

*Nut Country: Right-Wing Dallas and the Birth of the Southern Strategy*

Edward H. Miller

The University of Chicago Press, 230 pp., \$25

## **Nut Country: From A(lger) to (Cru)Z**

*By Darwin Payne*

As *Air Force One* carried John F. Kennedy and his wife Jacqueline on that short hop from Fort Worth to Dallas on November 22, 1963, the president turned to her and made a never-forgotten comment on this last morning of his life. “We’re heading into nut country today,” he said. In his hands the frowning young president held the infamous full-page, [black-bordered advertisement](#) in that day’s *Dallas Morning News*, an ad that effectively labeled him a communist. In *Nut Country*, author Edward H. Miller portrays those Dallas “nuts” and, as his subtitle elaborates, poses a provocative connection: *Right-Wing Dallas and the Birth of the Southern Strategy*.

Who knew that those nuts, in all their conspiratorial notions, foreshadowed the so-called “[Southern strategy](#)” that Richard M. Nixon followed to achieve his razor-thin victory in 1968 (Barry Goldwater having laid the groundwork four years earlier). Miller, beginning with those 1963 nuts and their antics, carries the story to the next level—how these conservatives (well, ultra-conservatives) transformed the beliefs of so many Dallasites into ballot box victories, and set a pattern for GOP successes throughout the once-Democratic Solid South that persists to this day, its latest permutation being the Tea Party.

First, let’s remind ourselves of a few of those best-known nuts who were making national headlines from Dallas in the early ‘60s. Army Major General [Edwin A. Walker](#) moved to the more hospitable clime of Dallas after resigning under pressure from his military commission because he introduced an ultra-conservative program to his troops and urged them to read John Birch Society literature. Fundamentalist preacher [W. A. Criswell](#), pastor of Dallas’s huge First Baptist Church (the Rev. Billy Graham was a proud member), said, among other things, that the election of a Catholic president would bring an end to religious freedom in America. The famous and wealthy oilman [H. L. Hunt’s](#) crude novel *Alpaca* advocated giving extra votes to those who paid the most taxes, and he sponsored numerous ultra-conservative broadcast programs and publications. [Bruce Alger](#) became in 1954 the first Republican congressman from Texas in many years, and was the only representative to vote against the school lunch program

for children, calling it “socialized milk” (the measure passed by a 348 to 1 vote). *Dallas Morning News* publisher [Edward M. “Ted” Dealey](#), at a White House reception, told President Kennedy to get off Caroline’s tricycle and act like a real man on horseback. [Frank McGehee](#), founder of the rabidly anti-communist National Indignation Committee, packed the auditorium with zealots when UN ambassador Adlai Stevenson spoke on UN Day in 1963, attempted to keep him from speaking, and assaulted him afterwards in the parking lot. Less than a month later the president was assassinated a few blocks away.

These ’60s extremists shared a fundamentalist belief in the literal interpretation of the Bible as a guide for contemporary politics, and they didn’t hesitate to say so. Racist convictions were sometimes blatant but often semi-disguised in coded language. Inevitably, there was an unquestioned acceptance of the inherent wisdom of unfettered private enterprise, and a universal belief that states’ rights were being usurped by a power-hungry federal government. A widely-held conviction was that Earl Warren and his Supreme Court were usurping traditional American values (remember the “Impeach Earl Warren” signs along the highways?). If that sounds like an earlier version of Ted Cruz’s political platform, ‘tis no accident. Cruz is a lineal descendant of Walker and Alger, Dealey and McGehee.

Several factors made “Big D” especially receptive to ultra-conservative politics. In the 1952 presidential campaign, Democratic nominee Adlai Stevenson took the side of the federal government in contending that oil-rich tidelands off the coast of Texas belonged to the nation instead of the state. The Republican candidate, Dwight D. Eisenhower, favored state ownership. This issue was the proverbial last straw that prompted Texas Governor Allan Shivers to bolt from the party of Jefferson and Jackson; he was joined by a majority of Texans in both the 1952 and 1956 presidential elections, thus bringing an end to Texas’s role as a certain Democratic vote in the electoral college. Another milestone occurred when new President Lyndon B. Johnson revealed that he was no conservative when it came to civil rights, greatly hastening the exit of conservatives from the Democratic Party and to an embrace of the newly revived and increasingly right-wing GOP. Still, it took decades for the Texas’s transformation to filter down to state and local races.

Still, the headline-makers of the late ‘50s and ‘60s generally lacked the organizational abilities or aptitudes to create a political strategy capable of producing votes at the ballot box. When the aforementioned Walker ran for the governorship in 1962, he finished a dismal sixth in the Democratic primary won by John Connally. How was political ascension precisely achieved in Dallas? The more difficult but less visible business of translating an ideology into electoral victories would be left to others. Their names do not ring bells for today’s readers, but they are aptly described by Miller.

A section in *Nut Country* entitled “The Housewife: Backbone of the GOP in Big D” summarizes the emergence in the 1950s of the hard-working, politically-minded women of Dallas who did so much of the grassroots work. They first became visible in 1954, when many of them joined 36-year-old Bruce Alger’s successful congressional campaign. His [stunning victory](#) was a political event that garnered national attention

because of what it heralded. Miller describes the well-dressed “coterie of Dallas debutantes” who walked precincts and made phone calls” in behalf of this “dashing, eloquent, and hard-working” candidate who told voters, “You elected Ike. Now support him. If you are for Ike, you are for me.” He coasted in every election until 1964, when he lost in the backlash over the Kennedy assassination. But until that special circumstance, Alger successfully capitalized on the reactionary sentiments of Dallas voters, who were antagonistic to school desegregation or forced integration of any kind, and opposed federal expansion and expenditures in the education realm. Alger’s success, notwithstanding his defeat in 1964, set the pattern for Republican hopefuls elsewhere in the South. Far from being an oxymoron, Dallas Republican, Miller argues, launched the two-party system in the formerly Solid South.

In Dallas, one of the organizations favored by the growing number of GOP women was the conservative Public Affairs Luncheon Club, whose speaker at the downtown Baker Hotel three days before President Kennedy’s fateful visit was Alabama Governor George Wallace. In the audience was Edwin A. Walker, who created a stir when he shoved a television newsman across a fully-loaded luncheon table. The national John Birch Society was also especially popular in Dallas, with as many as thirty-five chapters at its height. Founder [Robert Welch](#) was a frequent visitor to “Big D,” and the society’s American Opinion Bookstore offered a large collection of right-wing material. Another of the many organizations for Republican women was one opposing arms control negotiations entitled “80 Women from Dallas.”

Among the most active and effective Republican women in those days was Rita Bass, who helped establish the party’s institutional framework in Dallas, worked hard at organizing voter turnout, and served as a Republican precinct chairman while being the mother of four children. Her husband, Richard Bass, and his brother, Harry, both wealthy oilmen, added financial heft to the cause. (Rita later married William P. Clements, a two-term Republican governor of Texas). As Miller writes, Rita Bass turned from a Republican moderate into a right-wing activist under the influence of [Robert J. Morris](#), president of the University of Dallas, who was a prolific ultraconservative propagandist in intellectual clothing and background. Before entering academia, Morris had served two stints as chief counsel to the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, the Senate’s counterpart to the equally-controversial House Committee on Un-American Activities.

Male Dallasites also played an important role. Most influential of all in developing strategies, encouraging candidates for office, engaging himself on the national level of the Republican Party, and developing the Southern strategy was a conservative businessman and investor named Peter J. O’Donnell. Miller describes him this way: “While certainly no racist himself, he helped steer the party in a direction that would win elections by appealing to untapped white resentment, starting with the Dallas Republican Party and, finally, the national Republican Party.” The new GOP that O’Donnell championed favored positions dear to both fiscal conservatives and segregationists: states’ rights, lower taxes, and less government regulation.

This was the strategy that propelled [John Tower](#), with O'Donnell as his campaign manager (as he also had served Bruce Alger), into the US Senate during the 1961 special election to fill Lyndon Johnson's vacant seat. Tower, a professor at little known Midwestern University, was the first Republican senator from Texas since Reconstruction, a victory just as astounding as Alger's 1954 election. Afterwards, O'Donnell became state party chairman in Texas before he left Dallas temporarily for Washington, DC, to be chairman of the "Draft Goldwater Committee." In fact, in Miller's estimation, the "Goldwater phenomenon" of 1964, which resulted in the nomination of the most conservative candidate from the GOP since the New Deal, originated in Dallas County through the efforts of O'Donnell, Tower, and all three Basses, Richard, Rita, and Harry. Goldwater's ability to carry five Deep South states in the 1964 election, of course, was a harbinger of Nixon's Southern strategy.

Miller's *Nut Country* is a surprisingly authoritative and detailed study about Dallas's role in developing the strategy that realigned American politics, ending the New Deal coalition. It is reminiscent of a scholarly master's thesis or doctoral dissertation in style, which might limit its audience. And readers' unfamiliarity with many of the people portrayed—with the exception of well-known "nuts" such as Edwin A. Walker and H. L. Hunt—sometimes makes for tedious reading. But any serious student of American politics will find a gold-mine of new information.

One criticism that might be made of Miller's book is that his focus is limited strictly to Dallas. Brief comparisons with the political climates in a few other major Southern cities might have reinforced his thesis about the city's unique role. His repeated misspelling of the name of the most dominant individual in Dallas during these years, Republican mayor [Erik Jonsson](#) (as "Jonsson"), is an unfortunate distraction. Miller also doesn't quite come to grips with why Jonsson's reign of moderate Republicanism, under which Dallas thrived, didn't take hold and displace Alger's brand.

But if nothing else, *Nut Country* is extraordinary in that it reveals how the mind-set of ultra-conservative nuts half a century ago has evolved (or devolved) into the Tea Party, so dominant in the 2016 GOP campaign that it (along with the Donald Trump phenomena) poses a serious threat to the survival of the Republican Party.

Darwin Payne, professor emeritus of communications at Southern Methodist University, was a reporter for the *Dallas Times Herald* in the 1960s. He is the author of [Big D: Triumphs and Troubles of an American Supercity in the 20th Century](#).