

The Republican Conventions of 1968 and 2016

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Forty eight years ago, the Republican Convention, held in Miami, changed the American political scene, perhaps forever.

The forthcoming Republican Convention in Cleveland may well do the same.

At the 1968 convention the late non-lamented Richard Nixon initiated what came to be known as his "Southern Strategy" to lure the states of the solid south, Democratic since the end of Reconstruction after the Civil War, in to the Republican Party. President Kennedy had been unsuccessful in getting the support of the the southern Democrat members of Congress for his civil rights reform bills, but Kennedy's assassination and the legislative legerdemain of Lyndon Johnson had ultimately been successful in enacting into law the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1965 and the Voting Rights Act of 1967.

At the 1968 Miami Republican convention, Nixon had to get 575 votes on the first ballot or be relegated to the political obscurity he was to richly earn six years later with the revelations of the Watergate tapes. (It was before Senator Dole of Kansas made the famous comment: "Reagan: see no evil; Ford: hear no evil; Nixon: EVIL.")

The nation was being torn apart by the Vietnam War. Lyndon Johnson, tortured by the loss of the greatness he had achieved with his Civil Rights Acts and War on Poverty, chose not to run again. The Democrats were in confusion with their anti-war candidate Bobby Kennedy assassinated on the night of his California primary victory, leaving only the good but bumbling Vice President Hubert Humphrey, stuck with Johnson's war, as their candidate.

There were three Republicans in contention, Richard Nixon, Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York and the fresh new face from California, Governor Ronald Reagan. Rockefeller was liberal, Reagan conservative and Nixon was the former Vice President under Dwight Eisenhower, who since his defeat for the governorship in California in 1962 had been busily appearing all over the country at fund-raising dinners for local Republican candidates.

By convention time, Nixon had amassed over 500 delegates committed to him on the first ballot. Both Rockefeller and Reagan had in the neighborhood of 200 to 225 favorable delegates, leaving perhaps 120 to 150 who might conceivably be convinced to vote for one of the three.

Republicans of all persuasions gathered in Miami. At the time, I was a young and painfully naive freshman Republican congressman from California, surprisingly elected a few months earlier in a special election in, beating Shirley Temple Black. I was the first Republican elected to the House in opposition to the Vietnam War at a time when the majority of Republicans still believed in the war. I was thus understandably received with less than great enthusiasm by my Republican colleagues, many of whom had seen Shirley as a wonderful draw at fund-raising affairs.

There were a few, like freshman George H.W. Bush, the first Republican elected from Texas, Barber Conable of New York, Syl Conte of Massachusetts and Bob Stafford of Vermont, who welcomed me despite my unpopular views. I was invited to join a small group of liberal Republicans known as the Wednesday Club. There weren't all that many liberals in the Grand Old Party after the tumultuous Republican convention of 1964 in San Francisco, where Barry Goldwater, author of "Conscience of a Conservative," had been the chosen nominee. Republicans had been in the minority in the House since 1954 and would remain so until the ascension of Newt Gingrich in 1994.

Invited by several members of the Wednesday Club to accompany them to the convention to lobby for Rockefeller, and never before having attended any party political event of any kind, I accompanied my new friends to Miami.

We stayed at one of the skyscraper beach hotels and soon learned that Nixon, a secretive and strange man, was not exactly beloved by many of the delegates he had earned from all those chicken dinners, and that they would cheerfully vote for either Rockefeller or Reagan on the second ballot. It also became clear that Reagan, not Rockefeller, would be the more likely nominee if Nixon didn't win the first ballot.

So for the better part of two days, we roamed the hotel corridors seeking to persuade the rare uncommitted delegates to vote for Rockefeller. My only success was in getting a woman from

Washington, committed but distrustful of Nixon, to agree to vote for Rockefeller should there be a second ballot.

It was on the second day, I believe, that, while cruising the halls with Barber Conable, we heard a voice emanating from a curtained doorway. We pushed through the curtains to find ourselves at the back of a large room where a small man on the stage was exhorting some 200 people to stand fast for Nixon on the first ballot. These were the relatively few Republicans from the southern states.

The speaker's message was simple and clear. "I know you want to vote for Reagan, the true conservative, but if Nixon becomes president, he has promised that he won't enforce either the Civil Rights or the Voting Rights Acts. Stick with him."

It was Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina. His voice was strong and persuasive. That persuasion was successful.

The roll call vote on the first ballot came and towards the end the votes from Washington, I believe, got Nixon over the crucial 575 line. He ended up with 591, 16 over the required number.

What followed is history. Early in his administration, Nixon ordered that the Civil Rights administrator at HEW, Republican Leon Panetta, fired by HEW Secretary Bob Finch, because of his attempts to comply with the law and integrate the schools of South Carolina and other southern states. Panetta's efforts violated Nixon's promise to the southern delegates at Miami.

Finch refused, but Panetta got the message.

He returned to California, became a Democrat, and in 1976 ousted Republican congressman Burt Talcott, thereafter to follow a distinguished career, respected by Democrats and Republicans alike, ending as Obama's head of the CIA and Department of Defense.

The Southern Strategy, however, was wildly successful. The southern states can now be classed as The Almost-Solid South in the Republican column.

It's a different Republican party today, however. What will happen at the Republican Convention in Cleveland this summer may well be a game changer in American politics. Trump and Cruz are sounding remarkably like that former Republican demagogue, Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin. The species *Republican Liberal* has become extinct.

What Wisconsin's Republican voters will do on April 6th is a mystery which many Americans await with dread and foreboding. The 2016 Republican Convention may be as crucial to the nation's future as that of 1968.