee. Following Goldwater's defeat, NAR wrote Grant Reynolds, who eventually would serve as the organization's national president, and who currently headed its New York state branch. He noted that he was "delighted with what you are doing in the National Negro Republican Assembly to re-enlist Negro interest and participation in the Republican Party." He continued arguing that he agreed with the black delegates that "the most discouraging part of the recent election campaign was the submergence of the great tradition and record of our Party in the matter of Negro equality," and that "I can think of nothing more significant and important than what the National Negro Republican Assembly is now doing."⁹

Throughout 1965, Grant Reynolds continually prodded his party to advocate civil rights and reject the expansion of the far-right. At a meeting of Young Republicans at Oberlin College, Reynolds argued that many in his party were "pregnant with self-righteousness and self-

delusion” for embracing Goldwater’s brand of conservatism. He warned the audience that they must “vanquish” this group of “so-called Republicans” and “right-wing-scum,” and instead embrace its heritage as the party of Lincoln.¹⁰ Like other members of the NNRA, Reynolds believed that only NAR had the status to reinvigorate the increasingly conservative Republican Party. In a private letter, Reynolds told NAR that he must “assume a major role in healing our Party’s wounds and restoring it to its former position of confidence and respect,” and that the restoration must begin with “recapturing the support of Negro voters for our Party.” Though it was a risky political move, Reynolds assured the governor that “Negro Republicans throughout the country ... will serve to offer you and your colleagues our fullest support.”¹¹

Rockefeller’s staff recognized the importance of maintaining the support of the NNRA and Grant Reynolds. Rockefeller aide George Hinman, who scheduled numerous personal meetings and telephone conversations with Reynolds, frequently reminded others in the governor’s administration that in addition to his duties with the NNRA, Reynolds was the chairman of the Council of Republican Organizations, vice chairman of Republicans for Progress, and chairman of the Westchester Chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). “These positions,” Hinman argued, “give him an important public platform, and I continue to think we should keep him on our side.”¹²

In 1967, Rockefeller personally funded the annual meeting of the New York NNRA chapter in Albany.¹³ The annual meeting, which was attended by forty delegates from chapters in Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Albany, Westchester, and New York City, issued a public position statement called the “Albany Declaration” that endorsed progressive Republicanism and pledged “to resist with our every resource all efforts to besmirch or pervert these ideals.” The statement continued, forming a direct attack on the growing encroachment of the right-wing activism

within the party, declaring that “We regard as a major threat the forces of reaction emboldened by the widespread unmasking of latent bigotry, so blithely and unashamedly called the ‘white backlash.’” They did however, recommit to their belief that the Republican Party was the best vehicle for advancing the causes of African Americans. “Blind allegiance” and monolithic support for the Democratic Party would be “self-defeating at best,” because it would not only give a green light for the conservative takeover of the Republican Party, but it would allow the Democratic Party to simply take their vote for granted.¹⁴

Despite its overall critical tone towards the direction and goals of the national Republican Party, the Albany Declaration also provided its endorsement of the politician they believed could reshape the image and direction of the GOP. As the declaration concluded, the delegates confirmed that “we fully support and endorse the Governor of the State of New York.”¹⁵ Throughout the mid-to-late 1960s, NAR’s support of the NNRA proved beneficial to both his political career and the financial stability of the organization. Following the 1967 meeting, Reynolds assured NAR that “the delegates who met in Albany were young, energetic, unusually intelligent and deeply committed to the principles of Rockefeller Republicanism.” Moreover, he suggested that the NNRA was an “effective instrument, both for our State and in the coming presidential campaign.”¹⁶

Reminiscent of 1964, Rockefeller’s 1968 bid for the Republican presidential nomination again juxtaposed his civil rights record to his more conservative opponent, Richard Nixon. Throughout the spring of 1968, NAR continually challenged Nixon’s ambivalent comments towards the Civil Rights Act of 1968 and his latent appeals to white Southerners.¹⁷ He was particularly critical of Nixon’s “law and order rhetoric,” which “tends to misrepresent the black dissenter as a criminal who must be suppressed rather than a frustrated member of society whose

reactions are a result of economic, political and social representation.”¹⁸ Despite Rockefeller’s attacks on Nixon from the left, the national Republican Party base was a more conservative, and increasingly Southern demographic that could not sustain widespread support for northeastern progressives like NAR, Jackie Robinson, and Grant Reynolds.

In many ways, the fate of NAR as a presidential candidate reflects the fate of black Republicans within the GOP during the civil rights era. Throughout the 1960s, both NAR and black Republicans were among the nation’s most adamant supporters for civil rights and social/political equality. They were also a minority voice – but a voice nonetheless – protesting the emerging conservatism of the Republican Party. While their ultimate goal of creating a progressive Republican Party did not come to fruition, they were an active part of the public fight for leadership within the Grand Old Party. Moreover, black Republicans of the 1960s bore little resemblance to the small band of black conservatives that would emerge during the Age of Reagan in the 1980s. Black Republicans of the early and mid-1960s were distinctly liberal in their outlook, active supporters of the civil rights movement, and were well within the mainstream of black political thought.

The papers housed at the RAC, particularly those that provide unique insights into Grant Reynolds, offer an exceptional perspective unavailable at other archives in the country. Though a handful of Reynolds’ papers can be found at other archives, the collection housed at the RAC contains perhaps the single largest collection of his letters, memos, and research reports of any repository in the U.S. The hundreds of pages of documents relating to Reynolds are an untapped, yet vitally important source for any scholar seeking to better understand African American politics in New York, NAR’s relationship with black voters, and the complexity of black political networking during the civil rights era.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005; Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001. For works that emphasize the traditional interpretation of the "Southern Strategy," see: Dan Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, The Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995; Tom and Mary Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1992.

² Jackie Robinson, "Has Goldwater Captured GOP?" August 10, 1963, Folder 319, Box 51, George L. Hinman Files, Record Group (RG) 4, Series J. Politics, Subseries 2, Nelson A. Rockefeller (NAR) Personal Papers, Rockefeller Family Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York (hereafter designated RAC).

³ Current Positions Notebook, "Integration." July 27, 1962, Folder: Civil Rights (2 of 2), Box 10, George L. Hinman Files, RG 4, Series J. Politics, Subseries 2, NAR Personal Papers, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

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⁵ NAR to Jackie Robinson, September 19, 1962, Folder 2027, Box 201, RG 4, Series L, NAR Personal Projects, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

⁶ Harry O'Donnell to George Hinman, July 11, 1963, Folder: Civil Rights (1 of 2), Box 10, George L. Hinman Files, RG 4, Series J. Politics, Subseries 2, NAR Personal Papers, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

⁷ "Rockefeller On the Issues: Nelson A. Rockefeller's Answers to Questions Submitted by the California Republican Assembly." Folder: "On the Issues" Volume VI – Bound Edition, Box 30 Graham Molitor Papers, RAC.

⁸ Rockefeller National Campaign Committee, "The Nelson Rockefeller Story." Folder: Campaign Literature, Box 30, Graham Molitor Papers, RAC.

⁹ Nelson A. Rockefeller to Grant Reynolds, December 1, 1964, Folder 319, Box 51, George L. Hinman Files, RG 4, Series J. Politics, Subseries 2, NAR Personal Papers, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

¹⁰ Grant Reynolds to NAR, May 12, 1967, Folder 319, Box 51, George L. Hinman Files, RG 4, Series J. Politics, Subseries 2, NAR Personal Papers, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

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¹⁵ Ibid.

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¹⁸ Answer Desk, "Nixon: Exploits Riots for Political Purposes." July 4, 1968, Tab: Exploit Riots, Folder 30, Box 5, RG 4, Series G, DNA, NAR Personal Papers, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.