

7. SOUTH CAROLINA

Quietly, beginning in 1980, the state of South Carolina built itself an influential position in the Republican presidential nomination process. By carefully scheduling its GOP presidential primary two-to-three weeks after New Hampshire, South Carolina slowly carved out 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 GOP nomination and election to the White House.

South Carolina also was key in 1988. Vice President George Bush lost the Iowa caucuses to Kansas Senator Robert Dole that year. A big Bush victory in South Carolina ended Dole's candidacy and propelled Bush to the Republican nomination and the presidency.

Another important year for South Carolina was 1996. Conservative political commentator Patrick Buchanan upset Senator 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 sew up the 1996 GOP 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, and then lost the November election to incumbent Democratic President Bill Clinton.¹

"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 year 2000 presidential primaries got underway. "That's what makes South Carolina the most important primary in the nation."²

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 to that rule. The state's voters have tended to prefer that things stay the way they already are. This has produced an electorate that is institutional, orthodox, and tradition-bound rather than radical and progressive.

At first glance, South Carolina in the year 2000 looked ready-made for a moderate conservative Republican such as George W. Bush. In fact, Bush 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, he decided to concentrate his limited resources on winning South Carolina.

The first reason was that 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 was the large number of military veterans, many of them retired military, 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.³ McCain reached out 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."⁴

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 away. By the year 2000, the South Carolina 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 liberal and progressive campaign.

It did not take long for John McCain's strengths in South Carolina to become apparent. According to early polls, George W. Bush originally was leading McCain in South Carolina by upwards of 20 points. But, after McCain defeated Bush so badly in New Hampshire, McCain shot up 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, McCain was leading Bush by 5 points in the Zogby Poll. According to a *Time*/CNN poll, the South Carolina race was a statistical dead heat.

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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 New Hampshire, 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."⁵

But much more was occurring than just another Bush political speech. Bob Jones University was an ultra-fundamentalist Christian educational institution specifically designed to further conservative religious viewpoints among its students. In addition, there was a tinge of racism 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 Christian conservative 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 GOP called the Log Cabin Republicans. And 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 the elder George Bush, had spoken at the school. Bush made it clear he did not regret at all appearing at Bob Jones University.⁶

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In the last days of the New Hampshire primary, George W. Bush began developing a more informal campaign style. That new style was very much on display at the Bush rally at the airport hangar in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. By the time of the South Carolina Republican primary, Bush's new method of campaigning was fully developed and attracting considerable comment in the press.

A large crowd gathered at the Catawba Fish Camp, in Fort Lawn, South Carolina, to hear a

speech by George W. Bush. But, upon closer inspection, it seemed as though it might be a John McCain rally. Bush did not mount a stage or raised platform to speak to his supporters, as he had done throughout most of the New Hampshire campaign. Instead, Bush appeared to have adopted a theater-in-the-round strategy where he was surrounded on all sides by his supporters.

Bush's campaign appearances in South Carolina suddenly were very short on formal oratory and extra long on Bush going from voter to voter in the middle of a crowd. It had become clear to Bush's campaign managers that Bush's sharpness and charm, brilliantly radiated in personal conversation, simply was not coming across in public speeches.

Thus Bush found himself standing at dinner-table level at the Catawba Fish Farm. Speaking into a microphone, Bush pivoted 360 degrees as he fielded questions from his fellow diners, who were simultaneously munching batter-dipped catfish.

There was another change, too. Working hard to emulate John McCain's successful "town meeting" style of campaigning, George W. Bush began to shorten his answers to questions and worked harder to give the one-line answers that make good newspaper quotes and TV sound bites. And, in an effort to replicate John McCain's cozy chats with reporters and TV commentators on the McCain campaign bus, Bush began hanging around more with reporters and answering their questions in a more off-the-cuff manner.

In case anyone missed all these campaign strategy changes, there was a sign at the Catawba Fish Camp announcing: "One On One With Governor Bush."⁷

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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 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 conservative voters was working and that 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 the most painful of campaign developments - the issue 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 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 McCain 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."⁸

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."⁹

The reaction to McCain's negativism was so severe that, as election day neared, the Arizona senator renounced his own television commercials and pledged to run a more positive campaign.¹⁰ But 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 John 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."

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Republican presidential primary election day in South Carolina is a somewhat haphazard event. The Republican Party, and not the state of South Carolina, conducts the election, staffing the polling places with volunteers. A number of polling places were consolidated at the last minute because of a shortage of GOP 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."¹¹

But there was nothing haphazard about the results of the year 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 for military veterans and new voters.

"I'm excited and energized," George W. Bush said when the size of his lead over McCain became known. "This is a big victory. This campaign ignited and united the Republican base."¹²

In one respect, the South Carolina results mirrored the New Hampshire tally. 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. But in South Carolina there were not enough independents and Democrats voting for McCain to overcome Bush's tremendous support from Republicans.

George W. Bush's sharp turn to the right, symbolized by his speech at Bob Jones University, worked very effectively. Christian conservatives 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 front-runner [George W. Bush] had lost New Hampshire and regained his balance in South Carolina. The fire wall held."¹³

The news media, which had ignored Bush's victory in tiny Delaware, gave Bush the favorable publicity he deserved for winning the hotly-contested race in South Carolina. "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."¹⁴

George W. Bush's big victory in the South Carolina Republican presidential primary came at a high price. In order to win the hard core conservative vote in South Carolina, Bush moved far to the right and well away from his earlier moderate position as a "Compassionate Conservative." Political analysts speculated that Bush might have trouble moving back to the center once the South Carolina sweepstakes were over. And Bush's appearance at Bob Jones University, with all the University's symbolic association with the religious right, armed the Democrats in the upcoming November elections with visible proof that George Bush was far too conservative for the American people.

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Has the South Carolina Republican presidential primary evolved into a more important primary than New Hampshire? That's heresy, the folks in New Hampshire would argue, given that the New Hampshire primary has been important since 1952 and the South Carolina Republican primary only has been around since 1980.

But one fact stands out. New Hampshire has shown a tendency to support Republican

outsiders and mavericks whose campaigns do not get very far. South Carolina, on the other hand, votes for the establishment Republican candidate, who then goes on to win the GOP 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 year 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 year 2000 GOP nomination race.

And South Carolina voters had a good time making this very important decision. The year 2000 Republican presidential primary in South Carolina was a real contest, with the major contenders for the nomination competing hard against each other. The voters had a real choice to make. And it was well understood that the ballots that were 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 400,000 Republican primary voters in South Carolina, stated pollster Bill McInturff, "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."¹⁵

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 7:

1. For a detailed description of the 1996 South Carolina Republican presidential primary, see Loevy, *The Manipulated Path To The White House*, pp. 159-171.
2. Judy Keen, "GOP Hopefuls Focus On South's First Primary," *USA Today*, October 22, 1999, p. 6A.
3. John B. Judis, "Capture The Flag," *New Republic*, February 7, 2000, pp. 20-22.
4. John F. Dickerson, "George W.'s Rescue Squad," *Time*, December 6, 1999, pp. 48-49.
5. Anthony Lewis, "The McCain Appeal," *New York Times*, February 5, 2000.
6. Frank Bruni and Alison Mitchell, "Bush And McCain Scurry Toward Showdown," *New York*

Times, February 18, 2000, p. A1.

7. Frank Bruni, "His Lead Shaken, Bush Tries A Breezier, Less Ceremonial Style," *New York Times*, February 11, 2000, p. A22. Also see Richard L. Berke, "Bush And McCain: Mirror Images Of Each Other," *New York Times*, February 14, 2000, A16.

8. Peter Marks, "Bush Barked, But Voters Felt Only McCain's Bite," *New York Times*, February 21, 2000.

9. Kenneth T. Walsh and Roger Simon, "Bush Turns The Tide," *U.S. News*, February 28, 2000, p. 20.

10. Peter Marks, "Voters Skeptical Of Motive Of McCain In Pulling Ads," *New York Times*, February 17, 2000, p. A20.

11. Associated Press photograph, *Denver Post*, February 20, 2000, p. 28A.

12. Edward Walsh, "Bush Earns Crucial 'W,'" *Denver Post*, February 20, 2000, p. 1A.

13. Eric Pooley, "Read My Knuckles," *Time*, February 28, 2000.

14. David S. Broder, "A Winner Once More," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, February 28, 2000, p. 4.

15. David Broder, "Up Close And Personal In South Carolina," *Denver Post*, February 15, 2000, p. 7B.