

The New Strategy for Dixiecrats

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THE RUDE awakening of Dixiecrat congressmen that they are in their twilight of power and had better organize themselves or perish came last month when they sought a mere vestige of their former dominion over the critically important House Rules Committee—and came away empty-handed.

The southerners were appalled to learn that the Deep South seat on the Rules Committee (formerly held by Chairman William Colmer of Mississippi, who retired) was to be filled by a liberal: Rep. Gillis Long of Louisiana. A senior southern congressman was therefore delegated to see Speaker Carl Albert of Oklahoma.

Albert replied by suggesting an equally liberal alternative: Rep. Richardson Preyer of North Carolina. The southern emissary responded that his friends really wanted a reliable Dixie conservative young enough to become chairman someday—perhaps 40-year-old Walter Flowers of Alabama or 33-year-old Dawson Mathis of Georgia. Albert's reply: No, I want a man who will move my legislation. Gillis Long was named.

That rebuff informed southerners that their 20-year control of the Rules Committee, habitually blocking liberal legislation sought by Democratic leaders, was truly at an end. More than that it showed how low ancestral southern influence with the party's House leadership had sunk.

Since then, one of the canniest Dixiecrats, Rep. Joe Waggoner of Louisiana, has been working backstage to form a still unnamed conservative counterpart of the 14-year-old, left-of-center Democratic Study Group (DSG). Supporting Waggoner are some sur-

viving Southern grandees: Phil Landrum of Georgia, F. Edward Herbert of Louisiana, Robert Sikes of Florida.

This is no reincarnation of the all-but-forgotten Bollweevils Club, a loosely-knit southern circle presided over by Judge Howard Smith of Virginia, autocratic chairman of the Rules Committee until his defeat in 1966. The new group will have staff, office space and a structured existence—all of it still resisted by some southern graybeards but now essential in the twilight of their power.

The evidence of that twilight is a simple fact: The House Democratic leadership now lacks a southerner in its top three posts for the first time this century. More shocking to some Dixiecrats than their exclusion from Rules Committee control was the assignment to the Armed Services Committee, a southern redoubt, of Rep. Ronald V. Dellums of California, a black activist of the new school. Dellum's influential sponsor: Speaker Albert.

Indeed, Albert and his new majority leader, Rep. Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill of Massachusetts, have embraced the liberals, who now dominate the House Democratic caucus. Albert's most influential adviser is Rep. Richard Bolling of Missouri, a battle-wise liberal veteran.

"We've got our backs to the wall," says one southern conservative, adding that tighter organization and shrewder strategy are their hopes for survival. From a hard core 50 conservative southerners, the new group is aiming at moderate Democrats on specific votes.

That will require avoidance of self-defeating projects—such as some southerners wanting to seek a caucus vote preventing Rep. Charles Diggs of Michigan, a black, from climbing the seniority ladder to chairman of the District of Columbia Committee. Waggoner succeeded in smothering a move that, besides being doomed, would have branded its supporters as racists.

The similarity between Waggoner's group in 1973 and the infant DSG in 1959, using strategy and organization to compensate for lack of influence among the party leadership, is only superficial. The DSG's emergence was a sign of liberal strength: The new conservative group is a reaction to declining power.

In fact, the Dixiecrat congressman may be a gradually vanishing American. With Negro suffrage, he has a dim future in the South's big cities. Elsewhere, Republicans are picking up conservative congressional seats when the incumbent retires (in 1972 alone, two in Mississippi and one each in Virginia, Louisiana and South Carolina).

An obvious remedy is to finally cross that aisle and become Republicans, and many joining Waggoner's group would have crossed Nov. 7 if their switch would have produced a House Republican majority (thereby not costing them their Democratic committee chairmanships). But this equation seems more remote than ever; Republicans will probably lose, not gain seats in 1974. For now, the Dixiecrats can only band together to confront but not really thwart the new liberal hegemony in Congress.

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