



COLD WAR DIXIE

MILITARIZATION AND MODERNIZATION
IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Shifting Landscapes

Politics and Race in a Cold War Community

From 1941 to 1948, Aiken County was represented in the South Carolina state senate by Fred Brinkley, a physician from the tiny town of Ellenton. In addition to being one of the town's two doctors, Brinkley was also a part-time farmer and owner of the one of the town's gristmills. A longtime resident of Ellenton, Brinkley was closely tied to the region's agricultural rhythms and was active in community affairs. And like every other state senator, Brinkley was a Democrat in a state that reviled Republicans. In the early 1950s, after Ellenton was condemned to make room for the Savannah River Plant (SRP), Brinkley moved to the city of Barnwell. He died relatively soon after the evacuation, in June 1952, with his passing serving as poignant symbol of the larger transformations under way in the area.¹

The influx of thousands of new residents from communities across the nation altered not only the region's demographics, built environment, economic profile, and cultural identity but also its politics. In 1968, fifteen years after operations commenced at the SRP, Aiken County voters elected George McMillan to represent them in the State Senate. A Republican and former Du Pont supervisor at the SRP, McMillan was just one of a growing number of Republicans elected to public office in Aiken County and in the expanding suburban regions across South Carolina and other southern states in the 1960s and 1970s. The origins of the Republican Party lay in the communities housing the plant employees; the party drew strength from their conservative, middle-class values, forged not only by opposition to certain New Deal-era programs and staunch anticommunism but also from notions of efficiency and modernization as they applied to the political process. Such values were also deeply engrained in Du Pont's corporate culture.

The growth of the Republican Party in Aiken County coincided with and at times appeared synonymous with the acceleration of school integration. Although the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 motivated thousands of white southerners to vote Republican, the party's roots in South Carolina went further back and were tied to the changes brought on by the Cold War. Integration in this region was in part shaped by Du

Pont's corporate culture. Although the company encouraged employees to participate in local and state politics, there was an understanding that employees were not to engage overtly in the desegregation debate and were to let the issue run its course. As with its employment strategy, Du Pont preferred to follow local custom rather than challenge it directly.

School integration proceeded as slowly in Aiken County as it did in other towns across the South, but without the extreme public acrimony and outright violence present in some communities. Although whites in Aiken County—both longtime residents and newcomers—were content to drag their feet on the issue, the impending threat of a loss of federal funds as well as the judicial dismantling of freedom-of-choice school-assignment plans in the late 1960s finally brought desegregation to the region. When meaningful integration finally came to the county in 1970, white resistance died with a whimper.

The relatively uneventful process of integration partly resulted from factors related to Aiken's particular historical development as well as the more recent changes brought about by the Cold War. White resistance in this corner of South Carolina was muted by a variety of factors, including changing demographics, the influence of Du Pont's particular corporate culture, the central role given to large corporations for securing prosperity and security, the reputation of black schools, and the presence of Winter Colony residents. The intense backlash and white flight to private academies found in other communities simply was not present in Aiken. While not exactly welcoming of the prospect of integration, white parents also were unwilling to take extreme measures to stop it.



Following company president Crawford H. Greenewalt's advice, Du Pont employees became involved in the city's political institutions, initiating innovations that were based on their desire for modern, efficient, representative government, something that seemed lacking in this one-party region. The majority of Du Pont's permanent operations staff took up residence in Aiken's burgeoning suburbs and in the highly suburbanized town of North Augusta. To bring order and efficiency to the development chaos that was the result of rapid residential expansion, residents of these suburban enclaves organized civic associations that would regularly and collectively bring particular neighborhood issues before the city council. The first such group organized was the Crosland Park Civic Association. By the early 1960s, every suburb boasted a neighborhood association.²

These new civic associations were in the forefront of promoting a change in city government from the commission form 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, members believed, would promote “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 five-hundred-plus-home subdivision was cursed with chronic sewage overflow, a complaint regularly brought before the city council.³ 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.⁴ With the new neighborhood associations in the lead, Aiken residents overwhelmingly approved the adoption of the city manager system.⁵

Du Pont employees likewise were instrumental in bringing two-party politics to what had been a one-party state. Du Ponters took the lead in promoting Republican candidates in national elections and in organizing the first county-level Republican Party, joining other white-collar suburbanites around the state and region in developing a viable second party. South Carolina’s one-party system had grown out of historical racial and political animosities. Since Reconstruction, the Republican Party had been anathema to South Carolina’s white voters, synonymous with “negro control.” The return to Democratic Party rule in the 1870s was marred by violence, perhaps nowhere worse than in Aiken County, which had seen 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 the party in 1928 and polling huge numbers for Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s and 1940s. The Republicans rarely fielded candidates for office even at the state’s highest levels, and Democrats dominated local politics in all forty-six counties. According to one account, by midcentury, “the South Carolina GOP was merely a quaint relic of the past, widely accused of graft, corrup-

tion, and gross mismanagement.”⁶ Republican conventions were derided as “the semi-annual gathering of the pie brigade” where the spoils of party patronage were distributed.⁷

Dissatisfaction with the national Democratic Party began to emerge in the 1930s and 1940s as changes brought on by the Great Depression, New Deal, and World War II began to chip away at a southern caste system grounded in low-wage labor and white supremacy. By the late 1940s, a growing number of whites were becoming increasingly hostile toward the national Democratic Party’s position on civil rights. In 1948, outraged at President Harry S. Truman’s civil rights initiatives and the inclusion of a civil rights plank in the Democratic Party platform, South Carolina Democrats joined white conservatives from several other southern states and bolted the national party, throwing their support behind the States’ Rights Democratic Party, more commonly known as the Dixiecrats. Led by presidential candidate and South Carolina governor Strom Thurmond, the Dixiecrats hoped to wrest enough votes from Truman to throw the election into the House of Representatives. In the end, the Dixiecrats won only four states, but their campaign constituted a shot across the political bow, serving notice to the national Democratic Party that white southerners’ political allegiance could no longer be taken for granted. Still, despite their misgivings about the direction of the national party, wrenching a majority of southern whites away from the Democratic Party was going to be extremely difficult. Once “liberated,” where would they go? By the early 1950s, the South still had no meaningful Republican Party organization. Southern whites unhappy with the direction of the Democratic Party continued to express their displeasure in presidential elections, voting in unprecedented numbers for the Republican candidate, but not as members of any local Republican organization. The existing party apparatus was too weak, too corrupt. Any viable Republican Party would have to be built from scratch by individuals free of the historical political baggage carried by white southerners.⁸

Much of the impetus behind the growth of the Republican Party was the particular economic change that accompanied the Cold War. Between 1950 and 1970, 90 percent of growth in employment in industry in the South took place in high-wage industries, many of them considered part of the military-industrial complex.⁹ These white-collar employees, housed in expanding urban and suburban areas, increasingly identified their economic interests as resting with the Republican Party.¹⁰ South Carolina’s employment profile changed dramatically. Aiken County was one of the state’s fastest growing in terms of industrial expansion. In Aiken County in 1940, 31.5 percent of adults were employed in agriculture; by 1970, that percentage had dropped to 2 percent. In 1940, Aiken County was roughly 18 percent urban; by 1970, 44.4

percent of the population lived in metropolitan areas. Over the same period, the percentage of Aikenites employed in white-collar jobs shot from 15 percent to 41 percent. As part of this transition, the county had become wealthier. From 1953 to 1962, purchasing power in the county rose by five hundred dollars per capita and two thousand dollars per household, and retail sales doubled in dollar volume.¹¹ Such changes were not limited to Aiken. Overall, South Carolina's suburban population grew by nearly 400 percent between 1950 and 1970.¹² Aiken joined rapidly expanding counties such as Richland (Columbia), Greenville, Lexington, and Charleston in the white-collar suburban boom.

Profound political change followed this economic transformation. From 1946 to 1963, South Carolina had the lowest level of party competition in the South. Between 1964 and 1974, however, it moved into first place in the Deep South and seventh overall in the region. No other Deep South state experienced increasingly competitive two-party gubernatorial elections between 1960 and 1975.¹³

The expanding metropolitan areas were the source of the reborn Republican Party. In 1952, Dwight D. Eisenhower drew support from wealthier whites in the urban and suburban areas of South Carolina, as well as more race-conscious whites in the majority black lowcountry who were disturbed at the role of civil rights in the Democratic Party platforms of the late 1940s and early 1950s. By 1956, skeleton Republican Party organizations existed in roughly half of the state's forty-six counties. Between 1956 and 1963, the party had no paid staff and no official, continuing central headquarters. Party leadership came from a mishmash of businessmen, disaffected Democrats, and newcomers, most of them political novices.¹⁴

The early leaders of South Carolina's retooled Republican Party were recent transplants. Gregory D. Shorey Jr., for example, was born in Massachusetts and educated at Boston University, ultimately earning a graduate degree in public relations and marketing communications. He served in the U.S. Navy during World War II and subsequently became active in the Massachusetts Republican Party. In 1950, he moved to Greenville, South Carolina, where he founded a company that manufactured marine safety and water sports equipment and moved quickly to the top of the state Republican Party hierarchy. He served as state chair of Eisenhower for President in 1952 and 1956, a Republican elector in 1952 and 1956, state executive chair from 1954 to 1956, and state chair from 1956 to 1962.¹⁵ The nascent GOP received financial backing from Roger Mil-iken, president of the family owned Deering-Milliken Textile Corporation, the world's third-largest textile firm. Milliken had contributed extensively to the national Republican Party but had avoided the dysfunctional state party until the revamped version emerged