

Taking No Prisoners

Hooks, Baker, the GOP And the Road Not Taken

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By Roger Witherspoon

It's hard to make pancakes with your right arm broken and useless in a sling.

It was 90 degrees and humid in Miami Beach, even though it was just 7:30 in the morning. Frances Hooks was struggling to fix breakfast in the kitchen of their hotel suite during the NAACP annual convention. Breakfast was the only quiet time Ben Hooks would have that day for a protracted interview; but he didn't cook and a one-armed Frances was having a hard time.

So we changed roles: I cooked breakfast, Frances manned the tape recorder and Ben Hooks set the table and talked about the changing role of Blacks in national politics. Blacks needed to be represented in both political parties, he said, though that would work only if both parties really wanted black support.

"We're at a crossroads," he mused. "There is a slight chance that the Republican Party can really offer something to black folks. If Howard Baker wins the nomination, that's something I could work for. If Reagan wins, it's an opportunity lost."

Hooks was prepared to take a leave of absence from the helm of the NAACP and actively campaign for the Senator, a long time political ally who had become a family friend. In those years, the NAACP chapters provided the manpower for most civil rights campaigns, and Hooks said he would try to mobilize those ground troops for a Republican presidential campaign.

It would really shake things up, he said, if Blacks had a real say in the workings and platforms of both major political parties. The implications for the future could not be calculated. Under Richard Nixon, the Republican Party had launched its southern strategy, opposing affirmative action, civil rights and labor-oriented legislation, and progressive programs in general. It was, in Hooks' view, a genteel version of the racist politics of the past.

If Baker won, he said, there was a chance for progress with both parties making the

political and economic enfranchisement of Blacks a priority.

But Baker was a long shot. He was a star of the progressive “Rockefeller Wing” who was battling the telegenic Ronald Reagan for the presidential nomination in an increasingly conservative, anti-black, southern-oriented GOP. Hooks knew Baker from his early days as one of the few black attorneys in western Tennessee, back in the days when black lawyers walked into the court house via the back door along with the rest of the “coloreds.”

“We weren’t entirely on different sides of the fence,” recalled Baker. “Ben was initially a Republican during the Eisenhower era.” Hooks switched parties during the administration of Frank G. Clement, one of the few southern governors to back desegregation. It was a time when many blacks were Republican, a legacy of the Party of Lincoln which had begun to crumble with the administrations of President Roosevelt and the New Deal.

Baker was challenging Clements for a U.S. Senate seat, and “I was reaching out to get the support of Blacks in the Memphis region, which was unusual for a Republican in those days. I went to see if we could find common ground. He clearly was important to both parties.”

Hooks had become the state’s first Black criminal court judge, and Baker said “he was a man of stature, courage and determination.”

“I cannot over estimate the importance of Frances. She was a powerful ally for him and had insights she shared with him about the importance of two-party competition. Frances openly supported me in both of the early election races.”

It was a two way relationship between the civil rights leader and the young Tennessee Senator. “He had a great impact on my views,” recalled Baker. “He encouraged me to support the open housing bill and I did. Later, they were looking for a commissioner for the FCC. I did not know they would consider a Black, but I recommended him and I can’t tell why Nixon chose him. But he did.”

Baker lost the 1980 GOP nomination to Reagan, who went on to open his official presidential run with a speech on states’ rights in Philadelphia, Mississippi – a clear statement that racists were welcome. Baker later became Reagan’s chief of staff, and while the personal friendship remained, the break between blacks and the Republican Party intensified. The hostility was open when Reagan nominated Robert Bork to the U.S. Supreme Court. Bork was a federalist who opposed the Court’s landmark Brown vs. Board of Education decision. Reagan, who was scheduled to speak before the NAACP, asked Baker to go in his stead.

“I called Ben and said I need your help,” he recalled Friday. “I have to give the president’s speech, and I need some guidance. He called me back and said ‘would you settle for silence?’ I

said I'd settle for silence in a New York minute. So Ben introduced me and the whole place went totally silent. No applause, no nothing."

But that was better than open hostility and rudeness. There was respect, if not agreement.

Flash forward to today, a time when the Republican Party has become the repository of racist opposition to any proposal from an administration led by a Black man. The coalition of southern attorneys generals jointly suing the federal government to block enforcement of the national health law is a replay of the 1954 conclave called by then Alabama Attorney General John Patterson. Its purpose was to find ways to legally delay or "nullify" implementation of desegregation. The Alabama legislature then led a parade of states passing laws to nullify federal civil rights laws. Patterson would ride the celebrity from those anti civil rights efforts into the state house, beating George Wallace to become governor.

The open discussion of a second secession of southern states by Texas governor Rick Perry and others shows how far down the racist road the Republican Party has traveled.

According to Mark Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center, said "there is no question there has been a resurgence of the radical right. A major driver is the role of ostensibly mainstream commentators and politicians who push completely false ideas. Sarah Palin alleging Obama is trying to murder our grandparents. Michelle Bachman says FEMA is secretly building political reeducation camps for American children to reeducate them into good little communists. Republican Congressman Steve King of Iowa claiming criminally illegal aliens drunkenly run over and kill 25 native Americans a day. It's all completely false – it's not even remotely close to the truth.

"Tom Tancredo gave this speech in February attacking Obama as a fascist and saying the wrong Americans are allowed to vote and we should bring back literacy tests. To say that in the context of the first black president is patently racist."

The steady rise in the number of hate groups, without a negative word from GOP officials, is a far cry from the party a young Howard Baker tried to lead.

"It's amazing to me," said Potok, "that Republicans can sit there and allow people to talk about watering the tree of liberty with the blood of tyrants as the result of a straight-ahead, majority democratic vote. There were no coups, no Bolshevik elections. Nobody was forced to vote at gunpoint. So what are they talking about? Take our country back from what – from democracy?"

It didn't have to be this rancid.

There was a point where these friends — Ben Hooks, the civil rights leader, and Howard Baker, the southern politician — saw a chance to bring the nation together; to end centuries of rancor and racism. The country would have been a better place had they succeeded.