



Eugene Patterson

Two Parties, But No 'System'

NORTHAMPTON, Mass. — Smith College students, struggling to understand the South, ask the ancient question: "When will you have two parties?" To say the question is relative, which it is, or to propose a general answer, which one cannot, is unsatisfactory to them.

They want at least a guess as to when the South is going to organize itself politically like everybody else. The answer may even be never. But if a Southerner were required to risk a generalization, perhaps the most sensible way of getting at it would be this:

Southern Republicans will be wise to offer an alternative; they apparently cannot win a mere me-too campaign against the Southern Democrats.

Winthrop Rockefeller moved to the left of a conservative Democrat and won Arkansas in 1966.

Claude Kirk went to the right of a liberal Democrat and won Florida.

Conservative Republicans tried to fight a me-too campaign against conservative Democrats in Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia, and lost all three. Georgia almost certainly would have gone Republican as Arkansas did if a Rockefeller-type candidacy had been present to gather in the moderate and Negro vote.

All of which brings up the relative aspect of the thing. Party labels don't really mean as much to the future of the Deep South states as do the principles that are in competition. An increase of segregationist conservatism in a region already surfeited and stifled with it can hardly be called a political service to the South, whether it is the result of one party factionalism or is sanctified with the shibboleth of "two party system." A way out of the past, not a thrust backward into it, is the South's need.

And the Goldwater Republicanism of Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia—and to some extent South Carolina—offered an echo of old Democratic practices instead of the choice of something new.

Far from being constructive politically, this right wing challenge merely snuffed out the first glimmerings of moderation among Deep South Democrats and drove them back to the right to defend their old base of racism and reaction.

Then which party will risk the first move toward the middle of the road? Again, it is foolish to generalize: Georgia may be almost as different from Alabama as Florida is from Arkansas.

Yet it would seem reasonable in Georgia at least for the Republicans to lead the way out of the right hand rut and toward the center. The Democrats would undoubtedly follow them toward that higher battleground, since they were trying to move there before the Goldwater debacle chased them back to their old base. The state would benefit greatly by the moderating trend. And a moderate Republicanism, being known nationally as the more conservative philosophy anyway, might retain an advantage with genuine conservatives while freeing itself, as well as the Democratic party, from the destructive business of courting segregationists to the exclusion of moderates and Negroes in the South.