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# Politics & Race

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 22, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Andrew Breitbart?s deceitful splicing of a video with the intention of stoking racial animus has been exposed thoroughly by now. He should be a pariah, his name scratched off guest lists, his donations returned, his phone calls unanswered.

But, alas, his tricks may be new but the trade in racial fear-mongering has a long and bitter history. It is as American as apple pie.

Breitbart?s immediate predecessor is Lee Atwater, the campaign strategist who brought you Willie Horton, the escaped, black con who raped a woman while on leave but who was portrayed as Gov. Michael Dukakis?s best friend. Atwater also conceived the ?white hand? television spot that propelled Sen. Jesse Helms to a difficult re-election victory. In the ad, a white hand is holding a rejection letter while the voice-over said, ?You needed that job but they had to give it to a minority?.? Atwater, to his credit, apologized to the nation for his race-baiting tactics before his untimely death in 1991 although his boss, President George H.W. Bush never apologized for getting to the White House on the strength of such tactics. Atwater was preceded by Ronald Reagan?s invoking ?welfare queens? and Richard Nixon?s Southern strategy.

Stoking racial fears and hatreds used to be a central part of the Democratic Party?s strategy, not the Republican?s. Indeed, the GOP was organized for the expressed purpose of restricting the expansion of slavery into new territories. The ?Solid South? was a phrase that described a Democratic Party phenomenon, not a Republican one, and it was built on Jim Crow laws that denied blacks their most basic constitutional rights.

How did the change come about? Certainly evolving social attitudes played a part. The bravery and the sagacity of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was indispensable, indeed I think a case can be made that just as Churchill was Britain?s indispensable man in the 20th century, King was America?s. The vocal support for Dr. King?s cause from Catholic leaders like Washington?s Archbishop Patrick O?Boyle and a young priest in Mississippi, Father Bernard Law, helped convert Catholic minds and hearts.

There were three moments, however, that changed the narrative about race for the Democratic Party. Each moment involved leadership that went beyond political expediency, indeed, leadership that risked a great deal politically in the short-term to take a shaky step towards a distant and still obscure future, and each moment involved a decision that was seen as surprising at the time.

In 1939, the Daughters of the American Revolution denied permission for an integrated audience at a scheduled concert by Marian Anderson at the concert hall attached to their headquarters, which was then the only real concert hall in Washington, D.C. Eleanor Roosevelt resigned her membership in the DAR and convinced her husband to let Anderson perform a concert on Easter Sunday at the Lincoln Memorial.

Eleanor Roosevelt, daughter of WASP upstate gentry, had nothing in her background to indicate a special desire to help black folk and her husband was ambivalent on the issue of racial justice, mindful of the need to keep the support of Southern segregationist senators and voters. But, this highly public act, combined with less visible

acts throughout her husband?s tenure, said for the first time that the White House was willing to step in to right a racial wrong.

Harry S. Truman was not above using the ?N? word and when he was running for Senator, he allowed it to be known that his grand-daddy had fought in the Army of the Confederacy, knowing this would not hurt his chances. But, when he learned of the lynching of a black veteran, something clicked. A man who had risked his life for his country had a right to expect his country to protect his life and his liberties when he returned and the failure to do so struck Truman deep. He not only integrated the Armed Forces, creating an avenue through which blacks were able to rise and rise to the top more quickly than in many areas of American life, he backed a strong civil rights plank in the 1948 Democratic Party platform. Back then, platforms mattered, and the Southern states walked out of the convention, held a rump convention later and nominated Strom Thurmond to run as a Dixiecrat. The ?Solid South? was no longer so solid, and indeed, Thurmond took the states of South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana in the 1948 presidential election, but Truman took the rest and won re-election.

The next Democratic President, John F. Kennedy, was no champion on race relations. Just before the 1960 election, he called Coretta Scott King to inquire about her husband, who was then in jail. This may have tipped the black vote, and with it, the election in his favor. But, as the important book The Bystander [1] by Nick Bryant demonstrates, Kennedy was not only ambivalent about the issue, he was terrified of losing his hold on the South, which was already precarious because of his Catholicism. It was Kennedy?s successor, Lyndon Johnson who really delivered on civil rights and, just so, delivered the solid South into the hands of the GOP. And, he knew he was doing that and did it anyway. When LBJ stood in the well of the House chamber and uttered the words ?And We Shall Overcome? he doomed the Democrats in the South for a generation but there he was, and he did the right thing. Johnson was one of the most complicated men to sit in the Oval Office, but he was not complicated on this issue once he got to the Oval Office and, whatever his sins, let his name never be mentioned without remembering what he did to put this country on a better path regarding race.

I hope that Breitbart will not be the future of the GOP. I hope that someone like Sen. Lindsay Graham or Ambassador Huntsman will rise up and do for the GOP what Eleanor Roosevelt, Harry Truman and LBJ did for the Democrats, and for America. I disagree with the Republicans on many issues but I detest their inability to speak out and speak loudly to denounce racist tactics. Who among the leadership of the Republican Party will stand up to Breitbart, to Limbaugh, to Beck and to the others who traffic in stoking racial hatred?

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[1] http://www.amazon.com/Bystander-Kennedy-Struggle-Black-Equality/dp/0465008267