

The New York Times

The White Supremacy Caucus

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DEC. 11, 2017

In 2002, the Senate majority leader, Trent Lott, Republican of Mississippi, gave a laudatory speech at the 100th-birthday party of fellow Republican Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina. “I want to say this about my state: When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him,” Lott said. “We’re proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn’t have had all these problems over all these years, either.”

Thurmond had run for president in 1948 as a [pro-segregation Dixiecrat, declaring](#): “There’s not enough troops in the Army to force the Southern people to break down segregation and admit the Negro race into our theaters, into our swimming pools, into our homes and into our churches.” For celebrating him, Lott had to resign his leadership position. His words, the right-wing pundit [Charles Krauthammer wrote then](#), were “evidence of a historical blindness that is utterly disqualifying for national office.”

At the time, many conservatives and Republicans had been trying for more than a decade to scrub the stink of racism off their movement. In 1991, President George H. W. Bush [denounced David Duke](#), the Republican candidate for Louisiana governor, for his bigotry and Nazi sympathy. That year the Republican National Committee chairman, Lee Atwater, [dying of a brain tumor](#), apologized for his race-baiting Willie Horton ads. Before the decade was through, Ralph Reed, former head of the Christian Coalition, apologized for white evangelicals’ “shameful legacy of racism” and indifference to the civil rights movement. By 2002, with George W. Bush presiding over the most [ethnically diverse Republican administration ever](#), conservatives saw Lott’s nostalgia for segregation as very much off brand.

Since the election of Donald Trump, however, opposition to overt racism, like free trade and supply-side economics, has been revealed as an elite Republican preoccupation with questionable currency among the conservative base. The president’s supporters celebrate his racial demagoguery as a refreshing rejection of political correctness; they stood by him when he referred to some of the white supremacists marching in Charlottesville, Va., as “very fine people.” Representative Steve King, Republican of Iowa, has felt liberated to let his fascist flag fly, recently tweeting a quote from Hungary’s far-right Prime Minister Viktor Orban: “Mixing cultures will not lead to a higher quality of life but a lower one.” And as we approach Tuesday’s special Senate election in Alabama, the president has thrown his support behind Roy Moore, an apologist for slavery.

Moore’s record of alleged sexual assaults of underage girls has understandably overshadowed his many other disqualifications for high office. Still, his repulsive racial views also deserve our attention. In September, [The Los Angeles Times reported](#) on a rally where an African-American man asked Moore when America was last great. “I think it was great at the time when families were united — even though we had slavery — they cared for one another,” he responded. If Trump wants to return America to the 1950s, Moore would prefer the 1850s.

Moore's affection for the America of chattel slavery was shocking but not surprising, because he has long palled around with white nationalists. In both 2009 and 2010, Moore's Foundation for Moral Law hosted [pro-Confederate Alabama "Secession Day" celebrations](#). On Monday, CNN unearthed two 2011 interviews Moore did on the far-right radio show "Aroostook Watchmen," in which he said that getting rid of every constitutional amendment after the 10th would "eliminate many problems." He was particularly contemptuous of the 14th Amendment, adopted to give former slaves equal rights under the law.

By contrast, Moore's opponent, Doug Jones, is a prosecutor best known for securing the conviction of two members of the Ku Klux Klan decades after they planted bombs that killed four African-American girls in a Birmingham church. Some conservative leaders would like us to believe that Alabama Republicans see Jones as an unacceptable alternative to Moore because he is pro-choice. Perhaps, but Moore's allies are also attacking Jones for encouraging black people to vote. Politico reported that an ad by the Moore-aligned Restore Our Godly Heritage PAC, running on nearly 60 Alabama radio stations, blasts Jones for advertising on African-American radio. "Desperate to steal this Senate race, Jones and his race-hustling allies are trying to start a race war and it's only going to get worse in the final weekend, with millions of dollars in street money to turn out the vote," it says.

No one knows what's going to happen on Tuesday. It's safe to predict, however, that if Moore wins, Senate Republicans will put aside their qualms and work with him, just as they did with Trump. [Some analysts think Democrats benefit](#) in this scenario, since Moore will taint Republicans' image. But as Trump has shown, when ideologically extreme figures achieve political power, they're able to push the boundaries of public discourse. Moore in the Senate would send the message that defending slavery — never mind segregation — is no longer beyond the pale.

Last year the white nationalist Richard Spencer told me that he dreams of a white version of the Congressional Black Caucus, devoted to advancing the interests of Caucasians. It struck me as wishful thinking. Now, as the party follows Trump into the gutter, I wonder if it's inevitable.