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## Corporate Culture, the Cold War, and the American South in the 1950s and 1960s



KARI FREDERICKSON

IN 1956, William Faulkner lamented that agriculture no longer stood at the center of the southern economy. "Our economy," he remarked, "is the Federal Government."<sup>1</sup> Beginning in the immediate post-World War II era, the region that once had been dominated by cotton fields, tenant shacks, and textile mill villages was rapidly giving way to defense installations, aerospace engineering facilities, and suburbs. Within three decades, federal spending changed the South's economic base and demographics to such a degree that by the early 1980s the region that President Franklin D. Roosevelt had once identified as "the nation's number one economic problem" had become one of the nation's leading industrial producers. Much of this federal spending was filtered through the rapidly expanding military-industrial complex necessitated by the Cold War. Consequently, although federal dollars constituted the engine that drove change in the South, the direction and shape of change was very much determined by the various corporate entities that moved south in the 1950s and 1960s to capitalize on this federal largesse.

To date, studies of the impact of the Cold War on the American South have been largely confined to examining the complex impact of anticommunism on southern politics and the budding civil rights movement. Anti-communism poisoned the liberal political well and fueled the massive resistance movement, making even the most tepid statement on racial progress by an elected official a sure road to political oblivion. But the Cold War contributed more than just toxic anticommunism to the South's political

landscape. The economic and demographic impact of the military-industrial complex throughout the region was profound. The development of new aerospace facilities around Atlanta, the growth of the space industry in Huntsville and on the east coast of Florida, the development of the Research Triangle in North Carolina, and the proliferation of military contracts generally brought thousands of new, highly educated workers to the region.<sup>2</sup> Many of these new workers brought their Republican politics with them. At the very least, few possessed the historically based, reflexive support of the Democratic Party on matters of race that had plagued the South since the turn of the century. Unencumbered by the region's historic hostility to the Republican Party, these Cold War immigrants became the foot-soldiers in the creation of a modern civic politics and of the two-party system in the South.

This was nowhere more true than in western South Carolina. In 1950, the Atomic Energy Commission chose Du Pont Corporation to build and operate the Savannah River Plant, a vast industrial site dedicated to producing plutonium and tritium for the hydrogen bomb. Encompassing over 200,000 acres and employing a permanent operations staff of 6,000, the Savannah River Plant had a significant impact on the region. The arrival of thousands of highly trained scientists and engineers and their families spurred the creation of sprawling suburbs and hastened the arrival of national department store chains. A significant portion of these new residents came from outside the South, bringing with them political traditions and beliefs unencumbered by the peculiar forces of southern history. Their political activities in this region of South Carolina were, however, influenced by the newcomers' specific Cold War environment. The particular political changes that befell the region were shaped by Du Pont's specific corporate culture. Corporate America was a key player in the Cold War. On the national level, the ideas and actions of elite business leaders were critical in shaping President Dwight Eisenhower's Cold War policies and were crucial to the evolution of American culture during this period.<sup>3</sup> Henry Luce, publisher of *Time* magazine, had recruited corporate leaders to the Cold War cause in 1947, calling corporations the "front line soldiers and battalions in the battle of freedom."<sup>4</sup> Du Pont arrived in South Carolina, ready to do battle in the Cold War. With 150 years of industrial experience, a complex reputation, and a well-defined corporate culture that privileged modernization and innovation, Du Pont and its employees had a dramatic effect on the region, particularly its politics. During the 1950s and 1960s, Du Pont employees were instrumental in creating a more efficient and transparent

city government, as well as a vibrant two-party system in a region that, for the previous 80 years, had been dominated by the Democratic Party.



The history of E. I. Du Pont de Nemours & Company is intertwined with the history of the nation. Founded in 1802 on the banks of Brandywine Creek near Wilmington, Delaware, Du Pont is one of the nation's oldest companies. Originally a manufacturer of gun powder, Du Pont received its first government contract from President Thomas Jefferson. It was the beginning of a long relationship. Du Pont gun powder was used in the War of 1812, the Mexican American War, and the American Civil War. Pioneers used Du Pont powder to clear the wilderness for settlement, build railroads, raise factories.<sup>5</sup> During World War I, Du Pont supplied 40 percent of all the powder used by the Allied powers, chalking up more than \$1 billion in sales.<sup>6</sup> Such unseemly profits came under the scrutiny of the Senate Munitions Investigation Committee—more popularly known as the Nye Committee—which investigated the cause of America's involvement in the First World War. The committee's final report harshly criticized Du Pont's excessive wartime profits, and the company whose very success was tied to the country's own had earned a grisly, new nickname: "merchants of death." Du Pont worked hard to rid itself of this public relations disaster, downplaying its munitions production and turning to the research and development of consumer and consumer-related products, like nylon, cellophane, and Freon.<sup>7</sup>

But World War II drew Du Pont back to its munitions roots and back to government contracts. Du Pont built and maintained the Hanford Engineering Works, part of the Manhattan Project, and was responsible for creating weapons-grade plutonium that went into the bomb used in the Trinity test and the "Fat Man" bomb dropped on Nagasaki. Eager to avoid the label "war profiteer," Du Pont agreed to participate in the project under two conditions: one, that the company would not make any profits from its association with the atomic project; and two, that any patents resulting from the work accomplished would become the property of the federal government. The government agreed to both conditions, paying Du Pont one dollar a year over costs for its contribution.

Following the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan, Du Pont expressed reluctance to continue at the center of the nation's weapons complex. In 1946, the company turned over the maintenance of the Hanford works to General Electric. In the postwar era, Du Pont invested heavily in

research and development, particularly of consumer products and textiles. By 1952, it offered more than 100 products in a wide range of industries. Readily accepting Henry Luce's earlier corporate call to arms, Du Pont positioned itself as the provider of a veritable cornucopia of products, and created a patriotic perception of itself that did not rely on the production of munitions. President Eisenhower in particular embraced this perspective in his foreign policy, expanding it to characterize the nation at large in its global struggle with Communism. With companies like Du Pont in the lead, America would be the provider of goods and services superior to those offered by the rest of the world.<sup>8</sup>

But world events soon overtook the company. On the morning of September 23, 1949, armed with scientific data from American and British experts, a somber President Harry Truman informed the nation that the Soviets had exploded an atomic bomb. In four short years, America's nuclear monopoly was ended. The world had become a much more dangerous place.

The discovery that the Soviet Union possessed nuclear capabilities escalated discussions at the nation's highest levels over whether the United States should proceed with the production of the hydrogen bomb, a thermonuclear device whose destructive capabilities were projected to be one hundred times greater than those of the existing atomic weapons. On January 31, 1950, Truman authorized an accelerated program to develop the hydrogen bomb.<sup>9</sup> To build this new plant, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) turned to Du Pont.<sup>10</sup> Du Pont executives remained anxious to avoid anything that might revive the "merchants of death" stigma. But the federal government persisted. Said one atomic energy expert, "To ask anybody else to build the plant when you could get Du Pont would be like settling for a rookie when you could get Babe Ruth in his prime."<sup>11</sup> Du Pont relented.

In mid-1950, AEC and Du Pont officials criss-crossed the country, investigating some 114 potential production sites.<sup>12</sup> The ideal location would combine "low population density, proximity to a fairly large urban center, a local labor supply, and an adequate supply of water of specified purity."<sup>13</sup> Their assignment acquired heightened urgency when, in the early hours of Sunday morning, June 25, 1950, thousands of North Koreans poured southward over the 38th parallel. The Korean War had begun. Five months later, on November 28, 1950, only a few days after Chinese troops crossed the Yalu River, threatening to turn the Korean conflict into a larger Asian land war, the AEC announced that it had chosen a South Carolina site that bordered the Savannah River along the western edge of the state.<sup>14</sup> A massive undertaking, the plant, ultimately known as the Savannah River Plant,

would encompass great swaths of land in Aiken, Barnwell, and Allendale Counties.<sup>15</sup>

The tri-county region out of which the Savannah River Plant was to be carved was already undergoing change in the late 1940s, before AEC officials arrived. The declining cotton economy of large land owners and sharecroppers had begun to give way to a more diversified agricultural mix.<sup>16</sup> The rural areas of Aiken County had lost population since 1940, with sharecroppers in particular leaving in droves during the decade. The scores of vacant farm houses bore testimony to the region's decline.<sup>17</sup> This small human tributary joined the larger rushing torrent of four million — a quarter of the region's farm population — that left the South during the war years. Horse Creek Valley — known to locals as "the Valley" — stretched across the county's northwest quadrant. Home to some of the South's oldest textile mills and mill villages, the Valley likewise had entered a period of transition during the 1940s and early 1950s.

Whereas depopulation and transition characterized the countryside and mill villages, the city of Aiken retained much of its nineteenth-century charm. Though Aiken lay only a few miles outside the Valley and numerous rural hamlets, the residents of the farms, the mill villages, and Aiken lived in different worlds. Incorporated in 1835, Aiken boasted a population of only 7,000 on the eve of the plant's construction.<sup>18</sup> Prior to 1950, Aiken existed peacefully as a wealthy enclave, serving the needs and whims of the nation's upper crust. Mrs. Lulie Hitchcock of Long Island came to Aiken in the 1870s after she discovered that its temperate climate and sandy soil were ideal for raising and training thoroughbreds. Mrs. Hitchcock and her husband owned a stable of race horses and they brought their equine passion to Aiken. She soon convinced many of her wealthy friends in the horsey set to make Aiken their winter home. Collectively they became known as the "Winter Colonists"; they typically arrived in January and left in April. They built sprawling mansions that they called "cottages," and which they christened with names — some stately, some whimsical — like "Rosehill," "Whitehall," "Banksia" and "Joye Cottage."<sup>19</sup> The cottages lined the beautifully landscaped 150-foot-wide boulevards. Dividing the boulevards were lovely parks, lush with towering magnolias and filled with the riotous color of that magnificent southern trifecta of dogwoods, camellias, and azaleas. The city proudly adopted the slogan the City of Parkways. Most of these broad avenues were still unpaved in 1950, out of consideration for the sensitivity of horses' hooves.<sup>20</sup> The horses of some of the nation's leading racing stables, the majority of which were owned by northerners, wintered in



Aiken. Many Kentucky Derby winners held their debuts at the annual Aiken trials, on the beautifully laid-out Mile Track.

Novelist Pat Conroy once observed that Aiken was socially schizophrenic, a town of well-defined categories and an obvious pecking order. The Winter Colonists stood high above the “Old Aikenites”—the town’s merchants and politicians whose families had lived in Aiken for generations and whose livelihood depended on the Winter Colonists; both groups considered themselves superior to the mill folk of the Valley. Politically, however, Aiken—like the rest of South Carolina—was solidly Democratic.

The demographic and economic impact of the Savannah River Plant on this primarily rural region was profound and is relatively easy to document. Between 1950 and 1952, more than 30,000 temporary construction workers and 6,000 permanent employees and their families, as well as proprietors of businesses and services that catered to the plant personnel—nearly 180,000 persons in all—flooded into the region.<sup>21</sup> Even though the Savannah River Plant was crucial to the national security state’s expanding nuclear arsenal, and although the Korean War had presented the specter of a constant state of total war, the Truman administration rejected the garrison state. They chose not to impose excessive controls by the federal government or the military and decided to rely instead on existing cities, such as Aiken, and private enterprise to absorb the new residents. Ultimately, two-thirds of the permanent employees—managers, scientists, engineers, and technicians—chose to live in and around Aiken. By 1953, the city’s permanent population had tripled. The city’s square mileage had grown 139 percent as a result of suburban annexation and development. Private developers created twenty-seven new “modern and convenient” subdivisions within commuting distance of the plant. The town hired eighty additional teachers in 1952 and added 40 permanent classrooms and 36 temporary classrooms. The Savannah River Plant commenced operations in late 1952, and the first shipment of plutonium left the plant in December 1954. The region, which at the close of World War II was categorized as underdeveloped and primarily rural, now represented an important outpost on the frontier of nuclear science as well as an integral component of the national defense state.

But sheer numbers do not convey the impact of the Savannah River Plant on this region of South Carolina. As important in determining the shape of change was Du Pont’s specific corporate culture. Intent on promoting itself primarily as an innovator and creator of consumer products, such as nylon and cellophane, and downplaying its role in weapons manufacturing, Du Pont had crafted a culture that heralded scientific discovery, innovation, and creativity, and that emphasized consumption and material

well-being as the cornerstone of a free people. Shaping this culture from the top was company president Crawford Greenewalt, who personified the company's emphasis on innovation and achievement. A graduate of MIT and a chemical engineer by training, Greenewalt was technical director of Du Pont's Graselli Chemical Department. He was among a tiny group of civilians invited to the University of Chicago in 1942 to witness the first nuclear reaction. After Du Pont joined the Manhattan Project, the company's president chose Greenewalt to serve as liaison at Hanford between the production team and the physicists. When he took over management of the Hanford project, the nuclear physicists were suspicious of him because he was not a nuclear physicist. Greenewalt boned up so well on nuclear physics that in six months he could talk to the scientists in their own language. He was such a quick study, in fact, that when Du Pont turned the operation of Hanford over to GE after the war, pioneering atomic scientist Enrico Fermi asked Greenewalt to quit Du Pont and devote his life to pure research.<sup>22</sup> Greenewalt's wartime managerial success, in addition to his marriage to the daughter of former company president Irene Du Pont, thrust him into the corporate limelight, and in 1948, he became one of the youngest men (as well as only the second non-blood relative) to become president of Du Pont.

Greenewalt possessed a restless mind and creative spirit. An accomplished musician, he played the clarinet, cello, and piano; he built model steam engines, grew orchids, and developed high-speed photographic equipment to study hummingbirds. Greenewalt had a hand in crafting the company's corporate structure, which likewise reflected its emphasis on innovation. Du Pont's industrial operations were divided into ten departments directing such diverse projects as electrochemicals, explosives, and rayon. Du Pont frequently switched employees among departments to "cross-fertilize" the company and to broaden the employees' experience. For example, an organic chemist might be put in charge of sales, where he was left to sink or swim. Within these positions, employees and managers were given great latitude. If the manager did a good job, the general staff did not meddle.

Because of Du Pont's concerns about image and its desire to foreground its consumer products, Greenewalt maintained a very high profile, and the public record of his thoughts concerning science, the scientist, and society is voluminous. Science, Greenewalt proclaimed, was "the source of [our] national strength, of material progress, of added leisure, and of enriched cultural opportunities."<sup>23</sup> Science relied on creativity; it also was a communal effort in which no idea is ever lost or destroyed.<sup>24</sup> And the creative process, of course, relied on intellectual freedom.<sup>25</sup> As innovators and



problem-solvers, scientists, Greenewalt argued, had a duty to contribute to civic life.<sup>26</sup> This belief applied to Du Pont employees in particular. Greenewalt consistently remarked on the potential of research and innovation to improve Americans' material well-being, and encouraged his employees to expand their creativity to pursuits beyond the laboratory. He and other corporate leaders put their industrial pursuits into a larger Cold War context. Improvement in the material status of mankind can proceed only in a free society, and innovation and creativity in science can take place only where there are no restrictions placed on freedom of thought. This freedom extended beyond the laboratory to participation in democratic institutions. Greenewalt's philosophy about the role of scientists in society jibed with a general faith in scientists, a belief that they might legitimately offer expertise not only as scientists, but might weigh in on a number of policy issues. Greenewalt consistently maintained that leaders of industry and business had a responsibility to involve themselves in political affairs, and Du Pont regularly urged its employees to be politically active.<sup>27</sup>

Potential employees were attracted to Du Pont because of its diverse industrial profile, its emphasis on research and development, and the potential for growth and experience within the company. Two highly sought-after young scientists — chemist Mal McKibben and nuclear physicist Walt Joseph — are good examples of the Du Pont scientists of the 1950s. With his B.S. in chemistry from Emory University, McKibben considered an offer from Chemstrand Corporation. Later, after joining the Savannah River Plant, he received offers from General Electric, the International Atomic Energy Commission, and Allied General Nuclear Services. Joseph, then a doctoral student in nuclear physics at the University of Pennsylvania, was interviewed twice by what he assumes was the Central Intelligence Agency. Both chose Du Pont because of its wide range of consumer products, its focus on pure research, and its reputation as an innovator. As McKibben stated frankly, "Du Pont was Cadillac, the others were Fords." Now retired, neither is disappointed in his career path. Both men recalled the sense of excitement and discovery that pervaded their work at the Savannah River Plant. Recalls McKibben, "We were always encouraged to think creatively, and we were given the latitude necessary to solve problems. Many employees extended this creativity and problem-solving ability outside the plant."<sup>28</sup>

Of course, the Savannah River Plant was different from Du Pont's other manufacturing concerns. Because it was dedicated to developing components for the hydrogen bomb, secrecy and security inside the plant were paramount. Nonetheless, within the parameters laid down by the AEC, Du Pont still found ways to "cross fertilize." Nuclear physicist Joseph was as-

signed to no fewer than eight different divisions within the plant during his long tenure. At one point, he was put in charge of plant traffic. Chemist McKibben was moved from heavy-water production to fuel and target fabrication to separations — all extremely different processes — while employed by the company.<sup>29</sup> Outside of the plant, employees were forbidden to talk about their work. Employee Ronnie Bryant noted that he and his fellow workers in the heavy-water production sector joked that, when asked about their jobs, they would reply that they were making lipstick. Turning more serious, Bryant observed that the constant reminders not to talk about your work outside the plant “made us feel that what we were doing was really important.”<sup>30</sup> Spouses and children were kept in the dark regarding the work that was done at the site. Du Pont acknowledged that such secrecy could cause tension at home. In a “memo for housewives,” the company told spouses of plant employees that even dinner-table conversation about the plant was potentially dangerous. “SRP is not an ordinary plant,” Du Pont reminded the wives of workers. “Its mission is national defense; its job is important and secret.”<sup>31</sup> Such extreme secrecy in a time of heightened international tension caused stress for area families. Children often came up with imaginative explanations for the secrecy that invaded their family lives. Walt Joseph’s son recalled that “[My father’s] job and work were not the topics of conversation at our dinner table. He left in the early hours of the morning, riding with a group of other men in a carpool, and came home just in time for dinner. Some weekends there would be a late night phone call and he would leave for work in the middle of the night. . . . Every few weeks, . . . my mother, my sister, and I would get in the car in the early evening and drive to pick my father up, and when we did we picked him up at a barber shop in a shopping center on the highway which ran from Aiken to New Ellenton. This was the only business I could associate my father with in the first six years of my life, so I made the logical assumption. My father was a barber.”<sup>32</sup>

Everything about the plant seemed to dictate that it existed as an entity wholly separate from the surrounding communities. It was located in a remote region. It sat on 325 square miles of real estate — roughly the size of the city of Chicago. Plant operations and administrative buildings were secluded behind miles of wooded buffer. Traffic streamed into the plant in the morning and out at night. Employees needed an identification badge to enter. It was a curious, secret place. Nevertheless, this insistence upon secrecy and security, rather than isolating the employees and heightening the distance between employees and town, actually facilitated community involvement. For many, the sense of mission that accompanied their work did not stop when they left the workplace. Many took seriously Greenewalt’s — and

Du Pont's— notion about their role in improving the standard of living. "Better living"—a well-known Du Pont slogan—was achieved not only through the acquisition of consumer goods, but through the creation and improvement of community institutions. Recalled Walt Joseph, "it was expected that you were involved in civic affairs."<sup>33</sup>

Within the larger Aiken community, these scientists and engineers were referred to collectively not as Savannah River Plant employees but as "Du Ponters." The identification with the company was that strong. Buzz Rich, an Aiken attorney whose family moved to the region in the early 1950s and whose mother worked at the plant, recalled the impact of the Du Pont employees on the region. "All those Du Ponters had a lot of energy, . . . all that brain power, coming into that small southern town. They had time on their hands, in the evenings and weekends. . . . [T]hey got involved and started all of these activities."<sup>34</sup> Owen Clary, who grew up in the town of Warrenville in the Valley and who eventually worked for the Savannah River Plant before heading up a local food bank, remarked that many of the Du Pont employees were civic-minded. "They were generous with their time and always volunteered for fundraising activities."<sup>35</sup> The activities of Du Pont employees were covered in the local newspaper and highlighted in the company newsletter, the Savannah River News. Du Pont employees started the community theater group, the United Way, and the Rotary Club, and raised money for a new library. Despite their recent arrival, employees of the plant were instrumental in organizing the area's first historical society, with the plant's official historian listed as its first secretary. Plant supervisors and employees worked very hard to relate their work to the community at large. Farmers of Aiken County flocked to a public program on radioisotopes and their applicability to agricultural research.<sup>36</sup> The YWCA sponsored a popular lecture series on subjects that ranged from the nature of matter to nuclear reactors. Over 600 school teachers attended an all-day seminar on the incorporation of atomic energy into the school curriculum. Employees founded local chapters of their professional associations and made them relevant to the community. For example, the Savannah River Subsection of the American Chemical Society contributed \$125 for science books for the local high school and counseled students on careers in chemistry and atomic energy.<sup>37</sup> Arthur Tackman, assistant manager of the Savannah River Plant, was named Aiken County "Citizen of the Year" for 1953. He had served as campaign chairman of the American Red Cross–Community Chest, coordinator of committees of the Cotton Festival, and chairman of the Boy Scouts in the area. He had only been a resident of the area for two

years.<sup>38</sup> SRP employees provided volunteer labor to build a public swimming pool in nearby Williston, and SRP employees organized and staffed various suburban fire departments. By 1955, only five years after the decision to build the plant was made, Du Pont employees were either leading or participating in the major community institutions in Aiken.

Following Greenewalt's advice, employees likewise became involved in the city's political institutions, initiating innovations that were based on their desire for modern, efficient, representative government. The majority of Du Pont's permanent operations staff took up residence in Aiken's burgeoning suburbs. To bring order to development chaos, these new neighborhoods organized themselves into civic associations that would regularly and collectively bring their particular issues before the city council. The first such group organized was the Crosland Park Civic Association, the first suburb built to house plant employees.

These new civic associations were in the forefront of promoting a change from the extant commission form of city government to a city manager system. Crosland Park Civic Association took the lead among newcomers in supporting the transition to a full-time city manager system which, residents believed, "contain[ed] sound principles of efficient city administration. . . ." A full-time city manager would be better equipped to handle the problems associated with rapid growth, something Crosland Park residents knew only too well. The 500-plus home subdivision was cursed with chronic sewage overflow, a complaint regularly brought before the city council.<sup>39</sup> Crosland Park residents likewise supported the "appointment of city employees on the basis of merit apart from political considerations or influence," as well as "planning and zoning provisions which provide for orderly growth, stabilize property values, and protect the citizens of Aiken from the inconvenience, danger, and expense which can result from irresponsible real property development." Finally, the association called for "a carefully developed system of public hearings which assure that the citizens of Aiken shall have the opportunity to be heard in matters of basic policy determination." By calling for a merit system and a transparent decision-making process, the new residents were advocating not only for a more democratic and representative government, but for a process that in many ways resembled the scientific process, in which all variables are carefully weighed.<sup>40</sup> Aiken voters overwhelming approved the adoption of the city manager system.<sup>41</sup> The arrival of the plant and its thousands of employees likewise precipitated a more visual change in the city's identity. By the mid-1950s, the city's crest reflected its new, modern identity: joining images of a golfer,

a thoroughbred, and a plantation home was the symbol for nuclear energy with the word “progress” emblazoned across it.

Du Pont employees likewise were instrumental in lending support to Republican candidates in national elections and in organizing the first county-level Republican Party. South Carolina’s one-party system grew out of historical racial and political animosities. Since Reconstruction, the Republican Party had been anathema to South Carolina’s white voters. The Republican Party became synonymous with “negro control,” and the return to Democratic Party rule in the 1870s was marred by violence, perhaps none worse than in western South Carolina. Aiken County alone witnessed two of the worst race riots in state history in 1876. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, South Carolina was the region’s most reliably Democratic state, refusing to bolt along with its sister states in 1928, and polling huge numbers for Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s and 1940s. The Republicans rarely fielded candidates for office even at the highest levels, and the Democrats utterly dominated local politics in all forty-six counties. Against such daunting odds, the fate of the state Republican Party was sealed. According to one account, by mid-century, “the South Carolina GOP was merely a quaint relic of the past, widely accused of graft, corruption, and gross mismanagement.”<sup>42</sup>

Political scientists have noted how, in the postwar era, residents of the urban and suburban South “gradually began to identify their economic interests as resting with the Republican Party.”<sup>43</sup> As Aiken’s population exploded with the creation of the Savannah River Plant, they joined the growing numbers of urban and suburban residents across the South as they pulled the lever for Dwight Eisenhower and other Republican candidates. In 1952 in South Carolina, Eisenhower drew support from wealthier whites in the urban and suburban areas, as well as more race-conscious whites in the low country who were disturbed at the role of civil rights in the Democratic Party platforms of the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1956, in the wake of the *Brown* decision (in which the Eisenhower administration submitted an *amicus curiae* brief supporting the NAACP’s position), Eisenhower lost much of his race-based low country support. Dissatisfied with the president’s position on race, whites living in majority black counties threw their votes to unpledged electors. In fact, the only county the Republican president carried in 1956 was Aiken. Led by the county’s new residents, the Republicanism of Aiken County was shaped by an opposition to New Deal-style liberalism rather than an overt racism. The party leadership reflected the more cosmopolitan nature of the rank and file, with most key leaders coming from out of state.<sup>44</sup>



Not content to express their Republican sensibilities in presidential elections alone, Republicans in Aiken, led by Du Pont employees, built the party from the roots up, and by the late 1950s they were contesting seats on the city council. Their affiliation with the Republican Party was as much ideological as it was practical: the local Democratic Party appeared to many to be a “closed” body of established elites, so the Republican Party simply offered a vehicle for involvement. Efforts to organize the party on the county level occurred in the early 1960s. SRP employee Walt Joseph remembers the first Aiken County Republican Party Convention. “The law required political conventions to be held in public buildings so the group reserved the courthouse for the designated evening. When the small band of party faithful arrived for the convention, they discovered the courthouse dark and locked. Repeated attempts to phone the building custodian and other political figures were unsuccessful. Finally, in desperation, but within the letter of the law, the convention was held in the courthouse parking lot.” In 1967, Aiken County became the first county in South Carolina to hold a Republican primary.<sup>45</sup>

By the early 1960s, the state Republican Party had been transformed, drawing strength from expanding suburban areas in Aiken, Richland, and Charleston Counties and their middle- and upper-middle-class residents. Contemporary commentators observed that presidential Republicanism in South Carolina was stronger than that in any other southern state.<sup>46</sup> In the presidential election of 1960, Republican candidate Richard Nixon lost the state by fewer than 10,000 votes, and 63.2 percent of all city and suburban residents voted Republican.<sup>47</sup> South Carolina Republicans adopted a brand of conservatism that mirrored in important respects the conservatism taking hold in the country as a whole during this period. Popular conservative themes included concerns about the influence of organized labor, the conduct of the Cold War, and the burgeoning civil rights movement. Republican Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona was the poster child of this new conservatism, and he enjoyed widespread popularity among South Carolina Republicans.

By 1962, the state Republican Party felt confident enough to take on three-term U.S. Senator Olin D. Johnston. Johnston’s political credentials were formidable. Elected governor in 1934 and 1942, Johnston had served as the state’s senator since 1945. He was a reliable New Deal Democrat, a strong supporter of organized labor and the limited welfare state. Johnston had remained a loyal—if not enthusiastic—supporter of Harry Truman in the presidential election of 1948, when many states’ rights conservatives in South Carolina bolted the party over the Democrats’

civil rights platform. Likewise, Johnston had remained in the Democratic camp during the tumultuous 1950s, when many disgruntled southern Democrats voted as independents.<sup>48</sup>

The Republicans nominated well-known syndicated newspaper columnist William D. Workman to run against Johnston. A life-long newspaper man, the 47-year-old Workman had always maintained a politically neutral position. However, in a letter to Barry Goldwater, Workman revealed that he had “opposed the [national] Democratic tickets since Roosevelt’s second term.”<sup>49</sup> Devising a winning strategy proved difficult for the South Carolina Republicans. They considered trying to yoke Johnston to liberal president John Kennedy and the increasingly disruptive civil rights movement, but painting Johnston as a racial liberal was futile. Although hardly a virulent white supremacist, he had established his anti-civil rights credentials in the 1940s and had not wavered since. Although this was his first try at public office, Workman’s conservative criticisms of the civil rights movement and the welfare state were well known. Those not familiar with Workman’s journalism could familiarize themselves with his racial views by reading *A Case for the South*, published in 1960. Declaring his position to be that of “the [white] man in the middle,” *A Case for the South* is Workman’s attempt to explain the white South’s opposition to integration. Workman’s “case” was built on the tired, time-worn arguments of southern apologists: that hundreds of years of cohabitation had given southern whites special insight into the nature of the black man; that African Americans, as a whole were an adolescent race only recently moving into civic adulthood; and that southern whites were most capable of directing their own racial affairs without interference from the courts or the federal government.<sup>50</sup> Having made his own position clear, Workman stated confidentially on a number of occasions that he did not wish to bring race into the campaign. Most likely this was because it was not an issue with which he could attack Johnston. Johnston deftly kept his distance from certain elements of Kennedy’s program, telling South Carolina voters that he never supported civil rights measures or “wasteful foreign aid give-aways.”<sup>51</sup>

Unwilling to take on Johnston directly, Workman attacked liberalism generally and Washington liberals in particular, whom he called a “group of arrogant intellectuals surrounding the Kennedy clan...”<sup>52</sup> Workman railed against the evils of an activist federal government with its expansive, meddling bureaucracy, which he considered one step away from Communism. He opposed federal aid to education, as well as any federal intervention into health care for the elderly. The expanding welfare state had become “cradle to the grave protection . . . indulgence by the federal government at

taxpayers' expense."<sup>53</sup> He endorsed "national defense to whatever degree and at whatever cost is essential to the security of the United States," and championed an unrelenting resistance to world Communism. One Workman advertisement criticized Johnston for supporting arms control and disarmament, warning voters that by advocating arms reduction Johnston threatened national sovereignty and supported the notion of a Soviet superstate.<sup>54</sup> Such heated rhetoric was red meat to defense workers on the front lines of the Cold War. An arms agreement threatened the livelihood of folks who made their livings developing materials for the hydrogen bomb. Workman did his best to craft his message in the Goldwater mold, making his campaign part of the broader push for "a new conservatism which is spreading throughout America," which sought to stem "the liberal tide which has been sweeping the United States toward the murky depths of socialism."<sup>55</sup>

In Aiken County, Savannah River Plant and Atomic Energy Commission employees became heavily involved in Workman's campaign. Gus Robinson, who worked in the Atomic Energy Commission's Office of Public Information, and Don Law, editor of the *Savannah River Plant News*, provided key information on the political temper of plant employees, assuring Workman that they could "predict good a Republican vote . . . from AEC and DuPont personnel."<sup>56</sup> Plant physicist Walt Joseph served as a precinct captain for Workman, while North Augusta — a town heavily populated by plant personnel — was considered a lock for the challenger.<sup>57</sup>

Workman made an impressive showing in an improbable race, garnering 44 percent of the statewide vote from an electorate that only a decade before had possessed an almost visceral distaste for all things Republican. Aiken County was one of only three counties to give a majority of votes to Workman.<sup>58</sup> His most lopsided victories within the county came from precincts in Aiken and North Augusta heavily populated by middle-class plant personnel.<sup>59</sup>

Although defeated, South Carolina Republicans had made tremendous strides in building their party, and they looked forward to the presidential contest of 1964. In September of that year, U.S. Senator and Aiken resident Strom Thurmond announced he was leaving the Democratic Party and joining the Republicans to support standard-bearer Barry Goldwater. Thurmond's party switch was a tremendous coup for South Carolina's Republicans. Garnering the affiliation of the state's most popular politician lent the fledgling party instant credibility. Many observers have since credited Thurmond with bringing two-party politics to the state; however, a closer look demands that more credit be given to party operatives, changing

demographics, and the 1962 campaign in making Thurmond's switch something less than suicidal. Ever the astute politician, Thurmond no doubt had observed the changes in the political terrain wrought by the Cold War. After leaving the governor's mansion and losing the race for U.S. Senate to Olin Johnston in 1950, Thurmond settled in Aiken, joining a local law firm. For the next several years, he represented numerous landowners displaced by the Savannah River Plant in their quest for what they considered more equitable appraisals of their property. Although a private citizen, Thurmond was never out of the public eye, appearing frequently at community events. His professional and possibly his social circle came to involve individuals from the Savannah River Plant. And although it is impossible to know the extent to which he was influenced by the burgeoning Republican sentiment in Aiken, he was certainly aware of it. Within this context, then, Thurmond's switch seems less an example of political soothsaying than a well-timed and sensible political accommodation. Although Thurmond and his aides always maintained that the senator's high-profile switch was a singular act of political bravery, former aid Harry Dent confided to Thurmond's biographer that Workman's challenge to Johnston in 1962 provided "a pretty good poll" of potential Republican support.<sup>60</sup>



The onset of the Cold War and the disbursement of billions of dollars in federal funds through the military-industrial complex transformed regions of the American South in countless ways. In the once sparsely populated, mostly rural region of western South Carolina, the arrival of thousands of highly educated scientists and engineers heralded the beginning of a process to break down the political parochialism of the South. Just as New Deal labor legislation initiated the decline of the South's economic isolation, so too did the influx of the corporate Cold War footsoldiers mark the beginning of the end of the South's political isolation. In Aiken, South Carolina, the thrust for civic involvement and institution-building seemed to evolve naturally from Du Pont's internal culture and the larger culture of the Cold War. Perhaps what is most surprising about the transition of Aiken from a sleepy, wealthy enclave to bustling small city was not *that* it happened, but how quickly change came to this one community. By all accounts the early years of the plant (essentially 1950–1957) were frantic. The pressure to develop the hydrogen bomb and expand the nation's nuclear arsenal was enormous. In this harried context, such a high level of civic involvement makes sense only from the perspective of the employees themselves, who viewed community involvement as an integral part of their

overall mission. The result was a more modern South. The efforts of plant employees to create a viable Republican Party laid the critical groundwork for a two-party system in a region that had not known true political competition since the nineteenth century. The creation of a more democratic, competitive political system in which the local Republican Party drew on themes resonating in communities around the nation ultimately made the South less peculiar, and more like the rest of the country.

## NOTES

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4. *Ibid.*, 5; Luce quoted in Bruce Cumings, "The American Century and the Third World," *Diplomatic History* 23 (Spring 1999), 360.
5. Leonard Mosley, *Blood Relations: The Rise & Fall of the du Ponts of Delaware* (New York: Atheneum, 1980); Max Dorian, *The du Ponts: From Gunpowder to Nylon* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961); Gerard Colby Zilg, *Du Pont: Behind the Nylon Curtain* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974); "The Wizards of Wilmington," *Time*, April 16, 1951, 98.
6. Zilg, *Behind the Nylon Curtain*, 151, 156–59; "Wizards of Wilmington," 98.
7. David A. Hounshell and John Kenly Smith, Jr., *Science and Corporate Strategy: Du Pont R&D, 1902–1980* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 221–86.
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10. U.S. Department of Energy, *The Savannah River Plant of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission*, 1963, 3.
  11. "Wizards of Wilmington," 94.
  12. Daniel Lang, "Camellias and Bombs," *New Yorker*, July 7, 1951, 42.
  13. F. Stuart Chapin, Jr., et al., *In the Shadow of a Defense Plant: A Study of Urbanization in Rural South Carolina; A Final Report of the Savannah River Urbanization Study*, Institute for Research in Social Science, University of North Carolina, June 1954, 1. The head of DuPont's Explosives Department, H. L. Brown, wrote a memo on November 6, 1950, that detailed comparisons between a Paris, Texas, site and the Savannah River location. Brown noted that the Savannah River location had a lower wage scale. Further, the Texas site was occupied by two large cattle ranchers, while the Savannah River site was occupied by "colored agricultural workers" whose "houses are of low value." Presumably, they would be easier to dislocate. See Jobie Turner, "Aiken for Armageddon: The Savannah River Site and Aiken, South Carolina" (Master's thesis, University of Georgia, 1998), 20–22.
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22. "Wizards of Wilmington," 95.
23. Crawford H. Greenewalt, "The Slow and Steady Way of Progress," p. 2, speech, December 5, 1951, New York City, Pamphlet Collection, Duke University Library.
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