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REPUBLICANS, BULL MOOSE, AND NEGROES IN FLORIDA, 1912

by G. N. GREEN

DURING THE EARLY weeks of 1912, President William Howard Taft became ruefully aware that a former White House occupant, Theodore Roosevelt, would be his major opponent when the Republican Party held its presidential nominating convention at Chicago in June. Taft's political aides were scouring the southern states, searching out Roosevelt Republican office-holders and dismissing them whenever found. Local postmasters were advised that if they did not bring a pro-Taft delegation to their state convention, they would no longer be deemed available for reappointment. Another Taft stratagem was to hold the southern state conventions ahead of the usual time and before the Roosevelt men could organize. For awhile Roosevelt Republicans remained hopeful over the possibility that many job-conscious Republicans would support their candidate, since he was so widely regarded as "the only Republican who could win." In January and February 1912, Roosevelt organizers throughout the South were led by Ormsby McHarg, a New York attorney who has been described as a "hard-bitten, experienced, practical politician." He attempted by various means to bring these men into the Roosevelt camp.

On February 6, however, it became obvious that McHarg's tactics were not succeeding. On that date Florida Republicans held their state convention in Palatka, and, although the convention collapsed even before it was completely organized, a ten-man Taft delegation was selected to represent Florida at the Republican national convention.¹

Joe Lee, Negro customs collector of Jacksonville and chairman of the Florida Republican convention, apparently tried to settle the many contested delegations by giving tickets to the convention hall only to Taft men, refusing to admit delegates "with-

1. Florida had twelve delegate seats, although considering the meagre 10,654 votes for Taft in 1908, Florida merited only one seat.

out tickets," and then revoking the qualifications of the Roosevelt men because they were not present. The selection of a ten-man Taft delegation to represent Florida at the Republican national convention in Chicago was rammed through the Palatka meeting, with the strong support of the Postmaster's Protective Association.² Lee's rulings evoked a storm of protest, and over half of the delegates, including many Negroes, walked out of the meeting. The secession faction convened elsewhere and enthusiastically elected a slate of delegates to the national convention pledged to Roosevelt. They also nominated pro-Roosevelt men to run for various state offices. Roosevelt, who "happened" to be in Miami at the time, was informed by telegram of the events taking place in Palatka, and presumably he gave his approval. His presence in Florida would seem to indicate that he was certainly in touch with the Roosevelt people on the state level and there were many who believed that he was the mastermind behind this action from the beginning.³

The regular Republican state convention, consisting mostly of whites, continued on with its work after the Roosevelt delegates bolted, selecting a full state ticket. Fearful that these steamroller tactics in Florida would be duplicated in the rest of the South, Roosevelt and Ormsby McHarg agreed that their organization would attempt to contest all southern Republican conventions that named Taft delegations.

After Roosevelt formally announced in late February 1912, that his "hat was in the ring" and that he was available for the Republican nomination, his Florida supporters apparently felt that their rump convention in Palatka was too obviously an illegal affair, and that it could be branded a revolt by men who sought not principle, but patronage. After conferring with McHarg in mid-April, Roosevelt's supporters in Florida announced again their repudiation of the Republican convention in Palatka and

2. Half of the Florida Republican central committee were postmasters. The central committee supposedly ruled Florida's 10,000 or so Republicans with an iron hand. It tolerated Negroes, if they did as they were told. Joe Lee, though, with his Washington connections and excellent work both as postmaster and parliamentarian, was so powerful that the postmasters were a bit afraid of him. Lee controlled Florida's Negro Republican factions. *Daytona Beach News-Gazette*, March 23, 1912.
3. *Ibid.*; *New York Times*, February 7, 1912; *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, February 7, 1912.

issued a call for another state convention. The Roosevelt Republicans proclaimed that the dictation and rule of the officeholders' trust had become intolerable, that it was now time for what they called the Republican "masses" of Florida to take things into their own hands.⁴

The convention met in Jacksonville on May 18 in the Odd Fellows' Hall. Once again the Roosevelt enthusiasts selected delegates to the Republican national convention and candidates for the state ticket. The convention also excoriated Taft for appointing a Democrat to a Federal judgeship in Florida, for favoring the Catholic Church whenever he had a chance, and for not agreeing to enter a presidential primary in Florida. The leading white Roosevelt Republicans were W. O. Hodges, the convention's gubernatorial candidate, and H. L. Anderson, a Jacksonville attorney. This Jacksonville convention of bolting Republicans was in turn bolted by a group of Negroes led by C. H. Alston, a Negro lawyer from Tampa, who claimed that the white Roosevelt Republicans were discriminating against Negroes.⁵

The Republican national convention was scheduled to open in Chicago on June 18. Several days earlier, the party's powerful national committee assembled in that city to decide whether Taft or Roosevelt men were entitled to the 254 delegate seats which were in dispute. On June 9, the committee held hearings in which the three contesting Florida Republican delegations flailed away at one another. C. H. Alston led the Roosevelt Negro delegation; W. C. Hodges and H. L. Anderson, the "lily-white" Roosevelt delegation; and Joe Lee and Henry Chubb, the Taft delegation. Chubb was national committeeman from Florida and chairman of the Republican Party in Florida at the time.⁶

Ormsby McHarg accurately summed up the status of Republicanism in Florida at the time when he noted, "There is no Republican Party in Florida, for all the great number of delegations."⁷ Alston, however, captured the most attention at the hearing. When he tried to join the Jacksonville convention, he said, "One of the men wheeled on me and I wheeled on him

4. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 17, 1912.

5. *Ibid.*, May 19, 1912.

6. *Ibid.*, June 9, 1912.

7. *Ibid.*

and then they wheeled me out." He secured a ticket from one of the delegates and sneaked back in, hiding in the rear of the hall, but he was discovered again and forcibly evicted. Alston continued, amidst the national committee's roar of laughter, "I kept my ticket and brought it here and filed it with your secretary."⁸

Joe Lee admonished both Roosevelt delegations and warned that Florida would be better off if "outside leaders" like McHarg ceased organizing. McHarg countered that conventions of Florida Republicans were hardly more than private meetings of Federal officeholders, and that Republican slates were announced only after securing promises of Federal patronage. When a committee-man pointed out, "Everyone knows there is no use in putting out a ticket then," McHarg retorted, "Well, then, you frankly admit there is none. You might as well also admit there was no regularity in the election of the Taft delegates."⁹ Joe Lee could not answer McHarg's charge, but he did assert that "if there was no Republican Party in Florida for us, there could have been none for Roosevelt."¹⁰

The national committee awarded 235 seats to Taft and nineteen to Roosevelt. One observer, vainly trying to get the floor, insisted that no one would be recognized "but a hand-picked, machine-made crook."¹¹ Fistfighting among the delegates and prospective delegates almost broke up several meetings. Although the national committee included some twenty Roosevelt Republicans, it voted unanimously against almost every Roosevelt delegation from the southern states. The Taft delegation from Florida was upheld 44-0. Apparently, Roosevelt had decided not to continue the battle of contesting the delegations from the South. Frank Munsey, millionaire newspaper publisher and chief financial supporter of Roosevelt, explained that challenging the Taft delegations from the South would force a tabulation of delegate support which would show the country Roosevelt's great strength. The contests were thus for early grass-roots psychological effect, a play of practical politics, and were not to be seriously fought for at the showdown in Chicago.¹²

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. Victor Rosewater, *Backstage in 1912* (Philadelphia, 1932), 130.

12. "Delegate Contests at Chicago," *Independent*, LXXII (June 20, 1912), 1386-1387.

Perhaps the American public, which had been given to understand that all Roosevelt's claims were valid, was startled to hear that Roosevelt's own men on the national committee voted to seat Taft men, not only from Florida but from some other contested states as well. But there were no charges of "sell out" directed at Roosevelt by his Florida supporters because they believed that Roosevelt was going to repudiate the Republican national convention and establish a third party throughout the nation - as, in fact, he tried to do. And they probably assumed that if by chance Roosevelt did capture the Republican nomination and win in November, he would withdraw federal patronage from the Taft machine in Florida and reward the original Roosevelt men.

Of course, the approved Florida delegation to the Republican national convention voted for Taft and for all the Taft resolutions. Chubb and Lee enthusiastically applauded the distinguished senator from Ohio, Warren G. Harding, when he described Taft in his nominating speech as an "inspiring personification of courage."¹³ Chubb, in fact, called the Republican convention "the greatest political event in the history of the party."¹⁴ The 1912 Republican platform endorsed conservative principles. It called for a furthering of the conservation program and a stricter enforcement of anti-trust legislation, but it contained little else of a positive nature.

After Roosevelt walked out of the Republican Party and announced his willingness to accept the presidential nomination of the new Progressive Party, his southern supporters, as elsewhere in the country, began marshalling their forces. Alston's Negro faction and Anderson's whites joined Roosevelt's third party. Concerning racial questions, each state had been advised to follow whatever local formula would be "best designed for party success." Roosevelt urged that northern Progressive leaders bring a few Negroes to the Progressive national convention which was scheduled to meet at Chicago in August. He knew, however, that southern Progressives, if they expected any votes, would have to disavow Negro support. Certainly there was little

13. *Proceedings of the Republican National Convention, 1912* (Chicago, 1912), 378.

14. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, July 4, 1912.

reason for southern Progressives to court the Negro vote, since very few Negroes voted in 1912, in the South. Although the "Roosevelt Georgia White League" had refused to admit Negroes into their convention hall, they were disturbed that Negroes had held their own convention and had selected a Negro Georgia delegation to send to the Progressive assembly in Chicago.¹⁵

H. L. Anderson, now the Progressive national committeeman for Florida, was anxious to avoid an embarrassing racial contest such as that besetting Georgia Progressives, so he prudently organized two conventions, one black and one white. Most of Florida's Negro voters, however, were not aware - and Anderson certainly would not be the one to inform them - that their convention would meet over a hundred miles away from the white meeting and being so inconveniently placed, it would have no real voice in the selection of delegates to the national meeting. Thirty-five Negroes, most of whom were probably hired by Anderson, convened in St. Augustine on July 26. Without protest, they pledged support to the white Progressive state and national ticket. One of the delegates at St. Augustine was, incredibly, C. H. Alston, who had heretofore battled the white faction.¹⁶

Florida's white Progressive Party was launched in Ocala, July 27. The convention elected delegates to the national convention, candidates for state offices, and adopted two resolutions: a pledge that the Progressive Party would appoint no one but Caucasians to party committees or Federal offices in Florida; and, a polemic accusing President Taft of various unpatriotic sins. Taft had selected John Cheney as Federal district judge of the southern district of Florida, allegedly as a political favor to loyal Henry Chubb and Joe Lee.¹⁷ H. L. Anderson denounced this appointment in the bluntest language: "The President of the United States has paid a dirty miserable debt to a lot of conscienceless grafters headed by a Negro as black as your hat by appointing as a successor to the venerable and beloved James W. Locke a man whose only claim to the high office of U. S. Judge is that Joe Lee helped steal a nomination for this fat fool. The

15. George Mowry, "The South and Progressive Lily White Party of 1912," *Journal of Southern History*, VI (May, 1940), 239-240.

16. *Ibid.*, 240.

17. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, July 27, 1912.

infamy of it. . . . By God I will speak out: this act of William Howard Taft is as infamous as hell.”¹⁸

Anderson made a more important announcement earlier in the day when he decreed that Negroes would not be allowed to participate in the Progressive white convention. Police officials in Ocala feared trouble, since many Negroes, who had expected to take part in the proceedings, were present. They were forced to move into the galleries to watch as spectators. During the afternoon session, C. H. Alston, who had made a quick trip in from St. Augustine, led a charge of Negro politicians onto the floor, but they were quickly repulsed and were also confined to the gallery. The white delegates complained that some of the attackers (omitting Alston's name) were in the pay of Chubb's Republicans, and insisted that Negro Progressives had no cause for resentment, since they had already held their own convention at St. Augustine. Then, H. C. Groves, a white Ocala man who was the spokesman for Negro factions in the area, moved to allow his followers to be seated on the convention floor. His motion was seconded, but before a vote could be taken it was ruled out of order. Alston tried again to come onto the convention floor, but he was blocked once more, and when quiet was restored, Anderson outlined the Florida Progressive platform. The white delegates on the floor and the segregated Negroes in the gallery listened as Anderson called for a lower tariff, total restriction of immigration, and the elimination of class distinctions and bigotry.¹⁹

Later that afternoon, a large group of Negroes in Ocala, led by Alston, announced their repudiation of both the white Progressive convention and the rigged Negro one in St. Augustine, and formed a Progressive coalition of their own. A full slate of candidates for state offices and delegates to the national convention was elected.²⁰ This marked the sixth state convention committed to Roosevelt that had been organized in less than six months.

The following day, July 28, H. L. Anderson came out in opposition to the Ocala Negro convention, stating that the Republican experience during the past thirty years showed the im-

18. *Ibid.*, July 28, 1912.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

possibility of maintaining a strong party based on a division of offices among white and Negro. It was much better for both Negroes and whites, he insisted, to have two white parties in Florida, the Democratic and the Progressive.²¹

Anderson's segregationist tactics fared no better in Florida, though than those of the Roosevelt Georgia White League. Negroes, moreover, in Alabama and Mississippi also held rebel Progressive conventions, and not only selected delegates, but sent them to the opening meeting of the Progressive national committee in Chicago, August 3. With delegates present representing these four southern states, Roosevelt was publicly faced with a bothersome and embarrassing race question.²² Roosevelt thereupon released for publication a letter he had written to Julian Harris, son of Joel Chandler Harris and an ardent Roosevelt supporter in the South, that was designed to influence the deliberations of the national committee. According to Roosevelt, the North and South had different race problems. Many Northern Negroes were educated, he wrote, and because of their long history of free political action, they should be included in northern delegations. On the other hand, southern Negroes were politically corrupted and should be excluded. Thus, the former President of the United States upheld white supremacy in the South and appealed only to "the best white men in the south."²³

On August 4, the Progressive national committee began to hear testimony in the case of Florida's rival delegations. The latter were the most vehement among the three contested states. H. L. Anderson admitted that he had barred Negroes from the white convention.²⁴ The Negro leader, Alston, making his second trip that summer to Chicago, and, also testifying for the second time before a national party convention in regard to Florida politics, described his efforts of July 27 to get onto the floor of

21. *Ibid.*, July 29, 1912.

22. Mowry, "The South and the Progressive Lily White Party of 1912," 240. The Negro "lily-white" delegates (if such description can be made) who were chosen in St. Augustine on July 26, apparently had no further role assigned them in the campaign. They are not mentioned in the accounts of the National Progressive convention.

23. Elting E. Morison (ed.), *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge, 1954), VII, 584-590.

24. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, August 4, 1912.

the Ocala meeting: "Mr. Anderson met me at the door and said, 'There is not going to be a nigger in this convention'." ²⁵

Anderson challenged this statement and urged Alston to confine himself to "the facts." Alston replied that this was what he was doing and that if he failed in this effort he "would beg the forgiveness of his God." Alston reminded the committee that he had participated in national conventions for sixteen years, and he had never seen Anderson present. He insisted that he only wanted to work for Roosevelt whom he loved and admired. He claimed that there were less than 200 white Republicans in Florida, and said that this was because the corrupt Republican machine and its leader, Customs Collector Joe Lee, only wanted enough Republicans to hold the Federal offices. ²⁶

United States Senator Joseph Dixon of Montana, provisional chairman of the committee, then asked if the lack of white Republicans in Florida was because they were reluctant to follow the leadership of Negroes. Alston insisted that Florida Negroes did not want "to lead" anybody, they merely wished to follow. "We are not ward politicians," he added. "We came up here in a chartered Pullman and we won't have to walk back. We are all men of means. One of our colored delegates is worth \$250,000, and there is hardly one among us who is not worth \$50,000." ²⁷

Although several committeemen heckled Alston and asked him badgering questions during the hearing, he seems to have made a good impression upon others present. E. F. Tuttle, national committeeman from Rhode Island, protested against any attempts at discrimination against southern Negro delegates, which then blocked the certain casting aside of these Negroes. The chairman hastily called a recess and wired Roosevelt in New York, hoping to obtain some concessions for the Negro claimants. Obviously, a total shutout of southern Negroes from the Progressive convention might cost the former president many votes from northern Negroes and Negro sympathizers. Roosevelt, nonetheless, held firm to his position as he had stated it in the letter to Julian Harris, and reiterated his support of the "lily-white" position in the South. ²⁸

25. *New York Times*, August 4, 1912.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*

For the next two days the national committee dallied and debated, then announced a compromise for the four contested delegations. The "lily-white" delegates were to be seated; Negroes were to attend and sit in as supplemental delegates. The Negroes immediately denounced the decision. "If we attend the convention merely as spectators," Alston remarked, "we prefer to buy our own tickets." The five Florida Negro delegates stripped the Roosevelt badges from their lapels and together with the Negro delegations from Mississippi and Alabama, held an indignation meeting. White southerners, led by Julian Harris and H. L. Anderson, also objected to the compromise. The committee, either questioning the regularity of Anderson's calling a white and a Negro convention separately, or following Anderson's suggestion that he would rather see both delegations barred than to allow a Florida Negro onto the convention floor, decided to unseat the white delegates from Georgia and Florida. The white delegates from Alabama and Mississippi were approved. Thus, for a few hours, Florida went totally unrepresented in the Progressive national convention. After more debate and the personal intervention of Roosevelt, however, the southern whites accepted a solution that guaranteed white supremacy without actually stating it.²⁹

Some Progressives charged that President Taft had manipulated the activities of southern Negro delegates at the Progressive convention and had defrayed their traveling expenses to Chicago. All Negroes involved, however, hotly denied this.³⁰ Certainly Alston's militant deeds often played into the hands of the Taft Republicans, especially on the two occasions when he disrupted "regular" Roosevelt conventions in Florida. Just what his presence at the St. Augustine convention connoted is a mystery. He may not have known it was rigged until he got there. He may have been so enraptured with Theodore Roosevelt's candidacy that he was willing to tolerate a "lily-white" organization, until it actually barred him from its doors in Ocala. He may have been, as Joe Lee apparently was, selling out his race for a fee; or, perhaps, he was following some other line of reasoning known only to

29. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, August 6, 7, 1912; Mowry, "The South and the Progressive Lily White Party of 1912," 243-244.

30. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, August 6, 1912.

Negroes in public life during an era when Negroes had many detractors and few sympathizers, South or North.

It is interesting that H. L. Anderson never charged Alston with being a pawn of Taft. Anderson and Alston were men of different races working in different ways toward separate ends; they had been personally hostile toward one another for a long time. When Alston switched his support it was not to Taft, but to Woodrow Wilson and the Democratic party - the party traditionally most devoted to state rights and white supremacy.³¹

Wilson received 36,417 votes in Florida, and the Democrats carried every county in the state. With the Republican vote split, the Socialist Party candidate, Eugene V. Debs, ran second in Florida with 4,806 votes. Roosevelt was third with 4,535, and Taft was low man with 4,279 votes. Even the combined Progressive and Republican vote showed a drop of some 1,800 votes from the 10,654 votes that Taft received in 1908.³²

Roosevelt, apparently, managed to retain support of the white and possibly a portion of the Negro progressive Republican factions in Florida, but the vast majority of progressives in Florida preferred to work within the Democratic Party. These men admired Wilson's program in New Jersey, whereas Roosevelt's progressivism was spotty.

Aside from showing part of the confusion and corruption inherent in all Florida political organizations during the early decades of the twentieth century, the 1912 struggle between Taft and Roosevelt factions in the state illustrated the general lack of consideration or enthusiasm for the Negro cause on the part of either Republicans or the short-lived Progressive Party. By 1912, it was not the Joe Lee type of Negro politician, but rather the Alston type, that was increasing in number in the South. True, the Democratic Party of the South, exemplified in Florida by Governor Albert W. Gilchrist, seemingly was indifferent to problems of the Negro. But the almost total disregard of Negro rights by the Republican Party and its Progressive offshoot in 1912, in the North as well as the South, motivated some of the more vigorous Negroes to switch to the Democratic Party.

31. *Ibid.*, August 13, 1912.

32. *Report of the Secretary of State, 1908* (Tallahassee, 1909; *ibid.*, 1912 (Tallahassee, 1913). Votes were cast for individual electors rather than for entire states.

Individual Negro leaders of that day, like C. H. Alston of Florida, were to be the harbingers of a mass conversion of colored voters to the Democratic Party which would take place a generation later, under the New Deal program of Theodore's more liberal cousin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.