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By Heller

Carter Lost the Confederacy But Captured the New South

By Ellis Cose

All along it was just kind of assumed that Jimmy Carter would return what Strom Thurmond and Richard Nixon had taken away. And a surface analysis would tend to show that he did just that — that good old Jimmy brought back to the Democrats the states of the old Confederacy that piper Thurmond had lead astray.

But if one looks a bit closer one sees that Carter really did no such thing — even though he did indeed sweep the South on his way to becoming president-elect. The South that “came home” to Carter was really a South that had never left — it was a South that just recently came into existence.

Carter first of all lost the white South, lost it so overwhelmingly that if one subtracts the black vote (according to data collected by the Joint Center for Political Studies) only Georgia, Arkansas and possibly Tennessee could be counted in Carter's column. And the margin in Georgia certainly had less to do with the fact that Carter was a Southerner than it had to do with the fact that he was a home-town boy.

The second point that needs to be made is that the old South, that South that was once so dependably Democratic, was largely a white South — at least as far as voting went. But the voting rights act has had its impact, as have a number of voter-registration and voter-education drives in the South.

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John Lewis, head of the Atlanta-based Voter Education Project, estimates that his organization alone has registered half a million Southern blacks in the last four years. Other groups have had voter-registration drives as well, including the National Democratic Committee and a host of civil rights organizations.

It seems, in short, that Carter did not so much lead voters back as capitalized on voters who previously had not been allowed to vote.

What that means first of all is that one has to largely discount Carter's Southernness as the reason for his victory in the South and therefore in the nation. For, to white Southerners at least, President Ford and company were apparently successful in selling the idea that Carter was just a “Southern-fried McGovern.”

What it calls for secondly is some reassessing of the political South. For the indications are that blacks and moderate whites have managed to make themselves the majority, or at least an important enough bloc that the South, already headed in that direction, may find itself shedding its conservatism sooner, albeit for different reasons, than even proponents of the “New South” ever imagined.