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Reagan's Southern Comfort: The "Boll Weevil" Democrats in the "Reagan Revolution" of 1981

Abstract: In 1981, around fifty conservative southern Democrats in the House of Representatives, the so-called Boll Weevils, played a crucial role in the enactment of President Ronald Reagan's economic agenda. The significance of this episode has thus far been underappreciated. This article illustrates the importance of the Boll Weevils' support to the early success of Reagan's presidency, as well its implications for both the South's political landscape and for the national Republican Party.

Though short-lived, this coalition would prove to be a significant rupture in the Democratic Party's superiority in the South at the congressional level and highlighted the partisan fragmentation the region was undergoing. As this article will demonstrate, the events of 1981 returned southern conservatism to the center of power in Washington for the first time in over a decade and acted as a catalyst for a number of southern Democratic congressmen to move toward the GOP.

Keywords: Ronald Reagan, Conservatism, Boll Weevils, South, Democratic Party, Republican Party, Budget, Tax Cuts

Ronald Reagan's legislative blitzkrieg in the summer of 1981 is fundamental to his image as a transformational president who profoundly reshaped America's political and economic discourse. His agenda of unprecedented cuts to domestic programs, massive tax reductions, and a huge expansion of military spending signaled the eclipse of the hitherto dominant New Deal tradition. However, this triumph for Reaganite Republicanism was paradoxically dependent on the critical support of around fifty conservative southern Democrats in the House of Representatives, a chamber nominally under the control of the

opposition party. The crucial role of the “Boll Weevils,” as these Democrats became known, is an overlooked element of the Reagan Revolution, but one that had considerable significance for the development of conservatism in the late twentieth century.

This article outlines how the Reagan administration won the support of Boll Weevil Democrats through a combination of political pressure, personal persuasion, and hardheaded deal-making. In doing so, it demonstrates the significance of this coalition for both southern and national politics. As well as being critical to the early success of Reagan’s presidency, the Boll Weevil rebellion constituted an important marker in the South’s partisan migration into the Republican Party and demonstrated the enduring capacity of southern conservatism to influence the course of American politics. Significantly, it also highlighted the differences between Reaganite conservatism and the southern brand represented by the Boll Weevils. While Reagan’s antistatism found expression in efforts to limit the size, scope, and domestic costs of the federal government, the Boll Weevils bartered for constituency benefits in return for their support. They also manifested a populist skepticism toward the tax cuts at the heart of the Reagan Revolution on the grounds that these disproportionately benefited the wealthy.

In demonstrating their regionally focused priorities and populist instincts, the Boll Weevils were maintaining the long-standing traditions of southern congressional conservatism. During the 1930s and 1940s, as Ira Katznelson details in *Fear Itself*, conservative southern Democrats exercised “pivotal powers” over federal government policy. By utilizing their senior roles on congressional committees and by acting as a cohesive voting bloc, southerners wielded enormous influence—regularly acting to limit the liberalism of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal program and at the same time diverting large amounts of federal spending to their own states and districts. From this commanding position, Katznelson writes, “The South became the self-conscious arbiter of what could, and what could not, become law.” From the 1930s to the 1960s, southern Democrats often formed a conservative coalition with Republicans aimed at opposing their own increasingly liberal party leadership. The coalition did not unite on every issue, as Julian Zelizer has observed, but it was particularly forceful in “opposing most legislative proposals that could benefit African Americans, immigrants, organized labor, and other disadvantaged groups and in supporting benefits for farmers, small businesses, poor whites, and military contractors.” As Zelizer suggests, while rhetorical hostility toward big government was fundamental to the identity of these congressional southerners, this did not preclude them from passionately

supporting federal spending that benefited their region. Agricultural subsidies that aided southern farmers, for example, or large-scale federal projects that provided a boost to the southern economy—such as the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Rural Electrification Administration—were enthusiastically approved. The most prominent of these congressional southern Democrats were long-serving and powerful senators, such as Richard Russell of Georgia or John McClellan of Arkansas. But a southern Democratic bloc also wielded considerable power in the House, regularly uniting with conservative Republicans to obstruct liberal legislation under the informal but influential leadership of representatives such as Howard W. Smith of Virginia and Carl Vinson of Georgia.¹

In 1981, Ronald Reagan and his advisers came to office with the plan, as the *Baltimore Sun* explained, to work with conservative southern Democrats to construct a coalition similar “to the GOP–Southern Democratic alliance that thwarted liberal legislation in the 1950s and 1960s.” Almost all mid-twentieth-century southern Democrats were committed segregationists and, for them, the conservative coalition was primarily aimed at resisting advances made by the civil rights movement. However, as Zelizer writes, by the late 1960s this coalition had “splintered on the rock of civil rights” and the aging segregationist southern Democrats gradually left Congress. Consequently, many of the new generation of southern Democrats Reagan was seeking to win over were relatively young and had been first elected in the wake of the civil rights era. An overt dedication to maintaining a racial hierarchy in the South—a guiding principle for their predecessors—was absent from the Boll Weevils’ political identity. Instead, the focus of this new conservative coalition was on enacting the president’s economic agenda. Yet the Boll Weevils’ economic priorities, and those of white conservatives who had elected them to Congress, were not without a racial dimension. Their determination to scale back Great Society welfare programs, for example, disproportionately affected ethnic minorities and, in the post-civil rights South, racially coded antiwelfare rhetoric had become commonplace in the political vocabulary of white conservatives. Ultimately, while Mississippi Republican Trent Lott declared that the basis for this refashioned conservative coalition was to be “economics, strictly economics,” for the Boll Weevils it would still be economics as viewed from a peculiarly southern perspective.²

Thus far, the importance of these new southern Democrats to the success of Reagan’s economic legislation has not been studied in depth. Many biographical works on Ronald Reagan note his reliance on the votes of conservative Democrats during 1981, but none explore his political relationship with

them in detail. Published in 1994, political scientist Nicol Rae's *Southern Democrats* is a rare work focusing on the personalities and political thinking of this new generation of white southern Democrats. Through numerous interviews, Rae provides valuable insight into the nature of their conservatism, why they remained in the Democratic Party even as its congressional leadership gravitated in an ever more liberal direction, and how they navigated a political landscape in the South that now encompassed a significant African American electorate. Yet Rae's work does not examine the process by which these Democrats came to underwrite Reagan's signature legislative victories in 1981. In elucidating how and why they did so, this article highlights how the priorities of southern conservatism differed from those of the antistatist, movement conservatism of Reaganite Republicans: it was, for example, more regionally focused and transactional than national and ideological. Yet Boll Weevil support for Reagan also underscores the importance of Reagan's own popularity with white southerners in the wider story of the region's journey toward the GOP. Understanding the Boll Weevils' political relationship with Reagan offers an insight into why, by the early twenty-first century, millions of southern whites had fled the Democratic Party and forged a new political identity as steadfast Republicans.³

THE BOLL WEEVILS

By 1981, southern Democrats in the House had grown increasingly frustrated at being sidelined by Speaker Tip O'Neill's liberal leadership. Texas Representative Charles Stenholm summed up the resentments that had been building during the late 1970s: "We're people with a conservative philosophy who've been on the losing end of the majority of votes in the last couple of years." This claim was arguably based more on perception than reality—conservative Democrats had experienced some notable victories during Jimmy Carter's presidency, including supporting a \$16 billion tax cut against the administration's wishes and obstructing the passage of liberal welfare and healthcare legislation. Nonetheless, Stenholm accurately reflected the disillusionment of many southern Democrats. For them, the chance to push a conservative economic agenda through Congress was, as Rowland Evans and Robert Novak wrote, "sweet revenge" for the disrespect they felt senior House Democrats had shown them. Recognizing that their influence was likely to increase after Reagan's election victory, in November 1980 they had formed the Conservative Democratic Forum under Charles Stenholm's chairmanship. The group was quickly derided by congressional liberals as the

“redneck caucus.” In response, they revived and embraced the term “Boll Weevils,” a label previously applied to southern Democrats in the postwar era and derived from a notoriously resilient beetle that periodically infested southern cotton farms.⁴

While Stenholm nominally coordinated the CDF, the Boll Weevils had no designated leader. Still, as had been the case historically, they made a determined effort to act as a unified Southern bloc to increase their power, even using Mississippi Representative Gillespie ‘Sonny’ Montgomery’s congressional office as a “war room” to debate strategy. In the weeks after Reagan’s inauguration, these conservative southern Democrats went from being a largely unheeded group of backbenchers to become “the fulcrum of political power.” “These southerners,” reported the *Washington Post*, “recognize and relish their pivotal position.” Most Boll Weevils, furthermore, agreed in principle with Reagan’s overall plan for the economy. His aims, as explained in an address to Congress in February 1981, were to reduce “direct federal spending by \$41.4 billion in fiscal year 1982,” to dramatically increase military spending, and to reduce personal income taxes by 30 percent over three years—10 percent in each fiscal year beginning in FY1982. “This proposal for an equal reduction in everyone’s tax rates,” Reagan stated, “will expand our national prosperity, enlarge national incomes, and increase opportunities for all Americans.” The president’s words met with approval among southern Democrats. “We agreed with a lot of the things Ronald Reagan said he wanted to do,” Texan Marvin Leath later recalled. “We agreed that the tax system needed to be reformed, that our defense effort needed to be strengthened, and that the Great Society programs should be cut back and eliminated.”⁵

Compared to previous generations of southern Democrats, few Boll Weevils were known nationally, but several members of the group, including Texans Phil Gramm and Kent Hance, John Breaux of Louisiana, and Georgian Billy Lee Evans, would rise to prominence as a result of their newfound influence during Reagan’s first year in office. The districts they represented reflected the South’s huge economic disparities. Some, like Phil Gramm and Kent Hance, represented districts that exemplified the “Sunbelt” economic boom of the 1970s. The city of Midland in Hance’s district, for example, was an affluent hub of the Texan oil and gas industry, “a little bit of Beverly Hills . . . in the desert,” according to one description. Other Boll Weevils, particularly those from Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina, represented rural districts that were economically reliant on industries that had been struggling for years, such as agriculture or textile production. These parts of the South remained, as the *New York Times* noted in 1981, areas of “rural poverty and low skills and the

lingering belief that the Democratic Party is, on bread and butter issues, the party of the people.” Such stark economic discrepancies would find expression in the Boll Weevils’ varying support for Reagan’s tax cuts, which some from poorer districts rejected as a giveaway to the rich. Broadly, the congressional activity of the Boll Weevils reflected the populist conservatism of their electorates. Their voting records were often well to the right of their Democratic colleagues both in terms of economics, particularly welfare, and on social issues such as abortion. Indeed some, notably Sonny Montgomery of Mississippi and Lawrence McDonald of Georgia, had voting records to the right of all but a handful of Republicans. As one journalist observed, however, when it came to federal spending the Boll Weevils did “not necessarily see government as the enemy.” They retained a traditionally southern desire to protect their region’s interests and to represent the populist disposition of their districts.⁶

Most Boll Weevils were, above all, pragmatic, and acutely aware that the Democrats’ grip on the South had been loosening for more than a decade. Louisiana Boll Weevil Jerry Huckaby observed that his district was “97 percent registered Democrat.” Yet, he continued, “on a national level philosophically, most of the people in my district think more in tune with Republicans. It’s just that they’ve been Democrats since the War between the States.” This residual southern loyalty to the Democratic Party at the local and congressional level enabled many Boll Weevils to win elections throughout the 1970s with little Republican opposition, just as previous generations of southern Democratic congressmen had done. The few serious electoral tests they faced tended to come in wealthier, suburban districts—when Kent Hance was first elected in 1978, for example, he only narrowly defeated a challenge from future Republican president George W. Bush. Broader electoral trends, though, suggested the GOP was steadily gaining traction across the South. At the start of 1965, the Republican Party held just four southern Senate seats and seventeen southern House seats (15 percent of the region’s total). By 1981, there were ten southern Republican senators and forty-two southern Republican representatives (37 percent of the total). Ronald Reagan’s own popularity in the South, built over decades of personal and political appearances in the region, had also significantly boosted the Republican cause. In defeating President Jimmy Carter in 1980, Reagan had won everywhere in the South except Georgia, Carter’s home state. He had also beaten Carter by approximately 7 percent of the region’s popular vote tally—a margin of over one and a half million southern votes. Alongside his personal popularity, Reagan’s proposals enjoyed substantial popular support among white southerners. Once again, Charles

Stenholm's position reflected that of many Boll Weevils: "The similarities between my personal platform and the President's program are such that if I did not support the President, I could not explain it to my constituents in any manner except that he is a Republican, and that doesn't bother them."⁷

So, in early 1981, when most Boll Weevils found themselves representing districts Reagan had won the previous November, they were mindful that their own political careers could be at stake. "Like all politicians, their first impulse is survival," noted a *Washington Post* report, "and, in today's South, that often has little to do with the interests of the Democratic Party." Maintaining loyalty to the liberal Democratic House leadership was already becoming increasingly difficult for conservative southerners, and Reagan's obvious electoral strength in Dixie gave the Boll Weevils further reason to rebel. As Kent Hance explained, "It's mighty tough to go against a popular President in a district like mine, especially when he's pushing for the same kind of economic policies I've been talking about all along." Thus, the Boll Weevils needed little encouragement to support the newly inaugurated president's economic plan. Their enthusiasm was such that, when Reagan hosted a breakfast meeting with forty-four Boll Weevils on March 5, 1981, they suggested extra spending reductions on top of those proposed by the president. The Boll Weevils were, Reagan noted in his diary, "Gung ho for our [economic package] but went further & gave us their recommendation for 10 [billion dollars] in additional budget cuts."⁸

THE 1981 BUDGET

The first major test of Reagan's Boll Weevil support was a vote on the budget resolution bill in May, which set out the broad framework for spending reductions. A Budget Reconciliation Bill—which enacted specific reductions decided by congressional committees—and Reagan's tax cut legislation would both follow later in the summer. The Boll Weevils spent much of the spring of 1981 being alternately wooed and pressured by leaders of both parties. The importance of these southern votes to Reagan's economic agenda, and potentially even to the success or failure of his presidency, was acutely felt in the White House. "In a very real sense, this economic campaign will be won or lost in the South," acknowledged a senior Reagan adviser. In mid-April, therefore, as Reagan recuperated from an attempt on his life less than three weeks earlier, his aides announced what they called a "blitz" of fifty-three districts across the region. This was a large-scale effort aimed at reinforcing support for Reagan's budget proposals among southern voters, and thereby placing pressure on

their Boll Weevil representatives to vote in favor. Internal administration polling put popular support for Reagan's budget plan at 68 percent in the South, and White House strategist Lee Atwater outlined the operation's purpose in a memo: "Overwhelming positive public opinion will encourage their support and therein mitigate toeing the Democrat Party line."⁹

The blitz initially comprised three days of campaign-style events featuring Vice President George Bush, Senators Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, John Tower of Texas, and Jesse Helms of North Carolina, among others, and was maintained in subsequent weeks by direct mailing and television and radio advertisements. "We're not going in there [the South] to intimidate or blackmail," claimed a White House aide, "We're going in positively to help these congressmen." Nevertheless, Reagan and his advisers fully understood the political pressure this campaign would exert. "Behind the carrot of friendly persuasion," the *Washington Post* noted, "lies the potential club of political opposition in the 1982 elections. . . . White House political strategists are aware of Reagan's enormous popularity in the South." Given Reagan's strong showing in the South just a few months earlier, the possibility that the president might actively campaign against them in the 1982 midterms was a threat that many Boll Weevils were inclined to take very seriously. Therefore, when Reagan himself launched into a campaign of private coaxing during April and early May, he found his efforts had greater success with conservative southern Democrats than with recalcitrant members of his own party. When he addressed Congress on his economic plan on April 28, around forty Boll Weevils joined Republicans in giving Reagan a standing ovation. The following week, Reagan hosted a meeting with a number of them in the Oval Office. Afterward he confidently noted in his diary, "These [Democrats] are with us on the budget. . . . We really seem to be putting a coalition together." His confidence was borne out on May 7, when the House approved his budget plan by 253 votes to 176. Forty-five southern Democrats broke with their party and supported the president.¹⁰

The name of the legislation, Gramm-Latta, highlighted the crucial part played by one Boll Weevil in particular. Texan Phil Gramm was a prominent figure among those southern Democrats who supported Reagan's economic program. Such was Gramm's alignment with Reagan's agenda, he not only cosponsored the bill but also pursued greater spending reductions than Reagan's original proposal had demanded. Gramm was an old friend of Office of Management and Budget Director David Stockman—the man largely responsible for formulating the details of Reagan's economic legislation—and liaised with Stockman throughout the congressional budget debates. Phil

Gramm's leading role in driving Reagan's budget through the House included helping to thwart a rival budget resolution proposed by his own party's Budget Committee Chair, James Jones of Oklahoma, and his efforts served to give the legislation a bipartisan gloss that made it easier for other Boll Weevils to break ranks with the Democratic leadership. Equally important in winning Boll Weevil support, however, was the pressure applied in their districts by Lee Atwater's southern blitz. Prior to the vote, it was not just Republicans exerting pressure on the Boll Weevils. Alabama's Democratic Governor Forrest "Fob" James had called Ronnie Flippo, a Boll Weevil and fellow Alabaman, to persuade him into supporting Reagan. The Alabama governor's office notified the White House that "James has 'persuaded' Flippo to vote for the president." Similarly, Dan Mica of Florida had received calls from a local Democratic mayor urging a vote for Reagan's budget.¹¹

This victory was, though, merely the first hurdle in enacting Reagan's economic agenda. Next would come the Budget Reconciliation Bill, which laid out precisely which areas of the federal government the Reagan spending reductions would target. Throughout the coming debate, one editorial predicted in mid-May that "the Southern conservative bloc can look forward to being courted even more heavily." It was a marked change for representatives who, until recently, had been marginalized by both parties: "A Democrat from south of Mason and Dixon's line can enjoy being treated no longer as the proverbial illegitimate at the family picnic." As they came to understand the extent of their influence, the Boll Weevils became increasingly well organized and grew more demanding. "We never dreamed we would become the swing vote in the House," declared Georgian Bo Ginn, "and we're pleased to have an open line to Reagan." He was quick to add, however, "The White House needs to understand that we can't be taken for granted." The Boll Weevils now set about exploiting their newfound power to extract substantial concessions for their districts.¹²

Several of them, when called by Reagan personally to ask how he might guarantee their support, sought changes to an agriculture bill then under debate by Congress. Georgia representatives wanted increased protection for peanut farmers, while Louisiana congressmen John Breaux and Wilbert 'Billy' Tauzin won agreement from Reagan to introduce price supports for sugar. These and other concessions not only went against Reagan's ideological opposition to agricultural subsidies but would also cost a considerable amount to an administration seeking to reduce federal spending. Publicly, the administration denied it had struck any deals to alter its stance on agricultural policy. In reality, however, as Reagan aide Max Friedersdorf recalled in a 2002 oral

history, the White House was often quick to accede to Boll Weevil demands, particularly as the budget vote drew closer. “I mean, are you going to let the peanut subsidies rule your life? Or are you going to let the budget rule your life? So we’d call Stockman and we’d say, ‘Houston we’ve got a problem. We need a little sugar in Louisiana, some peanuts in Georgia,’ whatever it was. . . . That’s the way it worked.”¹³

Further concessions won by Boll Weevils included a victory for Georgia congressmen in getting cotton warehouses exempted from costly user fees, and changes to the Fuel Use Act demanded by several Texan Democrats in aid of the oil and gas industries in their districts. A restoration of \$400 million for veterans’ programs won the support of Sonny Montgomery. According to the *Washington Post*, funding for the construction of a nuclear reactor in Tennessee also found its way into the bill. “The controversial Clinch River fast breeder reactor project, which is strenuously opposed by Stockman as a waste of federal funds, nonetheless receives \$230 million more in the Republican budget plan.” Deals of this nature were ultimately crucial to the passage of the Budget Reconciliation Bill. “I went with the best deal,” John Breaux bluntly admitted, before joking that while his vote could not be bought, “It can be rented.” For all their public alignment with Reagan’s desire for dramatic spending reductions, the preservation of federal assistance to the South remained uppermost in Boll Weevil minds.¹⁴

The extent of their bartering vindicates David Stockman’s subsequent claim, made in his book *The Triumph of Politics*, that many Boll Weevils “weren’t even remotely genuine fiscal conservatives.” A few, particularly Phil Gramm, were clearly ideologically committed to enacting the Reaganite agenda, but most took stances more typical of traditional southern conservatives. Populist antigovernment sentiment remained deeply ingrained in the white South, and Reagan’s proposed spending reductions were notionally popular. But the overriding economic instincts of conservative southerners were to be intensely protective of regional interests and strongly supportive of federal aid to important southern industries. Such was their focus on gaining concessions for their districts, numerous Boll Weevils remained unclear as to the details of the enormous and complex final budget bill even as they were about to vote on it. On the day of the scheduled vote, House Majority Leader Jim Wright of Texas wrote to several Boll Weevils warning them of “unpleasant surprises in this clandestine deck of cards” and pleading with them to pause and reflect before supporting the President. “Have you read the Gramm-Latta substitute, and can you honestly say that you know what’s in it?” Wright wrote to Marvin Leath. “Please think it over carefully. . . . Do what

you do in good conscience. If you can honestly face yourself in the morning, you'll have no quarrel from me. But be honest with yourself." Wright's entreaties failed. With the help of Leath and other conservative southern Democrats, the Budget Reconciliation Bill passed the House by a margin of 232–193.¹⁵

The budget debate demonstrated the prioritization of regional interests that lay at the heart of southern conservatism and set it apart from the ideological antistatism of Reaganite Republicans. The Boll Weevils had shown they were determined to preserve, or even increase, federal assistance to the South while at the same time demanding government spending be reduced. "They talked a good budget-cutting game," David Stockman wrote, "but they loved even more their own regional pork." Still, the importance of Boll Weevil support for Reagan's budget cuts cannot be overstated. As Evans and Novak pointed out, "If Reagan's radical effort to thin the governmental wedge of the economy had failed, his equally radical 33-month marginal tax-rate cuts would also have failed. That would have finished the Reagan revolution." Instead, thanks to Reagan's coalition with conservative southern Democrats, a major component of his agenda won congressional approval. It made sweeping cuts to domestic funding—largely by tightening eligibility for various welfare programs and reducing funding to government agencies—while at the same time dramatically increasing defense spending. Southern conservatism was once again a decisive influence on the direction of American politics. Significantly, after years of being sidelined in Washington, the passage of the budget bill indicated to millions of white southerners that by allying with the Republican Party, and particularly with Ronald Reagan, their region's economic interests could be returned to the top of the agenda on Capitol Hill.¹⁶

THE 1981 TAX BILL

Southern votes continued to be critically important as the White House sought congressional approval for its tax legislation, which broadly favored the wealthy over lower- and middle-class Americans. The structure of Reagan's tax plan reflected his supply-side faith that growth could be promoted by reducing the tax burden on the rich and thereby increasing the incentive to invest and create jobs. Along with 30 percent across-the-board income tax cuts, it also included an immediate reduction in the top marginal tax rate from 70 percent to 50 percent and an 8 percent cut in the capital gains tax. Many Boll Weevils, however, were far more circumspect about voting for the president's proposed tax bill than they had been in their support for his spending

reductions. The *New York Times* wrote that while cutting federal programs “had been gospel in their region for years,” for the Boll Weevils “the situation is quite different on the tax issue.” Some, like Kent Hance, represented districts where cutting taxes for richer Americans was popular. Midland’s oil wealth meant it was “the kind of place that welcomes President Reagan’s proposal to give the wealthy the same tax breaks as the poor and middle-class.” Indeed, Hance would act as cosponsor of the Reagan tax cut in the House, the role Phil Gramm had played for the budget. Yet the South also contained “the hard-scrabble mountains of northern Georgia and the mill towns of South Carolina.” In such areas, both representatives and constituents were inclined to be deeply skeptical of tax cuts for the rich. “We’re all for spending reductions,” observed Ed Jenkins, whose largely rural district in Georgia had been badly hit by textile-mill closures and job losses. “The administration tapped that feeling in the budget fight. But there is a populist approach when it comes to taxes.” Ken Holland similarly argued that his rural South Carolina district would benefit little from the Reagan tax cuts: “The per capita income in my district is \$7,125 . . . most of my constituents will only pick up enough to pay for a few gallons of gas.”¹⁷

Among the Boll Weevils, therefore, there was not the same unity of support for the administration’s tax-cut legislation as there had been for the budget bills. As early as mid-March, Max Friedersdorf had warned Reagan’s senior advisers: “While the budget reduction portion of the President’s program seems to be going well, our staff continues to pick up disturbing intelligence with regard to the tax reduction side.” Reagan received a memo stating that even Kent Hance was “more skittish about the process than Phil Gramm was about the spending cuts” and that a phone call was required to “buck him up.” After calling Hance, Reagan jotted a note on the memo saying, “He’s solid.” Cognizant that his support among other southern Democrats was rather less solid, Reagan held a meeting with several Boll Weevils in May at which, according to Charles Stenholm, he offered “a shopping list” of potential compromises when it came to the tax-cut bill. The administration’s openness to compromise was received positively by senior Boll Weevils, and their worries were assuaged further at another meeting with Reagan on June 4. Anxious Boll Weevils asked the president if he would campaign against them in the 1982 midterm elections even if they supported his tax cuts. Reagan reportedly responded, “I couldn’t look myself in the mirror in the morning if I campaigned against someone that helped me on my program.” Though presidential aides later attempted to backtrack on Reagan’s pledge, the

concession eased Boll Weevil fears about his potentially powerful electoral influence in their districts.¹⁸

The Democratic leadership in the House proposed an alternative tax plan designed to lure wavering Boll Weevils back into the fold, featuring an individual tax cut over two years, smaller cuts for the wealthy and larger cuts for people on low incomes. In response, Reagan mounted a campaign of personal lobbying. He employed both friendly persuasion—inviting a group of Boll Weevils to a barbecue at Camp David—and strategically directed pressure, as when he called into a radio talk show in the district of Texan Democrat Ralph Hall to promote his tax plan. Reagan also telephoned Boll Weevils personally, but this time found them decidedly more tentative in their commitment. According to Reagan's notes, Buddy Roemer of Louisiana was undecided but nevertheless reassured Reagan that he was "enthusiastic about our plans generally." Doug Barnard of Georgia was also broadly supportive but concerned about "how to explain to his low-income constituents the [Democratic] bill offering a bigger break." When Tennessee's Bill Boner warily pledged his support, Reagan "assured him I'll remember come election time." All three men ultimately voted with the administration. To Jim Wright, the president's ability to cajole conservative southern Democrats was both depressing and remarkable. "I was supposed to be a good communicator," Wright later recalled. "In Ronald Reagan I'd met my master."¹⁹

Some Boll Weevils, however, were not to be convinced. Alabama Representative Ronnie Flippo told Reagan that he "wants to be helpful in the direction we're going but no commitments." Flippo was one of several Boll Weevils who had backed Reagan on the budget but eventually opposed his tax cuts, along with John Breaux and Billy Tauzin of Louisiana, Ken Holland of South Carolina, and Ed Jenkins of Georgia. On the day of the vote, Jenkins spoke against the Reagan tax cuts on the floor of the House. After noting that the "vast majority of my people make under \$20,000 a year," he condemned the Reagan administration's proposed tax breaks for the wealthy. "How you vote in respect to fairness and equity to all classes of society will be a decision which will be long remembered," Jenkins declared, "Let us serve the best interests of our people." John Breaux made a similarly populist case against the Reagan proposals, arguing they would simply "give the break to the wealthy people because somehow they are going to invest it for the public good. I do not think that is a logical reasoning." Breaux announced he would instead vote for the Democratic tax bill that, in his view, directed cuts to "working people."²⁰

Conversely, other Boll Weevils used the tax cut debate to reaffirm their support for President Reagan, serving to highlight just how far removed they

had become from the Democratic Party leadership. “I can see no sense in approving the first two portions of the President’s budget proposals, then balking at the underpinning of the proposals,” said Florida Representative Andy Ireland, before declaring himself “proud” to support the administration’s tax package. In Buddy Roemer’s view, “The spirit of the New Deal has become entombed in the programs of the Great Society.” He had decided, therefore, that he would “vote with my conscience and for the dreams of my district. I will vote with the President.” The administration’s intensive grassroots lobbying campaign had also seemingly swayed the votes of several Boll Weevils. The White House had enlisted numerous industry organizations to lobby Congress in support of its tax proposals. Aides observed that “groups with a southern orientation have been particularly active,” notably including the Tobacco Institute, the Cotton Council, and the American Textile Manufacturers Association. Ultimately, after a frantic few days of lobbying and debate in late July, the House of Representatives approved the final major component of Reagan’s economic program by 238 votes to 195.²¹

Though a number of Boll Weevils chose to remain loyal to their party instead of supporting Reagan’s tax cuts, the legislation nevertheless passed thanks to the votes of thirty-three southern Democrats, a dozen fewer than had supported his budget plan two months earlier. The final bill bore evidence not just of Reagan’s political compromises—his desired 30 percent income tax cut had been reduced to 25 percent—but also of the individual haggling that had been required for victory. As the Democratic leadership and the White House each attempted to outdo the other, the struggle over Boll Weevil votes became, as one headline put it, “more auction than debate.” Alongside oil provisions aimed at winning the votes of Texan and Louisianan Boll Weevils, the Reagan administration promised to maintain a quota restricting the importation of foreign peanuts—a concession that helped to win the votes of seven out of nine Georgia Democrats. As Evans and Novak noted, there were numerous similar “Southern-flavored goodies” scattered throughout the bill.²²

Some Boll Weevils found it necessary to justify their support of the tax cut to their constituents. Bill Nichols wrote in response to a letter from a resident of his Alabama district, “Let me assure you that I consider myself a Southern Conservative Democrat, and have no intention of changing to another party.” He went on to state his “real reservations about Supply Side Economics” but argued that he had received eight hundred calls to his office in the forty-eight hours preceding the vote, the vast majority of which “asked that I give the President of the United States a chance to try his plan.” Nichols concluded, “the ball is now in his court.” In contrast, Ed Jenkins continued to make the

case that Reagan's tax cuts were unfair and misguided. Writing in reply to a constituent in October 1981, Jenkins argued, "I sincerely believe that tremendous deficits and long-term high interest rates will surely result from such a gigantic tax decrease." The responses of both men are indicative of the unease with which a majority of Boll Weevils viewed Reagan's tax-cut legislation even if, like Nichols, they ultimately voted in favor. For many, cutting taxes for the rich was not high on their political agenda and did not sit well with the South's traditionally populist approach to economics.²³

The passage of Reagan's tax cut marked the apotheosis for the administration's alliance with the Boll Weevils. In the service of its economic agenda, the Reagan White House created a new variant of the GOP-southern Democrat conservative coalition that had once held sway in Congress. It was a coalition built through personal persuasion, the shrewd exploitation of Reagan's southern popularity, and a substantial amount of political horse-trading. Southern conservatives had played a critical role in a series of legislative achievements that would quickly come to be mythologized as the "Reagan Revolution," and Reagan's successes were celebrated almost as much in the ranks of the CDF as they were in the White House. Charles Stenholm spoke for many Boll Weevils when he acknowledged, "We had no earthly idea that things would work out this well." At the White House on September 14, Stenholm, Kent Hance, and Sonny Montgomery were among nineteen southern Democrats who presented Reagan with a boll weevil tiepin and a bumper sticker bearing the slogan "Thank Goodness for Boll Weevils." A few days later Billy Lee Evans, a Boll Weevil from Georgia, responded to a Reagan speech by praising the "beauty of his leadership." Though their support for Reagan had been rather more hesitant when it came to tax cuts than it had been for his spending reductions, many Boll Weevils shared this approval of Reagan's first six months in the White House.²⁴

1982 AND BEYOND

Even at the high point of their influence, the Boll Weevils were aware that their position was untenable in the long term. As early as September 1981, just a few weeks after the tax bill vote, there was media speculation that the Boll Weevil "phenomenon . . . may be evaporating even as it reaches the zenith of its power." Looking ahead to the 1982 midterm elections, Billy Lee Evans warned that if either Republicans or Democrats made major gains in the House, "We could wind up as a group without a party." Highlighting the quandary in which many Boll Weevils were beginning to find themselves, conservative

Democrats from Georgia began openly telling journalists that—while proud of their votes in favor of the administration—they were becoming more reluctant to support Reagan if he demanded further spending reductions. The major reason for the Boll Weevils' waning enthusiasm was a sharp downturn in the American economy that in turn damaged Reagan's popularity, even in the South. Beginning in the autumn of 1981, the United States suffered a fall of 2.9 percent in its GDP and around three million jobs were lost. On the surface, the southern economy fared better during the recession than other regions, but the prosperity of major cities in Texas and Florida acted to distort the South's overall economic picture. Average wages in the region remained substantially lower than the rest of the country and, the *Washington Post* reported, there were "significant differences in the economic structure and prospects" of the southern states, with the likes of Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Kentucky lagging far behind. Moreover, while unemployment levels were below the national average in most southern states, this was partly the result of a tradition of "underemployment" in the rural South. "When jobs are hard to come by," the *Post* noted, "people will eke out a living on the family farm and wait for the labor market to pick up rather than register as unemployed." Contrary to the positive headlines, many parts of the southern economy were hit hard by the recession of 1981–82.²⁵

Largely because of the recession, Reagan's national popularity underwent a steep decline. From a high of 68 percent in Gallup polls during the spring of 1981 to 49 percent by the year's end, it plummeted still further to around 40 percent by the autumn of 1982. Though affection for Reagan personally remained high among white southerners, it was combined with a widespread disapproval of his administration's economic performance, creating something of a political minefield for the Boll Weevils. His approval ratings in North Carolina, for example, slumped to 35 percent, with most voters citing the failing economy as the reason for their dissatisfaction. David Treen, Louisiana's Republican governor and a vocal Reagan supporter, argued that the president's "style, his personality, is attractive to the South." Yet, he was also willing to acknowledge that "there's been some erosion, obviously. That's fundamental after a time." Thus, for the Boll Weevils, supporting the president no longer appeared to be the electoral boon it had seemed a year earlier.²⁶

In addition, the threat of censure by Democratic leaders was growing. CDF members were largely excluded from the Democratic Party national conference in June 1982, but John Breaux and Kent Hance did appear before a party commission to defend the Boll Weevils' record of support for Reagan and to plead that no punitive action be taken against them. The possibility that

committee assignments or campaign financing could be withdrawn was a particular concern. "What is our crime?" Hance asked the commission, "Our crime is we represented the conscience of our district." Arguing that the Democrats risked committing "political suicide" if they turned away from southern conservative voters, he went on to warn—somewhat presciently given the South's subsequent partisan shift—"If I get beat, you're going to have an ultra-right wing Republican." Hance also noted the electoral strength of conservatism across the South, observing that in the 1980 election Ronald Reagan won Boll Weevil districts by an average of 53 percent to 43 percent and that Boll Weevil candidates outperformed President Jimmy Carter by an average of 35 percent overall. Though Democratic Party leaders delayed a decision on punishment at that June meeting, the threat of retribution hung over the Boll Weevils for the remainder of the 97th Congress. Given this context, many Boll Weevils proved rather less receptive to Reagan's personal appeals when he sought their votes for his budget in 1982. Georgia Democrat Doug Barnard warned Reagan of his concern that "we won't get as many Congressional [Democrats] as we need to," and a few days later, after a call to Barnard's fellow Georgian Charles Hatcher, Reagan's frustration was apparent in his notes: "What is this—he won't commit either?" In the end, Hatcher and enough of his fellow Boll Weevils voted in favor of Reagan's budget that it passed the House on June 11 by a narrow margin of 219–206.²⁷

It was clear, though, that Boll Weevil enthusiasm for Reagan was dwindling. When the White House was pushed into action by the faltering economy and began seeking support for a tax bill that reversed some of the tax cuts of the previous year, the debate threw party affiliations in the House into flux, creating particular uncertainty among southern Democrats. Several Boll Weevils who had loyally backed Reagan in 1981 now sided with conservative southern Republicans in opposing the president's proposals. Doug Barnard, Billy Lee Evans, and Lawrence McDonald joined their fellow Georgian, Republican Newt Gingrich, in opposing Reagan's tax increase, along with Charles Stenholm and Sam Hall of Texas and Richard Shelby of Alabama among others. Somewhat ironically, having opposed Reagan's original tax cuts, Ed Jenkins also voted against reversing them, fearing that taking money out of the economy would exacerbate the downturn. In the end, though, many of Reagan's most prominent Boll Weevil supporters reluctantly voted in favor, including John Breaux, Sonny Montgomery, Kent Hance, and Phil Gramm. Their votes were motivated chiefly by concerns that the size of the federal deficit could hamper any chance of economic recovery, while one Texan Boll Weevil also told journalists that he feared "some uglier options (for raising

taxes) are waiting in the wings” if Reagan’s bill failed. The legislation—which became the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act or TEFRA—passed the House by 226 votes to 207 on August 19, 1982. In another tight vote, Boll Weevils had again proved critical in providing a legislative victory for the Reagan administration, albeit one that it had been largely forced into by economic circumstances. The vote did demonstrate, however, just how far Boll Weevil support for the administration had diminished since the high point of the previous summer, as well as how volatile the southern political landscape was becoming as the 1982 midterm elections approached.²⁸

Few Boll Weevils ultimately found their campaigns for reelection problematic, being aided by their own incumbency and a difficult electoral climate for Republicans nationwide. Some contests did, however, illustrate the increasing fragmentation of partisan loyalties in the South. In Georgia’s 7th district, for example, Boll Weevil Lawrence McDonald received the support of many of the state’s leading conservative Republicans in his reelection, while his moderate Republican opponent was endorsed by large numbers of Democrats but not, notably, by President Reagan. McDonald’s fellow Georgian, Billy Lee Evans, became the only major casualty among the Boll Weevils when he lost a Democratic primary race in which he described his own party as “irrelevant” and received the active support of the Republican mayor of Macon. Paradoxically, by returning the vast majority of the Boll Weevils to Congress, conservative southern voters were able to register a protest at the state of the economy and reelect trusted incumbents while at the same time acting in concert with their abiding personal affection for Reagan by returning to Congress those Democrats who had provided him with crucial support. Reagan’s popularity in the South was scrambling the region’s political landscape, making white southern conservatives question their voting behavior and encouraging a number of Democratic candidates to become further detached from their own party and begin a gradual migration toward the GOP.²⁹

The wider success of the Democrats in the 1982 midterms—gaining twenty-six House seats nationwide—altered the political equation and ended the South’s brief return to the center of power in Washington. Conservative southern Democrats were now no longer a large enough bloc to provide the swing vote in Reagan’s favor. “While they won their own battles,” the *Washington Post* reported, “the nature of the war in the House has changed.” The future for individual Boll Weevils was now uncertain, though most would return to the Democratic fold, at least in the short term. Kent Hance, for example, had for weeks been “in the vanguard of those seeking reconciliation” with party leaders and had been raising funds for Democratic candidates in the

South as well as voting with his party's leadership in an attempt to rebuild bridges. Consequently, he was allowed to retain his seat on the House Ways and Means Committee. Like Hance, most Boll Weevils went largely unpunished by the Democratic leadership, but it was made clear that much greater loyalty would be expected of them in future. Sonny Montgomery, who was reelected as chair of the Veterans Affairs Committee despite a large number of Democrats voting against him, told reporters he had "got the message." Unsurprisingly, the Boll Weevil who faced the harshest punishment was Phil Gramm. Leading Democrats regarded Gramm as particularly treacherous, not simply for his cosponsorship of Reagan's budget bill, but because he had, according to the Texas Democratic Party chairman, acted as a "double agent" by providing information to the White House regarding Democratic strategy. Gramm had shown a notable lack of regret over his work on the budget bill, describing it as "the easiest thing I've ever done," and had refused to campaign for fellow Democrats in the 1982 midterms. Few were surprised, therefore, when Gramm was voted off the House Budget Committee by his Democratic colleagues, nor when he subsequently resigned from Congress and announced he was switching parties. In February 1983, Gramm returned to Congress as a Republican after comfortably winning a special election in his district.³⁰

At the time, Gramm appeared to be an isolated case. Most Boll Weevils returned to the backbench position they had occupied prior to Reagan's election, maintaining their opposition to the Democratic Party's liberal leadership, particularly on budget issues. For some, however, the feeling of detachment from their own party deepened over the following months. In March 1984, Andy Ireland of Florida announced his own switch to the GOP, declaring to his conservative supporters that, in the Democratic Party, "our views are not heard, not heeded and not wanted." The strength of the conservative vote in his district saw him easily win reelection later that year. Kent Hance would also ultimately join the GOP. After resigning his House seat to seek the Democratic nomination for senator in 1984, Hance discovered that a conservative voting record was a hindrance when fighting a statewide Democratic primary, even in Texas. His primary defeat to a liberal opponent, Lloyd Doggett, would spur him to change parties in May 1985, while Doggett went on to lose the senate election to Phil Gramm. It is noteworthy that Gramm, Ireland, and Hance were closer philosophically to the antistatistism of Reagan than many of their Boll Weevil peers. Moreover, they represented largely suburban districts in Texas and Florida that had grown wealthy in the Sunbelt boom of the mid-twentieth century. As previously noted, affluent constituents in such districts often shared a greater affinity with Reaganite

Republicanism—particularly when it came to the issue of tax cuts—than lower-income voters in rural Georgia or Alabama.³¹

When interviewed by Nicol Rae, other Boll Weevils offered a variety of reasons for remaining in the Democratic Party. Ed Jenkins, for example, decided “to stay within the party and fight it out.” Likewise, Marvin Leath argued that “it’s important that the Democratic Party have a conservative wing to counterbalance the ultraliberal wing,” while Doug Barnard claimed he would “never be tempted to switch” because “I’d lose my seniority and my subcommittee chairmanship.” For some, switching to the GOP became less likely as they grew increasingly disillusioned with Reagan’s inattention to the budget deficit, particularly during the latter years of his presidency. It was not until Reagan had left office, and the partisan trend among white southerners was moving inexorably in the GOP’s favor, that other Boll Weevil defections occurred. Buddy Roemer became Republican governor of Louisiana, defecting in 1991 after originally winning the governorship as a Democrat. Richard Shelby and Billy Tauzin were among several southern Democrats who switched to the GOP in the wake of the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, while Ralph Hall finally became a Republican in 2004. Nonetheless, their support for Reagan’s agenda during the first year of his presidency had acted as a signpost for their future political direction, just as it did for millions of their fellow conservative southerners. Even those who remained Democrats throughout their careers found themselves swimming against the partisan tide in their districts. When Sonny Montgomery announced his retirement in 1996, for example, the GOP won his Mississippi seat in the subsequent election. In Georgia, Ed Jenkins’s successor, Nathan Deal, won election in 1992 as a Democrat but within months was already considering switching parties, eventually doing so in 1995. Like Montgomery and Jenkins, many Boll Weevils would see their former districts turn Republican within a few years of leaving Congress.³²

CONCLUSION

The most obvious legacy of the Boll Weevils’ rise to prominence in 1981 lies in their importance to the success of Ronald Reagan’s presidency. Their votes proved decisive in enabling Reagan to enact his economic program and keep his administration on track. Failure to enact the centerpiece of his political platform would have severely undermined the remainder of Reagan’s time in office. Instead, the Reaganite agenda of cutting taxes and curbing the growth of federal programs would become a dominant trend in domestic politics. The

Boll Weevils were at the heart of this transformation, playing a crucial role in pushing the center ground in a markedly more conservative direction and demonstrating that the South could still wield significant influence over the political trajectory of the United States.

Furthermore, Reagan's coalition with the Boll Weevils arguably helped to reinforce his southern popularity. It demonstrated that, by allying with Reagan, the interests of the conservative South could be returned to the top of the political agenda in Congress after years of being disregarded by the liberal Democratic leadership. Not since the late 1950s had southern conservatives been "the fulcrum of political power." The successful coalition they formed with the Reagan administration and House Republicans acted as an important stepping stone in pulling southern conservatives toward the GOP and aided Republican attempts to loosen the Democrats' century-long grip on the region at the congressional level. It not only gave a number of Boll Weevils cause to reconsider their own party allegiance, but also challenged the long-standing belief among southern voters that their interests were best served by sending Democrats to Washington. By the end of the century, Republicans controlled seventy-six southern House seats (almost 60 percent of the region's total) and a majority of southern Senate seats. Clearly, cultural issues such as gun control and abortion played an important role in this partisan conversion. But once the Boll Weevil-GOP coalition had demonstrated that the economic priorities of southern conservatism—whether it was shrinking federal welfare programs, increasing funding for the military, or simply winning concessions for regional industries—could be better advanced by allying with the national Republican Party, electing Republicans became a more logical and appealing option.³³

The coalition also highlighted, however, the divergence in economic priorities between the antistatist, movement conservatism embodied by Ronald Reagan and the more populist conservatism of the white South. The former was ideological, radical, and often idealistic about shrinking the size and scope of the federal government. The latter, despite generations of overt antagonism toward federal power, was prepared to scale back government only when it did not have a negative impact on the economic interests of white southerners or important regional industries. As the Boll Weevils' negotiations with the Reagan administration illustrated, southern conservatives were willing to be openly transactional, even cynical, in advancing their region's priorities.

Once the white South migrated toward the GOP, this divide morphed into an intraparty struggle between ideological Reaganites and economic populists, a contest that both academics and journalists have labeled a Republican "civil war." White southern conservatives came to form the core of a nationalist, anti-

elitist wing of the Republican Party, loudly hostile to the political establishment and Wall Street, yet fiercely protective of their own economic interests and approving of federal subsidies. First through the Tea Party insurgency in the late 2000s, and then through the candidacy and subsequent presidency of Donald Trump, this populist wing has evolved into a dominant force in the party's base—polls repeatedly show President Trump's support as being particularly strong among rural white southerners. Within the Republican Party, therefore, southern conservatism has once again returned to a position of national political influence. Though the Boll Weevils' time at the center of power in 1981 was relatively brief, it foreshadowed a transformation in American politics. It acted as an important marker on the white South's partisan journey toward the GOP and gave southerners further encouragement to break with traditional Democratic loyalties that had been ingrained for over a century. In doing so, it helped set the stage for the region to become a potent political force in the Republican Party of the early twenty-first century.³⁴

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