

The Late, Great Republican Party
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If our first president, George Washington, had his way, we would not have had political parties. He disliked "factions," and preferred honorable men having honorable discussions until consensus would result.

This was not to be. From the first, there was such division among the 13 states that the emergence of parties was inevitable. Happily, only two parties arose, sparing us the nightmare of so many other examples in Europe of unstable multiple parties. The two parties were the Whigs, representing the northern states that were opposed to slavery and open to the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, and the Democrats, comprising slave-owning states with dependence on plantation agriculture.

Thomas Jefferson was a Democrat and John Adams a Whig. Over the years, there was antipathy between them until, in their old age, they reconciled. However passionately they supported their parties, they were Enlightenment gentlemen who understood compromise. This young republic survived because of the practice of compromise among its early leaders.

One compromise had to do with how to count the population every ten years so that Congressional representation could be determined. Had they not counted Slaves (property, not citizens), the South would have been permanently hampered by a much smaller population than the North. They compromised by counting each slave as 3/5 of a person, a ridiculous notion, but it kept the peace for the next half century. This original compromise, however, soon morphed into America's founding sin: the institution of enslaving human beings captured from Africa to provide labor for the South's major industry, agriculture. Cotton, tobacco, and sugar plantations made great fortunes among the small class of landowners. Their political clout in Congress was used to protect their international trade, protect their institution of slavery, and they attempted to enlarge the territory in which slavery would be extended. As the country extended west, another compromise permanently separated the North from the South: the Mason-Dixon line.

Throughout the first half of the 19th century, the slavery issue simmered. When slaves began to flee to the North, with the help of Northern abolitionists, the South secured the help of the Supreme Court, which shamefully approved a Southern law demanding that runaway slaves caught in the North must be returned to their masters.

The Whig party, serving the North, was itself divided between abolitionists who abhorred slavery and compromisers who wanted to keep the peace at any cost. The divisiveness caused the party to lose adherents, and a new party, frankly based on ending the institution of slavery, was born: the Republican Party.

President Lincoln was the first president elected from that party, and until his assassination, at the end of the Civil War, he pushed through emancipation for all slaves and legislated citizenship (and voting rights) for these former slaves. His efforts to integrate former slaves into American society were aborted by his assassination and the succession of Andrew Johnson, who tried to undo Reconstruction.

After the Civil War, the Democratic Party became a large tent embracing southern members who fought to keep the Black population from voting and promoted the "southern way of life" (segregation) and northern Democrats who represented liberal progress and support for the working man. The Republicans were a smaller tent representing untrammelled capitalism (the robber barons and the industrialization of the country), and the liberal republicans who still had Lincoln values.

The two parties were often adversarial, but still managed to compromise and work together in national defense and foreign policy, but this came to a halt when the Republicans embraced conservatism exclusively, opposing Lyndon Johnson's voting rights and anti-poverty programs. They replaced Democrats as the Southern party.

The Republicans morphed into a party of "no compromise" and "winner take all." When Barack Obama became our first Black president, Senate leader Mitch McConnell refused any cooperation or compromise with Democrats.

The unexpected election of Donald Trump has crippled and intimidated Republicans into cowardly obedience. Our institutions are still protecting us, but as many good Republicans desert their party, a new conservative party may well replace it in the near future. Our democracy needs two parties willing to govern together.

684 words

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