

## *Route to '66: Ray Bliss, the 1966 Election and the Development of the Republican Service Party*

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The pace of the Republican Party's recovery after Goldwater's 1964 loss, highlighted by the party's competitiveness in the 1966 elections, has raised a number of questions about how the party was able to reorganize and rebuild so rapidly. What was the nature of the organizational changes introduced at the RNC after the 1964 loss? Moreover, what effect did such changes have on the long-term development of the modern Republican Party? By examining the party-building process that followed the defeat, particularly in the areas staff training, message development and fundraising, I seek to illustrate how a new, more centralized and professional "service" approach to party organization, pioneered by RNC Chair Ray Bliss, played a critical role in the party's rapid recovery, as well as its organizational viability over time.

In the months following the 1964 election, the Republican Party was demoralized, bitterly divided, and near financial ruin. In addition to Goldwater's sweeping loss to President Johnson, the party lost two seats in the Senate and thirty-six in the House. This was matched at the state level by the defeat of 90 senators and 450 representatives nationwide (Pearlstein 2001). Commentators at the time spoke openly of the party's collapse (Polsby 1965). Despite the scale of the loss and resulting discord, however, the party was able to quickly reorganize over the next two years in advance of the 1966 mid term elections (Bibby and Huckshorn 1968). The pace of the party's recovery, highlighted by its competitiveness in both the 1966 and 1968 elections, has raised a number of questions about how the Republicans were able to reorganize and rebuild so rapidly. How do we account for the party's swift reorganization after such a staggering defeat? What was the nature of the organizational changes introduced at the RNC after the 1964 loss? Moreover, what effect did such changes have on the long-term development of the modern Republican Party?

The scale of the Goldwater defeat startled many leading Republicans and resulted in numerous calls for a change in the party leadership. The defeat also temporarily empowered the otherwise floundering liberal wing of the party, which pushed for the removal of the current RNC chair and Goldwater appointee, Dean Burch (Brennan 1995; Rae 1989). The result was not only a new chair, Ray Bliss, the chair of the Ohio Republican Party, who was elected unanimously as a unity candidate, but the development of a new

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model of party organization at the RNC. Bliss had originally been appointed Ohio party chair by the late Robert Taft, a leading figure on the conservative right. But rather than pursue a partisan agenda as the new RNC chair, Bliss focused his efforts on rebuilding the party organizationally through the development of what scholars describe as a more “service-oriented” model of party organization (Aldrich 1995; Bibby 2002; Frantzich 1989; Green 1994; Sabato and Larson 1988). By appealing to the professional goal of reorganizing the party, rather than reforming the party either procedurally or politically, Bliss and other Republican leaders hoped to unify the party by reaching out to feuding conservative and liberal party factions. They also hoped a service model would help the party grapple with ongoing changes in electoral politics, including the rise of candidate-centered campaigns, advances in communication technology, and the associated increase in the costs of modern elections.

The success of Bliss’ programs, particularly in 1966, helped institutionalize the “service” model within the national Republican Party. To be sure, the idea of developing a more centralized, professionally-oriented party organization was not new to the Republican Party. Despite having historically been quite weak organizationally, there had been periodic attempts within both national committees, often following a defeat to introduce more centralized management (Cotter and Hennessy 1964; Goldman 1990; Hames 1994). Bliss’ initiatives, however, were the first to be formally institutionalized within either major party. What distinguished Bliss’ work from previous efforts was the organizational scope and sophistication of his service party structure, which rested on a more organizationally autonomous national party structure characterized by a highly regimented, financially self-sufficient and professionally staffed headquarters operation. The outcome was not only a period of rapid growth, including enhanced state and national level cooperation, but a new level of organizational sustainability over time. This change was particularly evident both in terms of party staffing and programming levels as well as in party fundraising.

In place of the disarray left by the Goldwater loss, then, Bliss erected a party organization that in terms of both scope and its service orientation was more centralized and more professional than its predecessors on either side of the aisle. Although the nature of Bliss’ leadership and legacy has been debated, the service model he introduced effectively redefined the Republican Party’s core organizational mission. The result of Bliss’ work was a national party that, in spite of deeply felt divisions, was able to come together around the professional goal of rebuilding the party organizationally. After Nixon’s election in 1968, and his subsequent repudiation of the party-building process initiated by Bliss, it would take the party nearly a decade to fully realize the unity and competitive strength glimpsed between 1966 and

1968. But the forces Bliss set in motion would serve, both at their inception and as they developed, as the organizational foundation of the electoral resurgence of the modern Republican Party.

It is my objective here to examine the service party organization Bliss and the national Republican leadership introduced at the RNC in the run-up to the 1966 mid-term election. I begin by situating the “service” idea within the context of the broad array of changes that took place within the American party system in the 1960s. I then turn to a more detailed analysis of how Bliss and Republican leaders implemented the service organization within the Republican National Committee, particularly in the areas of party training, research, communications and fundraising. Doing so enables us to examine the degree to which Bliss’ service programs signaled the institutionalization of a trend toward increased centralization and professionalization within the Republican Party. I will conclude with a discussion of Bliss’ legacy, focusing on the impact that his service model of party organization had on the long-term organizational strength of the GOP.

### **A New Service Party Organization**

When Ray Bliss became Republican Party chair in 1965, most political observers doubted whether either national party committee could provide effective leadership. To do so, the national committees would have to achieve precisely what was missing from the RNC in 1965, and had eluded, as Tim Hames (1994) argues, party chairs for most of the century—namely, some viable system of national party leadership. Despite earlier efforts to centralize the operations of the national committees, particularly within the Republican Party, the committees had traditionally been rather weak organizationally, owing to their large membership, infrequent meetings, lack of financial independence from the states and virtual powerlessness in the face of either a president or a determined congressional leadership. The problem, Hames (1994) asserts, is that for most of their histories the national committees “lacked . . . any meaningful institutional autonomy or organizational independence” (149). The committees, as Cotter and Hennessy (1964) note, were “pretty much headless, drifting organizations” (vi).

Beginning in the 1960s, however, the national committees began to change, often, scholars note, in response to either defeat or increased competition. Such changes took a variety of forms, notes Paul Herrnson (1994), including the reforming of party rules; the renewal of a party’s organizational capacities and objectives or simply the reinforcement of existing programming (188). Scholars have alternatively described the difference between party reform and renewal as the difference between “intra-party” democratic reform and the professional “organizational approach” (Santori

1976, 71), or between “expressiveness” and “competitiveness” (Ranney 1975, 134). Expressive reforms, Ranney (1975) explains, have as “their main standard for judging a party’s institutions . . . how accurately they express certain characteristics of party members: their biological and social traits or their candidate and issue preferences” (134). This, he writes, is “challenged by the competitive” approach, which evaluates parties based on “how effectively they mobilize . . . resources for winning elections” (Ranney 1975, 134). A party’s goal, from the competitive perspective, is electoral victory, and the value of any change is assessed based on whether or not it enhances a party’s competitiveness.

The specific circumstances facing a party at any given time can also have an immediate bearing on whether and what type of change occurs. The scope of defeat, the degree of intra-party unity as well as the strength of a party organizationally can each affect the types of change a party undergoes. But arguably the most significant variable in determining the direction of party change is the party leadership. As Herrnson (1994) notes, “Party leaders’ abilities to recognize opportunities for change, coalition-building skills, and personal objectives [are] critical in determining the types of innovations introduced and the length of the time that their innovations [endure]” (186). As such, debates about why and how parties did and did not change in the 1960s are often shaped by assessments of the personal characteristics, or vision of specific political leaders.

Bliss’ leadership, in particular, has been the subject of considerable debate. The question that has long shaped the discussion of Bliss’ legacy is whether or not Bliss was a “leader” or simply a skilled political manager. Much, for example, has been made of Bliss’ remark that he preferred to be an “office” chairman, who was principally concerned with party building, rather than a “speaking” chairman, who took public stances on the various issues (Bibby and Huckshorn 1968). Herrnson, for instance, has argued that when Bliss assumed the RNC chair after the Goldwater defeat, he sought to “reinforce” rather than “reform” national party operations. Though “the circumstances were ripe for either party reform or renewal,” Herrnson (1994) writes, “neither occurred because . . . Bliss had a more limited vision for his party” (197). Whereas party renewal involves a “redefinition of the committee’s mission,” Herrnson (1994) writes, Bliss’ orientation was simply to “expand existing programs and improve the operation of the existing structure” (197). Such changes, Herrnson (1994) asserts, did not occur within the RNC until Bill Brock became party chair after the Watergate debacle (188).

Others have drawn a similar distinction between Bliss and Brock. In his comparative study of both “out-party” chairs, Philip Klinkner (1994) asserts that it was Brock, not Bliss, who truly “nationalized” the RNC in the late

1970s (135). Klinkner acknowledges Bliss' innovation and influence on Brock, but concludes that it was the latter's entrepreneurial skill as a party leader that enabled his programs to succeed where Bliss' did not. Bliss did achieve some success in reorienting the party toward the state and local level, Klinkner argues, but was unable to "centralize" power nationally at the RNC. Bliss, in Klinkner's opinion, simply did not have the political acumen, ambition, or policy experience to ensure that his programs had a lasting effect on party practice. Still others have come to Bliss' defense. Arthur Peterson (1994), for instance, contends that Bliss was a skilled political leader, who was "constantly driven by a grand design . . . knew how to use, and frequently employed, power to achieve his goals" (85). To make his case, Peterson points to Bliss' insistence on professionalism, the scope of his reorganization plans at the state and national levels, his use of polls, and his willingness to challenge existing blocks of political power.

To explain such sharp disagreements about Bliss' legacy, John Green (1994) has pointed to a generational divide among party scholars. "Older scholars, many of whom knew and worked with Bliss, offer a more positive assessment of his achievements in light of the standard of the time," Green (1994) explains, "while younger scholars, steeped in the present era of nationalized parties, see Bliss' work as modest by contemporary standards" (12). Part of the challenge, then, is context. A more significant problem, however, is a tendency to overstate the importance of personality differences in the party development process while deemphasizing the impact of particular ideas or institutional changes introduced by particular leaders at a certain time. Bliss' contribution, I argue, was less a consequence of his personal abilities as a political leader and speaker, than the success of the service party structure he introduced within the Republican Party. As a model, the service party redefined the party's core mission, and in the process provided not only the platform upon which the party was able to rebuild immediately following its 1964 losses, but also created a working institutional basis for the emergence of a more stable, unified and autonomous national committee over time.

Despite being bitterly divided politically after the 1964 election, no major effort at party reform occurred within the Republican Party in the 1960s (Aldrich 1995; Price 1984). Instead, Republican leaders, at Bliss' direction, eschewed political reforms in favor of organizational renewal as a way of resolving intra-party factional disputes. Indeed, for the most part, the type of party change that occurred in the 1960s took place along partisan lines, with Republicans pursuing organizational change and the Democrats embracing procedural, expressive reforms (Aldrich 1995). Republican Party leaders and activists, from across the ideological divide responded to the Goldwater loss with calls for party organizational renewal (Green and Guth

1994). Bliss' service organization at once reflected and responded to the desire for organizational change. In place of a party focused primarily on selecting and nominating candidates emerged a party organization geared more toward servicing the organizational and strategic needs of candidates.

Bliss' service party signaled the institutionalization of a new model of party organization within the Republican Party. "Institutionalization," as Cotter and Bibby (1980) note, "is a process involving changing roles of the chairmen, national committee members, and staff; the development of staff continuity; the elaboration of programmatic activity and division of labor, the development of regular financing and rule elaboration" (2). The result was essentially a new relationship between candidates and the party. Though campaigns were increasingly managed outside of the party, candidates still frequently needed assistance with the organizational and financial costs of running for office, especially in competitive races (Herrnson 2002; Sabato and Larson 1988). Moreover, the parties remained, despite deep internal political divisions, the primary ideological affiliation for candidates, as Aldrich (1995) notes, and thus continued to influence the policy making process. The party became, in Stephen Frantzich's (1989) analysis, at once a service agent, vendor, and at times a broker for candidates (263). The interaction favored candidates, and thus a more ideological type of politics, but did frequently involve strategic considerations on the part of the party concerning where to invest time and money as well as how to frame party issues (Rae 1989). Bliss, for instance, did not directly challenge the rightward shift of the Republican Party in the mid-1960s, but did insist on gauging, primarily through a copious use of polling data, how best to promote the party's increasingly conservative message. In the process, Bliss set a clear organizational precedent that institutionalizing a service organization within the Republican Party would not necessarily limit the conservative right's growing influence on the party. Instead, the national committee would serve as a common, and essentially non-ideological institutional meeting ground for all party elements.

In the end, Bliss' service party structure set the stage organizationally for much of the party building that occurred both before and after the Nixon presidency, including the work of Bill Brock. Bliss' reorganization of the headquarters staff, his nationwide education and training seminars, his outreach to the state and local level, his institutionalization of the direct mail fundraising program, and his work to rationalize the national policy-making apparatus established a new organizational baseline within the Republican Party. Such ideas changed the expectations and assumptions of party leaders. By doing so, Bliss paved the way both politically and organizationally for the dramatic expansion of party operations that occurred in the 1970s under Brock's chairmanship. "Brock's unprecedented actions to expand the role of

the RNC were made easier because Bliss already had demonstrated the utility of a service-oriented national committee,” writes John Bibby (1994, 30). Bliss, he explains, “had sold party leaders on the concept” (1994, 30).

This was true whether you look at Brock’s fundraising initiatives, his outreach to states, or his professionalization of party staff. In the area of fundraising, for example, the money raised by Brock through direct mail solicitations far exceeded the amounts raised by Bliss. But it was Bliss who had formally institutionalized the sustaining membership programs in 1965 despite its limited track record and heavy administrative costs. The program afforded the RNC a degree of independence unseen in party history due to the committee’s traditional dependence on state quotas for funding. It also kept the party afloat through the darkest days of the Watergate scandal. Thus, when Brock arrived in 1977, he had both the capital and the leverage he needed to dramatically reorganize the party. Bliss’ work with the states, which only hinted at the infrastructure Brock was able to erect at the local level, demonstrated that the party’s traditionally fragmented and state-centered decision-making structure could in fact be overcome. In each area, Bliss offered Brock not only a template with which to proceed, but also a degree of legitimacy that could only come from an established record of success.

By now turning to an examination of Bliss’ service party we can get a better sense of how the concept of an administratively centralized and candidate focused party structure was institutionally codified within the national Republican Party in the run-up to the 1966 mid-term election.

### **RNC as a Service Organization**

As it developed, Bliss’ service party was defined by four main characteristics: 1) centralized organization, 2) professional staff training, 3) research and messaging strategies and 4) financial self-sufficiency. As Bliss remarked after his election to the RNC chairmanship in January 1965, the party needed to begin “seeking qualified candidates for every office that will come up in the future throughout our nation, backing them up with a sound organization, [and] raising and providing for them, as well as our party committees with adequate financing” (Kesaris 1986, 56, 4:528-530). In each area, we see that Bliss’ service model represented a formal institutionalization or consolidation of prior efforts at party organizational renewal.

### **“Dirty, Ditch-Digging Job”: RNC and Party Organization**

As the new party chair, Bliss’ prioritized the creation of a more centralized headquarters operation capable of assisting Republican candidates with

the tactical, communication, and financial demands of modern campaigning. The development of such a centralized party structure was vital to Bliss' service concept. Providing candidates with ongoing assistance required a party apparatus capable of sustaining a professionalized staff as well as related informational and technological resources. At the center of Bliss' plan was the rebuilding of the RNC's divisional structure, with particular emphasis on the Education and Training, Research, and Public Relations Divisions. Given the increasingly sophisticated and media-driven nature of modern campaigns, Bliss and the RNC leadership regarded the work of each of these divisions as particularly important to the party's recovery.

Most of these party divisions were established features of the RNC prior to Bliss' arrival, but they experienced new life under his leadership. Both the Research and Public Relations Divisions, for example, dated to John Hamilton's pioneering chairmanship in the late 1930s. The Women's Division and the Young Republicans had been in operation since 1920 and 1935, respectively. But staffing, funding, and even political support for the RNC divisions had never been consistent between on and off years (Goldman 1990). The RNC had had a staffed national headquarters operation since Will Hays' tenure as party chair (Hays 1955). Too frequently, though, it had fluctuated with the electoral cycle, and had rarely been populated by trained professionals. Such shifts partly reflected the leading role the RNC had traditionally played in presidential campaigns prior to the rise of candidate-campaigns in the 1960s, as well as the committee's dependence on state party support for most of its funding (Hames 1994). But they also reflected a tradition of decentralized, part-time organization in American party politics. Bliss and the Republican leadership hoped to reverse these trends within the GOP by formalizing a new role for the RNC Divisions as the managers of the services provided by the party to candidates. Such a transformation logically began, in Bliss' analysis, with the work of the Education and Training Division, and the training of Republican Party personnel at all levels. Republican operatives had to be schooled in critical campaign skills, from organizational planning, to opposition research, to message development. And, it needed to happen on a national scale.

The service approach would necessitate very close coordination between many of the key headquarters divisions. It would also require a lot of money. But more than that, it would necessitate a new way of thinking about the RNC and national party organization. Indeed, no organizational plan of this scale had ever been attempted by either national committee (*Business Week* 1968).



### **Training the Political Workforce**

As the Republican Party leadership looked ahead to the 1966 mid-term election, it became clear that for the party to be competitive it would not only have to field strong candidates, but ensure that they were supported at all levels by highly trained staff. "One of the critical problems facing party organizations," Bliss explained, "has been the need for trained campaign managers." The problem, he contended, had "developed principally because politics has become more complex." Remaining competitive in politics, he continued, "requires a vast amount of technical skill as well as basic motivation" (*RNC News Release*, January 21, 1966, 1-2). Despite the enthusiasm for the Goldwater candidacy, especially on the right, the party had fallen behind the Democrats organizationally in the early 1960s, in Bliss' assessment. In 1964, for example, "seventy percent of voters were not contacted by party workers," he observed. The same thing had occurred in 1962. Yet, the pool of "potential workers," he continued, numbered in the millions (Kesaris 1986, 100-101, 5:103).

To ensure the party was capable of professionally assisting candidates, Bliss proposed a rigorous training program for party personnel nationwide. This would include party workers at all levels, from experienced state and national level organizers to new volunteers. To oversee the party's ambitious new education programs in advance of the 1966 election, Bliss appointed Ray Humphrey to lead the Education and Training Division.

In a series of memos sent to Bliss shortly after he took over in early summer 1965, Humphrey outlined his plans for the division. To get the training and outreach programs off the ground, Humphrey "envisioned a period of intensive upgrading of organizations from the precincts up . . . in every state." The principal vehicle for achieving this would be a series of unique national workshops geared to the separate aspects of campaigning, including management, finance and general organization and voter outreach. This would begin with "regional trainings for staff of state, district, and county organizations in the important new developments and general political procedures," Humphreys wrote. Such tutorials would provide "training aids" and "statistical and factual data on voting" to local officials as well as support for programs on "registration and enrollment of voters." And, as part of this initiative, the Division would work whenever possible with "both the Women's Federations and the Young Republicans . . . in promoting the various projects of the two groups" (Ray Humphreys to Bliss, June 22, 1965; Ray Humphreys to Bliss, July 1, 1965, both in box 91, "Education and Training Division, 1965-1966," Ray Bliss papers).

The first national workshop series focused on training campaign managers and staff. The idea of hosting a national campaign manager seminar had

originally been proposed by Representative Bob Wilson, chair of the National Republican Congressional Committee, in May 1965. Seizing upon Wilson's suggestion that the RNC take the initiative, Bliss and Humphrey organized the first managers' training that December in Pomona, California. The seminar, hosted jointly by the RNC, NRCC and the National Republican Senate Campaign Committee, was intended to "instruct Republican workers in modern campaign techniques." Speaking at the seminar, Bliss emphasized the need to professionalize Republican campaign operations. "Times have changed," he explained. "There was a time when campaign management was a matter of setting up a speaking schedule, arranging a candidate to shake hands at opportune places, [and] tacking up an array of posters." Now, a "political leader must run the gamut of modern campaign methods," he continued, "from the use of complicated electronic data processing systems to the measurement and impact of information media." Accordingly, it is "the objective of this seminar," he stated, "to introduce the [attendees] to the new and challenging array of ideas, tools and processes" so as "to develop for the 1966 campaign a reservoir of available personnel who are trained in modern campaign techniques" (RNC *News Release*, December 1, 1965; Ray Bliss, December 2, 1965; box 91, "Education and Training—Campaign Seminars, 1965-1966," Bliss papers).

To complement the training of campaign managers, the party also launched a series of "special" workshops with the help of the Research and Public Relations Divisions tailored to state research and public relations directors. The party also sponsored a series of "Big City" workshops, targeted computer data-processing seminars as well as over 70 statewide and congressional district meetings between RNC officials and the party rank and file as part of its "Count-Down to '66" initiative (Huckshorn 1994). Like the management trainings, the specialized research and public relations workshops sought to instill in local party officials an appreciation for the importance of ongoing professional campaign training. "Perhaps . . . the most important accomplishment was to convince many that the Republican Party could not flourish, or . . . even survive," write John Bibby and Robert Huckshorn (1968), "without extensive professional research efforts" (227).

Party trainings were not new to the Republican Party. Bliss' own career, first as a party worker, and then as state chair, highlighted the ongoing training the Republican Party sought to provide its membership. A 1955 conference in Washington, DC, for instance, which focused on evolving media and communication technology helped Bliss, as the Ohio Republican chair, shape the state party's 1956 campaign strategy (Conklin 1955). The national party had also organized a traveling "School of Politics" beginning in the late 1940s. The first, organized during the run-up to the 1950 mid-term election, consisted of "team[s] of professional organizers,"

explains Ralph Goldman (1990), which were “sent, with the consent of state and county chairmen, into states and congressional districts where Republican candidates had lost or won by a 5 percent margin or less in 1948” (499).

Such training programs reflected a growing appreciation within the postwar Republican Party for the increasingly complex nature of campaigning. But none of these earlier initiatives compared in scope or sophistication to Bliss’ nationwide training programs. By the end of 1966 more than 500 state and county party officials, together with officials from 160 different cities, had benefited from the specialized trainings offered by the RNC. These numbers were dwarfed by the estimated 15,000 “party workers” who attended the statewide meetings beginning in July, 1966 (*The Republican*, 1966; Humphreys to Bliss, March 15, 1966, box 91, “Education and Training Division, 1965-1966”; “Staff Meeting: Workshops (State-Wide and District),” August 9, 1966, box 95, “RNC Staff Meetings, 1965-1966,” both in Bliss papers).

Bliss’ emphasis on party training, particularly in the cities, placed him squarely in line with party moderates when it came to where they thought the party’s energies should be directed (Klinkner 1995). Conservatives, on the other hand, saw the party’s future in the South, where Nixon had been warmly received and Goldwater had won five states that had never before voted Republican. Conservatives were also more interested in electing more Republicans to the House, rather than electing a Republican president, and thus saw little advantage to statewide strategies. Bliss would grapple with these regional and ideological tensions throughout his tenure in Washington. But for him, one thing was clear: building a service-oriented party, capable of professionally assisting candidates, necessitated an approach that was as strategic as it was ideological.

### **Party Research and Messaging**

Among the more dynamic aspects of the service concept was the support the party offered candidate-centered campaigns with message development and strategy. Since assuming office, Bliss had stressed the importance of cultivating a more compelling and nuanced image for the Republican Party, and he looked to the newly formed Republican Coordinating Committee, as well as the national Research and Public Relations Division to clarify what the party stood for. But for Bliss, this did not necessarily mean altering the party’s politics. The Goldwater campaign had demonstrated the weakness of a highly ideological approach to party messaging, but it had also reflected the growing power of the party’s right wing (Brennan 1995). Bliss did not challenge the right’s influence. Instead, he and the party leadership sought to distill the conservative broadside against Democratic liberalism

that had characterized the Goldwater campaign down to a more targeted message in 1966 and 1968, namely, prices, spending and crime.

By the 1960s, the importance of ongoing research and analysis to party competitiveness had been well understood by several generations of Republican Party leaders. The party had had a separate Research Division at the RNC since 1936. And, as recently as 1957, then RNC chair Meade Alcorn had described the Research Division, in his review of all party divisions, as “absolutely essential,” and thus necessary regardless of any planned restructuring (see Cotter and Bibby 1980, 8). However, like other aspects of the national Republican Party apparatus earlier in the century, the party’s research function reflected the intermittent nature of the party-building process. The objectives of party research rarely changed, but the resources committed to the task, as well as the support of the leadership did fluctuate (Goldman 1990).

As part of his party-building efforts, Bliss hoped to make the research process a more permanent feature of the party’s overall operations. Providing candidates with detailed information, particularly updated polling data, on their opponent, their district, and the popularity of specific ideas was central to the service concept. For a party hoping to recover from the mistakes of 1964, as well as to respond to new political challenges and opportunities, such a need was urgent. This was especially true in 1966, as the national political landscape began to shift dramatically, particularly for the ruling Democratic majority.

Where a solid majority had once stood in support of the Democratic leadership, fissures had begun to develop within the broad New Deal coalition. The Vietnam War surfaced as the number one foreign policy issue, and at home concerns about inflation and the pace of civil rights reforms were beginning to test the public’s patience with the ruling Democratic majority (Edsall and Edsall 1990; Rieder 1989). The party’s own polling indicated that among registered Democrats who had voted for Johnson in 1964, 57 percent disagreed with current government spending levels, while roughly 60 percent disapproved of how the White House was handling both rising inflation and increases in the cost of living (Kesaris 1986, 88, 5:0425) By emphasizing the issues of prices, spending, and crime in 1966, and again in 1968, the party hoped to politically exploit these emerging cleavages.

The centerpiece of the Republicans’ public relations plan was a newly expanded national communications platform subdivided into the mediums of radio, TV and newspaper advertising. Led by Fred Morrison in close collaboration with Robert McCormick and the Republican Coordinating Committee, the plan called for a retooling of the party’s overall communication infrastructure to support several new programs. This included an expanded weekly wire and newspaper service as well as the launch of a national radio

program. The party's communication strategy also introduced an unprecedented level of coordination between RNC headquarters in Washington and the state parties. To ensure that candidates were aware of the evolving Republican message, the party erected a "network of communication between the headquarters office and headquarters offices in the states," explained RNC Public Relations director, Fred Morrison. A new national Telex-Teltex computer system, for example, was developed to "link the National Committee both with State Headquarters and with leading news outlets throughout the country" (Kesaris 1986, 130, 4:907-909). As were a number of so-called "idea councils," which brought together state and national party personnel with policy and academic experts to help match Republican rhetoric and RCC policy work with local political conditions (Bob Smalley to Bliss, April 5, 1965, box 80, "Memos and Plans, 1965-1966," Bliss papers).

Bliss' service party rested on the broad, national centralization and professionalization of party resources and activities. Leading this effort were the separate RNC national divisions, notably, Education and Training, Research, and Public Relations which provided the training, information and expertise at the center of the service project. But, Bliss' vision of a more integrated and professional service party would have been impossible without the consolidation of another key party function: fundraising. Bliss' objectives were ambitious and expensive. As one Bliss aide commented, "his brick-by-brick rebuilding of the party . . . has got to be cemented together with money" (see Pincus 1966, 73). Success, then, hinged upon bringing some order to the party's chaotic finances.

### **Coordinating Party Finances**

After an exhaustive national search in spring 1965, Bliss appointed Wall Street banker, and retired Army General Lucius Clay to head the National Republican Finance Committee. From the start, Clay and Bliss spoke with essentially one voice about party fundraising: it had to be unified at the national level under the direction of the National Republican Finance Committee. Bliss' expanded programming depended on it. This was, of course, easier said than done. After the 1964 election, which had been a mixed blessing for the party financially, the RNC and congressional committees returned to the practice of raising money independently of each other. Goldwater had been able to briefly unify party fundraising, through a variety of innovative tactics. His defeat, along with the sudden departure of the party chair, destroyed not only what unity had been achieved, but further fractionalized overall party fundraising. The RNC, for example, was left with control over only a small percentage of party money (Evans and Novak

1965a; Pincus 1966; William Middendorf to Ray Bliss, May 4, 1965, box 120, "RCB's File, 1965-1967," Bliss papers).

In order to institutionalize his idea of the RNC as the service hub of a rebuilt national Republican Party, Bliss had to reassert more control over party finances. The national party had frequently depended on, and had thus been beholden to state party contributions to finance its operations. To achieve any level of organizational autonomy for the RNC, the national committee had to at a minimum raise more of its own money, and if possible oversee the consolidation of all national party fundraising. "For the Republican Party to regain its historic position," Clay explained in his first appeal letter, "it must have a sound organization and a healthy financial structure." This meant, he continued, "establish[ing] a single source of fundraising" at the national level (Lucius Clay, June 22, 1965, box 120, "RCB's File, 1965-1967," Bliss papers).

Despite the opposition he would face, Bliss' idea of a more centralized fundraising scheme had, like his training and research programs, been attempted before within the party. Not only did Republicans routinely out-raise and out-spend Democrats, the party had also pioneered several new fundraising strategies over the course of the century. Chief among them was centralized fundraising. The concept was first employed on a national scale by the acclaimed late nineteenth century party chair, Mark Hanna. While managing William McKinley's 1896 presidential campaign, Hanna developed a fundraising system that effectively consolidated all national party fundraising into a single program administered by the RNC. The program relied on a national network of "finance committees in all the states," explains Raymond La Raja (2008), "each with a set of quotas to raise funds" (31). The primary targets of Hanna's fundraising appeals were "business firms," writes La Raja (2008), which he "assessed . . . for a fixed amount based on their total capital" (30). Both the centralized nature of Hanna's program as well as his policy of yearly, fixed assessments were unprecedented in American politics. The success of Hanna's initiative, which raised almost twice the amount of money spent by the party in the previous presidential campaign, effectively transformed how money was raised within the Republican Party. It also helped elevate the status of the RNC within national party affairs.

The party continued to rely on a centralized fundraising apparatus similar to the structure developed by Hanna for much of the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hays' successful fundraising effort during the 1920 presidential race, for instance, featured state-quotas as well as paid professional fundraisers coordinated by the RNC (Goldman 1990). The program raised nearly two million dollars before Harding was even nominated at the party's 1920 summer convention. A more nationally integrated structure was also at the

center of John Hamilton's broad-based retooling of the party's fundraising apparatus in the mid-1930s. In an effort to consolidate party fundraising, Hamilton created the RNC's Finance Division, in addition to the party's first national sustaining membership program. Hamilton also oversaw a fledgling attempt to integrate RNC fundraising with that of the congressional campaign committees (Goldman 1990). A series of new campaign finance laws in the 1940s compelled the party to decentralize many of its fundraising programs. But, after its loss of the White House in 1960, and with its ready access to large donors, the party again launched a sustaining membership program in the early 1960s.

Each of these programs offered Bliss a clear model of how party fundraising could be more successfully centralized. This was particularly true of the party's revised sustaining membership program. Begun in 1962, under the direction of then-party chair, William Miller, and his deputy, William Warner, the program was an immediate success, and quickly became one of the party's principal sources of revenue. During its first year of operation, the program brought in \$700,000; in 1963, it netted \$1.1 million. But it really took off after the Goldwater nomination when the campaign mailed nearly 15 million letters and raised almost \$6 million (Evans and Novak 1965a; Klinkner 1995, 79; Pincus 1966, 72).

Despite the disruption caused by Goldwater's loss, Bliss and Clay were able to quickly pick up where the campaign left off. In 1965, the RNC was able to raise \$4.2 million dollars, of which \$1.7 million, or roughly 40 percent, came from sustaining membership contributions. Taken together, it was, as Clay correctly predicted, "the largest sum of money ever collected by the Republican Party in a non-election year" (Kesaris 1986, 53, 5:0054). And "real proof," he continued, that "the Republican Party is still very, very much alive" (Kesaris 1986, 53, 5:0054). This was especially noteworthy given the ongoing competition within the party for small contributions. The RNCC, for example, had established its own direct mail operation, with Warner's assistance, shortly after the 1964 election, along with a new \$1000 "Booster" program.

### **1966 Election**

As a result of Bliss' party-building work, the Republicans entered the 1966 general election well organized, trained, and financed. The party had rebuilt its headquarters, established fledgling but productive relationships with the states, recruited a broad cross-section of candidates, and started a generational process of training the Republican rank and file in the "nuts and bolts" of professionalized campaign management.

The party was also generally unified. Having appealed to the professional goal of rebuilding the party, rather than pursuing any substantive political reforms, Bliss and the Republican leadership were able to successfully mitigate much of the bitter ideological infighting that had consumed the party after the Goldwater loss. In his work on post-war liberal Republicanism, Nicol Rae (1989) identifies several distinct Republican factions, including liberal progressives and moderates, and conservative fundamentalists and stalwarts. Reflecting broader changes in the post-war electoral system, including the ideological polarization of parties, and the increasingly candidate-centered nature of campaigns, such divisions, he explains, also began to be as much about ideology as they were about the strategic application of ideology. The progressives and fundamentalists were more purist and the moderates and stalwarts favored a more tactical or professional approach.

Bliss not did ignore these divisions, or the associated policy disputes. But rather than attempt to resolve these conflicts by either identifying with a particular faction, or by trying to reform the party politically, Bliss relied on a strategy of enlisting the support of the various party elements for the professional goal of making the party more competitive through organizational renewal. Of course, not all liberal or conservative activists, especially among progressives and fundamentalists, supported the goal of professionalizing the party. The opposition was ultimately short-lived, however, owing in large part to Bliss' decidedly non-ideological leadership, which made it easier for both groups to embrace a party-wide rebuilding effort.

Of course, all of this did not bode well for the Democrats. Despite its advantages in incumbency and registration numbers, the 1966 election highlighted not only that the Democratic Party was in trouble, but that the Republican Party was quickly on the road to recovery. Burdened by the challenges of an escalating war in Vietnam, the civil rights struggle in the south, and a souring economy, President Johnson had effectively ignored what his party managers, led by Marvin Watson, were unable to see: the once powerful Democratic Party coalition was beginning to implode.

Taken together, the GOP's reorganization and the Democrat's distress afforded the Republicans a unique opportunity in 1966 to rebound from its losses in 1964. And, a mere two years after its sweeping losses in 1964, and at a time when only 27 percent of registered voters were Republican, the Republican Party won forty-seven seats in the House, three in the Senate, and eleven new governorships in states as diverse as California, Florida, Ohio and Massachusetts. In the House, it was the party's largest single-year gain since 1942. It was a remarkable comeback, given the party's diminished state after the 1964 election, and it followed several upset victories in 1965,



including John Lindsay's election as mayor of New York City and the victory of Arlen Specter as District Attorney in Philadelphia.

Bliss' "Big City" push played a significant role in the party's success, as did his open support for both conservative and liberal candidates. The party experienced major gains in urban areas throughout the North. In city after city, the party either radically reduced its margin of defeat or actually carried the city. Volpe won Boston, for example, in his successful bid for Massachusetts Governor. "It has been years since any Republican has carried Boston," Bliss exclaimed at the time. In Detroit, Romney reduced a 207,000 vote deficient in 1962 to a mere 37,000 votes. And, in Los Angeles, Reagan carried the city by a stunning 135,000 votes. Taken together, these results demonstrated that Bliss' gamble on the nation's big cities, where Democratic rule had gone largely uncontested in the past bore fruit in 1966.

Ideologically, the election results again demonstrated the growing power of party conservatives, but also the continued prominence of liberal Republicans. The conservatives, for instance, boasted of the election of Ronald Reagan and Claude Kirk as governor in California and Florida, respectively, as well as the reelection of Senators John Tower and Strom Thurmond. Moderates, however, welcomed three new members to the Senate—Edward Brooke, Charles Percy and Mark Hatfield—and saw Rockefeller reelected as governor of New York by 400,000 votes. It was another testament to Bliss' efforts at non-ideological, bi-partisan leadership. The new chair "worked just as hard for a Reagan as he did for a Romney or Rockefeller," explained John Chamberlain (1966).

### **Bliss' Legacy**

Despite the uncertainty that initially surrounded his project, Bliss' policies had an immediate impact on the party. Not only was the bitter factional conflict that had threatened to fracture the party after the 1964 election largely neutralized, but the party was able to rebound in 1966. In addition to the party's electoral gains, Bliss' push to institutionalize a more service-oriented national committee accelerated a trend toward staff growth and permanency at the RNC. Whereas staffing levels for both parties had previously fluctuated with each election cycle, permanent staff at the RNC steadily increased during Bliss' tenure without any cyclical periods of decline (Cotter and Bibby 1980). Such organizational continuity can also be seen in the growth and consolidation of the national committee's fundraising programs. After raising a record \$1.7 million in 1965, the RNC's sustaining membership program brought in \$3.3 million in 1966, and \$3.5 million in 1967 (Alexander 1976).

Despite Nixon's repudiation of much of Bliss' party-building work, the Nixon presidency slowed, but did not completely reverse the trend toward party organizational sustainability. At first, Nixon's candidacy actually reinforced the party-building process, when Nixon chose to retain Bliss after the convention and to turn to the party for both financial and logistical help in the general election. The RNC diverted a million dollars to the campaign immediately following the convention, and ran a national voter registration program parallel to the campaign. However, the locus of power within the party did shift to the White House following the election, and the scope of RNC activities reflected the change. But the party nonetheless remained active. National party staffing numbers, for example, continued to grow under Nixon, from 184 in 1968 to 191 in 1969 (Cotter and Bibby 1980). As did the sustaining membership fund: it raised over \$3 million dollars in 1970, after a low of \$2.1 million in 1969, and then continued to grow, reaching \$5.2 million by 1972 (Alexander 1976). In fact, after reaching the party's yearly fundraising goal for 1972 in July, RNFC staffers were re-assigned to the campaign where they raised money directly for the president's reelection (Alexander 1976).

In the end, what most adversely affected the party during Nixon's presidency was the fall-out from the Watergate scandal, which led to the president's resignation in August 1974. Party fundraising dropped precipitously in 1973, and with it went nearly 25 percent of national party staff (Alexander 1976). But party fundraising and staffing levels quickly recovered after Nixon, owing in large measure to the revival of Bliss' centralized model of party organization beginning under Mary Smith, and then continuing during the chairmanship of Bill Brock and Frank Fahrenkopf in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Aldrich 1995; Cotter and Bibby 1980; Herrnson 2002, 1988). By 1977, notes Longley (1980), the party had a stable on- and off-year staff of 220 fulltime employees. For each of these chairs, Bliss' service model offered a return to the successful party building process that had enabled the party to rebound from its 1964 losses and then helped Nixon get elected. This was particularly true for Brock.

When Bill Brock assumed the chairmanship shortly after Ford lost the presidency to a virtually unknown Democratic opponent, he revived Bliss' model of centralized organization. As party chair, Brock oversaw a bold reorganization of a national party apparatus that closely paralleled Bliss' service structure in terms of its emphasis on improved state and national coordination, expanded direct-mail fundraising, and the creation of a more permanent, professional national party headquarters. Like Bliss, Brock turned much of the national party's attention back to the state and local level, where both chairs understood any chance for long term recovery had to begin. Brock even took the unprecedented step of creating an entirely new

RNC division dedicated to state and local races, which in advance of the 1978 election put paid, full time party organizers and regional field directors in targeted states across the country. The program offered candidates a range of services, from direct financial support to detailed district profiles and voter lists to access to the party's national "Rep Net" computer database. Brock supported this expanded programming with a massive investment in the party's signature direct mail membership program, which brought in a record \$42 million in 1980 (Klinkner 1994; Reichley 1985).

Equally significant to the long-term success of Bliss', and then Brock's service approach to party-building was the support it received from both Presidents Reagan and Bush (Hames 1994; Huckshorn 1994). Reagan would take the unusual step as a new president of promoting Brock, a party reformer, rather than demoting him after the election. He had already defended Brock's approach to party organizing when calls to replace Brock came after the 1980 convention. Following Reagan's appointment of Brock as his US Trade Secretary, Reagan named several party chairs committed to ongoing party building. Frank Fahrenkopf, for instance, took over at the RNC in 1983, and led the party for the remainder of Reagan's presidency. Fahrenkopf understood, as Bliss and Brock had, the importance of continuous party organizing, and maintained, as Bibby (1994) notes, many of Brock's service-related initiatives, notably, programs that provided direct financial and logistical aid to state-level candidates.

Electurally, however, the Bliss service party did not engender the same level of sustainability. Though Bliss' programs did produce immediate electoral dividends in 1966, and again in 1968, they did not translate into an electoral majority. By 1969, when Bliss stepped down after four years as party chair, the party had made major gains at every level of competition. Nixon carried thirty-two states in 1968, including California, Ohio, and Illinois, compared to only six in 1964. In Congress, there were now 192 Republican House members and forty-three Senators, the largest Republican delegations since 1956. At the state level, fourteen new Republican governors had been elected since 1964. There were now thirty-one, more than the party had had since 1920. Republicans also controlled twenty-one state legislatures, a gain of fourteen since 1964, and the most since 1954. Ninety-seven new Republican mayors had also been elected in the last four years (Alexander 1971).

But the party was unable to maintain this momentum. The Republicans would lose forty-eight seats in the House in the disastrous 1974 mid-term election, and its share of governors dropped sharply in the early 1970s. Moreover, it would not win a majority in the Senate until 1980 and in both houses until 1994.

In the end, while a service model did not immediately translate into electoral victory or majority, it did provide a means of sustaining the party organizationally regardless of electoral outcome. Indeed, more than anything else, what ensured the longevity of Bliss' party-building efforts was the strategic and financial advantage that came from maintaining a service-oriented national party. Even when in control of the White House, the party remained a highly efficient way to both raise and distribute money, to communicate and work with the states, to mobilize the rank and file in down ballot races, and to negotiate the country's increasingly complex campaign finance laws. The service party concept was at the center of the party's rapid recovery in the late 1970s, and would serve a similar role in the 1980s, when the party continued to grow at a phenomenal rate.

### Conclusion

When Ray Bliss accepted the chair of a defeated and demoralized Republican Party in 1965, he assumed a role nearly as uncertain as the survival of the party itself. That Bliss or anyone else could rebuild the Grand Old Party after the 1964 loss was doubted by many Republican officials, as well as by most seasoned political observers (Evans and Novak 1965b). "Poor Mr. Bliss," intoned William F. Buckley (1965), shortly after the new chair's arrival in Washington (630). "He is expected to accomplish what on a sublimer level even Pope John XXII could only hope to accomplish" (Buckley 1965, 630).

But the doubts did not end with the party. As Cornelius Cotter and Bernard Hennessy's (1964) seminal work asserted just the year before, the national committees were widely regarded as representing "politics without power." The national party chair is a "powerless and shadowy figure," wrote Evans and Novak (1965c), "who spends his time mouthing political homilies when his party is out of the White House and doing whatever the President orders when the party is in power" (3).

Just as Cotter and Hennessy wrote, however, the national committees began to take on added importance and power within American politics. Indeed, writes John Green (1994), "hardly was *Power Without Politics* in print than there began a major transformation of the national committees" (1). Spurred mostly by heightened competition in the mid-1960s, as well as the rise of candidate-centered campaigning as well as in the overall costs of modern, poll and television-driven politics, the parties began to change. The resulting change tended to involve either reforms of the expressive or procedural aspects of party activity or the operational and organizational side. They entailed, in other words, what Paul Herrnson (1994) has aptly described as either party reform or renewal. For Republicans, the change

came sooner, following closely on the heels of the Goldwater loss, and was primarily organizational in nature. The Democrats would also experience change later in the decade, though it would mostly involve procedural changes and other attempts to improve the party's "expressive" rather than organizational functioning.

Bliss' service party was the consequence of the push for organizational renewal within the Republican Party in the mid-1960s. Though scholars have questioned the impact of Bliss' leadership, his concept of a more centralized and professionally managed service party fundamentally altered the party's core mission. Periodic attempts had been made before, frequently following a defeat, to organize the Republican Party around a more nationally integrated party structure. Bliss' service party was the first such program to be fully institutionalized within the Republican Party. What distinguished Bliss' work was not only the scope, sophistication of his service concept, but its lasting impact on subsequent party-building. The outcome of Bliss' work was a party that not only grew, but achieved a new level of organizational continuity over time.

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