

POLITICO

Why Mississippi Hates Washington

Hint: It's not just the Tea Party.

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To hear the cries of many conservatives in Mississippi, one would think this country's greatest enemy is not the Islamic State, but the federal government. Lately, many conservatives in my home state have been expending their energy fighting various provisions of the Affordable Care Act, resisting gun control, objecting to Department of Education guidelines for local schools, opposing national immigration reform, frowning upon gay rights and doggedly refusing to recognize government-granted abortion rights.

What explains Mississippi's—and much of the South's—abiding antipathy toward Washington? In a way, it's in their genes. The Tea Party, which nearly swiped Thad Cochran's Senate seat in the state's GOP primary this summer, is just the latest manifestation of a strange brew of resentments dating back to defeat in the Civil War and such U.S. Supreme Court decisions as *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Roe v. Wade*. President Obama's skin color may be an issue for some on the far right, but in fairness, they would have opposed Obamacare had it been Hillarycare.

Anger at Washington has been a part of the politics of the American South for its entire history—one of its earliest imports, you could say. Buried near the end of *Albion's Seed*, his classic study of the settling of America by immigrants from the British Isles, the historian David Hackett Fischer writes that as early as the First Congress in 1789, “the backcountry did not support the federal government.” He was referring to territory that eventually included the states of the Confederacy. Ever since the first waves of Scots-Irish newcomers arrived in the Southern colonies in the 18th century, the white population in the American South has been dominated by a people with an ancient history of rebellion and resisting central authority. They fought monarchs in the old countries, and they disapproved of the concept of a strong central government when their new country was established nearly 240 years ago.

Their bloodline in the South, as a result, is rich with defiance. After declaring “give me liberty or give me death,” Virginia statesman Patrick Henry moved on to become an ardent critic of the Constitution and the institution of the presidency. South Carolina's John C. Calhoun served as a prototype for modern Southern demagogues by championing states' rights and slavery in the years before the Civil War. And to some modern Southerners, of course, the outcome of the war is still regarded as the ultimate indignity suffered by the region at the hands of the “federals.” In the 1800s, the name of an obscure settler and militia captain from the upper South, William

Lynch, was attached forever to the practice of executing alleged miscreants as soon as they were apprehended, rather than rely on the due process of law guaranteed in the Constitution.

The descendants of Calhoun & Co. have kept this antipathy toward federal law alive, though historically they have preferred to pick and choose among their Constitutional amendments. They were never enthusiastic about the 13th, 14th or 15th amendments that granted rights to blacks following the Civil War. The Tea Party would probably like to move elections to April 15 in order to exploit hatred for the 16th amendment, which permits the federal government to collect an income tax. Yet Southern conservatives heartily embrace the 2nd amendment, which speaks of the right to bear arms, and the 10th amendment, which grants states' rights. In 1948, the segregationist Dixiecrats who broke away from the national Democratic Party, ran under the banner of the "States' Rights Party." For years afterward, Southern leaders fighting federal powers cited "states' rights" in their struggle to maintain segregation in the region. (Curiously, many rural counties across the South continue to maintain prohibition, imposed by the 18th amendment, even though it was repealed by the 21st amendment.)

Although the Scots-Irish stock has been diluted a bit as the South became more cosmopolitan, their spirit still prevails in the 21st century. In large part, the dissidents are members of a tribe celebrated by Jim Webb, a Democratic former Virginia senator, in his 2004 book, *Born Fighting*, which praised the Scots-Irish for their warrior ethic and instinctive distrust of government. Today, that distrust is distinctly allied with the political right.

With the presidential nomination of Barry Goldwater in 1964, followed by the implementation of Richard Nixon's "Southern strategy" in 1969, the once-monolithically Democratic "Solid South" evolved into a solid Republican base. Regardless of party, white Southerners, with notable exceptions, have tended to be innately conservative—skeptics of what they call "encroachments" by the federal government. In most places, they represent the majority and hold local power. Although Mississippi has the highest proportion—above 35 percent—of blacks in any state, they and their white political allies are badly outnumbered. The state is reliably red in presidential elections; Republicans hold every state office but one and every seat in the state's congressional delegation but the one from the predominantly black Delta.

It is no coincidence that the white settlers of the South gravitated to a religious denomination that continues to represent one of the most powerful political forces in the region—the Southern Baptists. According to Fischer, "backcountry Christianity" exuded an "intense hostility to organized churches and established clergy." Each Baptist church is autonomous and beholden to no authority other than God. Women have traditionally had no leadership role in the Baptist faith, and churches still lead in local fights to prohibit the sale of alcohol. Baptists' bedrock beliefs on subjects such as same-sex marriage and abortion rights dovetail with a conservative agenda. When Southern Baptists Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton veered from these tenets, they were viewed as apostates by many of their Baptist brethren; although supported by black Southerners, both presidents were ultimately rejected at the polls in many of the Southern states. As the author Thomas Powers wrote recently in the *New York Review of Books*, Southern Baptist policy has become fused with Republican politics—"the old southern obsessions with white control of people of color, male control of women, nativist control of the nation's borders, and traditional conservative Protestant control of public morals."

The trouble is that Southerners today, nurtured by the GOP's conservative policies, seem willing to follow the party blindly, even as they oppose federal programs designed to help the country's poorest region. A decade ago, Thomas Frank wrote a best-selling book called *What's the Matter with Kansas?* It told of how Republicans had used such wedge issues as abortion, immigration and taxation among the socially conservative citizens of Kansas to convince them to vote for GOP officials who supported economic policies that were actually against the interests of the working people of Kansas.

The discussion can be transferred easily from the heartland to the heart of Dixie. Mississippi, the poorest state in the Union, has a long-standing reputation for resentment of federal programs. Although the state's population has acute problems with obesity and poor health, Mississippi leaders seem currently dedicated to the defeat of federal health initiatives. Governor Phil Bryant has spent much of his administration complaining about Obamacare; he calls it "ill-conceived" and "another example of a broken promise from Barack Obama." He is openly critical of other programs, too. This summer he informed federal officials that the state would no longer accept children in the Department of Health and Human Services' Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program, writing Obama about "my deep concern regarding the ongoing crisis at the United States' southern border" and complaining that "illegal immigrants—many unaccompanied children—are flooding into our country in record numbers." He also recently called the Common Core, a nationwide effort to set education standards, "a failed program" and vowed to take up the issue in the next legislative session.

There is amazing irony in Mississippi's aversion to the federal government. For all of the virulence directed at Washington, Mississippi in 2012 got [45.8 percent](#) of its state revenue from federal sources, making it, proportionately, the nation's leading recipient of federal money, according to the nonpartisan Tax Foundation. Moreover, the libertarian Cato Institute estimates that Mississippi taxpayers get back more than \$12 from the federal government for every \$1 they pay into the federal treasury. As Charles Mitchell, a Mississippi political columnist, has [written](#), "No state mutters and cusses more about Washington than Mississippi. And yet no state's public and private finances are as dependent—emphasize dependent—on what we keep complaining about."

Sadly, in a state that clings to "our heritage," hatred of Washington remains a significant part of our tradition.