

By John B. Judis

RICHMOND, VA.

THE CONSERVATIVES' SOUTHERN STRATEGY has been to unite middle-class Republicans with blue-collar Democrats by making covert racial appeals and by adopting the fundamentalist social agenda. It worked in some states, like Alabama and North Carolina, in the early '80s, but it is now beginning to destroy the Republican Party. Nowhere is this more evident than in Virginia.

Even while Ronald Reagan was easily carrying Virginia in 1980 and 1984, the state's once dominant Republican Party was steadily losing ground to the Democrats. In 1980 the Republicans controlled one of two Senate seats (the other seat was held by Harry Byrd, a Democrat turned independent who consistently voted with the Republicans); nine out of 10 congressional seats; and all the major state offices, including governor, lieutenant governor and attorney general. In 1980 the total congressional vote was 64.7 percent Republican and 31.3 percent Democratic. At the time Virginia was as Republican as Utah.

Today the situation has changed. Republicans control both Senate seats, but will likely lose one of them in November to former Gov. Chuck Robb. They control only five of 10 congressional seats, and in 1986 the Democratic congressional vote exceeded the Republicans by 52.2 percent to 44.7 percent. And the Democrats control every major state office and the legislature. Now Virginia is about as Democratic as Michigan.

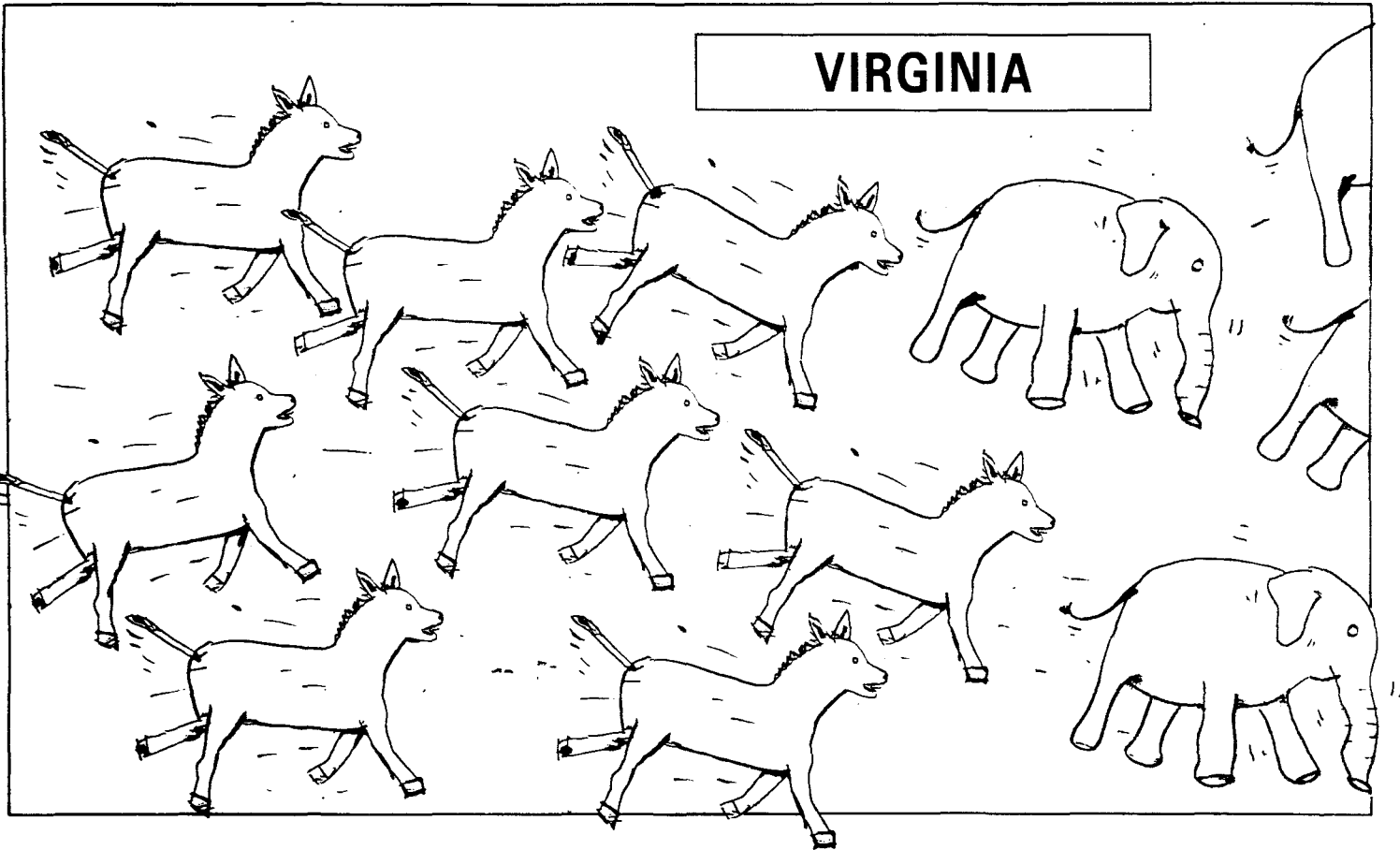
The Democrats in Virginia succeeded because they were able to build a coalition of moderate whites and blacks. The Republicans fell apart because they abandoned the black vote and courted the votes of the segregationist and fundamentalist far-right.

Robb revolution: The Democratic Party dominated Virginia politics from 1902, when blacks were disenfranchised, until the early '60s, when the party was torn apart by the Byrd wing's opposition to civil rights and to state expenditures for economic development. In 1969, Linwood Holton, a moderate Republican who backed school desegregation, won the governorship.

In 1973 and 1977, the Democrats nominated populist Henry Howell for governor. Many of the leading Byrd Democrats switched to the Republican Party. One of them, Mills Godwin, narrowly defeated Howell in 1973. Then in 1977, a Republican moderate, John Dalton, again defeated Howell.

But with the entry of the Byrd Democrats, the Republican Party was torn between its moderate wing, based largely in the West, and the Byrd conservatives. As the national Republican Party shifted sharply rightward in the late '70s, so did the state's Republican Party. This created disaster for Virginia Republicans in 1981.

After the 1977 debacle, the Democrats, reacting to Howell's success in primaries, substituted a convention system for choosing nominees. In the 1981 governor's race, they picked as their gubernatorial candidate neither a populist nor a Byrd Democrat, but Lt. Gov. Chuck Robb, Lyndon Johnson's son-in-law. Robb was a moderate on civil rights but a fiscal conservative. The Republicans nominated Atty. Gen. Marshall Coleman to oppose Robb. In 1977 Coleman had won a third of the black vote when he ran as a moderate against a segregationist Byrd Democrat, but in 1981 he was pressured by party leaders to run a right-wing campaign.



The GOP's slow road to destruction

Coleman opposed a state Martin Luther King holiday bill and also opposed extending the Voting Rights Act.

Coleman's refusal to back the King holiday was a turning point in his campaign. Before that, he was even with Robb in the polls. Afterward, he trailed and never caught up. Robb not only won more than 90 percent of the black vote, but he received almost half of the politically independent white, middle-class suburban vote, which makes up about half of Virginia's electorate. "Many white people in Virginia have racial prejudices," said Richmond reporter Margaret Edds, the author of *Free At Last*, "but they don't want to be openly confronted with them. If they are confronted, there will be a backlash to that."

Robb himself equivocated about civil rights during his campaign, but once in office he moved decisively to bring blacks and women into his administration—appointing more than 900 in his term. Robb's first executive order established a state policy of equal opportunity in hiring and promotion. His predecessor had spent \$260,000 with minority contractors in his last year of office. By contrast, Robb was spending \$36 million a year by 1985, his last year in office.

But Robb simultaneously endeared himself to Virginia's suburban middle class. He boosted economic development in the state, improved education and cleaned up the Chesapeake Bay, yet at the same time cut 200 employees from the state payroll. Lt. Gov. Douglas Wilder, who was in the state Senate when Robb was governor, said, "He made it possible for another Democratic administration to come in without people fearing the bottom was going to drop out."

Carry me back: In 1985, however, the Democrats seemed ready to risk all. They nominated Gerald Baliles, a Robb clone as governor, but also Wilder, a black who had bucked the party's segregationist elders. It was widely assumed that Wilder would bring down the ticket, but he ran a brilliant campaign, beginning with a 4,000-mile, station-wagon tour through rural Southside Virginia, an area that George Wallace carried in 1968

and that Reagan had won easily in 1980 and 1984.

Wilder also rejected attempts to paint him as a "liberal"—suggesting at one point that the term had racial connotations. He ran a tough law-and-order campaign, favoring the death penalty and opposing collective bargaining for state employees. In all, Wilder won 52 percent of the vote and 44 percent of the white vote. He got 49 percent in the suburbs and he won five of Wallacite Southside counties.

Wilder was aided, ironically, by Republican race-baiting. At a rally for Wilder's opponent, John Chichester, former Gov. Godwin attacked Wilder for a resolution he had introduced 15 years before against Virginia's state song, "Carry Me Back to Ol' Virginny." Wilder had objected to the song's plantation ethos, including its references to "darkies." Wilder had dropped the issue, however, and Godwin's use of it was seen as an attempt to fuel racial resentment against Wilder.

The state's Republican Party has basically fallen apart. The party made two substantial mistakes: it abandoned the black vote and it too strongly courted the votes of the segregationist and fundamentalist far-right.

Godwin's tactic backfired. According to the Republicans' pollster, Ed DeBolt, Chichester's support in the Northern Virginia and Tidewater suburbs dropped four to six percent after Godwin's speech.

In his campaign against Wyatt Durette, Baliles benefitted from the Republicans' identification with the religious right. Baliles' pro-choice stance won him votes in the suburbs, where he took 55 percent. In the cam-

paign's closing week, Baliles ran ads linking Durette to the Rev. Jerry Falwell, a very unpopular figure in the state. But most important of all, Baliles was aided by the fact that while he was focussing on education and economic development, Durette was crowing about abortion and school prayer. "They are not things that the people of Virginia think the governor should be addressing," DeBolt said.

Suburban voters: In Virginia, the lessons for Republicans are clear. And, indeed, many Republicans, including DeBolt and Sen. John Warner, understand them. But the Republicans may find their hands tied as Virginia Beach televangelist Pat Robertson brings more fundamentalists into the Republican Party. "They'll dominate, and we'll continue to lose elections," one prominent Republican rued.

The lessons for Democrats are also clear. As University of Richmond political scientist Tom Morris said, the Democrats' success was predicated on their abandoning the primary system and gaining the respect of white suburban voters. In the '70s, the primary system had nominated populists or Byrd Democrats, and neither could defeat Republicans. It took Democrats like Robb and Wilder to win in Virginia.

Other Southern Democrats have followed Virginia's lead in building coalitions between moderate whites and blacks. In 1986, for instance, moderate Democrats in Robb's mold won back Senate seats in North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana and Florida by combining the black vote with more than 40 percent of the white vote. But it may be more difficult to export some aspects of Virginia politics. It is more prosperous and more middle class than many deep South states. It was less touched by both populism and racism. Robb may be a model for Florida Democrats; but Arkansas' more populist Gov. Bill Clinton may also provide a model.

Whatever the case, Virginia shows that the Democrats can win in the South and that the conservative strategy, while successful in the short run, may doom the Republicans in the long run.

WELCOME TO DIOXINVILLE, ARKANSAS



Alex Brandon/Arkansas Democrat

This is the first part of a three-part series of articles on the chemical contamination of a small Arkansas community. It is the worst hazardous waste situation yet known in the U.S., more serious than those that forced evacuation of residents from Love Canal, N.Y. and Times Beach, Mo.

Babies are dying and adults succumbing to sudden disease in three neighborhoods that border EPA Superfund cleanup sites in Jacksonville, Ark. But the ramifications reach far beyond these sites.

Jacksonville holds a mirror to larger national questions surrounding toxic wastes, incineration and the continued production of deadly chemicals. It also reflects neglect and mismanagement by federal and state governments. And the picture encompasses not only the Pentagon and its Agent Orange and rocket fuel contracts, but the hidden involvement of multinational corporations and foreign entanglements.

The Arkansas saga is a microcosm of a much bigger problem in an increasingly toxic America, for what has happened in Jacksonville is far from an isolated phenomenon. Particularly in the rural South, many similar communities fighting for their economic survival have become dumping grounds. While state and local officials as well as business leaders protect their interests, the impoverished suffer—and take on the struggle against greed and indifference. In dozens of areas, people like Arkansas' Patty Frase are running the gauntlet to fight the pollution affecting their homes. This is their story, too.