

Democratic Party

Losers try to lead regroupment but grassroots leaders gain power

by Anita Gallagher

The scramble for control of the Democratic Party, a scramble few had the stomach for after the Carter debacle in November, has now begun in earnest. Incredibly, many of the same linemen hospitalized in November are back trying to carry the ball one more time, like Carter right-hand man Bob Strauss, who has just suggested a Democratic Coordinating Council of 30 party leaders to run the show from top to bottom. The McGovern liberals, the only grouping to lose worse than Carter, are also back with flanking from think tanks, including a "Coalition of Common Sense" led by McGovern himself.

Beyond these acrobatics however, perhaps the most significant grassroots moves are being made to rebuild the party since the days of FDR himself. The powerful Association of State Democratic Chairs met on Jan. 23 and elected Marjorie Thurman, an Atlanta lawyer who fought the Carter campaign takeover of the Democratic National Committee, as its chairman for the next four years. The association's effort to defend the party organizations at the state level have made it probably the most respected group in the Democratic Party today. Thurman's election went unreported in the press, which covers every new utterance from the same old crowd.

Another healthy sign is the persistent huddling of moderate Democrats in the U.S. House and Senate. On Jan. 31, Sen. James Boren (D-Okla.), who has been prominent in an "informal" group of 10 Democratic senators, took public exception to what he called Senate Minority Leader Robert Byrd's "tilting" toward the policies of Ted Kennedy. "We hope that Byrd gets the message and recognizes that the party is not just Kennedy and Company," said Boren. Other Democratic senators in the Boren grouping are Hollings (S.C.), Johnson (La.), Nunn (Ga.), Chiles (Fla.), Exon (Nev.), Zorinsky (Nev.), Heflin (Al.), Pryor (Ark.), and DeConcini (Ariz.). Senator DeConcini, who called on Reagan to dump Carter's hostage deal, spearheaded the grouping with Boren. Many of the group have also been urging Reagan to take action against Carter's Federal Reserve chairman, Paul Volcker. A similar group sprang up in the

House after the election, the 33-member Conservative Forum, which said it intends to box in House Speaker Tip O'Neill.

The focus of sparring this month is the election of a new chairman of the DNC. The four candidates are Chuck Manatt, who was both DNC finance chairman during the Carter debacle and also close to such California Democratic products as Tom Hayden, a symbol of what many in the party view as the problem; Judge Charles Curry of Kansas City, Mo., who supported Jackson, then Carter, in 1976 and 1980; and two machine leaders from New York, Patrick Cunningham of the Bronx and Joe Crangle of Buffalo. Manatt is the media favorite, and on Feb. 4 Trilateral Commission member Lane Kirkland announced the AFL-CIO's unprecedented endorsement to lock up Manatt's election. However, the climate within the ranks of party regulars is such that all four candidates led with their commitments to the state Democratic organizations, and not the national party apparatus, while the State Chairs listened and then endorsed no candidate.

The following interview with new head of the State Chairs Association, Marjorie Thurman, indicates how key people are thinking of rebuilding the party.

Interview

Marjorie Thurman talks about the DNC

The Association of Democratic State Chairs unanimously elected Marjorie Thurman of Georgia to a four-year term as its chair on Jan. 23. Thurman, a Georgia lawyer and chairman of the Georgia Democratic Party, was recently interviewed by Anita Gallagher of the National Democratic Policy Committee. Part One of the interview follows.

Q: What are your plans for the State Chairs Association?

Thurman: First, let me say that all the candidates for Democratic National Committee chairman have assured us of their concern for the State Chairs organization, and this is what we wanted to hear. We feel very strongly that whatever happens, we must have a DNC chairman who is not just dedicated to the re-election of one candidate, but one who is going to be concerned with electing Democrats all the way down the line. Every candidate I've talked with has expressed his dedication to the State Chairs and to strong party organization. We are the ones who have to implement the program. We are the ones who have to see about getting out the vote. We are the ones who have to do the fundraising and all those things that have to be done to elect Democrats. We have been very badly ignored for the last four years. So I feel very good about the coming term.

Q: Will the State Chairs endorse any candidate for DNC chairman?

Thurman: No. Of course, I cannot say what might or might not happen, but there was some discussion of this over the past weekend, and we almost unanimously concurred that it was not our place to pick one candidate over another in an election for office or a party election. I have encouraged each member to support actively his or her choice individually. I myself, as chairman of the Association of State Chairs, will remain neutral; I am going to have a responsibility to work with whomever is elected, and therefore I feel very strongly that I cannot choose one over the other. But the individual members will be very active, and their priorities and mine are the same. We want somebody who will be a good spokesman, we want somebody who can make money, and, the number-one priority, we want somebody who is dedicated to strengthening state parties.

Q: The state chairs seem to have gained a good deal of respect for being the only group in the party to stand up to the DNC's use of the party as a Carter campaign asset.

Thurman: We're adamant about it. Many of the DNC members are not involved in implementation. They do not have to assume responsibilities for what happens in their state. They just go to meetings and vote, many of them. . . . Some of them contribute a great deal, but some have no battle-line involvement in politics. We have got to be out there on the firing line. What we did in this last campaign was in spite of the DNC and not on account of it, because we were not getting any backup at all. In most instances in Georgia, we picked up the tab for the whole campaign. We did it in spite of the fact that we had been abused, because we are party people and our concern is to make the party survive. And we realize that if we don't do it now, we may not have another opportunity.

I am going to be dedicated to strengthening the partnership of the DNC with the state parties, and I think all four of the candidates for the DNC chairmanship feel the same way. All but one have been state party chairmen, and he has been a county chairman, and he knows what it is to have to implement. What we don't want is somebody interposing something that is not realistic in terms of what we are about. During this last administration, we had to deal with a DNC that was totally involved in electing a President and nothing more.

Q: When will the DNC members be up for re-election? This is state by state, but what is your overview?

Thurman: Most have just been elected to a four-year term, and there will be very little change in the members of the DNC. There is no way that we are not very much interested in rules changes, so far as delegate selection is concerned. We want the people who have the responsibility to be the ones who are represented on that convention floor, and this is not what we had in the past. . . . We are the party of inclusion. But you don't need to exclude the folks that are there doing all the work all the while.

Q: A lot of people now feel that the McGovern reforms have gone too far.

Thurman: We are going to have to totally re-evaluate and get back to something that is reasonable. We went too far. In getting your delegation together, when you have to exclude your political leaders, just in order to bring in somebody because they happen to be black or female, then something is wrong. I am not in favor of diluting the power of blacks, women, or any minority; it's just that we have got to be practical politicians. Our leadership forgot that for a while, and we consequently lost the Senate and are being threatened so far as our majority in the House is concerned, and we intend to do something about it.

I was excluded as a voting delegate for Carter, just because he didn't like me. All it meant was that I didn't cast my vote for him. But we went the last mile to elect him, and did extraordinarily well in Georgia so far as he was concerned and so far as the party was concerned. I keep my commitments to the party organization first, and petty personal feelings second.

Q: What do you think about the Democratic Advisory Council that Bob Strauss is proposing?

Thurman: If you're talking about a superstructure proposal that was circulated that was attributed to Strauss, I am opposed to imposing a superstructure over the DNC. If you're talking about a policy council, we've had that for years, and that is no problem. If we are going to have that kind of superstructure, why do we need the DNC? . . . That seems to be the consensus of all the chairmen I spoke to.