

Democrats Or Republicans? - Check The Record!

By Tarcisio Beal

With the mid-term elections coming up in November, it is urgent that American voters make their choice based on facts and with the intention of strengthening our democracy. The political stance of either the Republican or the Democratic Party has shifted back and forth since the late 19th century. **Today, Lincoln's ideals are best represented by the Democratic Party while the Republicans ceased being the Grand Old Party in 1878.**

The Democratic Party emerged in the early 1830s under the leadership of President Andrew Jackson, the American Commander in the war against Great Britain (1814-1815). A former cotton farmer, he was pro-slavery and denied both Native and African Americans their basic human and civil rights by granting Southern slaveowners millions of acres of cotton-producing lands by removing the Cherokees and other Southern tribes in the infamous 1830 "Trail of Tears." His Vice-President John C. Calhoun elaborated the **Theory of Nullification**, defining the Union as a compact of sovereign States with the right to nullify federal laws, thus justifying the South's break with the Union.

The Republican Party began to take shape in the early 1850s, claiming faithfulness to Jefferson's concept of a decentralized government, but with a centralized economy and friendly relations with big business, thus facilitating fraud. **Abraham Lincoln**, a humble and eloquent man, attracted followers by his sincerity and directness in addressing the issues of his time, especially the need to strengthen a Union with serious socially-divisive problems. **He always sought dialogue with political opponents.** In his debates with the Democrat, Stephen F. Douglas, he presented **popular sovereignty as the voice and the vote of the people as the keys to decide the issue of slavery and the direction of the government.** Douglas accused him of "having accepted the black man as his brother." Yes, Lincoln viewed slavery as blot on the nation, but preservation of the Union was his ultimate goal, so he was willing to go slowly in the relations between North and South, choosing the South Carolina Democrat, Andrew Johnson, as his running mate.

In his inaugural speech (March 4, 1860), Lincoln assured the South he would not interfere with the existence of slavery. Yet, his advocacy of at least some basic human rights for blacks contradicted the Southern States' desire to keep slavery as the basis of their economy and ultimately led to the Civil War and Lincoln's assassination. What particularly irritated Southerners at the start of the Civil War was the **Union's recruitment of some 300,000 blacks** to serve in the army. On July 18, 1863, **600 black soldiers of the Massachusetts 54th Volunteer Army Infantry** attacked Fort Wagner, South Carolina, in an effort to prevent the Confederate efforts to leave the Union. The Infantry lost no less than 97 casualties. One of the survivors was the former slave, Sgt. William Harvey Carner, the first black African-American to earn the Medal of Honor.

Andrew Johnson, the Democrat who became President after Lincoln's assassination, was openly racist and favored the worst

provisions of the Black Codes, opposing the execution of the Fourteenth Amendment, the Freedmen's Bureau, and the Reconstruction Acts. **The Southern democrats kept on violently resisting Reconstruction, including killing prominent Republicans**, so, led by **President Ulysses S. Grant**, the **Republicans** decided to **"pursue peace at any price."** From the 1850s to the 1870s, the socio-political atmosphere was also intensified by discontent and prejudice against new European immigrants, especially against Catholics who were the usual targets of the **Know-Nothing Party**, which **merged with the Republican Party** in 1856.

However, organized racist, and anti-Catholic violence was led mostly by the **Ku Klux Klan**. Founded in 1866 in Tennessee and still alive today, it went on a killing rampage, targeting especially blacks and Republican leaders in the South, all the way into the 20th century. Already in 1872, the Congress published 13 volumes of testimony of the Klansmen's violence. Then, in 1905, **the KKK was glorified by the Baptist minister and legislator Thomas Dixon** in his novel **The Clansman**, mostly a glorification of the Klan and an attack on the Republicans in the South during Reconstruction. The novel portrays the Klansmen as redeemers for attempting to rid the South of Negro blood. In 1915, Dixon's novel became the source of D. W. Griffiths' popular film Birth of a Nation.

The Republicans lost the disputed presidential election of 1876, but ended up securing the White House by betraying the Southern blacks through a deal with the Democrats: the new **President Rutherford B. Hayes**, ex-Governor of South Carolina, ended Reconstruction and withdrew all federal forces from the South and Southwest, thus allowing the Democrats to take control of the Southern States and stop the enforcement of the human and voting rights of black Americans, including by nullifying the **14th and 15th Amendments**. The Republicans recovered the Presidency in 1920 and controlled the White House and Congress until 1932. It was the worst of times for the country, particularly for the poor. By 1932, 1 out of every 4 Americans was jobless. In Chicago, the poor and hungry were forced to follow the city trucks to find food in the dumpsters. They were viewed as victims of their own failures and were even denied access to Sunday church services.

The **Democrats**, led by liberals and cashing in on the most unpopular and ineffective Republican administrations of the 1920s, recovered control of the federal government with **Franklin Delano Roosevelt** (FDR-1932-1945). These Democrats were quite the opposite of the old Southern pro-slavery party. One of the fierce opponents of FDR was **Father Charles Coughlin**, pastor of the Little Flower Shrine of Royal Oak, Michigan. His radio program was immensely popular, attracting up to 34 million listeners. Enamored with the tyrannical ways of Hitler, Coughlin waged an antisemitic campaign and even **attacked FDR as "a Jew"** and a liar. Incredibly enough, the Catholic magazine America (October 1939) defended his diatribes against FDR and the Jews

as Coughlin's constitutional right to free speech. FDR brought the country out of the Great Depression and **created the contemporary Democratic Party, the opposite of the party that shaped the Confederacy and that kept denying basic civil and human rights to African Americans at least until 1964.** FDR's "New Deal" set the tone for contemporary America and was the only President **elected 4 times.**

In the 1950s, the Republican Party began to look more and more like the old Democratic Party of the South. The signal of the American people's rejection of modern republicanism was already given **in 1947 when the republican congressional majority voted to restrict the activities of the labor unions.** Republican President Dwight Eisenhower transferred 40 billion acres of oil lands to the States and refused to stimulate a declining economy. Then, in 1954, the republican majority adopted the **"Termination"** policy which took away the self-governing authority of the Native American tribal leadership. It is also well-known that between 1948 and 1964, 4.5 million braceros were imported from Mexico to help reduce the shortage of farming and other low-paying jobs, under the condition they would return to Mexico at the end of their labor contracts. Between 1953 and 1954, one million Chicanos were deported back to Mexico.

The strengthening of contemporary liberalism and some of the best policies and actions of the federal government started with the election of the Democrat **John Fitzgerald Kennedy** and culminated with his successor Lyndon Baines Johnson. Under their leadership, the Democrats shaped what has been hailed as the **"Great Society"** which included the creation of the Peace Corps, the **enactment of the National Wilderness Preservation System** to control water and air pollution, the raising of the minimum wage, and the **Elementary and Higher Education Act** that provide \$1.3 billion in aid to the schools and scholarships to the students.

Opposition to the Great Society's initiatives began to take shape already in the presidential campaign of 1964 led by archconservative **Arizona's republican candidate Barry Goldwater**, who lost to the Democrat John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1960, gathering only 52 of 538 electoral votes. Goldwater preached that the best government is the one that governs the least, that promotes private enterprise, and that supports the free play of the market. **The Republicans sought the collective support of both white Southerners and of middle-class blue-collar Northerners who opposed economic aid to the urban poor and the enactment of the 1964 Civil Rights Act** that prohibited segregation in public accommodations. **Richard Nixon appointed 4 Supreme Court judges who ultimately failed him by voting for abortion rights in the Roe v. Wade decision of 1973.** He is mostly remembered, however, for the scandal of Watergate and for being the first President forced to resign from office. Incidentally, the worst face of the old Southern Democratic Party also reappeared with **Alabama's Governor George C. Wallace** who ran as a third-party candidate against Richard Nixon and the Democrat, Hubert Humphrey, in 1968.

Far-right, undemocratic conservatism, referred today as MAGA, emerged mostly during the **Ronald Reagan** presidency. Making the most of a modernized TV, Reagan was a shrewd speaker who often resorted to false statistics (cf. the **"White Papers"** issued by the State Department and the White House) to defend his policies. He could not even describe what kind of Christian he was, but declared that the US was God's favorite nation, agreeing with William Murray (the infamous defender of the Contras) that "one can make a strong argument that the American

system is synonymous of Christianity." **Those who disagreed with Reagan were accused of being enemies of the State and friends of Communism.** Dubbed the "Moses of the Potomac," he gathered the **full support of the Christian Right's televangelists, especially of Oral Robertson's "Christian Coalition" and "Contract with America,"** which Robertson called "God's Hand." Reagan's type of politics included the adoption of Milton Friedman's free play of the market forces, no government control of the economy, **total opposition to abortion**, insisting that a woman's right place is in the kitchen and, following Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority," **denial of human rights to gays and lesbians.** While the richest Americans were raising their wealth by 30%, Reagan was denying the reality of hunger in America and **claiming that persons who were homeless were so by their own choice.** His foreign policy toward Latin America, formalized by Henry Kissinger and typified by Oliver North's infamous "Contra Affair," provided **millions of dollars for the worst Latin American dictators and their para-military gangs** that killed hundreds of thousands of persons, including American missionaries and leaders of the Catholic Church.

It was Reagan's intervention in Central America that restarted the **northward heavy flow of Latino immigrants** toward the U.S., which persists to this day.

Some of the policies pursued by the Republicans today echo their troubled past, including doing anything to keep control of the White House, as they did in 1876, pursuing anti-abortion and LGBT policies, repeating some of the old goals of the Southern Democrats by allying themselves with archconservative groups that sponsor white supremacy and neo-Nazi goals. They are also following up on the example of George Bush who, in 1992, imposed restrictions on clear air regulations in order to accommodate big business.

As we can see, today's Republican Party has often betrayed the example of Abraham Lincoln who, were he alive today, would be horrified by a Party that does anything to get support from big money and from its base, spreading lies and manipulations and resorting to the new media technology to get the vote from its misinformed supporters. No one in her/his wildest and most pessimistic imagination could have predicted how un-American and antidemocratic the Republican Party would become after the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Fortunately, some conscientious republican leaders are beginning to break away from the "Trumpist" worship of power and control. For now, however, a vote for many of the republican candidates across the States could lead to a major threat to American democracy and to the ideals of the Founding Fathers and of Abraham Lincoln.

BIO: *Tarcisio Beal is professor Emeritus of History at the University of the Incarnate Word. [Note: Sources used for this article can be obtained from lavoz@esperanzacenter.org]*

