

The GOP's Future — One Man's View

By DENNIS FARNEY

WASHINGTON — Back in 1969 Kevin Phillips made a name for himself with a book called "The Emerging Republican Majority." Now, with Watergate threatening to submerge the Republican Party, it is interesting that theoretician Phillips still believes that a conservative majority shall emerge some day.

First, though, the blunt-spoken Mr. Phillips says the Republicans have to help get rid of Richard Nixon. "Nixon's blown it," he says, "a quick impeachment" would be the best thing for the GOP.

One reason impeachment would be best, he thinks, is that it would generate a nasty "impeachment backlash"—against the liberals, whom many voters would perceive as having hounded the President out of office. However much people may think they want impeachment now, a lot of them "will not like it once it has happened," he says.

The other reason is that with the Nixon albatross removed, conservatives could concentrate on the serious business of building the new coalition that Mr. Phillips thinks is destined to replace the old Roosevelt coalition of Southerners, blue-collar ethnics, blacks and eggheads. That Democratic coalition is inevitably disintegrating, Mr. Phillips argues, and in its place social tides are forming the conservative coalition described in his book: the South and growing Southwest, the Midwest and the Mountain States, some increasingly conservative ethnic groups and people generally fed up with the liberals' preoccupation with blacks and other minorities.

If nurtured and cultivated, Mr. Phillips argued in his book, this embryonic coalition would solidify into voting patterns that would shape American society for the rest of the century.

A Historic First

While many political analysts dispute the validity of the theory, Mr. Phillips insists that the only thing wrong with it is Richard Nixon. "Give the man credit for a great historic first," he says bitterly. "He may be the first President in history to ruin his party while it still controlled the White House."

What really galls Mr. Phillips is his belief that the Nixon administration failed to offer workable alternatives to liberal programs, and thus failed to consolidate its gains of 1968 and 1972. "They had all the stuff they needed to destroy the liberals intellectually," he says, "and all they did was wiretap them. That's the real crime."

Still, Kevin Phillips has faith. He still thinks his conservative majority will develop—perhaps not labeled "Republican," to be sure, but perhaps in time to defeat the Democratic presidential nominee in 1976.

This optimism might seem to put Mr. Phillips in the same league with a character in a recent magazine cartoon—the man who, after being chained spread-eagled to a dungeon wall, turns to this equally hapless fellow prisoner and says, "Now here's my plan." Just the same, Mr. Phillips offers a bewildering number of scenarios outlining any number of ways the conservatives could yet do the liberals in.

The first thing to remember, he says, is that while "the coalition that Nixon put together doesn't like him any more, it doesn't like his enemies either."

The other thing, he argues, is that the Democratic Party remains an improbable collection of mutually antagonistic elements, deeply divided on a variety of volatile issues. Watergate will enable liberal Democrats to sail right through this fall's campaign without even having to confront these issues, he concedes. "But as soon as

they are focused again by anybody, the Democratic coalition is going bye-bye."

It is almost an article of faith with Mr. Phillips that liberal politicians are even dumber than conservative politicians when it comes to the matters of self-preservation. So he is counting on congressional liberals to focus those damaging issues all by themselves.

As he sees it, the liberal, "veto-proof" Congress that voters may elect this fall will promptly revive a lot of Great Society-type concepts that voters never much liked in the first place. This will alienate

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conservative Democrats all over the place. Meanwhile, the fur will be flying as the various Democratic factions struggle for delegates to the 1976 convention.

By the time that convention is over, Mr. Phillips confidently expects the party to be in shambles again. And conservatives might be in position to pick up the pieces.

Just how will they get into that position? It is at this point that Mr. Phillips' scenarios begin to multiply bewilderingly. He himself isn't sure. But one way he envisions might be called The Whig Scenario, which holds that the Republican Party just may follow the Whigs into oblivion.

Mr. Phillips thinks the political situation today is rather similar to that of the mid-1850s, when the old Whig Party was wheezing its last. Then, as now, both parties (the Whigs and the Democrats) were trying to hold together "exhausted coalitions." Both were trying to sidestep difficult issues; neither was addressing itself to the big national problems if it could avoid it.

What happened then was that the brand-new Republican Party emerged, absorbing the Whigs and enough Democrats to reduce the Democratic Party to a minority status for the next half-century. What might happen now, Mr. Phillips theorizes, is that a new conservative party could absorb most of the Republicans and enough Democrats to make history repeat itself.

The odds against this happening are obviously formidable; even many conservatives scoff at the idea that Mr. Phillips is promoting in his newspaper column and political newsletter. For one thing, conservative Republicans have a hard time seeing the advantage to charging off to form a new party when they already control the GOP.

Even a recent Phillips newsletter conceded that a new party is "not very likely" to emerge by 1976. But it argued that what is possible is "a new presidential-level coalition."

Mr. Phillips thinks one way this coalition might come about is through The Ford Scenario, which begins with Richard Nixon either being impeached in a hurry or just resigning and getting out of town. Then Gerald Ford becomes President and promptly starts to cultivate Southern Democrats. He would name some prominent ones to high-level positions, take pains to consult Southern Democrats in Congress and, come 1976, pick a running mate popular in the South. As Mr. Phillips sees it, this might well pave the way for a fusion of Southern Democrats with the Republican Party, at least for the purpose of electing a President.

There is another possibility, of course—that Mr. Phillips is grasping at straws, that his emerging majority is simply not going to emerge. Politics is a quirky business, after all, and sometimes it just doesn't unfold with the logical precision

the Phillips scenarios require. In addition, there are at least two complications any scenario must take into account.

One is George Wallace. Mr. Phillips assumes that Wallace Democrats eventually must desert the Democratic Party. It's only logical, he thinks. But logical or not, Mr. Wallace is gearing up for another run for the White House as a Democrat, and some of his backers now talk of a Jackson-Wallace or even a Kennedy-Wallace ticket in 1976. So maybe those Wallace voters won't defect after all.

The other complication is that the Democrats might come up with a 1976 ticket that holds their coalition together. Mr. Phillips doubts it. It's awfully hard to glue a crumbling coalition back together again, he says. Anyway, "parties don't learn."

But Democrat Richard Scammon, for one, thinks parties do learn and that the liberals are not as dumb as Mr. Phillips thinks they are. Mr. Scammon is the co-author of the 1970 book, "The Real Majority," which warned Democratic liberals that they were going to lose unless they convinced the "unyoung, unpoor, unblack" majority that they were just as concerned as the Republicans about rioting, pornography, uppity kids and militant blacks.

Taking this advice, Democratic congressional candidates in 1970 and 1972 pinned little American flags to their lapels and rode around in squad cars with policemen. They looked rather silly making these symbolic concessions. They also won elections.

The Busing Issue

Interestingly, Democrat Scammon does agree with Republican Phillips on one point. He thinks "the social issue" he warned Democrats about in 1970 is far from dead today, just latent for the moment. He believes it could come roaring right back if, for example, the Supreme Court orders that middle-class white school children be bused into black ghettos.

But he disagrees that the Democrats are incapable of adjusting to such issues. He thinks they can muddle through, paper over the cracks in their old coalition and make the 1976 presidential race at least "contestable." That may not sound terribly encouraging, but Mr. Scammon argues that except for the aberration of 1964, Democratic presidential tickets have had to scramble for every victory they've won since 1948.

"And much of politics is muddling through and papering over," he adds. "I think this is a point worth making. Politics is rarely a clash of fundamental issues. Usually it's more a matter of muddling through and getting by until the next election."

Time will tell, of course, whether The Muddling-Through Scenario proves more accurate than The Whig Scenario or The Ford Scenario. For his part, Mr. Phillips maintains that there are times when muddling through just doesn't work—that when the Whigs tried to muddle through a time of growing national tensions they muddled right into oblivion.

But for the moment, only one thing seems clear: American conservatives, who as recently as 1972 saw themselves as the inevitable beneficiaries of the forces of history, are at least temporarily reduced to muddling through themselves and waiting for the liberals to make mistakes. Watergate has battered their confidence and given them what one Phillips newsletter has called "a single overriding concern . . . that great opportunities come and go in history, and that Richard Nixon has flubbed the GOP opportunity."

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