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Has GOP Lost Its Soul or Just Lost Its Way?

A Newspaper Column by Evan Barrett

August 7, 2016

Political parties change over time, sometimes reversing roles, sometimes disappearing. Today's GOP has undergone many transformations since its birth in the 1850s as the successor to the Whig Party. The Republican Party was founded on and ultimately found its legitimacy as the abolitionist, anti-slavery party prior to and after the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln, America's 16th and arguably greatest President, was its voice and identity.

Today we wonder if the GOP is going to be Abraham Lincoln's party or Donald Trump's.

In the years following Lincoln, because of the Republican commitment to ending slavery and reforming the south, and because of the vestiges of slavery/racism in America's south, we saw a century in which "the solid south" was solidly Democratic. Republicans didn't stand a chance in the south, but their party led the rest of the nation in the progressive era, peaking in the period of Republican President Teddy Roosevelt.

As the Democratic Party sought to support in northern cities, it struggled for an identity not based on the Jim Crow racism of the south – often cloaked in the rhetoric of "states' rights." The crisis period that changed the Democratic Party came between 1948 and 1968. In the 1948 Democratic National Convention, Hubert Humphrey urged the Democratic Party to "get out of the shadow of states' rights and walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights." Strom Thurmond Dixiecrats bolted the party. Yet, in the 1950s it was still a Republican President, Dwight Eisenhower, who sent the federal troops into Little Rock to enforce school desegregation.

Real change, the role reversal based on civil rights, began during the 1960 campaign when John F. Kennedy called up Coretta Scott King when she was fearful for Martin Luther King's life when he was held in Georgia State Prison for probation violation. Then Vice-President Richard Nixon, the GOP presidential candidate, decided not to make that phone call. Following JFK's 1960 election, he tried to walk a line between southern and northern Democrats, but ultimately bent toward that "sunshine of human rights." After Kennedy's assassination, Lyndon Johnson, a southerner, became a profile in courage when he pushed through the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Racially-tinged southern Democratic opposition to that legislation and to the direction of the party led to a long-term loss of Democratic strength in the South.

Meanwhile the noble history of Lincoln's GOP was radically altered in 1968 by politically reincarnated Richard Nixon's electorally-driven "southern strategy" which used racial code words, dog-whistles and states' rights rhetoric to secure, long-term, the southern vote for Republicans (described in Kevin Phillips' 1969 book *The Emerging Southern Majority*).

It's been awhile since the GOP was Lincoln's party. A Republican Party identity crisis looms today, thanks to Donald Trump who has gone way beyond dog-whistle politics to outright appeals to racism and intolerance and who strikes out at all kinds of people and peoples.

In her book, *Team of Rivals (The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln)*, historian Doris Kearns Goodwin notes Lincoln's "extraordinary array of personal qualities" and "that in the hands of a truly great politician [Lincoln] the qualities we generally associate with decency and morality -- kindness, sensitivity, compassion, honesty, and empathy -- can also be impressive political resources." She points out that under "appalling pressures," Lincoln "refused to be provoked by petty grievances, to submit to jealousy, or to brood over perceived slights."

Goodwin's book, written in 2005, could not have anticipated the GOP ascendancy of Donald Trump. Yet the very attributes Goodwin described as supreme assets for Lincoln represent potentially fatal flaws in Trump, who can be "baited by a tweet" to react in ways that are not just counter to his own good but also to the good of the country. Trump's instability and uncontrollable reactivity contrasts directly with Lincoln's studied calmness in the face of the most strenuous assaults.

So, has the GOP just lost its way? Will it, following this election, find itself returning to being the party of Lincoln, or even the party of Nixon? Or will it find itself, in Trump victory or defeat, permanently changed, having lost its soul? And, if so, will good-hearted Republicans stay with such a party?

Evan Barrett of Butte, recently retired from 47 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He currently writes columns and commentaries, is an award-winning producer of Montana history films and occasionally teaches.

(700 words in the body)