

Southern Strategy

By WILLIAM V. SHANNON

WASHINGTON, Sept. 28 — As Negroes have moved north in the last thirty years, they have unwittingly brought with them the politics of the South.

The distinguishing feature of Southern politics has been the inability of white workers and white members of the lower middle class to unite with blacks on behalf of their common economic interests. The divisive force of race has driven apart voters whose interests were otherwise similar.

George C. Wallace in his campaigns has discovered to his delight that it is possible to play upon the same fears and anxieties in Michigan and Ohio as it is in Alabama or Georgia. In his skilled and totally amoral use of the welfare issue, President Nixon in this campaign is working the same appeal with high hopes of success.

Instead of the powerful labor-liberal coalitions which emerged in the Northern states during the New Deal and which have largely dominated Northern politics in the last four decades, Southerners of modest economic means have remained in the neo-populist trap.

Populism is not easy to define but its essential quality can be conveyed in two statements. "It is hard for the ordinary man to get a fair shake in life," and "The Government is on the side of the rich and the big shots."

The first statement expresses an understandable resentment which many people have about their lot in life. The second reflects an ambivalence toward government, a distrust that its powers can or will really be used on behalf of ordinary persons. This ambivalence contrasts markedly with the confident optimism of liberals about the uses of governmental power to achieve reform and of sophisticated conservatives who know that Washington can be worked for tax favors, farm subsidies, or a Lockheed loan.

The original People's party of the 1890's was color blind. It wanted to unite blacks and whites in the kind of political coalition which Southern liberals still dream of. But reactionary racist demagogues around the turn of the century helped the Southern Bourbons to smash populism by playing upon racial feeling. Small farmers, small shopkeepers, blue-collar craftsmen—relatively poor but struggling hard and rising a bit in life—were then and are now fearful that social reforms may help blacks more than

themselves and that government power may raise their taxes or somehow endanger their modest gains in life.

Their hope that social change will improve their lot in life is closely balanced against their fear that it might make their lives worse. The bitterly divisive arguments over school integration and school busing perfectly exemplify how fear can outweigh hope.

Progressive Southern politicians have discovered that if they are to win, they have to rouse populist resentments against the rich and powerful while at the same time keeping their positive programs vaguely defined—liberalism as such is suspect—and courting Negro voters discreetly at the back door.

As Governor Wallace showed in the spring primaries, it is unnecessary ever to mention race. Instead, he worked the old neo-populist shell game playing upon the distrust of government, assailing the courts for their busing orders, denouncing the rich with their mysterious tax-exempt foundations, asserting that ordinary folks are not getting a fair shake economically and proposing no positive program but urging voters "to send them a message."

In his more gingerly and emotionally empty style of campaigning, Mr. Nixon is now going through the same political routine. He denounces busing. He assails permissive judges. He hints at tax relief and an exciting domestic program but is careful never to spell them out. He makes a big issue out of quotas.

In place of "law and order," his code word for a covertly racist appeal this year is "welfare." Speaking at the dedication of the immigration museum at the Statue of Liberty, Mr. Nixon perverted even that occasion for his special purpose: "I could speak of many ways in which those who came to these shores have enriched America, but let me point out one way in particular: They believed in hard work. They didn't come here for a handout. . . . We must reject that kind of philosophy that someone on welfare should receive more than someone who works."

There is no one who advocates such a "philosophy." Moreover, in Mr. Nixon's first term, the number of persons on welfare rose by six million and if he has a second term, the number will rise still further. But mere facts do not deter Mr. Nixon as he uses an old Southern strategy to split the North.