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Conscience of a Black Conservative: The 1964 Election and the Rise of the National Negro Republican Assembly¹

Leah M. Wright

In the immediate aftermath of the election of 1964, no group was more visibly alienated by the candidacy of Barry Goldwater than the black electorate. Abandoning the Republican Party en masse, black voters cast 94 percent of their votes to Lyndon Johnson in the national election. The percentage was a stunning decrease from the 32 percent Richard Nixon received in his 1960 loss to John F. Kennedy, and the 39 percent that Dwight Eisenhower amassed during his 1956 re-election over Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson.²

Black voters rejected Goldwater's brand of politics for many reasons, most notably the Arizona senator's outspoken support for states' rights and opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Roy Wilkins, executive director for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), attempted to explain the rationale behind African Americans' anti-Goldwater sentiment, noting that the senator's stance was akin to leaving civil rights in the hands of Alabama Governor George Wallace or Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett.³ For many, the party's "open-armed welcome" of South Carolina senator and 1948 Dixiecrat presidential candidate Strom



Dr. W. Oscar Harris (center), a black delegate from New Jersey, at the Republican National Convention in San Francisco in July 1964.

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¹ This is a modified version of chapter two of my doctoral dissertation, "The Loneliness of the Black Conservative: Black Republicans and the Grand Old Party, 1964–1980." Please do not cite without the author's permission.

² *Statistics on Black Politics since 1968* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 1968–2004); David A. Bositis, *Blacks and the 1992 Republican National Convention* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 1992); David A. Bositis, *Blacks and the 2000 Republican National Convention* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 2000). Denise L. Baer and David A. Bositis, *Elite Cadres and Party Coalitions: Representing the Public in Party Politics* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1998). Charles D. Hadley and Everett Carl Ladd, Jr., *Transformations of the American Party System: Political Coalitions from the New Deal to the 1970s* (New York: Norton, 1976), 9.

³ Democrat George Wallace was elected the governor of Alabama in 1962 on the strength of a pro-segregation platform. Democrat Ross Barnett, elected Governor of Mississippi in 1960, was a well-known white supremacist. Barnett was also pro-segregation. During the 1960s, Wallace and Barnett repeatedly made headlines for their hostility to desegregation efforts. "Goldwater Won't Get Votes from Negroes," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Sept. 26, 1963. For more information, see Jeffrey Frederick, *Stand up for Alabama: Governor George C. Wallace* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007).

Thurmond, was the final unpardonable offense.⁴ Reflecting on the campaign in a November 1, 1964, letter to the *Wichita Eagle*, reader Paul McBride noted that there was terrible incongruity in allowing “the candidate of the party of Lincoln to trample the right of the Negro.”⁵

The irony of the situation was not lost on the party’s most precarious faction—black Republicans. African American loyalists were disheartened by the party’s apparent inability to support civil rights, a position that reinforced black Republicans’ historically marginal role within the organization. In Connecticut, for instance, black Republican and attorney general of Hartford William Graham adamantly refused to vote for Goldwater in the general election, arguing that the senator’s nomination was not indicative of the majority feeling on civil rights in the party. Frustrated, Graham felt he could not vote for Lyndon Johnson either on the basis of the president’s “liberal economic and foreign policy views.”⁶

For many black Republicans, endorsing Goldwater was tantamount to betraying their race. Athlete-turned-activist Jackie Robinson aggressively promoted New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller as a respected alternative to Goldwater; he asserted that any black leader who demonstrated support for the nominee would lose power and influence since “The Negro is not going to tolerate any Uncle Toms in 1964.”⁷ Likewise, in an August 1964 editorial letter to the *New York Amsterdam News*, Jackson R. Champion, a black party member from New Rochelle, announced he would not join the Goldwater coalition. “Any Negro who helps the cause of Goldwater, should be declared anything but a Negro, because they will be a traitor to the Negro people.” Despite his ties to the party, Champion said he would resist the national “slap in the face” by working for the election of Johnson as if he was “being paid by the Democratic Party.”⁸

For those black individuals who remained affiliated with the party, the 1964 moment placed them in an unstable position; they were simultaneously shunned by the black community and subordinated by the Republican machine. Such a situation forced black Republicans to assert a voice and define an independent identity that addressed these seemingly irreconcilable loyalties. The *Los Angeles Sentinel* ruthlessly pointed out this bizarre relationship in December 1964, arguing that the election made “wishy washy Negro Republicans take open stands on topics they had skirted or about which they had double-talked for years.”⁹ Scornful tone aside, the *Sentinel*’s words reveal the urgency that informed black Republican politics in the 1960s. The 1964 moment—in essence, the public nadir of the Republican institution—served as a catalyst for black party members. Galvanized into action, these black Republicans fought aggressively for

⁴ “G.O.P. Negroes Form Clique Within Party,” *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 24, 1964; Barry M. Goldwater, *With No Apologies: the Personal and Political Memoirs of United States Senator Barry M. Goldwater* (New York: Morrow, 1970), 180; Robert Alan Goldberg, *Barry Goldwater* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 140.

⁵ Paul W. McBride Letter to the Editor, *Wichita Eagle*, Nov. 1, 1964, Civil Rights Files, Barry M. Goldwater Collection, Arizona Historical Society (hereinafter cited as Goldwater Collection).

⁶ “Conn. Negro Leaders Angry; ‘Won’t Vote for Goldwater,’” *Chicago Defender*, July 18, 1964.

⁷ Organized by the San Francisco Church Labor Conference, the protest was designed to “make known to the nation and the world that we completely reject Senator Barry Goldwater and his racist platform that he has presented.” Many influential black leaders took part in the protest, including A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Reverend Ralph Abernathy of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality. Wallace Turner, “Negroes Parade on Coast Today,” *New York Times*, July 12, 1964.

⁸ Jackson R. Champion, “GOP Please Note,” *New York Amsterdam News*, Aug. 1, 1964.

⁹ Bill Lane, “The Inside Story,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Dec. 31, 1964.

greater voice and recognition both within the party and within the effort to shape the future of black activism. The hallmark of their activity and ideology was the promotion of a unique agenda of racial equality and black advancement. Once reconciled with civil rights, black Republicans claimed that the “Party of Lincoln” would be uniquely suited to meet the needs of African Americans. The *New York Amsterdam News* highlighted the contradictions inherent to this relationship between black Republicans and their party, observing that in order to survive, the mainstream party needed to collaborate with a group it consistently scorned.¹⁰

The National Negro Republican Assembly

This article argues that the 1964 moment simultaneously provoked turmoil and opportunity, through which black Republicans attempted to revitalize and transform the character of the party. Roused into action, a number of coalitions formed. Of these splinter organizations, the National Negro Republican Assembly (NNRA) shrewdly positioned itself as the self-proclaimed official vehicle and voice for party reconstruction and African American outreach. The NNRA’s aggressive approach to American politics was characterized by a demand that the party recognize and address racial equality, integrate the mainstream machine, promote black advancement, and champion liberal and moderate Republican philosophies.

Speaking to an audience of prominent black Republicans at an August 1964 luncheon in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, George Fleming, a black party member from New Jersey, issued a robust call-to-arms to all African American party loyalists. “We are here to support our friends in the Republican Party,” he declared, “and, within the framework of the Party, to defeat those who have infiltrated the party and are seeking to drive us out.”¹¹ Fleming’s words were the highlight of a passionate meeting of self-proclaimed Republican “outsiders” who had answered an emergency summons issued in the aftermath of the Goldwater nomination. The group, christened the National Negro Republican Assembly, first assembled as a loose coalition during the July 1964 Republican National Convention. Their subsequent call-to-arms stemmed directly from their belief that Goldwater conservatism was a threat to black Republican survival, and that the “extremism” of the Goldwater faction had led to the “separation of the Negro from the Republican Party.”¹² Assessing this development, reporter John Averhill reasoned that the situation appeared to transcend conservatism, since by definition, the majority of black Republicans were “strongly conservative themselves.”¹³ When probed by reporters, black Republicans quickly justified their Goldwater aversion by pointing to the Senator’s recent vote against the Civil Rights Act of 1964, his tendency to vote with the southern political bloc 67 percent of the time, and his popularity with southern segregationists.¹⁴

¹⁰ “The Cornerstone,” *New York Amsterdam News*, Nov. 21, 1964.

¹¹ George G. Fleming to Negro Republican Convention, Aug. 22, 1964, Folder on National Negro Republican Assembly 1964–1966, Clarence L. Townes Papers, 1944–1988, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University (hereinafter referred to as CLT Papers).

¹² National Negro Republican Assembly, Statement of Principles and Policies, Aug. 22, 23, 1964, CLT Papers.

¹³ John H. Averhill, “Negro Group Won’t Vote for Goldwater,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 1964.

¹⁴ Goldwater voted against the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 on June 18, 1964. In total, 21 Democrats and 6 Republicans voted against the bill, and 46 Democrats and 27 Republicans voted in favor of the bill, thus voiding Goldwater’s vote. Lyndon Johnson signed the bill into law on July 2, 1964. Charles Mohr, “Goldwater Says He’ll Vote ‘No’ on the Rights Measure,” *New York Times*, June 19, 1964. E.W. Kenworthy, “Goldwater Joins in Futile Effort to Kill Key Part of Rights Bill,” June 16, 1964, Comments on Goldwater’s Vulnerable Areas in Civil Rights, Goldwater 1964 Presidential Campaign Speeches, Positions Notebook, 1963–1964, Republican National Committee Speeches, Barry Goldwater Collection.

The bitterness between black party members and Goldwater Republicans continued to fester, with relations finally reaching a breaking point in mid July at the Republican National Convention. Arriving at the Cow Palace in San Francisco, black Republicans were unsettled by the chants of 50,000 anti-Goldwater protesters, and disheartened to discover that there were only 43 African American representatives—15 delegates and 28 alternates, or approximately 1 percent of the total convention body. The representa-



Two prominent African American delegates at the GOP convention in July 1964: Clarence Townes (left) and Jackie Robinson (right).

tatives were incensed to hear stories of racial discrimination and exclusion, such as that of George W. Lee, a prominent leader among black southern Republicans, whose seat was revoked from the Tennessee delegation on the basis of his race.¹⁵ After expressing anti-Goldwater sentiments to the press, several black delegates were detained by Republican National Committee (RNC) security, while others were threatened with violence and verbally assaulted by Goldwater supporters. In a 2008 interview, Clarence Townes, a “Rockefeller, Scranton, Romney kind of guy,” claimed that “being black and from Virginia made me a target.” The former delegate recalled a physical altercation with Goldwater supporters who “messed my clothes up.” Pennsylvania delegate William Young received perhaps the worst attack of the convention when his suit was set on fire during another Goldwater protest.¹⁶

The relationship between Goldwater conservatives and black Republicans was already a combustible one, and the introduction of verbal suppression and physical attacks provoked an explosive moment of transformation. Black representatives aggressively denounced Goldwater and argued that his coalition was organizing a calculated “hate-vote” effort to disenfranchise African American constituents. And, upon closer examination, it can be argued that this transformation also signaled a move away from rhetoric and toward newfound action. Black Republicans Bill Nunn and John Clay described this moment as a “whirlpool of controversy” that sparked a “refreshing unity of action and political maturity in direct contrast with previous appearances.”¹⁷

In an effort to seize momentum and respond to this moment, William Young issued a call for solidarity on the first night of the convention. Gathering in a “war room” at the Fairmont Hotel, the 43 representatives focused on developing an action plan to counteract their silencing. Calling themselves the unofficial Negro Republican Organization (NRO), the black party members asked three pivotal questions: Should black representatives walk out of the convention? Should black delegates and alternatives leave the Republican Party? If they chose not to leave, how could black loyalists effec-

¹⁵ John H. Averhill, “Negro Group Won’t Vote for Goldwater,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 1964. See also, Ben Gilbert, “GOP Turning Lily White Under Goldwater Brush,” *Washington Post, Times Herald*, July 15, 1964.

¹⁶ John Clay and Bill Nunn, July 13–16, CLT Papers. Clarence L. Townes, Jr., telephone interview by author, July 23, 2008.

¹⁷ John H. Clay and William C. Nunn, Resume of Activities, Republican National Convention, July 13–16, 1964, CLT Papers.

tively express their deep anger and resentment over their treatment? Maryland's six representatives declared support for the "blackout" suggestion: "I can't see any Negroes going along with a Goldwater nomination," fumed August Knox. "Personally, I feel all Negro delegates will walk out." George Fowler disagreed, questioning what the public would think if they saw the group leaving the convention floor. "This group will certainly not bolt but will stay within the party and fight for our principles," Fowler asserted. The majority of the coalition concurred, and decided, "Under no condition, would Negroes walk out of the Republican Party. They would stay in, to support their friends and attempt to reshape the party, in the image which led to its birth!"¹⁸

The key aspect to the NRO's decision was the members' resolve not to defect to the Democratic Party, but rather, to stay and enact change from within the organization. Clarence Townes later suggested that this decision arose from black party members' unwavering belief in two-party competition. Arguing against black bloc voting, he maintained, "Two-party government is good. . . . You have choices in close races. You have competition. And with minorities, competition is good, particularly in the South. . . . When you don't have two-party competition, you have a one-party domination and it doesn't have to be good."¹⁹ Thus for black Republicans, many thought that a defection to the Democratic Party would be an act of political silencing in and of itself.

Over the course of the convention, NRO members embarked on a carefully orchestrated public relations campaign to expose the systematic discrimination of "Negroes, Jews, and Catholics," by the Goldwater coalition. At a press conference on July 14, Young announced the group's plans to "oust those who are attempting to make the party of Lincoln a machine for dispensing discord and racial conflict." Interestingly, Young and the other members of the NRO were also careful to distance themselves from mainstream civil rights groups including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). The members rationalized this aloofness by maintaining that they were not a part of the civil rights establishment, but rather, a firmly independent Republican group concerned with racial equality and civil rights.²⁰ The NRO took other measures to oppose the Goldwater nomination including distributing anti-Goldwater paraphernalia and advocating for the nomination of Pennsylvania Governor William Scranton as part of the interracial "Draft Scranton" coalition of liberal and moderate Republicans.

Thus when Goldwater received the Republican nomination, it predictably inspired the resentment of the NRO and the party's mainstream liberal and moderate base. Addressing an audience in the days following the convention, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller railed against the nomination, alleging that the party was in "real danger of subversion by a radical well financed, highly organized" minority bloc.²¹ Likewise, in his autobiography, Goldwater acknowledged the gloom that surrounded his nomination, bitterly lamenting post-convention reports that provided the country with a bleak, frightening picture of a "ruthless Goldwater machine, crushing opponents, denying anyone who disagreed with us the right to speak, and dishonoring the process by which parties

¹⁸ John H. Avervill, "GOP Negroes May Walk out of Convention," *Los Angeles Times*, July 13, 1964; John D. Morris, "Negro Republicans Challenge Goldwater's Fitness to Enforce Civil Rights," July 15, 1964; "GOP Negro Delegates: The Dilemma," July 15, 1964; Rosemarie Tyler Brooks, "GOP Negroes Bar Walkout," July 15, 1964. Clay and Nunn, CLT Papers.

¹⁹ Townes, author interview, July 23, 2008.

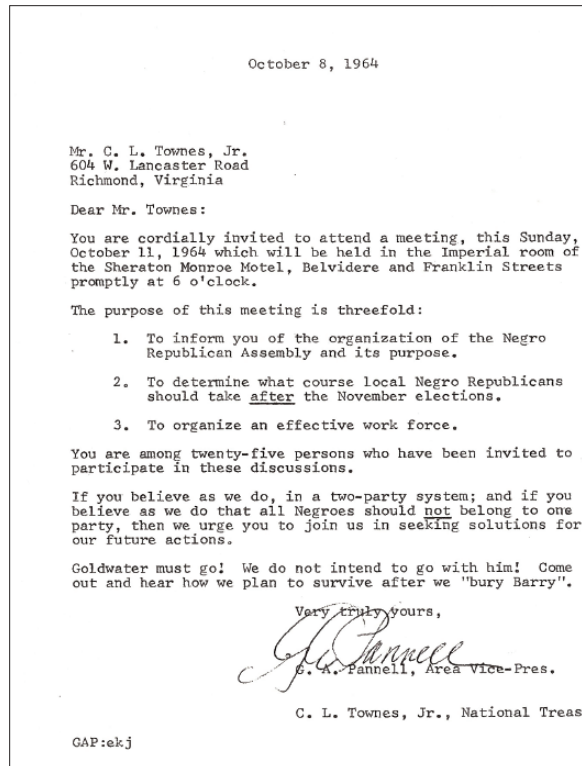
²⁰ Elsie Carper, "Negro Republicans Form Anti Barry Unit," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, July 13, 1964.

²¹ Goldwater, *With No Apologies*, 188–191.

select their presidential nominee.”²² In the wake of the nomination, the NRO seized on such themes, announcing that its members would abstain from voting in the presidential election, and instead, would concentrate on campaigning for Republicans who were supportive of civil rights initiatives. The Washington, D.C., cohort took the NRO’s message to heart: disgusted by the nomination, the five African American representatives resigned their seats. When interviewed by the press, former delegate George Parker expressed his determination to reshape the party into a coalition that provided equal opportunities to all.²³

The Philadelphia Conference

In the aftermath of the convention, the NRO members agreed that it was crucial that they harness their newfound momentum and solidarity. On July 27, 1964, John Clay issued a summons to attend an August convention dedicated to establishing a permanent organization within the framework of the Republican Party, increasing future delegates’ strength, encouraging more black Republicans to run for public office, and developing other programs “to insure that our voice be heard in the party.”²⁴ Fifty black Republicans from 16 states and the District of Columbia accepted Clay’s conference invitation, arriving at the Sheraton Hotel in Philadelphia on August 22 for the two-day workshop.²⁵ George Fleming welcomed the representatives, reminding them of their common bonds of solidarity in the face of turmoil. Fleming stressed the seriousness of the situation and declared that for eight years, the Republican Party “has been



George Pannell wrote to Clarence Townes on October 8, 1964, inviting him to an organizational meeting to plan the NNRA’s post-election activities.

²² Ibid.

²³ “Negro Delegates Reported Ready to Walk Out if Goldwater Wins,” *The Washington Post*, July 15, 1964; John D. Morris, “Delegates Disconsolate,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1964; “Negroes Plot GOP Walkout,” *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition)*, July 16, 1964; “Negroes to Withhold Support of Nominee,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 1964; Nicolas C. Chris, “Negroes Call off Convention Walkout,” *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, July 16, 1964; John H. Averhill, “Negro Group Won’t Vote for Goldwater,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 1964.

²⁴ For reasons unknown, the steering committee also elected to drop the National Republican Organization moniker, in favor of the name, “National Republican Minorities Council.” However, the group did not agree on this title, and by the time the coalition reconvened in August 1964, the group had no official name. Resume of Activities, Aug. 23, CLT Papers. John H. Clay to Clarence L. Townes, Letter, July 27, 1964, CLT Papers; John H. Clay to Negro Republican Convention, Letter, August 17, 1964, CLT Papers.

²⁵ The conference participants were limited for the first official meeting. Only 50 attended—43 RNC delegates and 7 prominent black Republicans, pre-selected by the steering committee. The 16 states were Alaska, Ohio, New Jersey, New York, Colorado, Indiana, Illinois, Kansas, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Tennessee, Florida, Michigan, California, Georgia, and the District of Columbia. National Negro Republican Assembly, Memberships, CLT Papers.

counting the Negro out, because he has lacked the spirit, drive and the muscle to count himself in.” He reinforced his central argument by pointing to the woeful lack of black Republican communication and solidarity, political representation, and grass-roots voter registration. With conditions like these, Fleming asked, “How can we expect to survive, let alone develop positions of strength?” The fiery speaker bemoaned the financial naiveté of black party members, and criticized the failure to pool resources in an effort to support black political candidates and jockey for influence in mainstream GOP circles. Moving beyond the Republican sphere, Fleming closed by asserting that the chaos and instability of the 1960s called for a concrete Republican plan for advancing equality, voice, and recognition:

We know our progress toward human dignity cannot be maintained or advanced if we permit any one party to put the Negro vote in its pocket, because it has no where else to go. It would be equally disastrous for the Negro to succumb to those who propose a retreat from the 20th Century. Thus, we are here to change this picture.”²⁶

Deeply inspired by Fleming’s speech, the conference participants caucused furiously, placing special emphasis on the development of a grass-roots operation. They also voted to increase black Republican political strength, create a women’s subdivision and militant church organization, and draft a positive program “to explain to Negroes why they must join and support the Republican Party.”²⁷

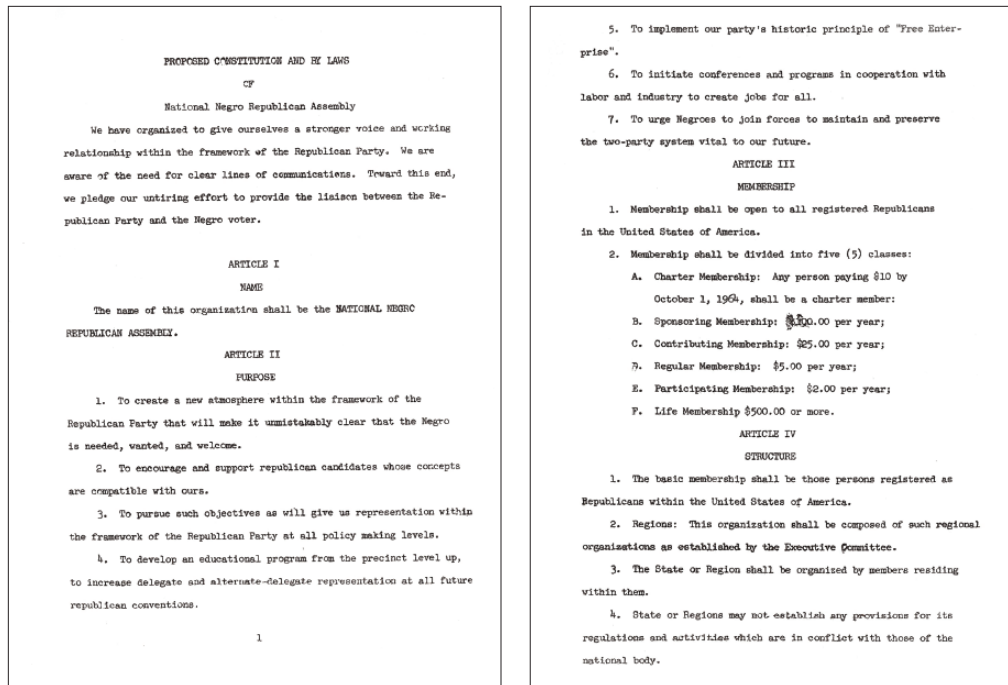
After much debate, the members agreed that the group should be renamed the National Negro Republican Assembly.²⁸ The NNRA adopted a detailed constitution that outlined the organization’s purpose and strategic vision:

1. To create a new atmosphere within the framework of the Republican Party that will make it unmistakably clear that the Negro is needed, wanted, and welcome.
2. To encourage and support republican [*sic*] candidates whose concepts can be approved as compatible with traditional Republican concepts.
3. To pursue such objectives as will give Negro citizens representation within the Republican Party at all policy making levels.
4. To develop an education program . . . to increase delegate . . . representation at all future republican [*sic*] conventions.
5. To implement the Republican Party’s historic principle of Free Enterprise, Justice, Individual Freedom and respect for human dignity.
6. To initiate conferences and programs in cooperation with labor and industry to create jobs for all without discriminatory distinction.
7. To urge Negroes to join forces to maintain and preserve the two party system vital to the future of the United States.

²⁶ George Fleming, Aug.–Sept. 1964, NNRA Constitution and Bylaws, CLT Papers.

²⁷ “Minutes of the National Negro Republican Convention Workshop, 1:00 P.M.” Aug. 22, 1964, CLT Papers; “Sub-Committee Report on Voter Registration,” Aug. 22, 1964, CLT Papers.

²⁸ Minutes of the National Negro Republican Convention Workshop, 8:30 P.M.” Aug. 22, 1964; “Minutes of the National Negro Republican Convention Workshop, 2:00 P.M.” Aug. 23, 1964; “National Negro Republican Convention: News Release,” Aug. 22, 23, 1964; Clarence L. Townes to George G. Fleming, Letter, Aug. 25, 1964, all in CLT Papers.



The draft of the NNRA constitution (pages 1 and 2 above) makes clear the group's goal to improve black representation within the Republican Party "at all policy making levels."

The statement of purpose explicitly reveals that the fundamental mission of the NNRA was to promote racial equality and black advancement through the integration of African Americans into the Republican Party. To those ends, the organization pledged to mount an "untiring effort" to serve as "the liaison between the Republican Party and the Negro voter" in the quest for equal opportunity for success, satisfaction, and security. Employing a language of black populism, the NNRA also claimed to offer a unique vision for addressing the needs of black unskilled laborers, unemployed youth and adults, forced retirees, and impoverished families. Specifically, the group theorized that its adherence to traditional conservative principles and civil rights would stimulate economic growth, create new jobs, and reinvigorate the black community. And yet, without enforcement and protection, such successes were unrealistic for most; thus, the NNRA explicitly separated itself from the anti-civil rights faction of the Republican Party by maintaining that "the Civil Rights Law of 1964, and all previous civil rights laws, must be unequivocally and vigorously enforced—that law and order must prevail—that the lives and property of all must be protected. We reaffirm our belief in God, Country, and the dignity of man throughout the world."²⁹

The Election Campaign

The NNRA's petitions for black Republican solidarity did not go unanswered. On September 8, 1964, new representatives from Texas and Washington joined the original members at a conference to discuss black Republicans' role in the November election. Discussing black Republican

²⁹ Proposed Constitution and Bylaws of the National Negro Republican Assembly, Aug.–Sept. 1964; Press Release, Sept. 21, 1964, both in CLT Papers.

ideological fears, newly elected Political Action Chair Grant Reynolds argued that “an era of blackest despair would develop and doom the Party of Lincoln to oblivion . . . if cast-off Democrats, repudiated Dixicrats, segregationists, racists and exponents of hate and bias” were permitted to gain permanent leadership roles within the party. “It is deplorable,” he complained, “to even think that the racist elements now entering the Republican Party should even presume to believe they could be comfortable.”³⁰ In an effort to combat this development, the NNRA appointed 17 regional directors charged with increasing the NNRA’s spread of influence. The organization’s goal was to create a larger voter registration pool, distribute an increased amount of NNRA literature, and generate a wider recruitment campaign specifically targeting black teenagers and middle-age women.³¹ Voter registration was a crucial component to the NNRA’s approach to recruitment, as the organization saw it not only as a powerful display against segregation and disenfranchisement, but also as a method of directly accessing new voters. Drawing inspiration from the registration efforts of mainstream civil rights organizations, the NNRA collaborated with church groups, including the Richmond Crusade for Voters (RCV). Speaking on a dinner panel at the conference, RCV President George Pannell lauded the grass-roots registration efforts of the NNRA, noting that in one Virginia district, registered voters had risen from 4,000 in 1956 to 18,000 in 1964. Pannell speculated that with continued efforts, the NNRA could register thousands more in Virginia before Election Day.³² These numbers resonated with the members of the assembly, since they provided tangible evidence of the power and potential of an independent grass-roots black Republican movement.



Grant Reynolds, Political Action Chair for the NNRA, actively promoted the group’s efforts to create an independent grass-roots black Republican movement to counter segregationist elements in the Republican Party.

Furthermore, by November 1964, it appeared that the NNRA’s rallying cry had been modestly successful. The assembly estimated that it had 250 members, with chapters in over 25 states.³³ Although relatively small compared to black Democratic organizations or mainstream Republican groups, the NNRA was notable because it contained an “aggressive concentration” of African Americans.³⁴ Moreover, the assembly’s growth instilled confidence in the members, which inspired bolder and louder actions; in one such display the organization publicly endorsed a number of “Negro friendly” Republican candidates two days before the national election. The group supported 41 party leaders from 19 states, including incumbents John Lindsey (New York congressman), Edward Brooke (Massachusetts attorney general), and George Romney (Michigan governor). Endorsements for presidential candidates, Democrat Party leaders, and Deep South

³⁰ “NNRA Meeting, Press Release,” Sept. 21, 1964, CLT Papers.

³¹ The 17 regions were divided by North, South, East, and West, and then broken into several subdivisions (i.e., Region 1. Washington, Oregon; Region 2. Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico; etc.).

³² George Pannell did not offer figures for the years between 1956 and 1964. Ibid.

³³ To place these gains in context, in July 1964, the NNRA (then called the NRO) had a steering committee that represented 7 states. By October 1964, the NNRA had representation in 15 states. Clarence Townes also indicated that Memphis, New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Atlanta had the most representatives in the NNRA. “Press Demands on National GOP Commit,” *New York Amsterdam News*, Jan. 30, 1965; Townes interview, July 23, 2008.

³⁴ Townes interview, July 23, 2008.

Republican officials were noticeably absent.³⁵ Of the candidates the NNRA endorsed, the organization wrote:

These Republican candidates are men that were alert to civil rights needs before the great crisis arose and are certainly alert now. They have not been fair weather friends who needed Birmingham to jolt them into action.³⁶

The trumpeting of these candidates adhered to the NNRA's vision of black advancement through a Republican lens and identified allies for future coalition-building efforts. In doing so, the group firmly stood behind its position that this was the correct interpretation of conservatism as it reflected and incorporated the party's civil rights heritage.³⁷ As such, NNRA members viewed the political assertion as a progressive step in their battle for equality.

Fundamentally, the development of a vocal, coherent, independent assembly, spurred by grassroots activity and cross-country mobilization, provided black Republicans with the vehicle by which to challenge the infrastructure of the GOP. And yet, black Republicans recognized that there was no direct and effective way for them to use the NNRA vehicle to penetrate the mainstream party and command the attention of prominent Republican leaders. As long as the Goldwater coalition dominated the national hierarchy, the NNRA had no bargaining power. Thus, in the aftermath of the senator's historic November loss, it is unsurprising that the members of the NNRA quickly identified the party's defeat as a moment of personal opportunity.

Public dissatisfaction with the Republican Party demanded that the party leadership consider a moderate course of action. Further analysis demonstrated the damage inflicted by the Goldwater candidacy; a post-election poll by Louis Harris showed that of the 27 million votes cast for the GOP nominee, only 6 million were "hard-core, down-the-line Goldwater supporters." Another 18 million, he argued, voted strictly out of party loyalty and expressed serious reservations about Goldwater's policies. A December 1964 survey in the *New York Times* underscored this point by indicating that over 60 percent of Republicans wanted Goldwater replaced as a party leader. Reflecting on such election statistics, New York GOP State Chairman Fred Young remarked sadly, "the Republican party has paid a shattering price for the erratic deviation from our soundly moderate 20th century course."³⁸

³⁵ The organization endorsed Republican officials from New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Michigan, Hawaii, Indiana, Rhode Island, California, Washington, Virginia, Ohio, Maryland, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, and Vermont.

³⁶ National Negro Republican Assembly, Press Release, Nov. 1, 1964, CLT Papers.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Post election surveys found that the average Goldwater voter was a white southern male, financially independent, and professionally successful. Another survey found that nearly 3 million voters, including 2 million southern Democrats, were motivated mainly by race and opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Likewise, nearly 2 million people abstained from voting in the general election. Of those voters who self-identified as conservative, approximately 36 percent described Goldwater as a radical, and "opposed a right-wing takeover of the Republican Party." A March 1965 Louis Bean and Roscoe Drummond report concluded that the "pure" Goldwater vote was between 2.5 and 3 million, while a Gallup poll noted that only 15 percent of the 1964 Republican voters considered Goldwater the party's most representative candidate. Ripon Society, *From Disaster to Distinction: A Republican Rebirth* (New York: Pocket Books, 1966), 48–49. See also Louis Harris, Louis H. Bean, and Roscoe Drummond, "How Many Votes Does Goldwater Own?" *Look*, Mar. 23, 1965; Ben A. Franklin, "G.O.P. Seeks Clues to Party Future in Study of Vote," *New York Times*, Nov. 8, 1964; "Election Results," *The New York Times*, Dec. 18, 1964; "Few Real Barrymen," *The Boston Globe*, Jan. 11, 1965; Robert E. Baker, "Negro Vote is Revived in the South," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, Nov. 8, 1964.

While no less devastating to black Republicans, the party's failures thus provided the NNRA with leverage, granting the assembly a valuable opportunity to negotiate for racial equality and a return to the principles of the "Party of Lincoln."

The Aftermath—Opportunity and Failure

The aftermath of the 1964 presidential election was a moment of opportunity for the National Negro Republican Assembly, sparking an explosion of activity. Delegates embarked on speaking tours and created an ambitious public relations campaign in an attempt to transform the party's national image from "a party of big business and of the lily white forces" to one that supported the "aspirations of the people."³⁹ The defeat of Goldwater elevated the actions and emotions of the NNRA members, producing a bolder approach to politics that bordered on militancy. The radical NNRA members pushed a philosophy that reflected black independence from discriminatory practices, albeit within the boundaries of traditional conservatism, because in the eyes of black constituents, the situation (specifically the civil rights movement and a fractured Republican Party) demanded it.⁴⁰ The assembly continued in its mission to exist as both an autonomous group (separate from black empowerment organizations and independent of the mainstream party) and as an integrated part of GOP decision-making. However, the NNRA's separatism did not exclude collaborative efforts with white or interracial Republican groups as the assembly deliberately sought strategic partnerships with other independent party organizations including Republicans for Progress, the National Conference of Republican Workshops, the Committee of '68, the Ripon Society, the Republican Governors' Association, and the Council of Republican Organizations.⁴¹ These collaborative efforts generated another method for the NNRA to garner publicity and gain entrance to political circles long denied to them.

High-ranking moderate and liberal party leadership, for its part, initially proved willing and eager to explore new strategies for reconstructing the Republican Party. Intrigued by the group's approach to integrated politics, newly appointed Republican National Committee Chair Ray Bliss met with the NNRA in January 1965 and invited them to present their agenda at a RNC meeting in Chicago.⁴² It was a critical opportunity, as Grant Reynolds noted, to make it "unmistakably clear that the Negro citizen is needed, wanted, and welcome."⁴³ By mid 1965, moderate and liberal party leaders were actively searching for African Americans to run for state and local offices. In Michigan, for example, Governor George Romney recruited real estate broker Joseph Bell to run for vice-chair of the party's state committee in the hopes of making "a showing at

³⁹ "Negro Republicans Demand Ouster of Goldwater Forces," *New York Times*, Nov. 14, 1964; "GOP Moderates to Meet Governors," *New York Amsterdam News*, Nov. 28, 1964.

⁴⁰ "Editorial," *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 3, 1965.

⁴¹ "Eisenhower Backs G.O.P. Unity Move," *New York Times*, Nov. 22, 1964; "Moderates Form New G.O.P. Group," *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 1965; "Reynolds Joins New GOP Group," *New York Amsterdam News*, Feb. 20, 1965; "GOP Moderates to Meet Governors," *New York Amsterdam News*, Nov. 28, 1964; Ripon Society, *Disaster to Distinction*, 78-80,86-87; "Richard L. Strout, "GOP Seeks New Image," *Christian Science Monitor*, Dec. 7, 1964.

⁴² Joseph A. Loftus, "G.O.P. Rebuilding to Try Comeback," *New York Times*, Jan. 18, 1965; "Bliss Rules out Doctrinal Feuds," *New York Times*, Jan. 23, 1965.

⁴³ "Negro GOP Assembly," *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, Feb. 13, 1965; "Urge GOP Woo Back Negro Vote," *New York Amsterdam News*, Jan. 23, 1965; "Demand Deputy," *New York Amsterdam News*, Jan. 23, 1965; "Press Demands on National GOP Commit," *New York Amsterdam News*, Jan. 30, 1965.

the Republican State convention."⁴⁴ Along similar lines, New York leaders went so far as to recruit NNRA member George Fowler to run for mayor of New York City.⁴⁵

However, the NNRA's opportunity shrunk due to intra-party difficulties. Despite Republican leaders' interest in the NNRA's agenda, party officials continued to equivocate on the issue of civil rights and racial equality for fear of alienating white voters. Some NNRA members despaired, bitterly accusing the mainstream Republican Party of having no real interest in the development of a two-party system for African Americans.⁴⁶ In particular, the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 signaled a crucial turning point in the once-promising relationship between the NNRA and the mainstream GOP.⁴⁷ Assembly members unequivocally supported the bill, as voting rights stood at the heart of the NNRA's campaign.⁴⁸ Assembly leadership urged Republican officials to take an aggressive stance in supporting the passage of the bill; for the most part, party leaders agreed, seeing it as an opportunity to wrest the civil mantle away from the Democratic Party and reject the anti-civil rights legacy of Goldwater.⁴⁹ And yet, despite their initial support, the process was marred with tension because Republican legislators added discriminatory provisions to appease white southern voters, a decision that attracted the ire of civil rights organizations and the NNRA.⁵⁰ The relationship between the NNRA and the mainstream party was soured further by the June 1965 convention of the Young Republican National Federation, which deteriorated into a vicious public battle over the constitutionality of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights bill.⁵¹ The NNRA petitioned the RNC to vocalize its support for black con-

⁴⁴ Glenn Engle, "Conservatives Hunt Negro for GOP Post," *The Detroit News*, Feb. 20, 1965; Glenn Engle, "State GOP Picks 1st Negro for High Post," *The Detroit News*, Dec. 5, 1965.

⁴⁵ The Fowler selection ended in disaster. Nervous over Fowler's chances at winning, Republican city officials asked Fowler to consider a lesser position. Fowler refused, resulting in a public battle between the NNRA and Republican city leaders. Eventually Fowler was dropped from the list of candidates. The NNRA even considered launching its own independent mayoral campaign, but settled for supporting John Lindsay instead (citing his civil rights credentials). The NNRA was infuriated that national party chair Ray Bliss did not intervene or advocate for Fowler and remained silent throughout the public battle; members mocked his calls for GOP unity as hypocritical. James Booker, "Fowler in Race for Mayor?" *New York Amsterdam News*, Apr. 3, 1965; "GOP's Launch Drive for Negro Mayor," *The Chicago Defender*, Apr. 10, 1965; Leslie Carpenter "Washington Beat," *The Washington Post Times Herald*, Apr. 10, 1965; "Negro GOPers Give Fowler Nod in Bid for Mayoralty," *New Pittsburgh Courier (National Edition)*, May 1, 1965; "Fowler Considers Running for Mayor," *New York Times*, Apr. 24, 1965; "Events Today," *New York Times*, Apr. 24, 1965; James Booker, "Fowler Serious in Bid," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 1, 1965; "Reynolds Blasts Ray Bliss, Pushes Fowler for NY Mayor," *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition)*, May 4, 1965; Thomas P. Roman, "G.O.P. List for Mayor Cut to 3; Fusion Ticket Also Considered," *New York Times*, May 8, 1965.

⁴⁶ Michael G. Long, Ed. *First Class Citizenship: The Civil Rights Letters of Jackie Robinson* (New York: Times Books, 2007), 156.

⁴⁷ The Voting Rights Act of 1965, signed into law on August 6, 1965, struck down restrictions to electoral voting on the federal, state, and local levels, established a streamlined voter registration process, prohibited the use of poll and literacy tests, and provided the federal government with the power to facilitate and enforce the voting process. Lyndon B. Johnson, Message on Voting Rights, Text of Speech, Text of Bill, Text of Talking Points, March 13, 1965, DNC Records, Series I, Box 80, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library (hereinafter referred to as LBJ Library).

⁴⁸ Members believed that enfranchisement was the first step to political empowerment; the concept permeated the assembly's philosophy of the importance of two-party competition, the success of which rested on the NNRA's ability to register and recruit African American voters.

⁴⁹ Thomas W. Ottendad, "Republicans Look for Ways to Regain Negro Confidence, Erase 'Lily-White' Party Image," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Apr. 11, 1965.

⁵⁰ Joseph W. Sullivan, "Stands on Voting Equality Bill Point Up GOP Schizophrenia," *Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 1965. For more information on the Voting Rights Bill/Act of 1965, see: Explanation of Federal Voting Rights Laws, Voting Rights Papers, Civil Rights Division, United States Department of Justice. See also, Hugh Davis Graham. *Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy, 1960-1972* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), and *Civil Rights and the Presidency: Race and Gender in American Politics, 1960-1992* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁵¹ David S. Broder, "Civil Rights Issue Roils Young G.O.P.," *New York Times*, June 16, 1965; Julius Duscha, "Bliss Gives Young GOP Hope for Extra Funds," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, June 16, 1965.

stituents and to reject right-wing and southern pandering; Ray Bliss did not respond. Summarizing the organization's frustration in series of 1965 articles, Jackie Robinson argued that the group was "truly fed up with the brand of Republican which wants Negro loyalty, and at the same time, hopes to avoid offending the South."⁵² Robinson announced that the NNRA was tired of the "great talk from so-called liberal Republicans" and warned that the assembly intended to do "more than just talk."⁵³

By spring 1966, the relationship between the NNRA and the RNC was so contentious that one reporter described it as a "hornet's nest."⁵⁴ The turmoil also highlighted a growing ideological split between conservative and militant assembly members; the division was brought to light when the RNC appointed former NNRA treasurer Clarence Townes as a high-ranking special assistant to Ray Bliss in April 1966. The appointment infuriated militant-leaning members of the assembly, who argued that Townes was too conservative and would fail to promote a "vigorous program to regain Negro votes." Interestingly, the selection of Townes was deliberate, as the RNC had rejected several prominent NNRA leaders for being "too aggressive and outspoken."⁵⁵

Further hampering the NNRA, assembly leader Grant Reynolds was accused of political corruption.⁵⁶ The claim found fertile ground with several mainstream groups, including the Midwestern Organization of State Chairmen, the Organization of Republican Women, and the Michigan Organization of Republicans.⁵⁷ Undoubtedly, the corruption controversy and ideological split had a negative effect on the NNRA. In May 1966, for instance, delegates were devastated when a number of high-profile black leaders "returned unexpected word that they could not attend" after hearing of the various scandals.⁵⁸ Moreover, the May convention was a public debacle—

⁵² Jackie Robinson, "Jackie Robinson Says: Sincerity the Only Hope for the GOP," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, July 3, 1965.

⁵³ Jackie Robinson, "Before You Can Say Jackie Robinson," *New York Amsterdam News*, Dec 11, 1965.

⁵⁴ Jack Steele, "Bliss Aide Under Fire," *The Washington Daily News*, May 30, 1966, in CLT Papers.

⁵⁵ *Ripon Forum*, Newsletter, June 1966.

⁵⁶ His anonymous accusers (the Ripon Society fingered Townes and Bliss) charged Reynolds with using his NNRA office for "his own political purposes" and called his association with the NNRA "undesirable."

⁵⁷ *Ripon Forum*, Newsletter, June 1966.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Alfred Duckett Press Release, CLT Papers; *Ripon Forum*, Newsletter, June 1966.



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CLARENCE L. TOWNES, JR., and National Chairman, Ray C. Bliss, discussing "Big City Push for '68."

Bliss & Townes: GOP Push For '68

As of today, Republican prospects for 1968 look better and better—but with seven years out of the White House, no one, especially at the National Committee level, is taking any chances on wishing their way back into full political power.

All areas and sections of the country will continue to see a stepped up drive by the Party with particular emphasis being placed upon urban and suburban voters. National Committee Chairman Ray C. Bliss will be heading up this "big push for '68" assisted by his Special Assistant Clarence L. Townes, Jr.

Townes, who also serves as Director of the Minorities Division, works with a staff of seven, coordinating various minority voter activities in cooperation

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CONGRESSMAN GEORGE BUSH with Bush All-Stars, a softball team which he sponsored in the spring of 1966.

GEORGE BUSH— Action In Houston

Freshman Congressman, George Bush, from the newly created 7th Congressional District in Houston, Texas, is probably one of the busiest and most effective new GOP members on the Hill.

As part of the "hunger crop" of new Congressmen and Senators the GOP sent to Washington after the 1966 elections, Bush has concerned himself with most of the major problems facing Americans in the 40's and has offered many constructive proposals for their solution.

None of this, however, surprises his constituents back home, because Bush was functioning as a Congressman even before he was elected.

During the Spring and Summer of '66, for instance, Bush in his capacity

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The GOP's campaign for minority votes in the 1968 election included Clarence L. Townes, Jr. (left), director of the Minorities Division, shown with Ray C. Bliss (right), GOP National Committee Chairman.

acting under orders from Ray Bliss and the RNC, Clarence Townes and the Michigan delegates attempted an unsuccessful assembly coup d'état.⁵⁹

As moderate and conservative black NNRA members left the organization for mainstream Republican groups and positions, the core leadership became more militant. Grant Reynolds and Jackie Robinson were at the forefront of this movement, publicly expressing their commitment to strengthen the “militant wing of Negro Republicans.”⁶⁰ When probed about the RNC, the duo suggested that the NNRA neither welcomed nor desired the help of the national committee. As Robinson biting remarked, “Ray Bliss and no one else is going to dictate to us. I think we have made that clear.”⁶¹ The ideologically aligned members placed importance on transforming the group into an “alert and militant instrument” determined to resist any outside influence that might seek to dominate, corrupt, or destroy its mission and its goals.⁶² By 1968, however, the organization had all but disintegrated under the shadow of a flourishing RNC Minorities Division, headed by Clarence L. Townes. Nonetheless, the NNRA—“born out of protest”—initially played an influential role in post-1964 Republican politics. And, while the organization’s militancy gradually moved it out of the party mainstream, the original principles, ideas, and values it espoused forced the Republican Party to acknowledge and address equality and civil rights issues in the 1960s.

Photo credits: Dr. W. Oscar Harris, 306-RC-2-6-10, Clarence Townes, 306-RC-2-4-12, Jackie Robinson, 306-RC-2-2-13, National Archives; Pannell letter, NNRA Constitution, Grant Reynolds, GOP newsletter, Clarence L. Townes, Jr., Papers, 1944–1988, Collection M 293, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

⁶⁰ Alfred Duckett Associates Public Relations, NNRA Press Release, Unknown Date [1966]; “National Committee Charged with Attempt to Dictate to Negro Republican Assembly,” Unknown Article, Unknown Date [1966], both in NNRA 1966 Folder, CLT Papers.

⁶¹ Duckett Press Release, 1966, CLT Papers.

⁶² Jackie Robinson, “A Trip to Detroit,” *Herald-Advance*, June 4, 1966, in CLT Papers.