

# States of the Union

## OUTLINE OF A NEW LIBERAL COALITION

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

**I**N HIS 1969 book, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (Arbor House), Kevin Phillips, that shrewd day-dreamer of the Right, noted "an epochal shifting of national gears" and predicted hard times ahead for the Democrats. The old FDR coalition of urban ethnics and Southern Protestants, he observed with undisguised satisfaction, was in full retreat before an all-new conservative alliance of suburbanites, Sun Belters and blue-collar workers disenchanted with the Democrats' "ambitious social programming."

To Phillips the future of the Republican Party looked both bright and white. Scanning the racial architecture of Richard Nixon's 1968 victory, he flatly concluded that "the GOP can build a winning coalition without Negro votes." As he saw it, Hubert Humphrey's near-unanimous black support had been a downright handicap, "a major source of Democratic loss . . . in many sections of the nation."

Some of us back then dismissed Phillips' breezy predictions as pure fantasy. It seemed to us that his ardent wish had been father to his frightening thought, and that Humphrey's defeat had been less a consequence of Right-wing re-

vanchism than of Left-wing disgust with the growing debacle in Vietnam. Surely Nixon's ascendancy was merely an aberration, an annoying but temporary detour from the inevitable advance of liberalism; surely this, too, would pass.

Today we are having anxious second thoughts. Indeed, with Republican moving vans lumbering into Washington, significant portions of Phillips' fantasy appear to have become fact. Certainly the Sun Belt shined on Ronald Reagan last November. Not only did he capture the entire West, he also succeeded in stealing much of the once-solid South from his Georgian opponent. True to Phillips' curve, moreover, enough city proletarians shed their Democratic habits to assure Republican victories in nearly all the industrial states of the North and East. To add salt to the wound, those triumphs were achieved in the teeth of strong Democratic turnouts among black and Hispanic voters.

It is begging the question to inquire whether Reagan's electoral success signifies a genuine conservative groundswell—"an epochal shifting of national gears"—or merely a genuine irritation with Jimmy Carter and his largely inef-

fectual sojourn in the White House. Those who argue that liberals had no real choice this time around conveniently forget the failed challenge of Edward Kennedy; they also forget that in 1976 the Democratic rank-and-file chose Jimmy Carter over a half-dozen liberal rivals, including Birch Bayh and Morris Udall. As voters we don't always get what we want, but we usually get what we ask for; and quite clearly of late, we have been asking for conservative leadership.

My own reading of the current liberal dilemma is that it doesn't matter whether Reagan beat Carter or Carter beat himself. In either case liberals were the losers; in either case, too, Democrats are now free of the Carter millstone and in an excellent position to reshape their party in ways that will once again kindle the country's liberal imagination. That imagination—which among other things has brought us the Bill of Rights, the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, the graduated income tax, Social Security and Medicare—is by no means dead. It has merely gone underground, a fugitive from the desperation of the Sixties and the pessimism of the Seventies. Our great task in the Eighties will be to restore it to light, to renew the American public's faith in a liberal future.

How shall we do that? To begin with, we should probably grant Phillips his major boast, and be glad of it: The New Deal coalition is finished; let us rejoice. It was not a savory arrangement, that marriage of big-city Pendergasts and small-town Talmadges; and if it seemed to work for a time, it never exactly set the world on fire. We are the only country in the Western world still waiting for national health insurance ("the Lost Reform"), and one of the few industrialized nations that has not seen fit to enact a minimum income plan; a half century after Roosevelt oratorically anointed "the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid," our legislation and political policies continue to neglect the poor and pamper the rich.

So let the old coalition die a dignified death, taking with it a long list of unrealized dreams and a record that com-

bins the tawdry with the noble in about equal parts. For better or for worse, it was *our* record. And let us build a new coalition in its place, one based on some new realities as well as some old friends.

For openers, there are the blacks and Hispanics, who have emerged now as the Democrats' two most loyal constituencies. They are not a bad political base on which to rebuild; the two groups already comprise more than 15 per cent of the total population, and they are increasing in number at double the national rate. A well-organized Chicano electorate could eventually reverse the Republican drift in Texas and the Southwest. In the Deep South black voters won big for Jimmy Carter in 1976, and managed even in 1980 to salvage a few scarce electoral votes for him.

A challenge to this old element in the new coalition will come early in 1981 when Congress considers renewing the 1965 Voter Rights Act, the law that enfranchised Southern blacks for the first time since Reconstruction. Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina and some of his Republican colleagues have served notice of their intent to kill the measure and thereby restore Southern politics to a condition of pristine whiteness. For the liberal coalition, this will be a decisive moment.

Another such moment will occur when Congress gets around again to debating the labor reform bill, a proposal that was filibustered to death two years ago. Labor reform would make it easier for workers to organize, particularly in the Sun Belt, a territory that corporations have been invading in droves as they forsake the unionized North in favor of the open-shop South and West. General Motors has located a plant in rural Louisiana, Michelin in rural South Carolina, Reynolds Aluminum in rural Arkansas. According to Robert Goodman in *The Last Entrepreneurs* (Simon and Schuster, 1979), nearly a third of all manufacturing jobs are now in rural areas, most of them below the Mason-Dixon line or west of the Mississippi. The workers there are prime prospects for the new liberal alliance.

Phillips has casually made a gift of

those sections—of the whole Sun Belt, in fact—to the GOP, but the liberal coalition need not despair. In William Jennings Bryan's day the rural West and South were as solidly Democratic and populist as they seem now to be Republican and conservative. Big business was the perceived enemy back then just as big government is the perceived enemy today. In the eyes of voters in the South and West, Jimmy Carter was *urban*; he had ceased to be a country boy from Georgia and had become instead a politician from Bureaucracyville, a sprawling city of the mind located



somewhere between Washington and New York.

**T**HE LIBERAL coalition needs to take into account rural disillusionment with the centralized, citified welfare state, to coax traditional anti-Establishment feelings into more useful political channels. That's how Bryan won the West. As C. Vann Woodward has commented, Bryan "had an intuitive grasp of the deep mood of protest that stirred the mass of voters, and he expressed that mood in a moral appeal to the conscience of the country. His real service was to awaken an old faith in social justice and to protest against a generation of plutocratic rule."

It is true that Bryan, like the members of today's Moral Majority, was a toter and quoter of the Bible. It is an old rural custom to buttress political argument with religious chapter and verse, but there is nothing in the Bible to suggest God is a Republican or that he banks at Chase Manhattan. The Socialists swept Oklahoma before World War I by holding thousands of camp-meeting revivals, where Amos and Hosea were more frequently cited than Marx and Engels. In the liberals' wooing of rural America, where the hearts of one-third of the electorate are to be won or lost, it is possible to take the Bible away from the "New Right" and give it back to the Bryans of today—to those who harbor "an old faith in social justice" and are ready "to protest against a generation of plutocratic rule."

Finally, as we ring out the old coalition and ring in the new, special attention should be paid to the millions who have opted out of the democratic process altogether—the 52 per cent of eligible voters who did not visit the polls last November. Their indifference constitutes a sharp indictment of both parties and poses a genuine threat to our two-party system. What these electoral lolligogs yearn for, one guesses, are not necessarily new answers to the many problems that beset us, but new questions, and a Rooseveltian willingness to invent and improvise. For in their thinking no less than in their rhetoric, both major parties have gone discouragingly stale. A little imagination of the liberal stripe might well be appreciated all around.

I do not mean to suggest that any of this will be easy. I mean only to say that in our defeat we liberals have an opportunity now to organize on a more solid base, one comprised chiefly of blacks and Hispanics, urban and rural workers, Western anti-establishmentarians, and the politically disaffected (many of whom are young and ready for bold experiment). With some diligence and a little luck, these voter groups could be mobilized in ways that would give the lie to Kevin Phillips' smug prophecies of yesteryear. Wouldn't that be worth the effort?

# HOW TO FOIL A CAR THIEF

A FEW SIMPLE PRECAUTIONS CAN REDUCE THE RISK OF THEFT

The numbers are staggering. Every 37 seconds or so a car is stolen somewhere in the U.S. That adds up to almost 800,000 cars a year. But you can do something to keep your car from becoming a statistic. Start by avoiding these four common parking mistakes.

**The "Just for a Minute" Syndrome.** When you leave your car, even if it's "just for a minute," lock all of the doors and take your keys. In fact, about one of every five cars stolen was left unattended with keys in the ignition. Keep driver's license and vehicle registration cards in your wallet or purse. If a car thief finds these documents in the vehicle's glove box, he can impersonate you if stopped by the police.

**The Isolated Location.** It's safest to park in a locked garage, but if you can't, don't leave your car in a dark, out-of-the-way spot. Instead, try to park on a busy, well-lighted street. Thieves shy away from tampering with a car if there's a high risk of being spotted.

**The Display Case.** There's nothing more inviting to a thief than expensive items lying in your car, in plain sight. If you lock these items in the trunk or glove box, there's less incentive for a thief to break in. Also, when you park in a commercial lot or garage, be cautious. Lock your valuables in the trunk, and leave only the ignition key with the attendant.

**The Space at the End of the Block.** In recent years, professional car-theft operations have become an increasing problem. Unlike amateurs, the professionals are not easily deterred. Cars parked at the end of a block are easy targets for the pro-

fessional thief with a tow truck. So, it's best to park in the middle of the block. Be sure to turn your steering wheel sharply to one side or the other. That will lock the steering column and prevent the car from being towed from the rear.

Unfortunately, there's no such thing as a "theft-proof" car. But at General Motors, we're equipping every car we build with anti-theft features. We want to help you make it as difficult as possible for any thief—amateur or professional—to steal your car.

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