

The evolving parties

When American politics turned European

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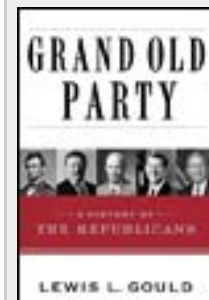
Distinguishing the donkey from the elephant

UNTIL 25 or 30 years ago, if you were asked to explain to an intelligent foreigner what were the issues that divided the Republican and Democratic parties in the United States, you would have had to explain that their divisions could be understood only in terms of the civil war and the Reconstruction in the 1860s and 1870s, of the blue and the grey, the “peculiar institution” and the bloody shirt. The Republicans preserved the Union and freed the slaves; the Democrats represented a Solid South that had not forgotten defeat and subsequent humiliation at Republican hands.

To be sure, there were always other important issues that went to define the principles and the platforms of both major parties. If the Republicans were the party of the Protestant business classes, from both Wall Street and Main Street, the Democrats were the party of “rum, Romanism and rebellion”, an alliance between upholders of states' rights and the southern way of life, with immigrants—often Catholic or Jewish—and unionised industrial workers. The Republicans were the party of the tariff, the Democrats of states' rights.

That being so, there was a tendency for the Republicans to

Grand Old Party: A History of the Republicans
By Lewis L. Gould



Random House; 588 pages; \$35

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Party of the People: A History of the Democrats
By Jules Witcover

going back to the birth of the Democrats (at first confusingly called the "Republicans") as the "French party" in the age of Jefferson and Madison, and to the origins of the Republicans in the need for a party that would oppose slavery without endorsing anti-immigrant prejudices in the new middle-west in 1854.

Mr Gould, whose career teaching history at the University of Texas included supervising President Bush's svengali, Karl Rove, has taken a broad historical approach. Jules Witcover, as a veteran political reporter and chronicler of presidential election campaigns, has focused more on the electoral fortunes of the Democrats. But both the Republican elephant and the Democratic donkey are well served by these handsome biographies.

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