CHAPTER 6

SOUTH CAROLINA FOR THE REPUBLICANS

Beginning in 1980, the state of South Carolina quietly acquired an influential position in the Republican presidential nomination process. By carefully scheduling its Republican presidential primary two-to-three weeks after New Hampshire, South Carolina slowly achieved a reputation for holding "the first Republican presidential primary in the South."

In 1980, an underdog former governor of California, Ronald Reagan, upset front-runner John Connally in South Carolina. Connally, previously the governor of Texas, had more money than Reagan and was leading in statewide polls. Reagan's surprise victory in South Carolina put him on the winning track for the 1980 Republican nomination and election to the White House.

South Carolina was key for the Republicans in 1988 as well. Vice President George H. W. Bush lost the Iowa caucuses to Senator Bob Dole of Kansas that year. A big Bush victory in South Carolina ended Dole's candidacy and propelled the elder Bush to the Republican nomination and the presidency.

Another important year for South Carolina in the Republican race was 1996. Conservative political commentator Patrick Buchanan upset Bob Dole in the New Hampshire primary and claimed that a win in South Carolina would put him on the "Dixie Express" to the Republican nomination. The Dixie Express was the idea that a Buchanan win in South Carolina would enable Buchanan to win all the other southern primaries and thereby secure the 1996 Republican nomination.

As it turned out, Buchanan's Dixie Express was badly derailed in South Carolina. Bob Dole defeated Buchanan in South Carolina, became the 1996 Republican nominee, but lost the November election to incumbent Democratic President Bill Clinton.

"Since 1980, every South Carolina Republican primary winner has gone on to win the nomination," trumpeted J. Sam Daniels, executive director of the state Republican Party, as the 2000 presidential primaries got underway. "That's what makes South Carolina the most important (Republican) primary in the nation."

There is no question that South Carolina is a southern state. It was the first state to vote to secede from the Union at the start of the Civil

War. In fact, the initial hostilities of the Civil War began in South Carolina when cannons in the port city of Charleston fired upon and forced the surrender of U.S. military personnel at Fort Sumter.

The South has traditionally been conservative in American politics, and South Carolina is no exception. The state's voters have tended to prefer that things stay the way they are. This has produced an electorate that is institutional, orthodox, and tradition-bound rather than radical and progressive.

At first glance, South Carolina in 2000 looked ready-made for a moderate conservative Republican such as George W. Bush, the son of former-President George H. W. Bush. In fact, the younger Bush's supporters quietly referred to South Carolina as a Bush "fire wall." It was a state thought to be so safely in the Bush camp that the "fire" of John McCain's candidacy could be stopped there.

As for John McCain, there were three reasons why, after his big New Hampshire victory in 2000, he decided to concentrate his limited resources on winning South Carolina.

The first reason was there was no official party registration in South Carolina. Independent voters, and even Democratic voters, could vote in the 2000 Republican presidential primary. That meant that John McCain could go after a non-Republican electorate in South Carolina that might be attracted to his maverick image and uncompromising support of campaign finance reform. Independent voters had given McCain his upset win in New Hampshire. Perhaps independents *and Democrats* could do the same thing for him in South Carolina.

The second reason fueling John McCain's hopes in South Carolina in 2000 was the large number of military veterans, many of them retired, who lived in the state. McCain's distinguished war record as a Navy pilot gave him great appeal to these veterans and their spouses and families. One poll found McCain running two-to-one ahead of Bush among South Carolina veterans. McCain appealed to this important electorate, said to be as much as one-third of Republican primary voters, by asking them to "go with me on one last mission."

The third reason McCain was competitive in South Carolina was the changing character of the state's population. The old cotton economy, with its giant textile mills, was rapidly fading. By 2000, the South Caro-

lina business scene was shifting in the direction of high-tech computer companies and automobile assembly plants. This created a new electorate of computer engineers and auto-plant technicians. These newcomers, many of them from the North, were said to be less tied to South Carolina's conservative past and thus likely to be attracted by McCain's more moderate and progressive campaign.

It did not take long for McCain's strengths in South Carolina in 2000 to become apparent. According to early polls, George W. Bush originally was leading McCain in South Carolina by upwards of 20 points. After McCain defeated Bush so badly in New Hampshire, however, McCain rose dramatically in popularity in South Carolina. It all happened just the way the concept of New Hampshire "exaggeration" suggested it would. With two weeks to go before presidential primary election day, according to a *Time*/CNN poll, the South Carolina race was a statistical dead heat between Bush and McCain.

To the average observer, it seemed as though it was just another campaign event. Giving his first speech in South Carolina following his loss to John McCain in the 2000 New Hampshire primary, George W. Bush walked to the podium at Bob Jones University. Bush was introduced to the cheering crowd as a person who "deeply loves the Lord."

Much more was occurring, however, than just another Bush political speech. Bob Jones University was an evangelical Christian educational institution specifically designed to further conservative religious viewpoints among its students. In addition, there was a vestige of racial segregation at the university that stemmed from school rules limiting social interaction between black and white students.

The news media were quick to pick up on the message George W. Bush was sending to South Carolina voters. By appearing at Bob Jones University, Bush was turning his campaign hard to the right in an effort to win over South Carolina's many evangelical Christian voters. To make that message crystal clear, Bush used the word "conservative" a total of six times in his speech.

George W. Bush began taking an outspoken stand against abortion,

the issue that seemed to matter the most to the "religious right." Bush began talking more about his own religious beliefs. He declined to meet with a gay group within the Republican Party called the Log Cabin Republicans. He sent a mixed message on racial issues by holding a political rally at Boone Hall, a pre-Civil War slave plantation near Charleston.

In addition, George W. Bush declined to take a stand on an issue that was seriously dividing white and black South Carolinians. African-Americans were trying to get the Confederate battle flag removed from flying over the state capitol building in Columbia. The flag was said to be an unpleasant memory for black people of the many years that human slavery was legal in South Carolina. Bush steadfastly refused to give any opinion, one way or the other, on the issue.

Bush vehemently denied that his speech at Bob Jones University signaled to South Carolinians that he would go easy in the fight against racial intolerance. "Don't you judge my heart based upon giving a speech at a university," Bush snapped back at reporters. He then pointed out that two previous Republican presidents, Ronald Reagan and his father (George H. W. Bush), both spoke at the school. Bush made it clear he did not regret at all appearing at Bob Jones University.

The image of U.S. Senator John McCain appeared on South Carolina television screens. He was dressed in a blue business suit with a red necktie. McCain looked straight into the camera as though he were getting serious and "leveling" with his viewers. The camera started to zoom slowly in on McCain's face as he began speaking. McCain said:

"I guess it was bound to happen. Governor Bush's campaign is getting desperate, with a negative ad about me. His ad twists the truth *like Clinton*. We're all pretty tired of that. As president, I'll be conservative and always tell you the truth. No matter what."

That TV advertisement followed another McCain ad that closed with a line referring to George W. Bush: "Do we really want another politician in the White House that America can't trust?"

Suddenly, it was clear the McCain campaign had decided to hit George W. Bush with a string of negative ads. It also was a sign that

Bush's strong appeal to evangelical Christian voters was working, and McCain saw the need to counter it in some way. Note that one of McCain's television ads contained the line: "I'll be *conservative* and always tell you the truth."

It was at that moment that John McCain experienced one of the most painful of campaign developments. That was campaign advertisement backfire. The Bush camp immediately charged John McCain with going negative and not telling the truth himself. An aide to George W. Bush, discussing the McCain ads, told reporters: "They went nuclear. That's when they hit themselves with their own pitch."

Suddenly, McCain's negative television commercials were the major issue in the 2000 South Carolina Republican presidential primary. Comparing George W. Bush to out-going President Bill Clinton appeared to have been a particularly bad mistake. Worst of all for McCain, the issue was costing him his carefully-honed image of honesty and frankness. The negative ads badly tarnished McCain's reformer image and weakened his claim that he was not like other politicians.

Said one political observer: "The hypocrisy killed him."

Said another: "McCain revealed himself as the anti-politician who politicked. His ad was seen as crossing over the line. South Carolina was the place where John McCain got off his white horse and made a mistake."

The reaction to McCain's negativism was so severe that, as primary election day in South Carolina neared, the Arizona senator renounced his own television commercials and pledged to run a more positive campaign. A similar pledge was not forthcoming from George W. Bush. He continued to run ads in which he talked directly to the voters about the way McCain's negative accusations were way out-of-bounds. Bush's campaign literature constantly repeated one simple phrase: "John McCain says one thing but does another."

Republican primary election day in South Carolina was a somewhat haphazard event in 2000. The Republican Party, and not the state of South Carolina, conducted the election, staffing the polling places with

volunteers. A number of polling places were consolidated at the last minute because of a shortage of Republican volunteers. Voters approaching one polling place in Mauldin, South Carolina, were greeted with this hastily scrawled sign: "Mauldin #6 Will Vote Today At Mauldin-Miller Fire Station."

There was nothing haphazard about the results of the 2000 South Carolina primary. George W. Bush handily defeated John McCain by 53 percent to 42 percent, an 11 point spread. According to exit polls, Bush won virtually all of the identifiable voting groups except military veterans and new voters.

"I'm excited and energized," Bush said when the size of his lead over McCain in South Carolina became known. "This is a big victory. This campaign ignited and united the Republican base."

In one respect, the South Carolina results in 2000 mirrored the New Hampshire tally. In South Carolina, Bush won among those voters who identified themselves as Republicans by almost a 3 to 1 margin. Voters who labeled themselves independents and Democrats went for McCain by 2 to 1. That was close to the way it went in New Hampshire. In South Carolina, however, there were not enough independents and Democrats voting for McCain to overcome Bush's tremendous support from regular Republicans.

George W. Bush's sharp turn to the right, symbolized by his speech at Bob Jones University, worked very effectively. Evangelical Christians turned out at record levels and gave Bush almost 70 percent of their votes.

Despite all the talk about how the population had changed character in South Carolina in previous years, the state once again proved itself a bastion of loyalty to the establishment Republican candidate. As *Time* magazine put it: "It was the third consecutive time a Republican frontrunner (George W. Bush) had lost New Hampshire and regained his balance in South Carolina. The fire wall held."

The news media gave Bush the favorable publicity he deserved for winning the hotly-contested Republican race in South Carolina in 2000. "To my eyes," said David S. Broder of the *Washington Post*, "Bush

outcampaigned McCain in South Carolina, the reverse of what we had seen in New Hampshire."

Broder also noted the extent to which John McCain helped to defeat himself. In a speech at the Opera House in Newberry, South Carolina, McCain denied any connection to an anti-Bush brochure that his campaign had indeed put out. It made voters very skeptical, Broder argued, about McCain's signature promise to "always tell the truth - no matter what."

George W. Bush's big victory in the South Carolina Republican presidential primary in 2000 came to be viewed as the turning point in Bush's campaign for the Republican nomination for president. Although McCain won in Michigan four days later, thanks as usual to independent voters, he subsequently lost major primaries to Bush in Virginia, Washington state, and South Dakota.

Had the South Carolina Republican presidential primary, by the year 2000, evolved into a more important primary than New Hampshire? That idea was heresy, political leaders in New Hampshire argued, given that the New Hampshire primary had been important since 1952 and the South Carolina Republican primary only had been around since 1980.

One fact stood out: New Hampshire had shown a tendency to support Republican outsiders and mavericks whose campaigns did not get very far. South Carolina, on the other hand, voted for establishment Republican candidates, who then went on to win the Republican presidential nomination.

Most political analysts argued that, if John McCain had won South Carolina, it would have been a mortal blow to the Bush campaign and McCain would have been the 2000 Republican presidential nominee. The reverse also was true. By defeating John McCain so convincingly in South Carolina, Bush for all intents and purposes wrapped up the 2000 Republican nomination race.

South Carolina voters had a good time making this very important decision. The 2000 Republican presidential primary in South Carolina was a real contest, with the major contenders competing hard against

each other. The voters had a real choice to make. It was well understood that the ballots being cast were going to greatly influence the outcome of the Republican nomination race. It was the kind of truly competitive election that voters say they want.

The Republican primary voters in South Carolina, stated pollster Bill McInturff in 2000, "have more power to determine the next Republican nominee and possibly the next president than anyone else in America, whether they know it or not."

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In 2008, the South Carolina Republican presidential primary was scheduled the same day as the Nevada caucuses. In order to win Nevada, former-Governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts abandoned campaigning in South Carolina and stopped running his television advertisements there. As a result, the 2008 South Carolina Republican primary was mainly between U.S. Senator John McCain of Arizona and Mike Huckabee, the former governor of Arkansas.

John McCain did not waste the years between his loss to George W. Bush in South Carolina in 2000 and the year 2008. McCain spent a great deal of time giving speeches and building political contacts in South Carolina. Republican leaders in South Carolina came to know McCain better and many were supporting him when he ran in South Carolina in 2008. Prominent among McCain backers was Lindsey Graham, the state's senior U.S. senator.

Above all, John McCain reached out to conservative Republican voters in South Carolina. He declared the United States to be a Christian nation. He came out in support of President George W. Bush's tax cuts, although McCain had opposed those tax cuts on the Senate floor because the cuts increased the national deficit. McCain made clear his strong support for the war in Iraq. After all, he had been an early and outspoken champion of sending a "surge" of additional U.S. troops into that seemingly-unending military conflict. John McCain particularly appealed to the state's many military veterans, pledging to "get bin Laden," the Islamic radical who launched the 9-11 attacks against the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.

Because John McCain lost Michigan to Mitt Romney only four days earlier and was probably going to lose Nevada to Romney as well, South Carolina had become a "must-win" state for McCain. A South Carolina win would bring McCain something he needed that Mitt Romney had plenty of, and that was money. McCain poured all his time and what money he had into winning South Carolina.

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Former-Governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas needed to win South Carolina in 2008 as badly as John McCain did. South Carolina has a large number of evangelical Christian voters, and Huckabee therefore saw South Carolina as his best chance to pick up a second win to go with his victory in Iowa, where evangelical Christians supported him strongly.

Mike Huckabee mentioned Jesus Christ frequently in his speeches, prayed openly at his political rallies, and took strong stands in favor of outlawing abortion and gay marriage, two issues of great concern to evangelical Christians. Huckabee, a former Baptist preacher as well as a politician, gave a speech at North Greenville University, a Southern Baptist school. When urged to do so by the president of the university, Huckabee told the crowd of his acceptance, when he was a child, of Jesus Christ as his Savior.

In his effort to rally Southern white voters to his cause, Mike Huckabee reran an issue that played prominently in the 2000 Republican primary in South Carolina. That was the issue of flying the Confederate flag over the state capitol in Columbia, South Carolina. Although the Confederate flag, the "Stars and Bars," had already been removed from flying over the capitol dome and placed in a more historical location on the capitol grounds, Huckabee's supporters ran radio ads criticizing John McCain and Mitt Romney for voicing objections to the Confederate flag.

Speaking in Myrtle Beach, Huckabee said the Confederate flag was a states' rights issue that "the president of the United States does not need to weigh in on." Huckabee noted: "If somebody came into Arkansas and told us what to do with our flag, we'd tell them what to do."

There was a problem for Mike Huckabee, however. One of the less-

competitive candidates for the Republican nomination in 2008, former-Senator Fred Thompson of Tennessee, decided to make a real effort to win South Carolina and, similar to Huckabee, aimed his appeal at evangelical Christian voters. To the surprise of many observers, Fred Thompson directly attacked Huckabee, charging that Huckabee's economic policies as governor of Arkansas were too liberal and Democratic.

Fred Thompson's revived candidacy in South Carolina raised the specter for Mike Huckabee that the evangelical Christian vote might split between Huckabee and Thompson, thereby enabling John McCain to win the primary. The Huckabee camp complained to the news media: "Thompson's only in this as McCain's attack dog." It was well known that John McCain and Fred Thompson had been close friends when Thompson was serving in the U.S. Senate.

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Republican primary election day in South Carolina was raining and cold, but plenty of voters made it to their polling place and voted. When the results were in, John McCain had received 33 percent of the vote and Mike Huckabee 30 percent. It was a somewhat narrow margin of victory for McCain, but it was a victory nonetheless. Fred Thompson was in third place with 16 percent, a pretty good showing for a candidate who had gained a reputation for not trying hard until he got to South Carolina. Mitt Romney, who had written off South Carolina to concentrate on the Nevada caucuses the same day, was close behind Thompson in fourth place with 15 percent.

It did appear that Fred Thompson successfully played the "spoiler" and cost Mike Huckabee a win in South Carolina. Adding the Huckabee vote (30 percent) to the Thompson vote (16 percent) produced a total of 46 percent, more than enough votes to beat McCain's 33 percent. Exit polls confirmed this idea. Many evangelical Christians turned out to vote in the South Carolina Republican fracas, but they split their votes rather than giving all of them to Mike Huckabee.

South Carolina was a "must-win" state for John McCain, and one way or another he won it. That in effect made John McCain and Mitt Romney the two leading contenders for the Republican nomination for

president. Mike Huckabee had spectacularly won the Iowa caucuses, but he had not won anything since. Huckabee's loss to McCain in South Carolina convinced many observers that Huckabee's base of support, apparently limited only to evangelical Christians, was too narrow to sustain a successful candidacy very much longer.

John McCain had won a big one. News commentators made much of the fact that, in the more than a quarter century from 1980 to 2008, no Republican had been elected president without first winning the South Carolina Republican primary. It was an excellent omen for McCain.