A National Party No More: The Conscience of a Conservative Democrat
By Sen. Zell Miller


First of three parts:

Once upon a time, the most successful Democratic leader of them all, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, looked south and said, "I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished."

Today our national Democratic leaders look south and say, "I see one-third of a nation and it can go to hell."

Too harsh? I don't think so. Consider these facts.

In 1960, the state of Georgia gave Democratic presidential nominee John F. Kennedy a higher percentage of its vote than did JFK's home state of Massachusetts. "You can look it up," as Casey Stengel used to say. Only the percentage in Rhode Island was greater.

And Georgians were not disappointed in Kennedy's performance as president. He stared down the Russians over Cuba and cut taxes in a significant way that stimulated the economy. Had he not been assassinated, he could have carried Georgia a second time.

In the last nine presidential elections, except for 1976 when regional pride was a huge factor and native son Jimmy Carter lost only Virginia among the 11 states of the old Confederacy, the scoreboard read like this:

Hubert Humphrey carried Texas in 1968 because of Lyndon Johnson, but no other state of the 11. Carter carried only Georgia in 1980; the others left the incumbent. In 1992, another native son of the South, Bill Clinton, carried Georgia, Arkansas, Louisiana and Tennessee. In 1996, Clinton lost Georgia but picked up Florida and kept Arkansas, Louisiana and Tennessee.


Either the Democratic Party is not a national party or the candidates were not national candidates. Take your pick.

But there is more to this sorry tale. In the mid-term elections of 2002, not a single national Democratic leader could come to the South to campaign without doing more harm than good.

Democratic National Chairman Terry McAuliffe couldn't come. He was too liberal. Bill Clinton couldn't come. He was too liberal. The party's titular head, Al Gore of Tennessee, who two years earlier had put up a big fat zero in the region, couldn't come. Too liberal. Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle couldn't come, nor House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt. Too liberal.

Little has changed, except that Rep. Nancy Pelosi of California has taken the place of Gephardt, which makes it even worse when it comes to romancing the South.

If this is a national party, sushi is our national dish. If this is a national party, surfing has become our national pastime. The people leading our party and those asking to lead our country are like a bunch of naive fraternity boys who don't know what they don't know.

A foreign land

National Democratic leaders know nothing about the modern South. They still see it as a land of magnolias and mint juleps, with the pointy-headed KKK lurking in the background, waiting to burn a cross or lynch blacks and Jews.

They are like Shreve McCannon, the Canadian in William Faulkner's "Absalom, Absalom!" who asks the Southerner Quentin Compson: "Tell me about the South. What's it like there? What do they do there? Why do they live there? Why do they live at all?"

The modern South and rural America are as foreign to our Democratic leaders as some place in Asia or Africa. In fact, more so. I'm sure each could explain the culture and economy of Pakistan, Taiwan or Kenya better than that of the American South.

Average Americans, especially those who follow the job market, know a lot more. They know the South has become a land of great promise with an unlimited future. It isn't rusting and rotting away like a lot of places up North. Recent census
statistics on the 100 fastest-growing counties show two-thirds are in the South. Many arrivals are immigrants from the "blue" states.

If you were to separate 15 Southeastern states from the rest of the Union (I'm not advocating that; 11 tried once), their joint economy alone would rank as the third-largest in the world, behind only the United States as a whole and Japan. The population would be far greater than New England. Georgia alone has the 17th-largest economy in the world, larger than Singapore, Hong Kong or Saudi Arabia.

Fiber-optic cable was developed in the South. Atlanta has three times more fiber-optic lines than New York City and is at the most significant fiber-optic intersection in North America. This is the region where the modem was developed and the first mobile satellite uplink was produced. Nearly a third of the Fortune 500 companies have headquarters in the region.

Georgia was the first state to deliver insurance-reimbursable medical care by telecommunication. The New York Times even called it "sophisticated." I was so shocked by the Times calling anything down South sophisticated, I cut out the article and saved it.

We're further along in racial politics than the national Democrats ever could imagine or choose to believe.

Minority Southerners complete high school at the same rate as whites. The percentage of minority Southerners with college degrees tripled in the past 25 years. When Newsweek recently named "the cream of the crop" of high schools, seven of the top 10 were in the South, as were 22 of the top 50.

In 1990, a total of 565 African-Americans held elective office in the 11 states of the old Confederacy. You know what the number was in 2000? Almost 10 times that: 5,579.

In Georgia, which is 70 percent white, seven blacks have been elected statewide. Three have been elected twice. While Sen. Max Cleland and Gov. Roy Barnes, both Democrats, were losing in 2002 with about 47 percent of the vote, state Attorney General Thurbert Baker and Commissioner of Labor Michael Thurmond were getting about 57 percent. They carried predominately white counties overwhelmingly, as they had four years before.

I could continue citing facts like these for pages. As Dizzy Dean once said, "If you've done it, it ain't bragging." The South that Democratic Party leaders have stuck in their minds is gone with the wind.

Democrats in Washington also believe in purity. Like that old Ivory Soap commercial, 99.44 percent pure is all that will do. You cannot agree on just seven of their 10 issues, or even nine. All 10 must be embraced and ostentatiously hugged to your bosom with slobbering kisses.

Remember how Democrats wouldn't even let Pennsylvania Gov. Bob Casey speak at their national convention because he was pro-life? That was keeping the convention "pure."

Democratic leaders are as nervous as a long-tailed cat around a rocking chair when they travel south or get out in rural America. They have no idea what to say or how to act. I once saw one try to eat a boiled shrimp without peeling it. Another one loudly gagged on the salty taste of country ham.

Democrats have never seen a snail darter they didn't want to protect, but sometimes I think the one endangered species they don't want to save is the Southern conservative Democrat.

We're like the alcoholic uncle that families try to hide in a room up in the attic: After the primaries are over and the general election nears, national Democrats trot out the South and show us off — at arm's length — as if to say, "Look how tolerant we are; see how caring? Why, we even allow people 'like this' in our party of the big tent. We still love that strange old reprobate uncle."

As soon as the election is over, the old boy is banished to the attic and ignored for another two years.

Al Gore became only the third Democrat since the Civil War to lose every state in the old Confederacy, plus two border states. George McGovern and Walter Mondale were the others. But they had an excuse: They were crushed in national landslides.

Gore's loss was different. Had he won any state in the old Confederacy or one more border state, he would be president today. Gore lost his home state of Tennessee, Clinton's home state of Arkansas and the Democratic bastion of West Virginia. Even Michael Dukakis — hardly a son of the South — didn't manage to lose there.

The campaign in the South was a mess, and it didn't have to happen. The region had more Democratic governors than Republican governors, and the Democrats held a majority of state legislative chambers. Largely because of the debacle, three Democratic governors also bit the dust in 2002.

In 2004, if we have the same popular-vote split between the Democratic and Republican candidates for president, and if these candidates win the same states, the Electoral College margin for the Republican will be bigger. How much bigger? The Republican would have a majority not by four electors, as George W. Bush did in 2000, but by 18.

A matter of trust
If Southern voters think you don't understand them — or much worse, if they think you look down on them — they will never vote for you. Folks in the South have a simple way of saying this: "He's not one of us." When a politician hears those words, he's already dead.

For Southern voters, the issues you choose to talk about are as important as the positions you take on those issues. Voters may say they're for gun control, and they may well be for gun control, but they simply don't trust anybody who spends too much time talking about it. Clinton understood that. Gore did not.

There was a time when the leaders of my party understood both the policy and political value of cutting taxes. The Kennedy-Johnson tax bill in 1964 cut all brackets. It was passed by an overwhelmingly Democratic Congress as part of an aggressive agenda that included the creation of Medicare.

And how did opponents attack the Kennedy-Johnson proposal? As fiscally irresponsible, because it didn't pay off the debt and was nothing more than a quick fix.

Who was attacking these tax cuts? Why, lo and behold, it was Republicans. It was a political fiasco. Republicans would not regain control of the House or the Senate for a generation, and not until they had reversed their party's position on cutting taxes.

I know from personal experience that you can be a Democrat and have a solid Democratic agenda while cutting taxes and holding the line on spending. When I was governor of Georgia, we cut taxes by almost a billion dollars, reduced spending and cut personnel by 5,000 positions.

That was why I was able to raise the salaries of university professors and public school teachers to the highest in the South and get a lottery passed by the voters in my Bible Belt state. We provided pre-kindergarten education for every 4-year-old; technical training for every high school graduate; and the HOPE Scholarship, which gives a tuition-free college education to every student who maintains a B average.

We Democrats need to remember that talking about an aggressive agenda for America is quite different from getting it done. For us to get it done, the people we serve have to trust us.

Britain's Conservative Party, with towering figures like Margaret Thatcher, dominated that country's politics for 18 years until the Labor Party led by Tony Blair was able to reclaim power. It happened because Blair took his party kicking and screaming toward the middle. The extreme left wing was obliterated and the influence of the trade unions was greatly diminished.

If Clinton had followed through and governed as he campaigned, it would have happened here for the Democrats.

A waiting grave

For many years in the South, the magic formula for the Democratic nominee to win against a Republican has been to get 40 percent of the white vote and 90 percent of the black vote. Increasingly, it has been easier to get the latter.

But the margin of black votes for the Democrats is going to change soon. It has to change only a fraction to make a huge difference. Ralph Reed, the brilliant strategist and former Republican chairman of Georgia, understands this. So do Bush strategist Karl Rove and many other Republicans.

It will be similar to what happened in a couple of governor's races in Virginia in the 1990s. Virginia Republicans figured out that they were not going to get many more white votes. They started quietly going after black support.

George Allen and then James Gilmore each received nearly 20 percent of the black vote, just by reaching out and working for it. Going after this constituency directly cost the Democrats core votes. And, by moderating the look of the Republican Party, it indirectly cost the Democrats swing votes.


Only time will tell the effect of seeing President Bush surround himself with black Americans like Secretary of State Colin Powell, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Deputy Attorney General Larry Thompson.

I own a fiddle that supposedly belonged to Zeb Vance, the great North Carolina mountaineer elected governor in 1862. Vance opposed much of what Confederate President Jefferson Davis was doing in Richmond. He was too young to be involved in the Whig Party at the height of its popularity, but he had been "born a Whig."

And many thought this moderate, independent-minded, vigorous young leader might be the one to keep the party alive in the South. When Vance was approached to do so in 1865, he was typically direct: "The party is dead and buried and the tombstone placed over it and I don't care to spend the rest of my days mourning at its grave."

Like the Whig Party of the late 1850s, the Democratic Party has become dangerously fragmented. And, considering the present leadership, it can only get worse.

The special-interest groups have come between the Democratic Party and the people. The party is no longer a link to most Americans. Each advocacy group has become more important than the sum of the whole.

It is a rational party no more. It is a national party no more. So, bang the drum slowly and play the fife lowly, for the sun is setting over a waiting grave.