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"A Truly Democratic Party"

1962–1966

> I want to see the Democratic Party become honest in Georgia, so that those who are masquerading as Democrats within the party now will be forced to either form a party of their own or join the Republican Party where they actually belong.
>
> State senator Erwin Mitchell (D-DeKalb County), 1961

There were ample reasons for Georgia's Loyalists to be very satisfied with the way things were going in the early 1960s. In November 1960, John F. Kennedy won Georgia by a larger margin than any other state except Rhode Island. In the winter of 1961, massive resistance was repealed, and token school desegregation followed in Atlanta that fall without serious incident. In 1962, the county-unit system was abandoned, and Carl Sanders was elected governor by a landslide after campaigning on the twin promises of economic modernization and open schools. It is hard to imagine what more Loyalists could realistically have hoped for. And yet senior Loyalists remained anxious about the future. Their anxiety was captured in a December 1962 letter sent by J. B. Fuqua, the newly appointed Georgia Democratic Party chairman, to Claudia Duffell, a Loyalist member of the Fifth Congressional District Democratic Executive Committee. Despite all the positive developments of the previous few years, and even though Sanders had been elected governor only weeks earlier, Fuqua wrote Duffell that it was urgently necessary that the state party be "rejuvenated." In particular, Fuqua warned, it would soon be necessary for "a decision [to] be made as to whether the Georgia Democratic Party brings into its ranks the Negro voter, who now represents a sizeable factor in our state."[1]

Fuqua's concerns were an indication of how the Loyalists' position in 1962 mirrored that of the Regulars in 1946. In that earlier moment,

Regulars had been returned to statewide office, but were immediately compelled to take measures to address the vulnerabilities in their position. Sixteen years later, Loyalists were similarly aware that while they had gained the political initiative, this did not mean future success was guaranteed. As Fuqua suspected, and as subsequent events would confirm, the string of victories that Loyalists enjoyed between 1960 and 1962 did not represent a final resolution of the struggle to shape postwar Georgia. Instead, they were a prelude to the most politically fluid and uncertain period in the state's postwar history: a period during which Loyalists experienced successes and setbacks in seemingly equal measure.

Fuqua's call for the party to be "rejuvenated" was a recognition of the challenges Loyalists faced. The most critical remained the civil rights movement. Although the end of massive resistance represented a grudging acceptance by most white Georgians that limited desegregation was a price worth paying for open schools, this did not mean that there was much support for doing anything more than the bare minimum that compliance with the law required. Such minimal compliance would have suited most Loyalists just fine, but if they hoped that civil rights activists would accept the kind of stage-managed token desegregation that Atlanta had undertaken in September 1961 as a sufficient rate of change in the racial order, they were quickly disabused of that notion.

Even before massive resistance ended, the civil rights movement had begun to take a more confrontational approach. The Auburn Avenue Strategy of back-channel negotiations and the so-called Atlanta Way of addressing racial issues by getting white and black community leaders to hammer out compromises that were then handed down as fait accompli to their constituents began to lose ground after the rise of student protest movements in the winter of 1960.[2] At this time, a new generation of black leaders both expanded the targets of civil rights protests and changed the style of those protests. Within Georgia, the student movement in Atlanta and the campaign of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in Albany attracted the most attention, even though they were not necessarily as successful as lesser known protests elsewhere.[3] Nonetheless, the very presence of direct-action protests, successful or otherwise, presented Loyalists with a thorny political challenge.

In the first place, direct-action protests inevitably sparked white resistance, which in turn ensured that race remained at the center of political debate.[4] As white resistance escalated, pressure grew for the passage of

federal civil rights legislation. This again left Loyalists with a choice they did not want: either support the desegregation of public accommodations or tacitly condone the violent opposition to it. The former remained unpopular with white voters, while siding with the resistance would certainly alienate the growing number of black voters and, more problematically, risked tarnishing the state's image in the eyes of investors. On the other hand, while direct-action protests certainly caused a serious political headache for Loyalists, they also created an opening to adjust to limited desegregation. This was the result of a secondary impact the protests had: they exacerbated the generational tensions within Georgia's politically active black population. While such senior figures as A. T. Walden, William Holmes Borders, and Martin Luther King Sr. provided support and legal assistance for some of the protests, they were also frequently at loggerheads with the student leadership over whether to continue the sit-ins and store boycotts.[5] Leaders of the Atlanta student movement, such as Lonnie King, Herschelle Sullivan, Ben Brown, and Julian Bond, regularly encountered resistance to their activities from established black leaders and institutions, particularly in the editorials of C. A. Scott's *Atlanta Daily World*.[6] Loyalists took advantage of these divisions to criticize the students and direct-action protests while simultaneously aligning themselves with the "respectable" black leadership in order to demonstrate that they were not hostile to black voters as a whole.

In doing so, Loyalists again used progressive color blindness, though they deployed it in a manner that was subtly yet significantly different from earlier. Whereas in the 1940s the courtship of black voters had been clandestine, and in the 1950s acceptance of desegregation had been justified in terms of preventing disaster befalling the state, by the 1960s Loyalists were pivoting toward positively flaunting their associations with "respectable" black leaders. In particular, once Loyalists decided that Jim Crow was in its death throes, they came to believe that acquiescing in its demise and publicizing their willingness to seek good race relations through cooperating with selected parts of the black community made good political sense. This attitude represented a transitional moment between the postwar Loyalists' fear of being seen as prodesegregation in the 1940s and the New South Democrats openly celebrating the value of desegregation to southern progress in the 1970s. This approach reflected the evolution of an existing strategy rather than a new departure; at the same time, it answered in the affirmative Fuqua's question about whether

to make the "Negro voter" an integral part of the Georgia Democratic Party.

Loyalists faced two further challenges in the early 1960s. The first was how to maintain a functional relationship with the national Democratic Party; the second was how to respond to the rising strength of the Republican Party. While John Kennedy had easily carried Georgia, there was no hiding the ominous signs that support for the national Democratic Party in Georgia was on very tenuous ground. Many parts of the state that voted for Kennedy were the same parts that routinely backed Regular candidates who vowed to fight the national party's agenda. This was not encouraging for the long term. As Numan Bartley put it in his survey of postwar Georgia politics, this represented "a political absurdity that could not forever endure."[7]

Additional cause for concern for Loyalists was the nonbinding referendum sponsored by Regulars in September 1960 over whether the Democratic electors chosen at the presidential election should be required to vote for Kennedy or should remain "free"—that is, unpledged to any candidate. The result was a 55 to 45 percent majority in favor of unpledged electors.[8] Had the result of the referendum been honored, Georgia's electors would likely have followed the lead of Mississippi's unpledged electors and cast their presidential ballots for U.S. senator Harry Byrd of Virginia. Loyalists could therefore be grateful that Governor Vandiver changed his mind on the issue after a private meeting with Kennedy and decided to withdraw his support from the "free electors" campaign. Instead, Vandiver endorsed Kennedy's candidacy.[9]

Loyalists were nonetheless alarmed at what they saw as a repeat of the Dixiecrat campaign of 1948 and suspected Regulars were intending to use the state party organization to actively sabotage the Democrats' presidential ticket. In order to prevent this from happening, a group of Loyalists established the Democratic Forum in March 1960. Their intention was to raise funds for and support the candidates of the national Democratic Party.[10] The Democratic Forum attracted several prominent figures from within the Loyalist ranks, including Helen Bullard; A. T. Walden; Ivan Allen Jr., who in 1961 would be elected mayor of Atlanta; and Charles Weltner, a young attorney who was gearing up for a primary challenge against Congressman James Davis in 1962. Once Kennedy was nominated, the Democratic Forum arranged crowds for his visits to Georgia and held a series of fund-raisers. True to Loyalist tradition, it engaged in color-blind

politics. Blacks were members of the group, and a Kennedy campaign event the Democratic Forum hosted at Atlanta's Hungry Club became the state's first officially integrated fund-raiser, but the question of racial equality was never explicitly raised as a goal of the organization.[11] Instead, as Weltner wrote to Senator Russell in a vain attempt to gain his support for the organization, the core principle of the Democratic Forum was that it stood "four-square for party loyalty."[12]

The Democratic Forum was one of the first of a series of organizations that Loyalists established over the coming decade to "rejuvenate" the state party. As well as the problem of the Regulars' attacks on the national party, Loyalists also worried that the state party organization had become moribund. They saw this as a huge liability for Democrats once two-party competition began in earnest, as Loyalists were certain it soon would. In the most populous parts of the state, Republicans were already making serious inroads. Although Nixon trailed Kennedy by 25 percentage points statewide, he was less than 5 points behind in urban and suburban counties. Within Atlanta, Nixon was only 3.6 points adrift, thanks in part to the estimated 57 percent support he received from the city's black voters.[13] In General Assembly contests, Republicans were registering increased support in urban and suburban districts, and in 1962 they picked up state senate seats in Atlanta, Savannah, and Macon. Given that these were the same parts of the state that Loyalists relied on for their support, there was an understandable anxiety at the inexorable rise of an organized Republican opposition and the absence of an effective Democratic organization through which to push back.

To address this trio of challenges, Loyalists built on the themes they had developed to advance their agenda in the 1940s and 1950s, but tried to augment them in a way that recognized the increased militancy of the civil rights movement and the changing nature of partisan competition in the 1960s. The experiences of three individuals who were active at different levels of Georgia politics illustrate the various ways in which Loyalists responded to the political climate of the early 1960s.

The first was Charles Weltner, who was elected to Congress in 1962. As a congressman, Weltner came to support civil rights legislation as necessary, but adamantly insisted that he was not a civil rights advocate. The second was Melba Williams, a Democratic activist from Atlanta's suburbs who saw firsthand the growing GOP strength around her and the lack of a Democratic organization to challenge it. The third was Governor Sanders.