

The GOP's Secret Weapon

If the war with Iraq was largely the work of the Likudnik faction that has commandeered the Bush administration's Middle East policies, the liberation of Liberia on which the President suddenly embarked the nation last summer seems to have originated at least in part with yet another lobby of questionable loyalties. On July 7, as Mr. Bush was trying to explain (so to speak) why American troops had to be sent yet again into an overseas combat theater, the *Washington Post* suggested what were perhaps more compelling reasons than the President and his speechwriters could invent, let alone express.

Not only the ill-conceived Liberian adventure but also the President's summer vacation in Africa, his denunciations in Senegal of his own country for its role in the slave trade, his support for \$15 billion in public funds to combat AIDS in Africa, and his transparent mollicoddling of Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, the most brutal (perhaps) and offensive despot on the African continent today were evidence of an unexpected interest in Africa from an administration that had hitherto seemed preoccupied with the Middle East. As the *Post* explained, the President's

willingness to focus attention on Africa reflects the growing influence of an eclectic lobbying coalition that includes aid groups, religious organizations, entrepreneurs and the Congressional Black Caucus,

and, indeed, the No-Whites-Allowed Club on Capitol Hill that had opposed the Iraq war was eager for the White House to send troops to Liberia.

Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice were also instrumental in influencing the President's Liberia policy, the *Post* reported, and the paper was careful to describe the one as "the first African American to serve as the top U.S. diplomat" and the other as "another African-American." Miss Rice herself took credit for influencing Mr. Bush's views of "the peculiar ties between America and Africa, dating back to the slave trade." The President, she told the *Post*, "felt an obligation to 'bring

about reconciliation.'"

It is also notable that Mr. Bush's trip to Africa, his anti-American speech on slavery, his aid for AIDS, and his Liberian policy all were unbosomed just before the national conventions of the NAACP and the Urban League, a coincidence that was unlikely to have been coincidental and which brings us to the point. As inexplicable as the sudden decision to send troops to Liberia seems in terms of national interests and the administration's general foreign-policy agenda, it is easily decipherable, given the domestic political delusions that continue to envelop the minds of the President and his main political advisors (principally Karl Rove). The simple and unvarnished truth is that we are sending American troops into serious danger in Liberia because Mr. Bush has been led to believe he can win black votes in next year's election.

Winning black votes—or, as various Republicans have rather indelicately put it in years past, "luring blacks into the Republican Party," much as one might lure squirrels into a trap—has been a goal of what pass for grand strategists in the GOP for decades, and, like most of the other goals of such strategists, it has been embarrassingly unfulfilled. In the 2000 election, the Republicans sprinkled various blacks around their national convention to show everyone who paid attention how tolerant they were, and Mr. Powell and Miss Rice were prominently exhibited. As black columnist Armstrong Williams wrote the day after the election, "Gov. Bush pursued African-American connections with more avidity than any Republican candidate of recent memory" and "studded his campaign trail with stops at inner-city schools, churches, welfare offices, and black communities."

All to no avail, of course. In 2000, Mr. Bush received a pathetic eight percent of the black vote, the lowest percentage won by a Republican candidate since Barry Goldwater's six percent in 1964. And to judge from the loud denunciations of the President and his party by such eminences as Julian Bond and Kweisi Mfume of the NAACP only a few days after his African trip, President Bush will be lucky to get even that much next year.



Almost nothing the President has done to win black favor has pleased the implacable lords of the NAACP. Last summer, the *Boston Globe* reported that "Bush has appointed more minorities to top-level government positions than President Clinton did when he put his first administration together." Mr. Mfume, interviewed by the *Globe*, quickly dismissed Mr. Bush's approaches to blacks as a "ploy," while Mr. Bond, at the NAACP convention, was positively vicious in denouncing the Republicans as a whole for appealing to the "dark underside of American culture" and aligning themselves with those "who reject democracy and equality" and whose "idea of equal rights is the American flag and Confederate swastika [sic] flying side by side."

One would think that, by now, it would be obvious to the Republicans that they are not going to get any appreciable number of black votes, that pursuing them will only distract the party and its resources from making approaches to constituencies that they either already have or could realistically hope to win, and that they do not need black votes anyway. The Republican Party today is, as it always has been, a white party, and its future lies in enhancing its share of the white vote, not in trying to construct a mosaic. In 2000, Mr. Bush won 54 percent of the white vote; had he spent less time pandering to nonwhites and more time wooing white voters whose turnout has been dwindling, he might even have won a majority of the national popular vote. In no presidential election since 1972 has a victorious Republican candidate failed to win a majority of whites. Only in 1992 and 1996 did the weak candidacies of George Bush I and Robert Dole garner 40 and 46 percent of the white vote, respectively.

Moreover, it should be equally obvious that the Democratic Party is now almost

entirely dependent on black votes to remain a major party at all. Of the 50 million votes received by Al Gore in 2000, one out of 19 (about 20 percent, or some ten million votes) came from blacks; if that bloc were to vanish, the Democrats would win no more votes than Bob Dole in 1996. Even more important than the black vote to the Democrats in the general election is the role of the same bloc in picking the party's nominee. This has been true since 1988, when the first Super Tuesday concentrated several Southern primaries on the same day, allowing the 40 percent or more of blacks who vote in them to cast a largely solid ballot for whichever candidate has sufficiently pandered to them (or, at least, to their self-appointed leaders). In 1988, the bloc went for Jesse Jackson, who won what *Congressional Quarterly* called "nearly unanimous" black support in the Southern primaries and emerged from them only 14 delegates behind Michael Dukakis, who won the party nomination that year only by mobilizing the ethnic vote. In 1992, Bill Clinton emerged as the leading Democratic candidate after winning even more votes than Jackson had four years earlier, and, in 2000, Al Gore forced his only serious rival for the nomination, Bill Bradley, out of the race by out-pandering him to win the black vote in the Southern primaries. Given the power of the black bloc virtually to dictate the Democratic presidential nomination and its importance for a Democratic electoral victory, it ought to be obvious that no number of black appointees and no amount of neocon chatter about vouchers, the color-blind society, and enterprise zones are going to persuade black voters and their chieftains to switch over to the GOP.

Why do Republicans not see this? It is tempting to suspect that they do see it, that Mr. Mfume is essentially right, and that the whole GOP racial pandering tactic is simply a "ploy" to make it look like the party is eager to help blacks while in fact piling up white votes. There are two problems with that theory. One is that the "ploy" takes so much effort (intervention in Liberia, for example) that it is clearly more than a ploy; the other is that, since it clearly does not work, what would be the point of continuing to abuse our patience with the pretense? The only plausible reason that can account for the obstinate GOP persistence in a failed and counterproductive strategy is that the party leaders really believe it, that they have become at least as wedded to the

Rainbow Republican strategy as the Soviet communists were to their economic dogmas, and that there is virtually nothing—no argument and no event—that could shake that belief. The Stalinists had Trofim Lysenko; Republicans have Mr. Rove.

And, if the Republicans themselves do not really believe it, the neoconservatives who have replaced the brains of the party with their own acute intelligence do. Thus, back in 1998, neocon Christopher Caldwell argued—quite seriously—in the *Atlantic Monthly* that the Republicans would be well advised to drop appeals to white Southerners, the Southern heritage, cultural issues, and especially opposition to gun control. The GOP, he wrote, through its "nitpicking libertarian indifference to Americans' fears about armed violence," had already alienated too many voters. If there really is anything resembling a rational purpose behind the Republican obsession with winning blacks, it may lie merely in the need to attract the sort of urban professional technocrats (like Mr. Caldwell) who may be about the only real constituency neoconservatives have and who despise any hint of affiliation with what they perceive as a rural, religious, gun-owning, culturally conservative, Southern, bigoted, and quite nontechnocratic stratum of the American population. Pandering to blacks makes people like Mr. Caldwell and his friends at the *Weekly Standard* feel sophisticated and progressive, though it must not be carried so far that very many nonwhites actually start showing up in their neighborhoods, schools, and fern bars.

More recently, neoconservative guru Arnold Beichman, writing in the *Washington Times*, seriously advocated that President Bush dump Vice President Cheney in 2004 and replace him with . . . Condoleezza Rice, a maneuver Mr. Beichman claimed would "split" the black vote and line Miss Rice up for a run for the White House in 2008, thereby forestalling the archdemon Hillary. Mr. Cheney would be happy to be demoted to national security advisor, he wrote. Confronted with heavyweight strategies like these from the Republicans and their neocon brain trust, the Democrats have little to fear.

The danger that the Republican delusion creates, however, is not that the party will lose. Quite frankly, it makes little difference which party wins, and I suspect most Americans know that. Last

summer, after Democratic presidential candidate Joe Lieberman had angered the NAACP by failing to show up at its convention, he tried to make amends by claiming he would appoint Mr. Mfume to the Supreme Court. What difference would it make if he did? How would Mr. Mfume vote differently from Sandra Day O'Connor, David Souter, and Anthony Kennedy, to name only three of the seven Republican appointees on the current Court? And what difference would it make if the president's name were Lieberman instead of Bush?

The real danger of the Republican delusion that the party can break the black political monolith by racial pandering lies in the pandering itself. It is one thing to sprinkle black faces around the convention, kiss black babies, and appoint black officials. It is quite another to endorse affirmative action, insult and denounce your own country because of slavery, and send troops into a violent and unstable country like Liberia for no better reason than the groundless hope of gaining a few black votes. The deeper into their delusion the Republicans immerse themselves and the party, and the more wedded to it and the policy and political commitments it implies, the less possible it will be for serious conservatives of any stripe to prevail within the party or in contests against Democrats.

Last summer, shortly after Mr. Bush returned from his African odyssey, he addressed the national convention of the Urban League, to what was described as "polite but tepid applause," and moored to his audience that "our journey toward justice has not been easy and it is not over" (and similar banalities). On the same page that it carried the article about the President's speech, the *Washington Post* carried another article about a new poll conducted for the Democratic Leadership Council, hardly a warren of Republican sympathizers. "Dramatic erosion in support among white men has left the Democrats in a highly vulnerable position," the *Post* reported, "and unless the party strongly repositions itself, President Bush will be virtually impossible to beat in 2004." Just so. Republicans can get all the tepid applause and outright insults the black politico-racial monolith has to offer, but they do not need its support or the foolish counsel of neoconservatives alienated from their own country and people. What they do need are white votes, more of them, and the issues and commitments that will win them. c

A Nightmare on Elm Street

I have raised up a chosen man from my people, with my holy oil I have anointed him so that my hand is always with him and my arm strengthens him.

A year ago, on the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Bishop Thomas G. Doran of the diocese of Rockford elevated a church downtown on Elm Street, St. Mary's Shrine, to the status of an oratory. (See "The Bells of St. Mary's," *The Rockford Files*, October 2002). The declaration seemed the crowning moment in the five-year-long comeback of the second-oldest Catholic church in Rockford. Before the fall of 1997, when the bishop entrusted St. Mary's to the care of the Institute of Christ the King, Sovereign Priest, the church had failed as a parish. Downtown Rockford simply no longer has enough residents—Catholic or otherwise—to sustain the massive red-brick Gothic structure. The Institute, which, at the invitation of Bishop Doran, ministers to the Latin Mass Community of Rockford, took on the task with gusto, under the leadership of St. Mary's rector, Fr. Brian A.T. Bovee.

O God, who for the defense of the Catholic

Faith and the restoration of all things in Christ didst fill Saint Pius, Supreme Pontiff, with heavenly wisdom and apostolic courage: grant in Thy loving kindness that by following his teachings and examples we may attain eternal rewards.

Between the first Sunday of Advent, 1997, and Christmas 2002, Father Bovee oversaw a massive renovation of the church. The altar rail was restored; two side altars were constructed, honoring the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph; the steep roof was replaced and the steeple repaired; and, at a cost of over \$400,000, the stained-glass windows ("some of the finest in the Midwest," according to stained-glass expert Frank Houtkamp) were removed, cleaned, repaired, and reinstalled. Organist and choir director Mark Dahlgren, at great personal expense, replaced St. Mary's aging organ.

The restoration of the church was paralleled by the growth of its congregation. By this summer, average Sunday Mass attendance had reached 425; most Sunday liturgies were standing room only. Father Bovee raised the possibility of adding a second Sunday Mass. (He already celebrates two Masses on weekdays.)



And then, over Labor Day weekend, while Father Bovee, Bishop Doran, and other top diocesan officials were out of town, everything changed.

Last November, I mentioned Winnebago County's plan to build a massive new jail over nine square blocks, across the street from St. Mary's (see "The Cohn Zone," *The Rockford Files*, November 2002). As I wrote,

It's an open secret that the county has long desired the property on which St. Mary's stands; now, since the jail would cover the lot in which most of the congregation parks, some parishioners have begun to suspect that Winnebago County hopes to solve the problem of public parking for the jail by making life uncomfortable for St. Mary's.

No one quite knew just how uncomfortable, however. On Thursday, August 28, county-board member Rick Pollack sent an e-mail to the board's secretary:

Sally, Here is my plan regarding the St. Mary's Church: Please have a resolution written to enlarge the land acquisition area (include the church property) for appraisal and potential purchase. At our meeting on Sept. 3, we will vote on the resolution and bring it in to the full County Board Sept. 4.

I hope to have a representative from the diocese and Paul Logli to be present for moral support. I don't want a media circus on this so I will talk to our board members. Tim Simms will check support for this at our caucus next week.



Tom Krause

Detail of the stained-glass window above the high altar. Bishop Doran signed the decree elevating St. Mary's to the status of an oratory on the Feast of the Transfiguration.