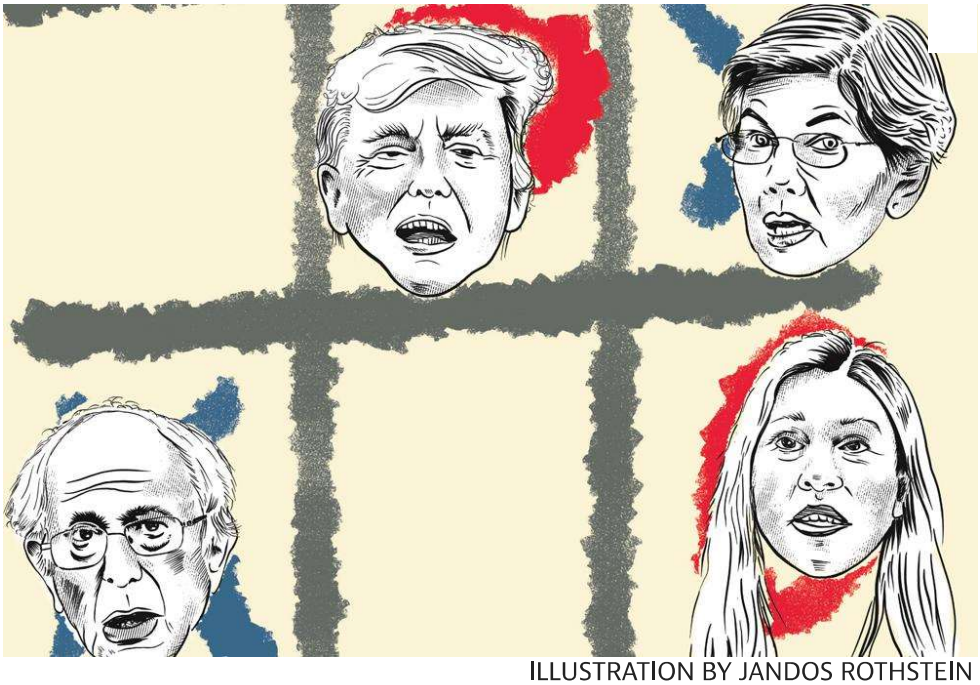
How American Politics Turned Deadly

The explosive consequences of the realignment of the two major parties

BY PAUL STARR AUGUST 4, 2022



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What It Took to Win: A History of the Democratic Party

By Michael Kazin

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

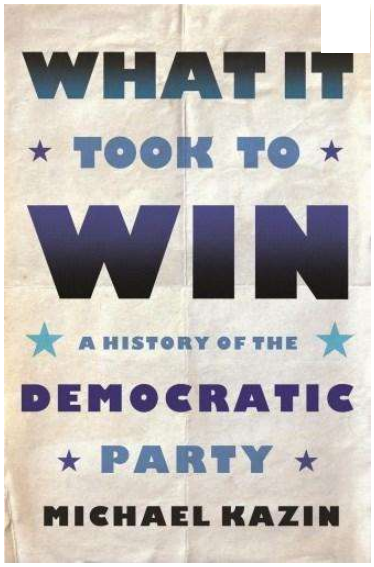
The Destructionists: The Twenty-Five-Year Crack-Up of the Republican Party

By Dana Milbank

Doubleday

Three historic changes in the major parties and their social foundations have shaped American politics as we know it today.

The first, beginning in the mid-20th century, was the racial and regional realignment that has made the Democratic Party the home of Black Americans and majorities of other people of color, while enabling the Republicans not only to capture most Southern states but to become the majority party of white America.



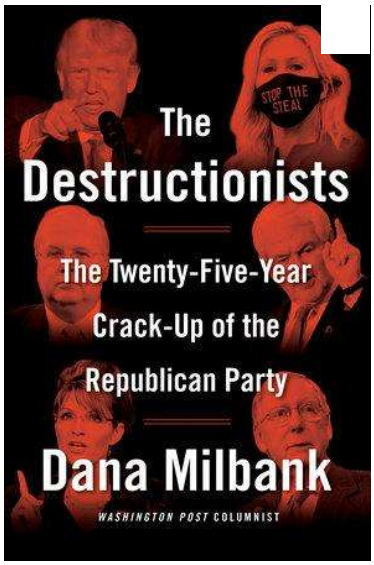
The second was an independent though related cultural shift, in which women, people with nonconforming gender identities, and the more secular, urban, and better-educated moved toward the Democrats, while the more religious, rural, and less-educated, particularly men, moved into the Republican Party. The combined effect of these two general processes was to make the Democrats the party of racial and cultural transformation, while the Republicans became the across-the-board party of backlash even as they remained the party of business.

The third change has come as a shock, though perhaps it

should have been anticipated as a result of the first two. This was the collapse of the center-right, the takeover of the Republican Party by its ethnonationalist right wing, and the resulting uncertainty as to whether Republicans can still be counted on to follow the basic rules of democratic government, like giving up power after losing an election.

More from Paul Starr

While not framing recent changes in these terms, two new books about the parties—the historian Michael Kazin's *What It Took to Win: A History of the Democratic Party* and the journalist Dana Milbank's *The Destructionists: The Twenty-Five-Year Crack-Up of the Republican Party*—help us think about the astonishing transformation that has overtaken the parties and put the survival of American democracy in serious doubt.



Kazin's book is a sweeping history of the Democrats from the party's origins in the early 19th century down to the present. Running through *What It Took to Win* is the idea that what it took was, first of all, persuasively argued commitments "to make the economy serve ordinary people" and, second, the construction of effective organizations to recruit candidates, turn out voters, and absorb the "energies of rising social movements." The party was able to do those things during the only two periods when it had "durable majorities," from the late 1820s to the mid-1850s and from the 1930s to the late 1960s.

As Kazin makes clear from the start, the Democrats' egalitarianism was originally limited: "It took a hideously long time for the self-proclaimed 'party of the people' to welcome the support and fight for the needs of Americans whose skin was not white and whose gender was not male." Well into the 20th century, the Democrats were the party of white supremacy, unable to win power nationally without

white supremacy, unable to win power nationally without the Jim Crow South.

> As one elite, the very rich, remained Republican, another elite, the educated and culturally influential, became Democratic.

Nonetheless, Kazin argues, the party provided the vehicle for two distinct, though not necessarily incompatible, egalitarian tendencies. The first was an anti-monopoly current, which dominated the party's early history; the second was a pro-labor current, which became central during the New Deal in the 1930s. The first tendency resisted concentrations of economic power; the second resisted exploitation in the workplace. Each tendency created the basis for a majority coalition. Anti-monopoly united Southern and Western agrarians and Catholic immigrants against industrialists, high tariffs, and Wall Street. The pro-labor tendency united working- and middle-class Americans behind policies such as rights to collective bargaining and Social Security.

The anti-monopoly and pro-labor tendencies are still present in the Democratic Party today, but the party is now also the vehicle for egalitarian challenges to racial and gender inequalities that also involve making the economy (and society more generally) serve the great majority, indeed, a greater and more inclusive majority than in the past. But the new tendencies arouse deep-seated anxieties and resentments and have complicated the party's efforts to do what it takes to win.

The political scientist Eric Schickler's 2016 book *Racial Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism* provides what may be the best account of how the Democrats' transition from a white supremacist to a racial egalitarian party came about. The conventional view of the realignment emphasizes the Democrats' national embrace of civil rights under Lyndon Johnson and views the role of

of civil rights under Lyndon Johnson and views the role of the states mainly in terms of the South's resistance to desegregation. In contrast, Schickler argues that, beginning in the late 1930s outside the South, an alliance in support of civil rights captured the Democratic Party from below. That alliance had critical support from liberal Democratic leaders in states like Pennsylvania, who saw opportunities to win over Black voters, and from the leadership of the industrial unions, which needed to organize Black factory workers. The Great Migration of African Americans to the North was a critical factor in this process. Fearful of losing the white South, however, the party's national leaders had to be pressured to change. At the 1948 Democratic national convention, it was a local leader, Minneapolis Mayor Hubert Humphrey, who spoke for the liberal-labor-Black alliance when he presented the civil rights plank whose adoption led to a walkout by Southern Dixiecrats. This was the beginning of a transformation that over the next decades put the Democrats on the side of racial equality.

AP PHOTO

Hubert Humphrey's demand for a civil rights plank at the 1948 Democratic convention began to put the party on the side of racial equality.

Kazin sums up the eventual significance of that breach: "For Democrats, the demand for Black empowerment was a 'time bomb' with a long fuse planted by left-wing New

Dealers and their union allies during the 1940s. When it detonated in the mid-1960s, it fragmented the party and did much to bring an end to the New Deal order that labor, the white South, urban machines, and liberal activists had built together." Supporters of other marginalized groups planted time bombs with even longer fuses.

The racial realignment played out over decades. From the 1970s to the 1990s, Democrats still drew much of their support in Congress from Southern conservatives and moderates; during the same period, the only presidents the party was able to elect, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, were Southern governors who held on at least to some Southern states. In 1949, the historian Richard Hofstadter had written that the Democratic Party was "in the anomalous position of being a party of 'liberalism,' whose achievements are subject to a veto by a reactionary faction." The Southern veto long blocked civil rights measures, and it limited others as well. By the mid-1960s, Democrats were able to pass civil rights legislation not only because of increased strength outside the South, but also because of support for the legislation from liberal and moderate Republicans, including the Republican leader in the Senate, Everett Dirksen. But Southern Democratic power brokers continued to hold back progressive policy in Congress long thereafter—and even today Joe Manchin still plays that role, at a time when Democrats cannot count on any Republicans to cross over to support even mildly progressive legislation.

Kazin lays some of the blame for the party's post-1960s decline at the feet of Lyndon Johnson for ignoring a "primary lesson" of the New Deal, which was to enact measures serving the great majority. Instead, Kazin writes, Johnson's war on poverty, except for Medicare and aid to education, "got viewed as benefits to poor and mostly non-white Americans … It was a sincere appeal to the better angels of the nation, but it was not effective politics."

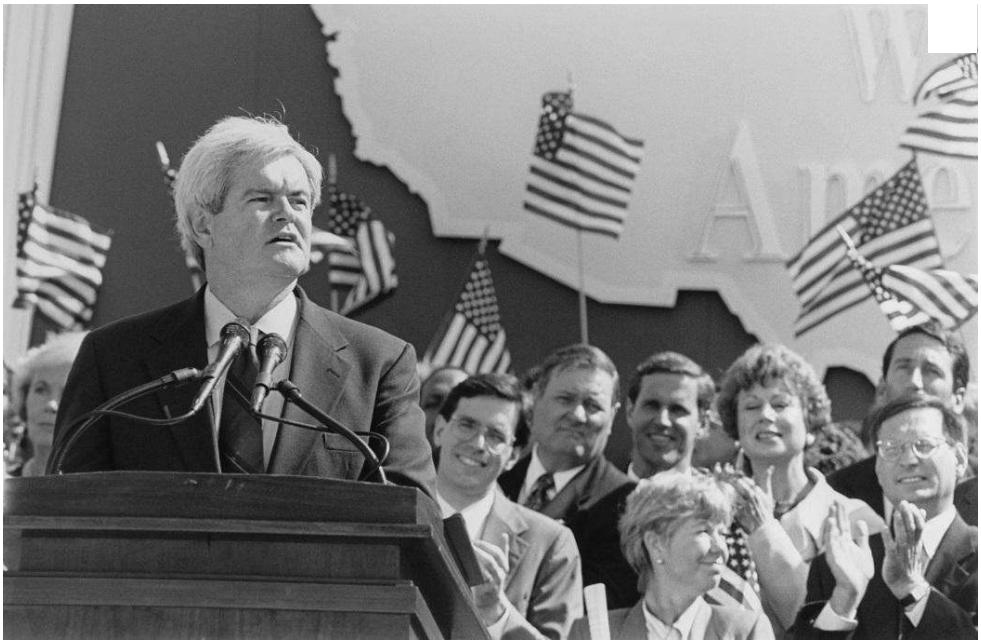
I hesitate to put any blame on the war on poverty. The transition from a white supremacist to a racial egalitarian party was bound to take a toll on the Democrats' earlier majorities. A different mix of social policies in the mid-

majorities. A different mix of social policies in the mid-1960s might not have made much difference, especially given all the damage the Democrats suffered from the Vietnam War. If not for Vietnam, Humphrey might have won the presidency in 1968 or Johnson might have run successfully for re-election; as it turned out, Richard Nixon's election that year anticipated an era of Republican dominance. But neither the metaphorical war on poverty nor the real war in Vietnam caused the long-term shift in party dominance. In the long run, the Democratic Party became the vehicle for cultural as well as racial change, and it had to absorb the brunt of overlapping racial, religious, anti-feminist, and homophobic backlashes. This has been the larger context of the party's struggles.

In the great cultural transformation from the 1970s to the early 2000s, the courts did most of the heavy lifting, but there was no mistaking which party supported those decisions and was prepared to carry them out. Yet over that same period, Democrats (and the courts) did little to advance a pro-labor agenda—indeed, the party did virtually nothing to protect and promote unions while employers mounted an intense campaign against them. The old anti-monopoly concerns had also faded. So, whatever Democrats might say, their "revealed preferences," to use the economists' phrase, favored the new egalitarian tendencies in the party over the earlier ones.

Why did the Democratic Party make that choice? A large part of the explanation is that the party's base changed. Industrial workers not only declined in number but turned politically to the right, while the college-educated not only increased but became more liberal. As one elite, the very rich, remained Republican, another elite, the educated and culturally influential, became Democratic but did not necessarily identify with unions. With demographic change came an increase in the nonwhite electorate and gave Democrats a broader base among people of color than had Black voters alone. The gender divide became more important. The "gender gap" in voting used to be conceived as a political difference between Republican-trending men

and Democratic-trending women; now it's also a gap between straight and LGBT+ voters. All these changes have tended to give priority to racial and gender egalitarianism in the Democratic Party, to increase the salience of those issues in American politics, and to feed the resentment, anger, and moral panic that have energized the contemporary right and transformed the Republican Party.



CHRIS MARTIN/CQ ROLL CALL VIA AP IMAGES

Newt Gingrich taught Republicans how to win elections using phony scandals, conspiracy stories, and slurs.

DANA MILBANK'S *THE DESTRUCTIONISTS* recounts the Republican Party's transformation over the past 25 years. This is not a story about anything so profound as a change in political philosophy or even a shift in policy positions. It is a tale instead of the shedding of all restraint in the drive for power, a process that began long before Donald Trump.

Contrary to many accounts of partisan polarization, the change in American politics has not been symmetrical. One party has continued to observe the norms of democratic government and respect for truth, while the other hasn't. "Republicans," Milbank writes, "have been hacking away at the foundations of democracy and civil society for a quarter century" in four ways: "their war on truth, their growing exploitation of racism and white supremacy, their sabotage of the institutions and norms of government, and their dehumanizing of opponents and stoking of violence." *The*

Destructionists is a journalist's recap of that history, reminding readers of the long series of right-wing fabrications and obsessions since the early 1990s, from the supposed murder of Clinton's assistant White House counsel, Vincent Foster, to the Big Lie of the 2020 stolen election. Newt Gingrich taught Republicans how to win elections with the relentless use of phony scandals, conspiracy stories, and slurs debasing their opponents. Rush Limbaugh and Roger Ailes used the same techniques to reshape right-wing media. Rather than creating anything new, Trump merely exploited the pattern of mendacity and vilification that others had already shown to be successful strategies in arousing the base of the Republican Party.

But if Trump was only the culmination of a long process, why did that process happen in the first place? Milbank doesn't offer a general explanation, although his narrative suggests two relevant points. Discussing Gingrich's rise to leadership in the House, he mentions that Bob Michel, the Republican leader whom Gingrich replaced, was a World War II veteran who followed the gentlemanly norms of bipartisan comity and compromise that had prevailed in Congress. The demands for national unity during World War II and the Cold War had fostered partisan self-restraint. Once the Cold War was over, the road was open to bare-knuckled partisan aggression.

> “Both the Democrats and Republicans have thrown off the restraints that once held them back—but with radically different effects.

The other relevant point has to do with the rational basis of that aggression for Republicans. Demographic and cultural change have been working against them. Theirs is a party with a base of older white voters smoldering with rage about a changing America. As Milbank notes, there is a

"perfectly logical, if deeply cynical, reason" why "Republicans have become an authoritarian faction fighting democracy." Going back to 1992, they have lost the popular vote for president in seven out of the last eight elections. The turn toward authoritarianism has also had a rational basis because Republicans now have an entire media ecosystem of their own, including Fox, Breitbart, and right-wing talk radio, effectively blocking the mainstream media from confusing the party's base with actual news.

Still, Republican leaders could have chosen differently. Milbank mentions that after Obama's re-election in 2012, the Republican National Committee issued a post-mortem recommending that the party compete for rising numbers of Hispanic and Asian voters by supporting such policies as immigration reform. Instead, the party did the opposite, and it is hard to say that, from the standpoint of partisan self-interest, its choice was irrational. Not only did Trump get elected; Republicans at lower levels appear to have suffered little penalty for extremism. The direction taken by the party expresses powerful impulses among its supporters. Those impulses are not new, but they are now out in the open, and under Trump the party's leadership has doubled down on them.

Since the mid-20th century, both the Democrats and Republicans have thrown off the restraints that once held them back—but with radically different effects. Both parties used to be ideologically heterogeneous, and as a result they each had internal checks. The Democrats were constrained not only by the Southern veto but also by culturally conservative Democratic voters, many of them working-class. As those influences weakened, the party was first able to respond to Black demands for civil rights and later able to support the rights of other marginalized groups. The Republicans had the internal check of a moderate and in some respects distinctly liberal faction, which kept their party from becoming outright racist and reactionary. As the party shed those liberals and moderates, it became a vehicle for more extreme, ethnonationalist tendencies. Some on the right today genuinely believe the conspiracy stories and lies,

while others just opportunistically fall in line. It doesn't matter: The opportunists are as dangerous as the true believers. The Republican Party is on a desperate path, and we have no way of anticipating how deep into the authoritarian abyss it is prepared to go.

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