The Seventies Shift

When Michael Barone began his career as a political observer, Los Angeles was like Des Moines by the sea and America was transfixed by the Vietnam war and the counterculture. Nobody saw the deeper forces that were beginning to transform the nation.

BY MICHAEL BARONE

On Wednesday, June 10, at 6:17 pm, with a feeling of calm relief, I finished writing my share of *The Almanac of American Politics 2010*. This is the 20th edition of the book, and the moment came almost exactly 39 years from the time Grant Ujifusa, whom I had known as a fellow editor of *The Harvard Crimson,* asked me to be a coauthor of the first. Grant's idea was to prepare a portrait of every state, congressional district, and member of Congress for students protesting President Richard M. Nixon's decision in the spring of 1970 to send U.S. troops into Cambodia, but as we began working—equipped, in my own case, with a Smith-Corona portable electric typewriter and a pocket calculator, then an incredibly high-tech device—it occurred to us that our guide could be useful to Americans with all kinds of political views. After months of work and the providential finding of a publisher, Lovell Thompson's Gambit, Inc., *The Almanac of American Politics 1972* appeared a few months before the year began.

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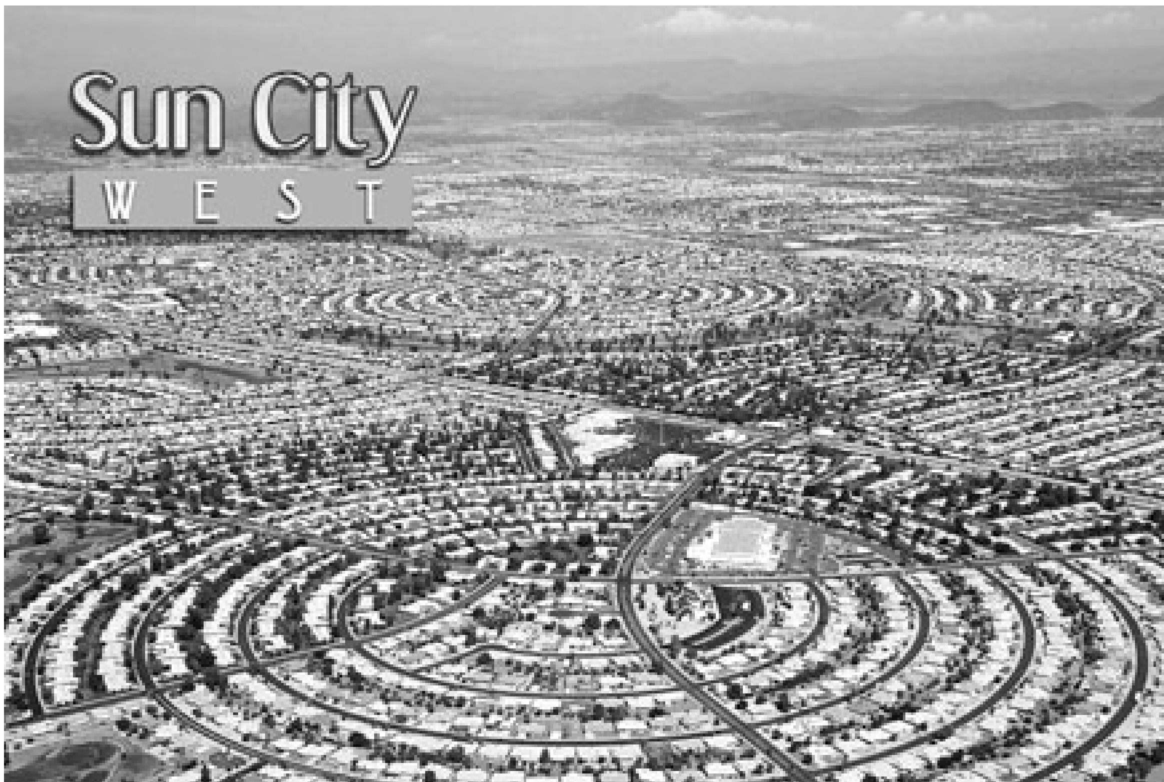
I expected the book to make only a tiny splash as it fell into the depths of the vast pool of American political writing. Instead, it proved to be a commercial and critical success. We had found a market niche: The community of Washington journalists and lobbyists—which I may have been the first to call "K Street"—had just gotten large enough to provide a market for a volume that described and gave relevant statistics for every member of Congress and every state and congressional district. New editions have appeared every two years, published since 1983 by *National Journal.* Through 20 editions I have processed something more than 15 million words, including 1,000 state profiles and most of the 8,700 descriptions of the 435 congressional districts. In 1998 I met a goal I had set early on, to at least touch down in each of those districts, when I landed at Ted Stevens International Airport in Anchorage, Alaska.

A forced immersion in the minutiae of American politics and demographics like mine provides a unique perspective on the past four decades. What is surprising about what has happened in those years is not that America has grown—from 203 million people in 1970 to 305 million, according to a Census



"Go West, old man!" could have been one of the mottos of the burgeoning Sun Belt. This Arizona retirement community was begun in the late 1970s.

Bureau estimate last year—but that it has grown in such different ways from what people expected. We didn't see it when we began working on the *Almanac*, but the years around 1970 were a hinge point in U.S. demographic and political history, a moment of rapid transition from postwar America, as we called it then, to the America of the era in which we are living and for which we still have no convenient name.

The postwar baby boom is generally dated from 1946 to 1962, but the abrupt drop in birthrates in the mid-1960s was considered for some time a temporary aberration. In 1972, Congress approved an immediate 20 percent increase in Social Security benefits coupled with automatic cost-of-living increases in the future on the assumption that the baby boomers would soon begin producing as many babies (and future taxpayers) as their parents had. That, like so many predictions based on straight-line demographic extrapolations, did not come to pass.

Among the demographic changes that did occur was a sharp shift in the geography of growth. Hard as it is to believe now when population growth in the Northeast and industrial Midwest is minimal, the fastest-growing parts of the country from World War II through the 1970 Census included industrial Michigan and Ohio and the thickly populated bloc of counties clustered along Interstate 95 from New Hampshire to northern Virginia—an area dubbed "Megalopolis" in the 1964 book of that name by geographer Jean Gottmann. In the South, only Florida, Texas, and Virginia were growing faster than the national average.

Around 1970 that pattern changed. Between 1940 and 1965, blacks had migrated from south to north in massive numbers, spurred initially by the job-killing advent of the mechanical cotton picker and the labor demands of wartime defense plants, and also by a vision of achieving free-

dom from the South's legally and violently enforced racial segregation. But in 1965, net black migration suddenly stopped—a response, I think, to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, with its ban on racial segregation, and the eruption of the first major postwar urban race riot in the North, in Harlem, which was followed by riots in Watts in 1965, Newark and Detroit in 1967, and Washington, D.C., and other cities after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968.

TWELVE PERCENT of the U.S. population is now foreign born, with 60 percent of the newcomers from Latin America.

Those events, plus (as the late political scientist Nelson Polsby noted) the spread of air conditioning, made the South more attractive to national corporations and more open to venturesome entrepreneurs. In the 1970s, every southern state, including even West Virginia, grew faster than the national average, as did every state in the West. No midwestern states and no states in the Northeast except three small New England states did so.

That pattern, only slightly modified, has continued ever since. The only states in the Midwest and Northeast that have grown faster than the national average since 1970 are the tax havens of New Hampshire and Delaware. High-tax states such as New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio have grown sluggishly or hardly at all. A telling example: New York had 18 million people in 1970 and 19 million in 2008, while low-tax Texas grew from 11 million people to 24 million. Even California, for all its glorious climate and attractions, has managed to drive out people with high taxes and environmental restrictions. Since 1990 immigrants have kept the state's population growing, but there has been a net outflow of others.

Like native-born Americans, immigrants have rearranged themselves on our national map in ways not generally anticipated. When Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1965—the Senate floor manager was the 33-year-old Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.)—experts testified that it would result in only a temporary rise in Asian immigration and, with its new national quotas, might reduce the flow of Latin Americans. The foreign-born share of the national population when I was writing the first *Almanac,* 2.2 percent, was at its lowest point since the 1840s. The assumption was that immigrants would come mainly from Europe, as they always had, and since Europe was booming there would not be many newcomers. Since then, nearly 30 million immigrants have become citizens, and an estimated 12 million illegal and 12 million legal immigrants are currently living in the United States. Twelve percent of the U.S. population is now foreign born. About 60 percent of the newcomers hail from Latin America, half of them from Mexico. About a quarter of the total comes from various parts of Asia, and only a relative handful from Europe.

I remember reading an article in the early 1980s that urged the federal government to create an agency to inform immigrants of job prospects and warn them not to move to distressed steel towns such as Pittsburgh and Buffalo. That proved to be unnecessary. Immigrants sought high-growth cities and further stoked their prosperity. Hispanic immigration during the 1980s was heavily concentrated in a few metro areas—Los Angeles, Houston, Miami, New York, and Chicago.

In the last two decades Latinos have moved to other fast-growing areas in Arizona and Nevada, Georgia and North Carolina, to meatpacking towns in the Midwest and chicken-processing centers in the South. The Los Angeles I first visited in 1969 had the air and ethnic composition of a midwestern town, like a giant Des Moines spread over a street grid stretching from the ocean to the mountains. The Los Angeles I have come to know since the 1990s is distinguished by vast tracts inhabited almost entirely by Latinos, the shops and restaurants of Koreatown,

and the giant all-Chinese supermarkets in the San Gabriel Valley.

Latin American immigration has fallen sharply in the recession, and it's possible that it may never return to the high levels of recent decades. Surges of immigration earlier in our history ended suddenly, and contrary to the predictions of the time: Irish and German immigration tapered off unexpectedly. Congress tightened immigration quotas in the 1920s, but the number of new arrivals fell below even these levels in the 1930s. The influx from some parts of Asia—South Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan—has already declined, and a sharp drop in Latino immigration, together with the recently documented reduction in the numbers of illegal immigrants from Mexico, may cause both proponents and opponents of legalization to reconsider their prescriptions for regulation. At the same time, immigration from sub-Saharan Africa has been on the rise, as economies there advance to levels at which many can afford the cost of passage. The numbers of African immigrants are low, but the reservoir of potential newcomers is large and the family reunification provisions of existing law may allow the flow of African immigration to swell as the flow of Latino immigration once did.

The combined effects of immigration and domestic migration have left our major metro areas very different in character from what they were. The coastal cities—metropolitan New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago (on the coast of Lake Michigan), Los Angeles, San Francisco—have become sharply divided economically between a highly educated affluent class and a large mass of low-wage immigrants. The interior boomtowns—metropolitan Dallas, Houston, Atlanta, Phoenix, Charlotte, and Tampa—have attracted many domestic migrants plus smaller numbers of immigrants; with booming private-sector economies and lower housing prices (consequences of greater availability of land and fewer environmental restrictions), they have more income equality. As journalist Bill Bishop argues in *The Big Sort* (2008), affluent Americans (and affluent immigrants) are able to choose to live in places they find culturally congenial, reinforcing and strengthening their cultural identity. Thus over the last three decades the San Francisco Bay area has become more Democratic and the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex has become more Republican.

After decades of decline, the Rust Belt factory towns—Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Buffalo—are reaching low-growth equilibrium, with populations that are relatively elderly and health care replacing steel and autos as the major industry. Meanwhile, many somewhat smaller metro areas—Columbus, Indianapolis, Minneapolis, Kansas City, Denver—are achieving above-average growth. What has emerged from all these changes is a nation that not only looks quite different from the postwar America of the late 1960s, but is shaped increasingly by volitional migration—the movement of Americans affluent enough to choose where they live based on their personal tastes, in a way that reshapes local cultures, and the movement of immigrants free to seek opportunity wherever it appears.

Just as America was at a demographic hinge point when I started working on the first *Almanac,* so it was at a political one. The country was moving from the fairly predictable patterns of postwar politics to an era of high volatility punctuated by more settled interludes. The new volatility was vividly apparent in the 1970 midterm elections, which were just behind us when I sat down in my Detroit apartment to write up the *Almanac* profile of the first state on my list, Alabama.

Southern politics had been rapidly changing in the previous decade. George C. Wallace had been elected governor of Alabama in 1962 after promising to "stand in the schoolhouse door" to prevent integration at a time when almost no blacks were allowed to vote in the state or in most other parts of the South. Like almost all southern politicians, he was a Democrat; Bull Connor, the police chief who turned fire hoses and police dogs on peaceful black demonstrators in Birmingham in 1963, was then Alabama's Democratic national committeeman. Wallace ran in the Democratic presidential primaries in 1964 and won surprisingly large percentages in Indiana and Wisconsin; he ran for president as a third-party candidate in 1968 and won 13.5 percent of the vote, as Nixon edged Hubert H. Humphrey by only 43.4 percent to

42.7 percent. But southern blacks were enfranchised by the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the most effective civil rights legislation ever, and by 1970 they were a significant part of southern electorates. Thanks to the vicissitudes of the alphabet, Wallace's successful comeback in the 1970 race for governor of Alabama was the subject of my first state profile, and it was a considerable challenge.

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It was a challenge also to chronicle that year's 34 Senate races, 23 of which, by my count, were seriously contested—the most in any election cycle since popular election of senators began early in the 20th century. From the White House, Nixon set out to eliminate the Democrats' Senate majority even at the cost of reducing his chances of whittling down their majorities in the House. Twelve incumbent Republican congressmen (including Texas's George H. W. Bush) were recruited to run for the Senate, plus such eminent candidates as Missouri attorney general John Danforth and Jesuit priest and future television talk show host John McLaughlin.

These races occurred in rapidly changing political landscapes. Liberal Republicans held important offices, but some, such as New York mayor John Lindsay, were in political peril because of their high-tax and soft-on-crime policies. (Lindsay had been defeated for the Republican nomination in 1969 and won a plurality as the Liberal Party nominee.) The Democratic Party was split between antiwar liberals and its traditional ethnic and blue-collar constituencies, a development that resulted in the Senate victories of Conservative Party nominee James Buckley in New York and Republican Lowell Weicker in Connecticut (where Nixon persuaded incumbent Democrat Thomas Dodd, who had been denied renomination by his party, to run as a third-party candidate, thus splitting the Democratic vote). In the South, veteran incumbent Albert Gore (not then referred to as Sr.) was beaten by the conservative (but not, as some Gore admirers imagined, racist) campaign of Bill Brock.

But Nixon's hopes of gaining a majority or near majority in the Senate were disappointed. Republicans captured Democratic seats in Maryland, Ohio, Connecticut, and Tennessee, but lost Republican seats in California and Illinois. Republicans came up agonizingly short in 10 seriously contested races. Nixon's gamble had failed. The results emboldened the Democrats to choose George McGovern as their nominee in 1972 and left Nixon chastened. He spent much of his 1972 campaign money on ads featuring his Democratic Treasury secretary, former Texas governor John Connally, urging conservative Democrats to vote for Nixon, with the implication that it would be fine if they voted Democratic otherwise. Nixon felt confident that he could rely on southern Democrats to give him a working majority in Congress. He would be disappointed when they refused to stand with him during the Watergate crisis.

In retrospect, American politics in the early 1970s was pregnant with many possible futures, and some of the unlikeliest actually came to pass. Nixon was ousted from office less than two years after his landslide victory. In 1976, both parties nominated candidates from their historical but waning bases. Gerald Ford hailed from outstate Michigan, settled originally by New England Yankees and one of the birthplaces of the Republican Party. He was nominated by a narrow margin over Ronald Reagan, who had great support in the parts of the country that were trending Republican, the South and the West. Jimmy Carter was a son of southern Georgia, where continuing resentment over Sherman's march a century earlier had enabled Boston-bred John F. Kennedy to win the state in 1960 simply because he didn't belong to the party of Lincoln. Carter's good showing

in the Iowa caucuses and his victory in the New Hampshire primary established both events as major contests in American politics, and his victory in the Florida primary ended George Wallace's run as a national figure. In later contests Carter prevailed over weighty rivals Henry Jackson, Morris Udall, and Frank Church.

Carter's narrow victory in November, together with Wallace's continued Democratic allegiance, slowed the Republican trend in southern congressional and legislative elections, which did not reach flood tide until 1994.

Looking back, we can make a distinction between two different kinds of political periods: those characterized by trench warfare, in which the parties battled it out along familiar lines and voters largely stuck to their party affiliations, and those of open-field politics, when the old rules seemed no longer to apply, independent candidates won wide support, and partisan alignments were subject to sharp change.

A new politics: Ronald Reagan burst onto the national scene with a big victory in the race for California's governorship in 1966. Here he stumps for reelection in 1970 at a computer company.

I grew up in an era of trench warfare that ran from about 1947 to 1967. Voters tilted toward Democrats in times of economic slowdown, toward Republicans when inflation seemed a threat. The South still mostly elected Democrats, though sometimes it rebelled against the national Democratic Party. Then, in 1967, in response to urban riots and campus rebellions, stalemate in the Vietnam War, and disappointment with the war on poverty, a period of open-field politics began that lasted until 1983. The high levels of trust and confidence in political leaders and political institutions that had prevailed during the preceding 20 years vanished. The post-1967 years saw the rise of Wallace, the McGovern nomination (and the Nixon landslide), and Carter's narrow victory in 1976 and thumping defeat by Reagan in 1980. In the four presidential elections during that period, less than half the states lined up behind the same party all four times.

Since then, we have had relatively long periods of trench warfare politics (1983–91 and 1995–2005) and relatively brief periods of open-field politics (1991–95 and 2005 to the present day). At first, Americans settled down to vote mostly Republican for president (Reagan and the first George Bush) and mostly Democratic for Congress. Then came an

open-field period with the largely unpredicted emergence of popular independent presidential prospects who were able, albeit briefly, to lead in polls (Ross Perot in spring 1992 and Colin Powell in fall 1995), the election of a Democratic president in 1992, and the election of a Republican Congress in 1994.

NEW YORK WAS ONCE the nation's prime marginal state, California a dependably Republican one.

Trench warfare then resumed under President Bill Clinton in 1995, with far more straight-ticket voting than in the 1970s and '80s, leaving the two parties almost evenly balanced in both presidential and congressional elections. We were a 49 percent nation, as I wrote in the introduction to the 2002 *Almanac.* The two parties—their politicians and their voters—were like two equal-sized armies in a culture war, fighting for the narrow strip of territory that would make the difference between victory and defeat. The demographic variable most highly correlated with voting behavior was religion, or degree of religiosity. Democrats made gains in large northern metropolitan areas by taking liberal stands on cultural issues and tapping large new blocs of immigrant voters. Republicans made partially offsetting gains in rural and Southern areas on the strength of conservative stands on cultural and foreign policy issues. Notably, three big states changed their political stripes. In high-tax New York and California, with their widening inequality, affluent liberals and arriving immigrants both surged toward Democrats. New York was once the nation's prime marginal state, California a dependably Republican one. Now both were Democratic bastions. In low-tax Texas, by contrast, despite considerable immigration, increasingly Republican rural areas and conservative domestic inmigrants transformed what had been a swing state into a Republican stronghold.

The period of open-field politics that began in the summer of 2005 with a bloody stalemate in Baghdad and flood waters in New Orleans resulted in successive victories for Democrats in 2006 and 2008. Some analysts have extrapolated from the 53 percent majorities for Barack Obama and Democratic House candidates last year the emergence of a new Democratic majority that will reign for years to come. If black voter turnout remains as high as it was in 2008 and Hispanics and voters born since 1980 continue to lean as heavily Democratic as they did, that may be the case. But other analysts extrapolated from the 51 percent majorities for George W. Bush and Republican House candidates in 2004 an enduring Republican majority for years to come. Both parties can claim advantages in some demographically expanding groups, but it is not clear that these advantages will provide enough of an edge to establish the kind of political hegemony each of the parties enjoyed at different times before 1970.

For all the power of the trends I have observed in writing the *Almanac,* much still depends on events that are entirely unpredictable. Periods of open-field politics began with the perceived failure of governing majorities to exert control over menacing events. Voters began making choices they had never made before. Periods of trench warfare began when governing majorities—often bipartisan majorities, as during 1947–49, 1953–61, 1983–91 and, except for six months, 1995–2003—seemed to have gotten things under control. They gave at least the appearance of achieving an equilibrium on policy and a certain competence in the management of affairs. Whether we have reached such a moment or will soon is uncertain, but it seems to me unlikely. By the summer of 2009 the balance of enthusiasm, which worked so strongly for Obama and the Democrats in 2008, seemed to be working, at least temporarily, against them. We may know more when, soon after the November 2010 election, I begin work on *The Almanac of American Politics 2012*. ■