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## The myth of Nixon's 'Southern Strategy'

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The Democratic Party's claim to be the party of the good guys, while the Republicans are the party of the bad guys, hinges on the tale of Richard Nixon's so-called Southern Strategy. According to this narrative, advanced by progressive historians, Nixon orchestrated a party switch on civil rights by converting the racists in the Democratic Party — the infamous Dixiecrats — into Republicans. And now, according to a recent article in *The New Republic*, President Trump is the “true heir, the beneficiary of the policies the party has pursued for more than half a century.”

Yes, this story is in the textbooks and on the history channel and regularly repeated in the media, but is it true? First, no one has ever given a single example of an explicitly racist pitch by Nixon during his long career. One might expect that a racist appeal to the Deep South actually would have to be made, and to be understood as such. Yet, quite evidently none was.

So progressives insist that Nixon made a racist “dog whistle” appeal to Deep South voters. Evidently he spoke to them in a kind of code. Really? Is it plausible that Nixon figured out how to communicate with Deep South racists in a secret language? Do Deep South bigots, like dogs, have some kind of heightened awareness of racial messages — messages that are somehow indecipherable to the media and the rest of the country?

This seems unlikely, but let's consider the possibility. Progressives insist that Nixon's appeals to drugs and law and order were coded racist messaging. Yet when Nixon ran for president in 1968 the main issue was the Vietnam War. One popular Republican slogan of the period described the Democrats as the party of “acid, amnesty and abortion.” Clearly there is no suggestion here of race.

Nixon's references to drugs and law and order in 1968 were quite obviously directed at the antiwar protesters who had just disrupted the Democratic Convention in Chicago. His target was radical activists such as Abbie Hoffman and Bill Ayers. Nixon scorned the hippies, champions of the drug culture such as Timothy Leary, and draft-dodgers who fled to Canada. The vast majority of these people were white.

Nixon had an excellent record on civil rights. He supported the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. He was an avid champion of the desegregation of public schools. The progressive columnist Tom Wicker wrote in the *New York Times*, “There's no doubt about it — the Nixon administration accomplished more in 1970 to desegregate Southern school systems

than had been done in the 16 previous years or probably since. There's no doubt either that it was Richard Nixon personally who conceived and led the administration's desegregation effort."

Upon his taking office in 1969, Nixon also put into effect America's first affirmative action program. Dubbed the Philadelphia Plan, it imposed racial goals and timetables on the building trade unions, first in Philadelphia and then elsewhere. Now, would a man seeking to build an electoral base of Deep South white supremacists actually promote the first program to legally discriminate in favor of blacks? This is absurd.

Nixon barely campaigned in the Deep South. His strategy, as outlined by Kevin Phillips in his classic work, "The Emerging Republican Majority," was to target the Sunbelt, the vast swath of territory stretching from Florida to Nixon's native California. This included what Phillips terms the Outer or Peripheral South.

Nixon recognized the South was changing. It was becoming more industrialized, with many northerners moving to the Sunbelt. Nixon's focus, Phillips writes, was on the non-racist, upwardly-mobile, largely urban voters of the Outer or Peripheral South. Nixon won these voters, and he lost the Deep South, which went to Democratic segregationist George Wallace.

And how many racist Dixiecrats did Nixon win for the GOP? Turns out, virtually none. Among the racist Dixiecrats, Strom Thurmond of South Carolina was the sole senator to defect to the Republicans — and he did this long before Nixon's time. Only one Dixiecrat congressman, Albert Watson of South Carolina, switched to the GOP. The rest, more than 200 Dixiecrat senators, congressmen, governors and high elected officials, all stayed in the Democratic Party.

The progressive notion of a Dixiecrat switch is a myth. Yet it is myth that continues to be promoted, using dubious case examples. Though the late Sens. Jesse Helms of North Carolina and John Tower of Texas and former Mississippi Sen. Trent Lott all switched from the Democratic Party to the GOP, none of these men was a Dixiecrat.

The South, as a whole, became Republican during the 1980s and 1990s. This had nothing to do with Nixon; it was because of Ronald Reagan and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America." The conservative appeal to patriotism, anti-communism, free markets, pro-life and Christianity had far more to do with the South's movement into the GOP camp than anything related to race.

Yet the myth of Nixon's Southern Strategy endures — not because it's true, but because it conveniently serves to exculpate the crimes of the Democratic Party. Somehow the party that promoted slavery, segregation, Jim Crow and racial terrorism gets to wipe its slate clean by pretending that, with Nixon's connivance, the Republicans stole all their racists. It's time we recognize this excuse for what it is: one more Democratic big lie.