

The Negro and the Parties

The shift from the party of Lincoln to the New Deal was just a stage in a larger change

By Loren Miller

MY FATHER worshipped Theodore Roosevelt; he hated William Howard Taft. But he cast his ballot for Taft in the 1912 election because, as he explained to me, no decent Negro could afford to "vote anything but Republican." To my father, as to the vast majority of Negroes of his time, "voting Republican" meant voting the ticket straight from President down to the most obscure township official. The reasoning was simple: the Republican party was the party of Abraham Lincoln, of freedom, and of the North—as opposed to the Democratic party, the party of slavery, disfranchisement, and the Solid South. As a matter of fact, Democratic and Republican politicians of that time had a gentleman's agreement on the Negro question; the Republicans connived at the disfranchisement of southern Negroes for the benefit of the Democrats and in turn the Democrats conceded the northern Negro votes to the Republicans.

Even as my father was explaining how imperative it was for Negroes to vote Republican, a rift was appearing in the, until then, almost solid political front of the race. W. E. B. Du Bois was flirting with the Wilsonian New Freedom in the pages of the *Crisis* and an organized group of Negroes was campaigning for Wilson. The rift has widened since that time; every succeeding campaign has seen a further drift of Negroes from the Republican Party. Today there is a Negro Democrat in Congress and Negro Democrats sit in a half dozen state legislatures. There were more Negro delegates to the Democratic national convention this year than there were Negro delegates to the G.O.P. convention.

More amazing, the Democratic Party, as a national entity, is making a determined bid for northern Negro votes, and Franklin D. Roosevelt is an odds-on favorite to garner a majority of the Negro vote in November. The Republicans are actually on the defensive and are trying desperately to win back their straying Negro camp followers. "A struggle unlike anything we have known in the past is going on over the Negro vote," Frank Kent observed recently. The magazine *Time* believes that not in seventy years have politicians been so "Negro minded" as they are today, and Mark Sullivan used one of his Sunday columns to lecture the Democrats about "the hypocrisy of what Chairman Farley and the other Democratic leaders are doing about the Negro vote in the North."

These hysterical attempts to curry favor with Negro voters do not portend any fundamental changes in the Negro policies of either



Sharecroppers

H. M.

of the old parties. The Democratic Party is still committed to Negro disfranchisement in the South, with its most reactionary sections, as witness Gov. Talmadge of Georgia, openly financed by the Republican Liberty League. Despite Mark Sullivan's crocodile tears, the Republican Party remains in the hands of the reactionary bosses whose callous disregard for the welfare of the Negro people has steadily driven Negro voters away from the party.

The 1912 revolt of Negroes against the Republican Party was largely negative in the sense that it was inspired by the knowledge that the G.O.P. had failed to protect southern Negroes from discriminatory state legislation. While the Democrats accepted this disgruntled support, they did not make any concerted drive for Negro votes. The situation changed radically only after the war-created labor shortage had drawn many thousands of Negroes to northern cities. These cities are located in the so-called pivotal states: New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and, to a lesser extent, Missouri and Maryland. Most of these urban centers formerly gave majorities to the Republican presidential nominee but were in the grips of local Democratic machines. Many Negro politicians saw that they could get local patronage only by lining up with the Democrats and began detaching themselves from the Republican party.

Sections of the Negro masses also joined the drift toward the Democratic Party for the same reasons that attracted other urban voters: they believed that the party stood for the working-man; they knew the Republican party had left a seventy-year trail of broken promises. Hoover's four years of failure to grapple with unemployment problems stampeded jobless city workers into the Democratic Party; jobless Negroes were swept along and

helped swell the New Deal majority in 1932. Republicans know that if they regain the Negro vote they lost in 1932 they have an excellent chance of winning the large pivotal states, while the Democrats are convinced that if they can hold that vote they can carry them.

Like other city workers, thousands of Negro voters are on public works projects. They are afraid of Landon. To counteract this sentiment, the Republicans have set up an elaborate machine that is busy grinding out propaganda centering around the historic pasts of both parties. Certain of the fact that many Negroes will never return to the G.O.P., Mr. Hamilton and his aides recently installed a well known Negro Republican as chairman of the Union Party Negro division in an effort to cripple Roosevelt. But Lemke won't get a handful of Negro votes.

Both old parties are proceeding on the age-old assumption that, as Kent says, "the bulk of the Negro vote is purchasable." That statement is no more true of the Negro people than it is of underprivileged groups in general; those who lack educational advantages can often be persuaded to a course of action by the use of skillful propaganda, and propaganda costs money. But, like other Americans, Negroes are far more alert to the issues of the time than they were yesterday. Seven years of depression have taught them many lessons.

Many Negroes are going to vote for Roosevelt in spite, not because, of the fact that he is the standard bearer of the Democratic Party.

They feel somewhat like the starving woman who accepted stolen goods because she felt that "God sent this blessing even if the devil did bring it." The appointment of Negroes to New Deal agencies has flattered the strong racial feeling of the group on one hand and on the other Negro workingmen are beginning to understand that measures designed to aid the working class also include them as workers, even though they are still subject to discrimination. The vague social reform panaceas of the New Deal have intrigued them; they fear for the fate of old-age pensions, unemployment insurance, and the like should Landon win.

The pivotal character of the Negro vote in national elections and the new independence of colored electors are matters of importance to proponents of a Farmer-Labor Party. The first illustrates the fact that any party hoping for national success must reckon with the Negro voter; the second that the Negro vote can be won if the party bidding for his ballot is willing to come to grips with his problems.

Such a party must not content itself with

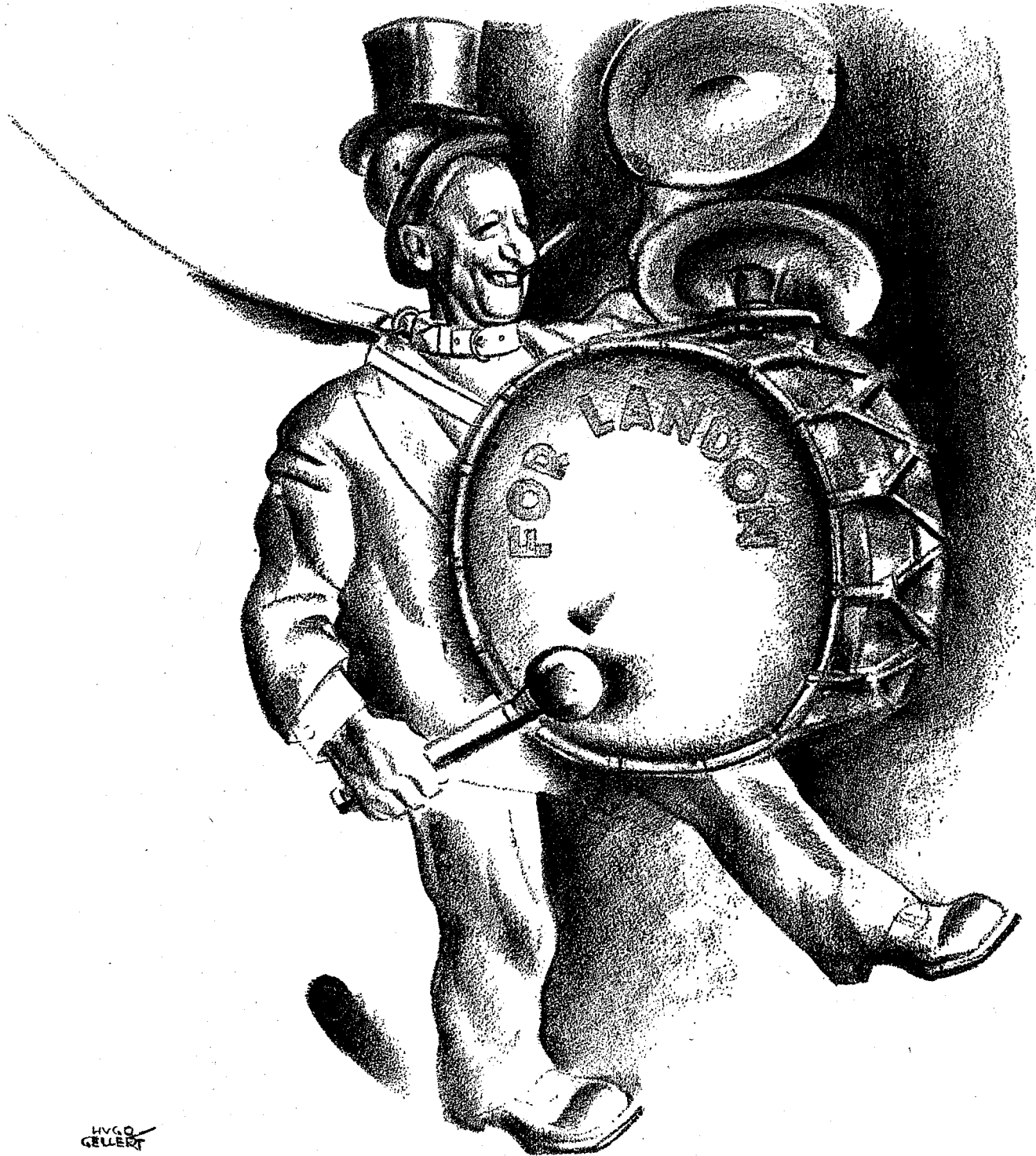
mouth high-sounding phrases about "equality." To be successful it must come to grips with everyday issues: discrimination in civil service, differentials in work-relief wages, proportionate sharing of public jobs and such prosaic matters as political patronage. It goes without saying, I presume, that Negro candidates must be put forward in so-called Negro districts. In other words, Democratic and Republican local machines must be met on their own territory and, to put it in the vernacular, gone one better. A new party, paying

the proper heed to the special aspects of Negro voters' problems, while striking out boldly at wider problems, such as social-security measures, could hope to enlist the colored vote.

The time is ripe for a third party to make that bid for the Negro voter who has cut loose from his old Republican moorings and is attached to the Democratic Party and Roosevelt. If the move is made quickly and intelligently it is a certainty that Negro voters will range themselves on the side of progress.

This was most clearly shown in the re-

sponse to the recent broadcast by James W. Ford, Negro Communist vice-presidential nominee, a speech which was printed in full in a number of non-Communist Negro papers such as the *Amsterdam News* and which whole Negro communities listened to avidly. Ford's speech brought home to them the lesson that the Communist Party platform is the only one in the present campaign which contains an adequate plank for Negro rights, and at the same time emphasizes the struggle for a Farmer-Labor Party.



AL SMITH AND THE HEARST-LIBERTY LEAGUE

(Fable of the Ass and the Lion Hunting)

The ass and the lion made an agreement to go out hunting together. By and by they came to a cave where many wild goats abode. The lion waited in ambush at the mouth of the cave and the ass, going within, kicked and brayed and made a mighty fuss to frighten them out. When the lion had

caught very many of them, the ass came out and asked him if he had not made a noble fight, and routed the goats properly. "Yes, indeed," said the lion, "and I assure you you would have frightened me, too, if I had not known you to be but an ass."

THE final month of the presidential campaign got under way with Candidate Roosevelt proclaiming himself a "far-sighted conservative," Candidate Landon conferring with Herbert Hoover, and Candidate Browder resting up in an Indiana jail, held on a charge of vagrancy. The New York State Democratic convention was the occasion chosen by the President to cast aside his "non-political" mantle, which he did by repudiating a Communist support that was never his to repudiate. The President's entire speech was a confirmation of the Communist view of him as one who would make only enough concessions to American workers to keep them from becoming militantly class conscious. This view of Roosevelt was clearly echoed two days later by the *New York Times*, which formally called for the President's reelection to "provide insurance against radicalism" and offered the opinion that he would "make his second Administration more conservative than his first."

Support for the belief that Roosevelt contemplates no further "radical" experiments such as the N.R.A. and A.A.A. was afforded by his address in Pittsburgh two days later. Ardently defending the expenditures and the record of his first term, the President predicted a balanced budget within a year or two, without additional taxes. The glowing picture he painted of his administration's accomplishments found faint reflection in the comprehensive survey of the New Deal published during the week by the *Economist*, most important organ of financial opinion in Great Britain. "Relief there has been," says the *Economist*, "but little more than enough to keep the population fed, clothed, and warmed. Recovery there has been, but only to a point still well below the pre-depression level. Reform there has been, but it is slight in comparison with the reformers' blueprints." But for all that, the journal believes Roosevelt deserves reelection because the Republicans have even less to offer.

ONCE more the Social Security Act served as a focal point in the campaign. Governor Landon made public a report attacking the old-age provisions of the act which he said had been made by the Twentieth Century Fund. Since the Fund is supported by Edward A. Filene, a Roosevelt backer, publication of the critical report might have had a telling effect but for a few circumstances not mentioned by the Landon command. The report, given to Governor Landon with the distinct understanding that it would be kept confidential, was only a tentative analysis by one member of the committee's research staff, and not the official report of the organization. Much more serious, as the *New York Post* pointed out, was Landon's use of the document "in an attempt to bolster his own views." The report, said that journal, "is written from a viewpoint even more liberal than that of the New Deal—whereas Governor Landon's criticism is from a viewpoint considerably less liberal."

This was the view expressed more force-



*Covering the events of the week
ending October 5*

fully by Earl Browder over the radio. Assailing the law as a "mockery" of its title of "social security," Browder called attention to Landon's speech on the subject in Milwaukee, in which the Republican candidate offered to repeal entirely the principle of federal responsibility and leave it all to the states. The governor's own state of Kansas, as Senator Wagner pointed out, is one of the few states that have not even entered into cooperation with the federal government on an old-age security program, has no pension law, and provides nothing more than pauper relief on a county optional basis.

THE Landon forces got the worst of the week's bargaining in the way of supporters. To the sunflower standard came pathetic Al Smith. Before a gathering sponsored by what is in effect a woman's auxiliary of the Liberty League, the once-popular wearer of the brown derby apologized for having a high hat on the ground that "so has every other man that ever goes to a wedding or a funeral." Embittered because Roosevelt had never asked for his advice, the man who less than a year ago declared that he had been born in the Democratic party and would die in it urged the election of Landon. Descending to invective that smacked almost of senility, Smith said of his party: "Why, even a Communist with wild whiskers and a smoking bomb in his hand is welcome as long as he signs on the dotted line."

But while Landon was attracting such has-beens as Al Smith, the one-time Socialist John Spargo, and Henry L. Mencken, he lost the support of a still active and powerful leader in his own party, William E. Borah. For twenty years Borah has been noted for his savage attacks on the tory leaders of his party up to the day of the convention, and for his complete submission and loyalty from then until election day. Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover he managed somehow to swallow. But of Landon he told a reporter of the *Philadelphia Record*, "I have absolutely no intention to speak in his behalf. Principles are more important to me than my election. . . . If certain parties persist in forcing me into the Presidential race I shall make clear in no unmistakable terms what I think about Mr. Landon, the forces about him, what really happened at

Cleveland, and who wrote the telegram to the convention that bore his name."

WHILE the two old-party leaders wrangled over almost meaningless points of difference, it remained for the Communist candidate to crystallize the one real issue of the campaign: civil liberties, democracy or fascism. The crystallization was not of Browder's making. It was handed to him on a platter by the petty Republican officials of Terre Haute, Ind., who clapped the candidate and four companions into jail as vagrants in order to prevent Browder's speaking in that city. The high-handedness of Terre Haute's two-penny Fascists went unremarked by both Landon and Roosevelt, but to Browder it was a significant step, an attempt on the part of reaction to see how far it dare go in openly flouting those constitutional guarantees to which it had hitherto given at least lip-service. "My arrest," he said, "served to show the arbitrary power of the capitalist interests and their ability to put behind bars anybody at all. It illuminated the movement in this country toward fascism."

Further illumination on that score was not lacking during the week. In New York's Madison Square Garden, a crowd of 20,000 gave Avery Brundage, chairman of the American Olympic committee, the straight-arm Nazi salute as he extolled Hitler and declared, "We can learn much from Germany." Another speaker was Mayor Karl Stroehlin of Stuttgart, whose admittance to the country was protested by the American League Against War and Fascism. The State Department a few weeks ago barred Willie Gallacher, Communist member of the British Parliament, as a possibly subversive influence, but it found no reason to keep out the anti-Semitic Stroehlin, who is in charge of disseminating Nazi propaganda to Germans outside the Reich.

If more illumination of the fascist trend were needed, it came on the labor front. The toll of one dead and over two hundred injured resulted from a charge of state troopers on several thousand pickets at the Berkshire Knitting Mills in Reading, Pa. In California's Salinas Valley, where the lettuce strike continued, the affected area remained in the grip of vigilantes and the equally menacing and irresponsible "law-enforcement" agencies, mobilized and "coördinated" by professional Red-baiters and agents of the growers and shippers. Citizens of Salinas responded by forming a Defense Committee. With the support of the state labor federation and the sympathetic walkout of 3000 Filipino field workers, the drive was intensified to stop the sale of "hot" lettuce. Governor Merriam, on the spot because of his own encouragement of violence, was forced to offer a compromise settlement. But the grower-shippers, bent on destroying the agricultural union, rejected the plan.

While Salinas Valley workers held firm, a few miles north in San Francisco the President's newly-appointed Maritime Commission succeeded in dragging out of the ship-owners a fifteen-day extension of the awards