

Stephen Bannon's Southern strategy and the Alabama Republican primary

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In recent days, the right-wing web site *Breitbart News* has effectively transformed itself into a campaign platform for US Senate hopeful Roy Moore in advance of today's Alabama Republican Party run-off primary. Last week, the web site published roughly 50 articles supporting Moore and attacking his opponent, incumbent Luther Strange, who was appointed to the seat Jeff Sessions vacated when he became Donald Trump's attorney general in February.

This is a calculated political maneuver by *Breitbart*, its Executive Chairman Stephen Bannon and their multi-billionaire backers. Their aim is to build a mass Southern base for a fascist movement independent of the two-party system.

The election accentuates the divisions between Bannon and the Trump administration and points to a growing crisis within the Republican Party. Trump and the leadership of the Republican Party support Strange, a former Alabama attorney general, while Bannon and a number of prominent far-right figures (including Sarah Palin, Sean Hannity, Ann Coulter, David Horowitz and Trump's own Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson) back Moore.

Both the White House and *Breitbart* are sending key supporters to campaign as the election draws to a close. President Trump spoke in support of Strange before a large crowd in Huntsville on Friday night and Bannon headlined a rally for Moore yesterday. Sebastian Gorka, another former Trump aide who now works at *Breitbart*, campaigned for Moore on Thursday.

Since leaving the White House in August, Bannon has issued cautious criticisms of Trump. When Trump indicated his willingness to deal with the Democratic leadership on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) immigration program, *Breitbart* ran the banner headline "Amnesty Don."

Though *Breitbart* and Trump are formally opposed to one another in the election, they are not working at political cross purposes. In his Huntsville speech Friday, Trump referred to both Strange and Moore as "good men." He said he wondered whether he "shouldn't be doing this, shouldn't be involved in a primary," adding that he would work for Moore if Strange lost the primary.

Trump also used his Huntsville speech to lash out at football players demonstrating against police violence by kneeling during the national anthem. In an effort to whip up racist and nationalist elements, Trump called players "sons of bitches" for protesting and urged the National Football League to fire players for kneeling. *Breitbart* has lavished praise on Trump's comments and

denounced the NFL for lack of patriotism and insufficient support for the police. One article yesterday was titled "The NFL hates America: 9 pieces of proof."

Nevertheless, Bannon has backed Moore because the primary contest accentuates the split in the Republican Party and because Bannon hopes Moore's candidacy can form a populist bridge between *Breitbart* and tens of millions of evangelical Christians.

Moore, the son of an impoverished construction worker, went to West Point and was a military police officer during the Vietnam War. Hated by the men under his command for his gung-ho militarism, he slept on sandbags for fear that soldiers would kill him by rolling a grenade under his bunk, a practice known as "fragging."

After the war, Moore went to law school and entered private practice before becoming a prosecutor. He ran for circuit judge as a Democrat in 1982 and 1986, losing both times. He switched party affiliation in the late 1980s and was appointed to a judgeship. He received the support of the powerful and well-funded Christian Family Association, which drafted him to run for chief justice of the state Supreme Court in 2000, an election he won.

Moore gained national attention in 2003 for placing a two-ton statue of the Ten Commandments outside the Alabama Supreme Court building. He disobeyed a federal court ruling ordering that the statue be taken down because it violated the First Amendment's proscription against state endorsement of religion and religious groups. Backed by the Christian right leader Jerry Falwell, he called demonstrations that numbered in the thousands.

Moore was removed from office for violating the federal court order, but was reelected in 2012 with the support of leaders of the Christian neo-Confederate League of the South. Between terms on the state's highest court, he ran for governor twice, losing badly in the 2006 and 2010 party primaries.

In January 2016, Moore ordered local probate judges to refuse marriage licenses to same-sex couples, a move for which he was removed as chief justice (though not from the court itself) in April 2017 by a special review board comprised of retired judges. In February 2017, he appeared on the radio program of a pastor who advocates the death penalty for LGBT people. He has called homosexuality "abominable, detestable, unmentionable." Also in February, he said the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 took place because of efforts to "legitimize" sodomy and abortion.

On September 17, he told a crowd: "Now we have Blacks and Whites fighting, Reds and Yellows fighting, Democrats and

Republicans fighting, men and women fighting. What's going to unite us? What's going to bring us back together? A president? A Congress? No. It's going to be God."

In the same speech, Moore said road rage, murder and political corruption were punishments wrought by God for "the awful calamity of abortion, sodomy [and] perverse sexual behavior."

Just days before the Alabama primary vote, Moore leads Strange by between 5 and 15 points in an election dominated by evangelical voters. If Moore wins the primary as expected, polls show him leading the Democratic candidate, Doug Jones, by 3 to 4 points. Jones is a former US attorney who prosecuted the two surviving Ku Klux Klan members responsible for the 1963 Birmingham church bombing that killed four African-American children. A general election match-up between Moore and Jones therefore makes for a natural link between Bannon's candidate and neo-Confederate, Nazi and Klan elements.

The corporate media has billed Tuesday's primary run-off as a bellwether of Bannon's ability to mobilize far-right primary challengers to Republican incumbents. While the vote will be an indication of Bannon's ability to follow through on his threat to wage "war" on the Republican Party in the 2018 midterm elections, Bannon's move involves more than a mere electoral tactic. His all-out support for Moore is part of a strategy to strengthen his far-right network's ties to powerful evangelical church organizations and to tens of millions of evangelical voters below the Mason-Dixon line.

Bannon is following divisions that are emerging within evangelical denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention, an organization with 15 million members that nearly split in March between pro- and anti-Trump factions, the latter representing many of the church's African-American followers. Bannon has also launched attacks on the Catholic Church, of which he is a devout member, for appealing to "illegal immigrants." He thereby hopes to win over more reactionary Irish and Italian factions within the US Church leadership.

Bannon is well aware of the history of southern populism and its right-wing nativist and racist currents. In *Devil's Bargain: Steve Bannon, Donald Trump, and the Storming of the Presidency*, Joshua Green writes that Bannon has long seen southern religious voters as ripe for conversion to an independent far-right movement.

Bannon blames the Republican Party for what he feels was a hesitancy to appeal to bigotry and backwardness among southern religious voters. He "thought that the South—populist, patriotic, pro-military, and skeptical of immigration—was in fact the [Republican] party's salvation," Green notes.

Green explains that in 2013 Bannon met with Sessions and the latter's advisor, Stephen Miller, to encourage Sessions to run for president. Bannon said, "We can bill you as the agrarian populist and take trade and immigration and pull them toward the top of the party's issue list." He hoped, in this way, to either transform the Republican Party or break off the right wing. Bannon said, "Five, ten years from now—different party. You're going to have a workers' party."

Bannon's use of the term "agrarian populist" indicates a familiarity with figures such as Tom Watson, a Populist Party

congressman from Georgia who was the party's vice presidential nominee on the 1896 ticket headed by William Jennings Bryan, who was nominated by both the Democrats and the Populists that year.

An agrarian populist who initially advocated radical land redistribution and racial unity among the poor, Watson became a standard bearer of populist reaction, adopting a viciously racist, anti-Catholic and anti-socialist platform in the early 1900s. He was involved in whipping-up anti-Jewish sentiment in the pages of his Georgia newspaper *The Jeffersonian*, leading to the lynching of Leo Frank in 1915, an act he praised on the grounds that Jews were to blame for poverty in the working class.

Bannon is also aware of the tradition of the Know Nothings, an anti-immigrant party aimed at maintaining Protestant domination in the US in the mid-19th century.

It is the legacy of populist figures such as Watson that Bannon seeks to revitalize today. But despite the size of *Breitbart's* readership, Bannon has struggled to build a popular base of support for his fascistic brand of American nationalism.

There remains a profound democratic tradition in the American working class, which is more racially integrated and socially liberal, and less religious, than at any time in US history. But in the southern and plains states, evangelicals make up a powerful voting block, especially in Republican primaries.

According to Pew Research, evangelical Christians made up 26 percent of the electorate in 2016 and voted 81 percent to 16 percent for Trump. Aware of the social grievances held by many across the deeply impoverished South, Bannon and *Breitbart* are fighting to revive the methods of right-wing, Sunday Revival southern populism, with the Bible as their wedge.

The fact that a figure like Moore, who combines the views of David Duke and Billy Sunday, could be competitive to win a Senate election is an indication that the Republican Party is threatened with destruction by its own Frankenstein monster. No serious opposition to this will come from a Democratic Party that has long pandered to religious backwardness and overseen, alongside its Republican counterpart, the continued economic immiseration of the American South.



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