

The Virginia NEWS LETTER

Republicans and Race in Virginia

By Linwood Holton

Author's note: The 1999 Virginia elections, which occurred since I wrote this article, added Republican control of the legislature to Republican control of all of the statewide elected offices. I was pleased to see true two-party competition in action in those legislative races. When Democrats talked of transportation problems, the Governor announced a transportation plan of his own. He responded with a plan to fund public education facilities when the Democrats pointed to a deficiency there. He met publicly with officials of the Virginia State Conference of the NAACP—the first time a Republican Governor had a public meeting with these officials since I attended the State Conference in 1972—and promised attention and financial resources to demonstrated needs of the African-American community.

These developments enhance my optimism that the Republican Party one day will revert to



Governor Holton

reason and will find a way to again serve all of the people. It will be interesting to discover what approach the Republican-controlled legislature will take.

Less encouraging are the reports coming from Congress: rejection of the nuclear test-ban treaty, refusal to control handguns, refusal to reform political campaign finance, refusal to confirm the appointment of an African-American from Missouri to a federal judgeship, indiscriminate budget cuts to fund a nominal tax reduction—in Washington, we Republicans seem to continue on a suicidal path.

When I returned from the Pacific in 1946 and saw that Bill Tuck had been elected Governor of Virginia—another in an uninterrupted line of Democrats that stretched back into the 19th Century—with just 8 percent of the registered vote, I told myself: “I’m going to break this up!”



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But it wasn't easy. "Old Guard" Republicans didn't want us—a new breed of Republicans, eager to challenge the prevailing political wisdom—to run candidates for Roanoke City Council. But we did, and Johnny Waldrop was elected in 1952. Or for Congress—but we did, and Richard Poff, Joel Broyhill and William Wampler were all elected that same year.

The Republican Old Guard feared that competition at those lower levels would anger Byrd Organization leaders who would otherwise help elect a Republican President—the major source of patronage plums for the Republican Old Guard.

The "Senior Senator" himself—Harry Byrd—jumped in to save the Democratic nominee, Tom Stanley, when Republican Ted Dalton was on the verge of becoming Governor in 1953. "Massive resistance" to desegregation kept the Byrd Organization alive a few extra years and created an atmosphere that defeated Republican candidates for the General Assembly, such as Frank Angell and me, in 1957. I ran for Governor in 1965 on effort alone—we spent about \$60,000 against a "shoo-in" Democrat but got 40 percent of the two-party vote—and began the four-year campaign that produced victory in 1969. Money for Republican campaigns was hard to pry loose from Organization loyalists (who had most of it), and it took real courage for someone like Lawrence Lewis, who furnished needed funds at a critical juncture in the 1969 campaign, to break old ties and create the "New Republicans."

We overcame all of those odds through all of those years and a winning statewide Republican party was born. With my election in 1969 as the first Republican ever elected in a statewide race in Virginia, one-party domination was gone.

In the Holton administration, we had the largest capital outlay, mostly for projects in higher education, transportation, and mental hygiene, in the history of the Commonwealth. We had the resources from Mills Godwin's sales tax, from Richard Nixon's revenue-sharing program, and from my own income and gasoline tax increases, to do the needed job.

The record will reveal many other accomplishments that took place during those four years and in subsequent years as a result of seeds planted during my term.

But there are a couple that I especially want to emphasize.

In the first place, I understood the relationship in our constitutional system between the legislative branch of the government and the executive. I welcomed and enjoyed the sessions of

the General Assembly in which the give and take between those two elements produced better government for Virginia.

The greatest source of satisfaction and pride for me from that four-year experience was in the field of race relations. It is well-known that in my Inaugural address I announced to the world that the "era of defiance is behind us." I asked that we "make today's Virginia a model of race relations based . . . on an aristocracy of ability, regardless of race, color or creed."

The obsession was not new to me. I still remember being offended when Carrie Porter, my baby sitter who was just a few years older than I, had to sit in the gallery when she took me to the movies because she was black. It still hurts for me to remember my older friend and mentor on many activities, John Cloud, when he began his comments on some mean and arrogant treatment of him by one of our mutual friends, with the words "now I know I'm a _____," and he used the "N" word, which offended me then and is unacceptable to most people today.

I told General Eisenhower, in a letter written on Dec. 15, 1965, analyzing the gubernatorial election (he had come into Virginia to campaign for us that year), that I believed that a two-party system was coming to Virginia in which the Republican Party would "continue to develop as a middle-of-the-road party" . . . and that "we will not, and I regard this as fortunate, be the type of Republican Party which bases its appeal to Southerners on some sort of segregationist position; that appeal, in my judgment, is creating for us more problems that it solves."

I also made a speech to the Sixth District Republican Convention in early 1956, in which I pointed to the opportunity which was available to the Republican Party to take the lead in reaching a moderate solution to the problems which were certain to arise from the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The very suggestion of any compliance with that decision, however, sent both my good friend Richard Poff (then in his second term in Congress) and the editors of the Lynchburg newspapers into orbit. Congressman Poff signed the "Southern Manifesto," which condemned and defied the U. S. Supreme Court. He likely would have been defeated if he had not signed that document, but I expect he has regretted that signature through the years. Congressman Brooks Hays of Arkansas did refuse to sign the Southern Manifesto, and he was defeated for re-election. But I expect he slept well most nights. (He told me as much when he visited me in the Governor's office during my term.) Lyndon Johnson was another who refused

to sign that document, and he made out very well in subsequent years.

I more directly and publicly confronted Massive Resistance at the end of my unsuccessful campaign for the House of Delegates from Roanoke in 1957. I scraped together enough money to run a full-page ad in the Roanoke Times, on the Sunday before the election, in which the words "KEEP OUR SCHOOLS OPEN" in two-inch red letters dominated the ad.

These earlier positions helped me to obtain the endorsement in 1969 of the very influential Richmond Crusade for Voters. The statements thus became very valuable to me in the long run, but at the time the temperature was pretty high.

The great opportunity, of course, came in September of 1970, just eight months after I became governor. After discussion in depth within the family, my wife Jinks took our children Anne and Woody to the Mosby Middle School on opening day. That was the school to which those young people would have been assigned under the city's busing plan if we had been subject to the court's jurisdiction. (Because we lived on state property, we were not under the city's assignment plan.) Similarly, I escorted Tayloe to the Kennedy High School, and the New York Times photograph of the two of us, together with the well-known fact that Jinks was doing the same thing at Mosby with the other children, demonstrated that our actions would be consistent with the words of my Inaugural address.

Gov. Colgate Darden, in a letter to me years later, described the newspaper picture of the two of us approaching Kennedy as portraying "... the most significant happening in this Commonwealth during my lifetime;" and the impact of that photograph was nationally recognized by its appearance in World Book Encyclopedia for years afterward.

It was significant because it demonstrated that Virginia was indeed a law-and-order state. Virginia would not defy the Supreme Court of the United States; Virginia's governor would not stand in the doors of the school houses (a la Governors Wallace, Faubus, Barnett and Maddox) defending the proposition that certain citizens, because of their race, would be denied equal protection of the law. It was significant because Virginia led the parade; it was a year later that Southerners elected a covey of "New South" governors: Jimmy Carter, Dale Bumpers, Reuben Askew, John West, and, later Lawton Chiles and Bob Graham. Significant also was the fact that very few Virginians put pen to paper to object to my performance on that opening school day. By far the great majority of those who wrote, both

from within and without Virginia, expressed approval of my actions. National newspapers noted the absence of violent clashes in Virginia which did occur in other states.

There were other accomplishments in this field during the Holton Administration. Ernie Fears became the first black director of Selective Service in the nation. He thoroughly integrated the Selective Service system in Virginia at a time when two-thirds of the kids we were drafting were black. Bill Robertson was the first African-American professional to serve in the Governor's office in Virginia, and his four statewide Governor's Conferences on Equal Employment Opportunities (all of which drew standing-room-only audiences comprised of officers of Virginia employers) gave impetus, I am sure, to the placement of black white-collar workers in many of the financial institutions and other offices in Virginia.

I must relate an anecdote about race which occurred at a seafood festival in Urbanna several years after the end of my term. An old black man, pretty short and fairly feeble, caught my attention and signaled for me to come to hear what he had to say. I leaned over to hear his almost whispered words: "First Governor of all the people."

You can hardly get any higher than that!

It is still possible that the "Republican party will develop as a middle of the road party" and that we will abandon the segregationist appeal to Southerners which has been so evident since I and the other "New South" governors completed our terms. But Republicans, in and out of the U. S. Congress, are espousing such extreme measures as to be destructive of our credibility: vigilante mentality about handguns and high-tech automatic assault weapons; insistence on federal interference with private decision-making currently guaranteed to each individual by the Constitution of the United States; actions taken and advocated which cause minorities to cast 90 percent of their votes for our opponents. In the words of a long-time chairman of one of the rural counties of Virginia who had turned Republican after a long time career as a Democrat, "Guv'ner," he said to me, "dem Republicans has dun gone too far!"

It is my considered judgment, too, based on the progress I have seen in Virginia since World War II, that the leadership of my party today is, at both federal and state levels, overly obsessed to cut taxes. Virginia is not a high tax state. The benefits which tax increases have brought to Virginia since 1965 are enormous! Our citizens have recognized and appreciate these benefits. Mills Godwin isn't remembered for passing the

sales tax; he is remembered—almost revered—for creating the community college system and enhancing creation of our world class system of higher education, neither of which could have been done without that tax. Jerry Baliles isn't remembered (by anyone except the editors of Richmond newspapers) for increasing taxes, but rather for meeting some of the transportation needs which have helped create the jobs which have resulted from our vibrant high-tech economy. And I'll bet not 3 of 10 people could tell you what tax I increased, but they all appreciate the swimmable rivers throughout Virginia which my 1 percent increase in the state income tax paid for.

Our citizens want the best and, when they understand the opportunity, they're willing to pay for it! Taxes are the price we pay for civilization, and Virginia's modern tax increases have created a civilization that all Virginians are properly proud of.

Let me conclude this retrospective with a telling anecdote. Soon after I was elected in 1969, Helen Guerrant, an acquaintance in Roanoke, sent me a small oil painting which she had done in memory of her husband Bob. Bob, she said, was a "died-in-the-wool Democrat," but before his death had expressed support for me as the Republican candidate for Governor. The picture was of a duckling recently emerged from its shell. She expressed the hope that it would be a pleasant symbol for me of a young and fresh start in Virginia's Republican era.

It could be that it is now a dying duck. But I am optimistic that the Republican Party, one day, will revert to reason and will find a way again to serve "all of the people." There is a growing

number of independent-minded elected Republicans whose attention is on solving problems: transportation needs, public school facilities, reliable and safe child care for working single moms who are trying to earn enough to pay the rent, make the car payment, and have enough left to put food on the table. They recognize the need for safeguards against child abuse, in homes and especially in state-supported correctional institutions. They seek ways to get at the roots of crime.

My hope is that the Grand Old Party I worked long and hard to make a winner will thereby become a permanent component of a vibrant two-party competition which will best guarantee the highest standard of living in the best possible environment for not just some but *all* Virginians.

Just as kids are asked today to remember the 3Rs to pass their SOLs, I ask that my administration be remembered for 3Rs of its own: We REASONed with legislators to determine needs; with public support, we allocated RESOURCES to meet those needs, and we moved Virginia a long way toward being a model of RACE RELATIONS based on an aristocracy of ability, regardless of race, color or creed. ●

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