

The Party of Civil Rights

This magazine has long specialized in debunking pernicious political myths, and Jonah Goldberg has now provided an illuminating catalogue of tyrannical clichés, but worse than the myth and the cliché is the outright lie, the utter fabrication with malice aforethought, and my nominee for the worst of them is the popular but indefensible belief that the two major U.S. political parties somehow “switched places” vis-à-vis protecting the rights of black Americans, a development believed to be roughly concurrent with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the rise of Richard Nixon. That Republicans have let Democrats get away with this mountebankery is a symptom of their political fecklessness, and in letting them get away with it the GOP has allowed itself to be cut off rhetorically from a pantheon of Republican political heroes, from Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass to Susan B. Anthony, who represent an expression of conservative ideals as true and relevant today as it was in the 19th century. Perhaps even worse, the Democrats have been allowed to rhetorically bury their Bull Connors, their longstanding affiliation with the Ku Klux Klan, and their pitiless opposition to practically every major piece of civil-rights legislation for a century. Republicans may not be able to make significant inroads among black voters in the coming elections, but they would do well to demolish this myth nonetheless.

Even if the Republicans’ rise in the South had happened suddenly in the 1960s (it didn’t) and even if there were no competing explanation (there is), racism – or, more precisely, white southern resentment over the political successes of the civil-rights movement – would be an implausible explanation for the dissolution of the Democratic bloc in the old Confederacy and the emergence of a Republican stronghold there. That is because those southerners who defected from the

Democratic party in the 1960s and thereafter did so to join a Republican party that was far more enlightened on racial issues than were the Democrats of the era, and had been for a century. There is no radical break in the Republicans' civil-rights history: From abolition to Reconstruction to the anti-lynching laws, from the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Civil Rights Act of 1875 to the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, and 1964, there exists a line that is by no means perfectly straight or unwavering but that nonetheless connects the politics of Lincoln with those of Dwight D. Eisenhower. And from slavery and secession to remorseless opposition to everything from Reconstruction to the anti-lynching laws, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, the Civil Rights Act of 1875, and the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960, there exists a similarly identifiable line connecting John Calhoun and Lyndon Baines Johnson. Supporting civil-rights reform was not a radical turnaround for congressional Republicans in 1964, but it was a radical turnaround for Johnson and the Democrats.

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GASBombed

It would be tempting to write that the Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB) is poised to blow a \$3 trillion hole in the budgets of state and local governments. But in fact, if you want to be precise, GASB is getting ready to blow the lid off of the \$3 trillion hole that is already there.

The problem is this: State and local governments have, for the most part, woefully underfunded their employee-pension systems. As a result, they have massive unfunded liabilities for future pension payments – liabilities that total as high

as \$3 trillion, by some estimates. They can't forgo writing those pension checks, they don't have money set aside to cover those pension checks, and they are promising ever more generous pension checks in the future.

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Elizabeth Warren's Wall Street Money Machine

Elizabeth Warren has called Massachusetts Senator Scott Brown the "poster boy for Goldman Sachs." Her aide Alethea Harney had this to say: "Unlike with Scott Brown, middle-class families won't have to wonder whether Elizabeth Warren will choose them over Wall Street." And why might Scott Brown, who does not have particularly deep ties to Wall Street, choose distant financiers over the voters in his backyard? The answer, Professor Warren says, is filthy lucre, i.e. campaign donations. "The Wall Street guys have been meeting aggressively to say, 'How many different ways can we fund Scott Brown to make sure Elizabeth Warren does not go to the United States Senate?'" she has charged. A Massachusetts Democratic spokesman, Kevin Franck, made a similar charge: "It's no surprise that Wall Street and the big banks continue to finance Scott Brown's campaign, because he continues to put their interests first, ahead of middle-class Massachusetts families."

Senator Brown shares with President Barack Obama the distinction of being a recipient of very generous campaign donations from Goldman Sachs, his third-largest contributor behind two Massachusetts mainstays: Boston-based Fidelity and

Boston-based Liberty Mutual. If these donations make Senator Brown the “poster child for Goldman Sachs,” then we must think of a comparable epithet for Professor Warren, whose campaign also takes in a great deal of money from Wall Street – or, in the interest of more precise metonymy, from the sewers beneath Wall Street. I am in general not much of an admirer of Wall Street bankers, but the bankers are scholars and gentlemen compared to Wall Street lawyers, who combine the rapacity and cleverness of the financier with the paid-by-the-hour-plus-a-percentage complacency associated with the legal profession. With apologies to Matt Taibbi, Wall Street lawyers are the sort of people who give vampire squids a bad name.

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An American Gospel

Americans are an enterprising people, and we start churches like we start businesses. (It is not always possible to tell the two apart.) There are more than twice as many distinct religious communities as McDonald’s restaurants in the United States, and eight times as many religious congregations as ZIP codes. The diversity of American creeds and the comity among their adherents is remarkable: The West Texas city in which I was raised was dominated by white Baptists and brown Catholics, but we had everything from staid Methodist congregations to foot-washing Primitive Baptists, holy-rolling Foursquare and Full Gospel churches, a tiny congregation of Latin-loving sedevacantists led by a discalced Franciscan (try *that* on a sidewalk in Texas in July), neo-Marcionite churches full of people who did not know what a Marcionite is, various expressions of the Seventh-Day Adventist tendency, even a few Mennonites out in the countryside. Everybody

thought everybody else was going to perdition, though to the best of my recollection Janet Reno was the only one willing to dispatch anybody to hell from Texas over religious peculiarities.

But the Mormons are a tribe apart.

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'No Wi-Fi': The Real Sign of Our Times

I popped into a coffeeshop the other day to get my brain jump-started, and I saw a sign that stopped me cold: "No Wi-Fi." That's the history of the millennial era in two words: The day before yesterday there was no such thing as wireless Internet access. Then it became available, usually for a pretty stiff usage fee. (Remember the dark ages of having to rely on Boingo at the airport? Oh, wait . . . if you fly out of LaGuardia, you're still in the dark ages. More about that in a minute.) Then wireless got so cheap that it became available as a courtesy in public spaces, and coffeeshops and the like began to offer it as a basic amenity, like restrooms or comfortable chairs. Up went the signs: "Free Wi-Fi." Pretty soon, you could log on for free at McDonald's while sucking down all 1,160 calories in your supersized shake. And then a funny thing happened: The "Free Wi-Fi" signs went away. The new sign was the invisible sign: "*Of course* we have wireless – what do you think this is, Waziristan?"

And now wireless Internet access has become so ubiquitous, so cheap, so convenient, that the odd establishment that for whatever economic or aesthetic reason declines to offer the

amenity to its customers feels compelled to advertise the absence of what didn't exist only a few years ago. It's like a sign reading "No Public Restroom."

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