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Realignment Of Politicians And Parties

One of the soundest principles of politics is that where there's smoke, there may not always be fire, but there's almost certainly a smudge pot.

The Texas smoke machines are sending up big puffy clouds these days about John B. Connally's impending switch to the Republican party. There hasn't been such an orgy of skywriting since that other handsome John—sur-named Lindsay—made his great leap into the Democratic camp in 1971.

Connally is animated by the same goal that spurred Lindsay—the presidency—and his move may end as inauspiciously as Lindsay's, with a concession speech in a drafty hotel ballroom. On the other hand, Lindsay didn't have a President of the United States scattering rose petals in his path and announcing to the public that this is the man who is destined to lead the nation, and maybe save the world.

Personalities aside—and one turns with reluctance from a personality like Connally's — the former Texas governor's promised switch is one more indication, a major one, that the long-awaited realignment of our political parties may, in fact, be taking place.

It's not the kind of realignment we've seen in past political epochs, when a dramatic event, like the Civil War or the Great Depression, has smashed the party loyalties of millions and forced the politicians to reassemble in new formations. This has been a more gradual process, beginning back in 1964, when Barry Goldwater's nomination started the Republican party on a continuing move South and right. In that same year, Lyndon Johnson's coattails pulled in enough additional northern, liberal representatives and senators to guarantee the long-term direction of the national Democratic party—at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue—would be liberal and urban-oriented.

It was in 1964 that Strom Thurmond made his jump from the Democratic to Republican side, and after that, "conversion parties" became popular in many southern states. Today, many of the leaders of the GOP's conservative wing, from national committee general counsel

Harry Dent to California Gov. Ronald Reagan, are converted Democrats.

Just yesterday, Mills Godwin, a former governor of Virginia and the last heir of the conservative Byrd Democratic organization, said he would be happy to run for his old job this year as a Republican candidate.

While conservative Democrats have been sliding over to the GOP, a counter-movement has been taking place as liberal Republicans have decided that they would be more at home in the Democratic party. Lindsay, Rep. Ogden Reid of New York (grandson of a founder of the GOP), and, most recently, Rep. Donald Riegle of Michigan have crossed the aisle to the Democrats. One of the newly elected Democratic Senators, Floyd K. Haskell of Colorado, was Nelson Rockefeller's state campaign manager in the 1968 Republican presidential nomination fight.

These men represent just the most visible part of the realignment process that is gradually gathering momentum. Switches among state and local officeholders have been far more numerous, and more frequent still are the recalculations of aspiring office-seekers as to their party allegiance. When Rep. William Colmer of Mississippi, chairman of the Rules Committee and a symbol of the old guard Southern conservative Democrats in the House, retired last year, his administrative assistant, Trent Lott, ran for his seat. But Lott ran as a Republican, not a Democrat, apparently figuring he would rather contend with the remaining Civil War memories in Mississippi than constantly explain away his being on the same ticket as George McGovern.

The notion of party realignment scares a lot of people, who see terrible danger of ideological civil war between radical extremes. But those dangers are exaggerated. This is a practical country, not an ideological one, and all that the present sorting-out is accomplishing is to get more of the politicians with similar tendencies to view political issues alike into the same camp.

It's ironic that this sorting-out is taking place at a time when the general public indicates it could not care less about party responsibility or party labels. A recent Harris poll showed almost two-thirds of those with a preference thought it advantageous to have a President of one party and a Congress controlled by the opposition.

That preference, of course, is the root cause of the "constitutional crisis" in Washington today, with its unremitting warfare over executive impoundments and cutoffs and counteractions by Congress.

The gradual realignment of the parties offers whatever long-term hope exists for a more sensible, less ruinous kind of politics and government than what we have in Washington today.