The Passing of Three Southern Political Icons
By Michael Bitzer

 Rarely in one week does the passing of three political legends occur. Yet the recent deaths of Maynard Jackson, Lester Maddox, and Strom Thurmond not only symbolized the passing of three political icons, but that epitomized a generation that remade Southern politics: the Old Democratic segregationist South of Maddox, the New Democratic South of Jackson, and the rise of the Republican South of Thurmond.

The Old Democratic Party of the South was one based on the continuation of the Civil War. As the only political party in the old Confederate States, the Democratic Party was solidly based in the South and solidly based on segregation. It was within this party that politicians like Lester Maddox came to prominence. Maddox, a firm believer in racial segregation and states’ rights, came to prominence in Georgia in the early 1960s, as the civil rights movement was breaking the South’s segregationist stranglehold.

It was his refusal to allow blacks into his Pickrick restaurant, to the point of standing in the doorway with an ax handle, that fueled his popularity among white conservative Georgians and served as the basis for his 1966 gubernatorial candidacy. In a closely divided election, Maddox, running a segregationist and populist campaign as the Democratic candidate, actually lost the popular vote. But a quirk in Georgia state law mandated that if the winner did not receive a popular majority, the election was thrown to the Georgia General Assembly—filled with staunchly Democratic legislators, who elected the eccentric Maddox.

Once in office, however, Maddox did not rest on his segregationist laurels, noting at his inaugural that "there will be no place in Georgia during the next four years for those who advocate extremism or violence." Maddox sought reform of Georgia government, often without regards towards race. Barred from running for re-election, Maddox surprised folks by running for the lieutenant governor’s position—and won.

Maddox never repudiated his beliefs in racial separation, however, and this would cause him to come into conflict with another Atlanta politician on the rise. Shortly after Maddox won as lieutenant governor, he crossed paths with a man who ran a similar grass-roots, populist style campaign approach, but who radically disagreed with Maddox’s Old Democratic Party and racist beliefs. That man was Maynard Jackson.

The South’s New Democratic Party was one morally and philosophically opposed to the Old Party, and was exemplified by the rise of Jackson. Following the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the national Democratic Party shifted its focus to the emerging black vote, and in the South, new Southern Democrats opened their ranks to rising black officials. The great-grandson of former slaves, a graduate of Morehouse College at 18, and a graduate of N.C. Central University’s Law School, Jackson was the first black official elected mayor of a major Southern metropolis in 1973, benefiting from the influx of new black voters into the Democratic Party. Only 35 at the time and one of the youngest mayors ever elected, Jackson went on to serve as Atlanta’s mayor for three terms, second only to William Hartsfield.

The connection between Atlanta’s two longest-serving mayors is evident in the growth in that city’s airport. Named after the longest-serving mayor, Hartsfield International Airport was expanded and enlarged during Jackson’s first two terms. Tied to the airport’s expansion was Jackson’s controversial use of an affirmative-action
program, which ultimately contributed to an increase of minority-owned businesses and the growth of a black upper and middle class in Atlanta. After serving two-terms as its mayor, Jackson returned eight years later and served again as the head of the Southern city that boasted it was “too busy to hate.”

As Atlanta became known as the city that downplayed racial animosity that engulfed many Southern states in the 1960s and 1970s, it was one individual who left Maddox’s old Democratic Party and who would challenge Jackson’s new Democratic Party in the South. Strom Thurmond’s legacy was born in the same party as Maddox, but unlike the former Georgia governor, the South Carolina governor and U.S. senator saw the prevailing winds of change within the once Solid South, and helped to break the Democrat’s stronghold on the region.

After his 1948 “Dixiecrat” presidential bid and his fights against the enactment of civil rights legislation, Thurmond switched parties in 1964. It was his endorsement of the party of Lincoln, reshaped to the ideology of Goldwater that year, that signaled acceptance for Southern conservative whites to vote Republican. Not only did Strom help to bring about a new conservative Republican Party to the South, but his 1972 “Southern Strategy” paved the way for modern Republican victories at the national level through its Southern base of support. Today, when it comes to winning the White House, it is the Republican Party that often garners a “Solid South,” much like the Old Democratic Party of a hundred years ago. This will most likely be one of the great legacies of Thurmond.

With their passings, these three icons represent the three divergent approaches to the political landscape of the American South. Their marks on Southern politics will be measured well into future generations to come.

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