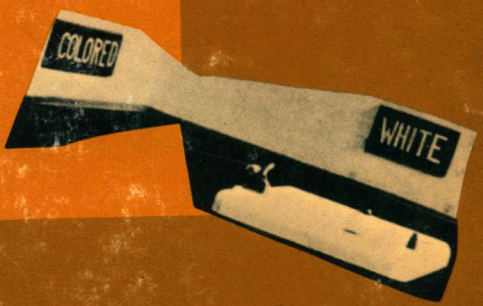
CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE CRISIS OF LIBERALISM

The Democratic Party 1945-1976



John Frederick Martin

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CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE CRISIS OF LIBERALISM

About the Book and Author

Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism: The Democratic Party, 1945-1976

John Frederick Martin

This book is an interpretation of our recent political past. It offers an explanation of the rise and decline of postwar liberalism, a creed that was vitally concerned with civil rights. Partly because of such special concern, liberalism inspired in many a daring vision of social justice and, by the end of the 1960s, inspired in many more a reaction of loathing and contempt.

To explain the rise of this ideology, John Frederick Martin has drawn from numerous archives and interviews and assessed the contributions of Truman, Stevenson, Kefauver, Harriman, Kennedy, and Johnson. To explain its decline, he has analyzed the reaction to the liberals' government—the sentiments aroused by busing, affirmative action, Model Cities, and the militance of blacks, Democrats, and white ethnics. Though varying in their intent, these responses shared a dislike of the liberals' treatment of minorities and a dread of government power—a dread made stronger by the antiwar movement and the Watergate scandal—and thereby discredited the very ends and means of the liberal program.

By the early 1970s, Martin argues, it was no surprise that a politics of consumerism—pivoting on the rights of the average citizen, not of the deprived citizen, and eschewing government power—had replaced the liberal ideology.

Placing this narrative in a larger context, Martin explains the importance of the race issue in previous liberal movements and composes an interpretation of the whole of American liberalism as well as of its latest stage and the Democrats' recent ordeal.

John Frederick Martin, a graduate of Harvard College, is a Ph.D. candidate in history at Harvard, where for the last four years he has been a Teaching Fellow.

To my parents,

John Bartlow and Frances Rose Martin

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expressed in this book. Nor do they necessarily share these views; sometimes they have told me they do not. Others have kindly answered my request for help: Congressman John Brademas, Jonathan Daniels, Robert J. Donovan, Judge Samuel Gold, and Newton Minow. Douglas Costle gave me a copy of the study he made of the Model Cities program. And on several occasions, Milton and Lisa Gwirtzman gave me valuable advice and encouragement. To all these people, I am indebted, and I must express my profound gratitude.

In a book of this kind, on events so recent, interviews are indispensable. Those I interviewed, in the spring and fall of 1976, gave generously of their time: Derrick Cephas, witness to the Cambridge, Maryland, riot of 1967; Douglas Costle, Model Cities expert (now administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency); Richard Goodwin, Kennedy and Johnson speechwriter; Milton Gwirtzman, aide to Robert F. Kennedy; John Harwell, former official of the Urban League, Chicago; Kathy Hwang, Office of Civil Rights, Boston; Melvin King, representative to the Massachusetts legislature; James O'Hara, congressman from Michigan; Arthur Okun, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers under Johnson; Cortney Pace, administrative assistant to Senator James Eastland; Elvira Palladino, cofounder of the anti-busing group, Restore Our Alienated Rights; Joseph Rauh, co-founder of the Americans for Democratic Action and counsel to the UAW and Leadership Conference on Civil Rights; James Rowe, aide to Roosevelt, Truman, Harriman, Johnson, and Humphrey; Herman Talmadge, senator from Georgia; Ted Van Dyk, aide to Humphrey; Robert C. Wood, under secretary of HUD and urban specialist for Johnson. These people cleared up many matters for me. I am grateful to them all.

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J.F.M.

CONTENTS

PART 2
CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE LIBERAL TRIUMPH

PART 3
CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE LIBERAL FAILURE

INTRODUCTION

This book is about ideology and politics. It focuses on the civil rights issue in Democratic party politics from 1945 to 1976 but glances at a longer history to describe American liberalism. It has the limitations its topic imposes. It does not chronicle the civil rights movement or the Great Society, nor does it explain economic and demographic changes, but rather takes these events and changes into account, for they had an influence on liberal thought. And liberal thought is the subject of the book.

After World War II the Democrats seriously debated for the first time the issue of civil rights. It was a divisive issue, throwing the party into a struggle, which, by the time it was resolved in 1960, had transformed the Democrats—and liberalism too—from the ideology of property and small government to that of civil rights and federal power. Soon the liberals transformed the nation. But as they did, at the height of their success during the Great Society, they ran into trouble. They were assailed from all sides, maligned as inept bureaucrats, as the wielders of oppressive power, as the timid apologists of the white Establishment, or, more often, simply as liberals; for within a few years of their startling successes—civil rights laws and medical care for the poor and old—their name was a term of opprobrium. Why?

The answer takes us back through the history of liberalism. From the time of the American Revolution, the purpose of liberalism always had been to control power and protect people and their property, a purpose that limited liberals, often impeding their view of social problems. Another impediment was the racial prejudice of the American people. It, too, limited the reach of the liberal quest and, on several occasions, upset liberal alliances. The New Deal broke one of these limits—it dispelled a little of the fear of big government—but it did not break them all or even that one

completely. The fear of power and the faith in property and racial prejudice were old, venerable beliefs. They had deep roots in the American mind. And they were not challenged, all of them together, until the civil rights issue appeared after World War II and threw the Democrats into an uproar. This issue tore the party apart, pitting the old guard of the South against the liberals of the North. Each side was adamant on civil rights; each saw that the fight would determine more than the fate of the blacks. For civil rights threatened not only white supremacy and the "solid South" but also states' rights and the laissez-faire view of government; it promised not only to make blacks equal but to do so with federal power, which the liberals thought should also protect the working man and all others made defenseless by modern industrial society. The civil rights fight thus stood as the symbol of a larger fight—the fight to determine the party's ideology.

It impinged on every Democratic decision—the choice of candidates and campaign strategy, of platforms and the party's future—and on every leader. By precipitating the fight over civil rights, Truman lost control of his party. By conciliating the sides, Stevenson maintained his influence and so did Lyndon Johnson. But others wanted to fight—the segregationists of the South and the liberals, Harriman and Kefauver—and as they struggled, the party gradually changed. By 1960, the liberals having won, the Democrats broke the restraints on liberal thought and framed a new ideology, one of civil rights and federal power. Their ordeal of fifteen years within the party was over. Their ordeal in the nation began.

This ordeal was shorter; the liberals' decline was swift. A principal concern of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations was the blacks, and a frequent demand of both was that federal power help them. Thus did Kennedy and Johnson fulfill their party's purpose, as the recent struggle had redefined it. But as soon as they did, they were attacked for their use of power and their tampering with race relations. A reaction set in from both the right and the left: the right blaming the liberals for beginning, the left for not completing a revolution in race relations; and both distrusted the liberals' power. By the end of the Great Society the liberals themselves, not the problems they tried to solve, had become the political issue. Out of office, their nerve broken, the liberals pondered their demise. They reassessed their doctrine and—this was their final defeat—retreated from their positions. Once the wielders of unprecedented power, the liberals

joined their earlier foes and called for the return of small government. Once the moral core of the liberal creed, the civil rights issue faded, leaving in its stead only one fervent issue, a reminder of the past—busing, called "forced," a word to describe break-ins and rape. An old thought came alive. Born in the Revolution and nurtured since in the South, it said that power was bad, the people good. And a Georgian was elected president.

This is the history the book seeks to explain, not to take sides but to explain the recent course of liberalism in the United States. These events were swift and surprising—the Democrats' bitter fight, the transformation of liberal doctrine, the liberals' hurried achievement, even more their abrupt and bewildering failure—but none of it was by chance.

PART ONE

LIBERALISM AND AMERICAN HISTORY