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My Last Lecture: Political Polarization and Baptist Higher Education: Reflections Relating Party Realignment in the South with Ouachita's Future

Hal Bass

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In the classical era, Stoic philosophers advanced the proposition that we are all citizens of two communities: the physical one where we reside, and the metaphysical one that identifies us with likeminded individuals throughout the world. The early Christians embraced and adapted this notion, linking local congregations with the catholic, or universal church. This notion of dual citizenship surely applies to those of us in today's academy. We are simultaneously citizens of our campus communities and those of our scholarly disciplines.

In my last lecture, I propose to connect my major disciplinary interests with some concerns and hopes I have for the future of Ouachita Baptist University. I have a long title for this short talk: "Political Polarization and Baptist Higher Education: Reflections Relating Party Realignment in the South with Ouachita's Future."

Before delving into the substance of my talk, I need to express heartfelt gratitude for several political scientists who have nurtured me over my decades in the discipline. The first is Avery Leiserson, my major professor in my graduate studies at Vanderbilt. Avery alerted me to two perspectives that have shaped my understandings of politics and that certainly inform this particular presentation: first, the significance of the relationships between structure and behavior; and second, the centrality of political parties to the study of politics. Next is Nelson Polsby, who accepted my application to participate in an NEH Summer Seminar at Berkeley in 1982. Nelson explicitly encouraged me to seek, find, and analyze connections among disparate developments that were transforming our political order in the early 1980s. These two giants in

the discipline each took a personal interest in me and in numerous ways opened professional doors for me for the rest of their lives. Long after their deaths, their endorsements of me continue to pay dividends. I have been so very fortunate to have basked in their bright glow.

Here on campus, I will forever be grateful to Dan Grant for going way out on a limb, farther than college presidents probably should go, and hiring me forty years ago, and then retaining me. I strongly suspect that Dan's appreciation for Avery, his former Vanderbilt colleague, loomed large in those decisions. Doug Reed has been my departmental partner for over thirty years now. Kevin Brennan joined us over two decades ago, and Steve Thomason has now been here for almost a decade. I treasure my departmental colleagues, with whom it has been such a joy to work alongside through the years.

Looking back, Ouachita has been an ideal place for me to indulge myself in my scholarly interests. Here at Ouachita, officing since 1978 next door in McClellan Hall, I have been incredibly well positioned to observe and analyze the growing political polarization in the United States. That phenomenon has been substantially driven by the realignment of Southern party politics, wherein the Southern Democrats, exemplified by John McClellan, fell from the longstanding dominance they were still enjoying when I arrived here in 1976 to their present nadir. In turn, in reviewing the demise of the Southern Democrats and the ascendance of the Republican Party, we can discern rippling effects that have more broadly transformed American politics, government, and society, including, I suggest, Ouachita Baptist University.

I want to take a few minutes now to outline the scholarly understandings of the causes and consequences of the decline of the Democratic Party in the South, and the corresponding Republican rise. In addition, I want to reflect briefly on an extended Arkansas anomaly,

wherein Arkansas Democrats effectively resisted the Republican surge, before eventually succumbing to it. Then, in conclusion, I want to ponder how and why these developments might pertain to us here at Ouachita, as well as how we might respond to them.

With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, it is apparent that in the post-World War II world which I entered over sixty-seven years ago, Democratic Party dominance in the South was both an artifact and an anachronism. It was an artifact of the Civil War and Reconstruction, during which the Republican Party was anathematized throughout the region. It was an anachronism in that the shifting ideological foundations of partisan coalitions had already begun to place the relatively conservative Southern Democrats in a position of heightened conflict with their national party, and also drawn them ever closer to the once-despised Republicans. Over the course of my lifetime, but especially over my past forty years here, Southern politics have lost much of their distinctive character. In a very real sense, we have finally joined the Union.

In looking for explanations, scholars have typically focused on the centrality of civil rights and race. When the national Democratic Party began to embrace the cause of civil rights for African-Americans in 1948, strains immediately appeared in the form of the Dixiecrat faction that competed for the presidency that year. The party managed to paper over the abiding differences throughout the 1950s, but the 1960s saw the passage of major civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965, accompanied by the noteworthy attrition by Southern officeholders and voters from the party. The entrance of large numbers of newly enfranchised African-American voters into the Democratic party coalition heightened the dissonance for some white voters. The “Southern Strategy” undertaken by the GOP in the late 1960s explicitly targeted white Southerners as likely converts.

A second set of causes for party realignment in the South pertains to economic development and social class. The New Deal cemented a longstanding tendency in national party politics for the GOP to represent the upper echelons of the social class ladder, while the Democrats spoke for the lower levels. The one-party South stood in stark contrast, where Republicans claimed a tiny and tenuous coalition of poor hill-country whites and engaged African-Americans. Meanwhile, the Democrats virtually united the white population, without much regard to social class.

After World War II, economic development in the region brought unprecedented prosperity, as well as substantial in-migration. In the process, the GOP gained and sustained a foothold in the affluent suburbs of the growing urban areas. This development made the South more like the rest of the United States in the party/class relationship.

Cultural and religious factors are also relevant to this realignment. The emergence of cultural issues, such as abortion in the 1970s, initially generated internal divisions in both major parties. Increasingly, however, they led to consolidation of pro-lifers into the GOP and the corresponding pro-choice alignment with the Democrats. The South has long been the most culturally conservative region, and as such, this partisan sorting clearly swelled the Republican ranks below the Mason-Dixon line.

Cultural concerns were paramount in the mobilization of Southern evangelicals, nominally Democratic as late as 1976, when they enthusiastically supported Jimmy Carter's presidential candidacy for the Democratic nomination and the general election. Four years later, in large numbers, they abandoned Carter and the Democrats and flocked to the Republican banner raised by Ronald Reagan. They have been mainstays in the Republican

coalition ever since. I don't think it is merely coincidental that intense conflict within the Southern Baptist Convention closely accompanied these developments. Similar forces and factors were afoot linking the political and religious arenas.

Another factor I should mention is reapportionment. Beginning in 1990, redrawing legislative districts in the wake of the census has, for three decades now, afforded Southern Republicans with advantageous opportunities for expansion. Federal Justice Department encouragement of majority-minority districts, strongly supported by African-American Democrats, has led to bi-partisan efforts to draw district lines in a manner that packs reliably-Democratic African-Americans into a handful of districts, leaving the remainder lily-white in a fashion that resembles the pre-Voting Rights era of Southern politics, but with the Republicans claiming comfortable majorities in almost all of them.

My references thus far to in-migration and African-American enfranchisement can be bundled into a final set of factors for our consideration that are demographic in nature. That is to say, they refer to population characteristics of the parties and the region. The remaining point I want to make to this causal enumeration fits in this category, and it pertains to mortality. Put simply, over the decades, lots of Southern Democratic officeholders and voters died; and generational replacement was not forthcoming. From this perspective, it was not so much a wholesale abandonment of partisan loyalties by individuals as an inability of the modern Democratic Party to sustain the loyalties of the children and grandchildren of the traditional Southern Democrats, alongside a willingness by the younger generations to claim the Republican label.

The processes I have been describing have been underway throughout my life, but a clear tipping point occurred in the mid-1990s. Interestingly, here in Arkansas, it took the GOP another decade or so to consolidate their dominance. I want to take a little more of your time to reflect on why it took us somewhat longer than our neighbors to make the shift.

One widely-held explanation centers on candidate factors. Our state's Democrats were able to present some very able and popular standard-bearers whose political appeal was sufficiently strong to hold back the Republican tide. Their ranks included such luminaries as Dale Bumpers and David Pryor back in the 1970s, Bill Clinton throughout the 1980s, and more recently, Mike Beebe.

Another perspective is rooted in economic development, and more specifically, the relative absence thereof. Arkansas has been and remains a relatively poor state. We largely lacked the affluent suburbs of the Metroplex, or Atlanta, or even Memphis. It is worth noting that the region of our state that has experienced the most noteworthy economic advance, the northwest, trended Republican in the old days, owing to the hill-country traditions. As such, economic development in our state did not initially have the transformative partisan effect that it did elsewhere.

Further, our African-American population is relatively small, by regional standards. The 1957 Little Rock crisis notwithstanding, we have not experienced as much race-based tension and conflict as have many other Southern states.

Turning from causes to consequences, the demise of Southern Democrats transformed American politics. Their retreat is central to the ideological polarization that now plagues our polity. I should note in passing that shortly after World War II, the American Political Science

Association issued a controversial report that advocated a more responsible party system that would feature more ideologically coherent political parties. We need to watch what we pray for.

Forty years ago, conservative white Southern Democrats for better or worse served as the balance wheel of national politics and government. Their very real flaws and shortcomings notwithstanding, their centrist location on the political spectrum and the cross-pressures of party and ideology they confronted, positioned them to be essential bridge builders in a political order that resembled a normal, or bell curve. When they were loyal to their party, which was typically in the majority thanks to their numbers, a liberal Democratic policy agenda was achievable. When they were true to their ideology, joining the GOP in a conservative coalition, liberal proposals would fail and conservative counterparts could advance. They were courted by both sides of the spectrum. I should note that to a much lesser degree, liberal Republicans, primarily in the Northeast, but some in both the Midwest and the Pacific Coast, occupied a similarly strategic vantage point along the ideological spectrum.

Then came realignment. Southern Republicans now substantially fortified the conservative character of their new party, while the Democrats, absent the Southern leaven, became much more liberal. Polarization, the product of heightened intra-party unity and heightened interparty differences, prevailed. Absent cross-pressures, division increases and conflict intensifies.

That bridge, that balance wheel, at the vital center, has almost disappeared, weakening the prospects for bi-partisanship, bargaining, and accommodation that had traditionally facilitated the functioning of our constitutional order that featured separation of powers and

checks and balances. In sum, we are left with a constitutional structure that demands cooperation and compromise, and a political alignment and culture that discourages both. It's not a pretty sight.

Finally, what does all this have to do with Ouachita, and why does it simultaneously cause me concern and give me hope for our future? Again, in retrospect, there were many reasons, relating to demographic and socioeconomic factors, as well as federal government support, why Baptist colleges in the South, and OBU for sure, flourished in their post-World War II golden age. In our case, as a student of the presidency, I would add strong, effective presidential leadership by the likes of Dan Grant and Ben Elrod to that list.

I further submit that it is appropriate to add the traditional political alignment I have attempted to characterize to this array of contributing forces and factors. Additionally, I contend that our present polarization poses a grave danger to Baptist higher education across the South, including OBU, while also affording us new opportunities for leadership and service.

Back in the day, at least from my perspective, as both student and professor, our Baptist colleges functioned effectively as half-way houses, gingerly advancing culturally conservative undergraduates toward the middle, where they could find solid footing for the world of work and the lives of faith and civic responsibility that awaited them. The aforementioned political developments in Baptist life can be properly understood as both cause and effect of polarization. Whichever, they have surely undermined our capacity to perform this bridging function. Further, that middle, that unimodal, normal distribution, has almost disappeared. Our contemporary ideological spectrum is now much more bimodal.

To reiterate, polarization imperils this pragmatic promise of Baptist higher education, placing campuses like ours on the horns of a dilemma. Think about our options. Purists among us may prefer to embrace uncritically our distinctly conservative subculture, taking on the role of fortifiers of the wall that separates us from the secular liberals across the way. In my view, if we pursue this path, we simply cannot aspire to be a respected institution of higher learning, and we will not well-prepare our students to engage beyond that narrowing subculture. A lifetime on college campuses has convinced me to always bet on the future. And the way of the wall does not face us forward. Neither is there a place for us at the other pole that would compel us to abandon our traditional identity and calling.

And, at least for the time being, that pragmatic middle ground I want us to occupy can be a perilous place. I am acutely aware that a Baptist college in the South that dares to depart from the orthodoxies of our particular subculture may not readily recruit students and donors in sufficient numbers to pay faculty-staff salaries. Still, my suggestion is that we claim for ourselves a central role and responsibility in fortifying and reestablishing the center.

Please understand, I am not yearning nostalgically for the restoration of an old order. That's not going to happen, and I wouldn't want it to. In certain respects, the old Southern Democrats were a disreputable bunch and we are well rid of them.

However, the bridging function they once performed remains vital, and now demands different structures. I submit that our Baptist colleges are particularly well positioned to provide it. Indeed, I wonder, who is better situated, by virtue of our Christian faith and our Baptist identity, to play the role prescribed in Isaiah 58:12, that of "repairers of the breach?" I

note is passing that one of the last of the old Southern Democrats, President Bill Clinton, two decades ago referenced this verse as a central theme for his 1996 reelection campaign.

Put simply, I am encouraging us to resist calls for cultural war and rather to pursue the mission and ministry of blessed peacemakers. That, to me, would surely enlarge and advance the arena for Christian education that St. Thomas Aquinas established almost eight hundred years ago. Aquinas responded to the question posed centuries earlier by the Church father, Tertullian, “what has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” He systematically reconciled the rediscovered, pagan teachings of Aristotle with those of his own devout Christian faith. My hope, my dream, for a contemporary synthesis of faith and learning is that we have the courage and the capability to rise to this challenge and set out to restore a middle ground to a system that desperately needs it.

The time has come for me to retire. I trust I have fought a good fight. But I fully understand that we are participants in a relay race that is far from finished. The present polarization notwithstanding, I am confident both that you will take advantage of the opportunities that arise here at Ouachita, and that our republic remains strong and resilient. These are exciting times for both country and campus, as we await our next presidents. I apologize for concluding with a cliché, but I firmly believe that our best days are yet to come.

I thank all of you for coming today and for the many kindnesses you have consistently shown me and my family over the past forty years. I leave you now with my very best wishes.