

MAY 11

Political bluster and the filibuster

The battle over the filibuster is now one of the country's biggest political news stories. The Bush administration seems determined to change Senate rules so a simple majority of senators, instead of three-fifths, can cut off debate and force a vote on the president's judicial nominees. Both sides claim to be arguing for procedural principles.

But a Senate filibuster is not inherently good or bad. Throughout U.S. history, the meaning of the filibuster has always been a matter of political context. The merits have everything to do with what kind of nation people want.

During the 1950s and '60s, to anyone who supported civil rights legislation, "filibuster" was a very ugly word. In Washington, it was the ultimate maneuver for avian racists whose high-flown rhetoric accompanied their devotion to Jim Crow. The gist of many speeches and commentaries was that civil rights bills were part of an ominous plot against "states' rights" and sacred American traditions.

The names of many senators who fought for racial segregation – Russell, Stennis, Eastland, Ellender – are now displayed on federal buildings or U.S. Navy vessels. Such was the hallowed clout that Southern Democrats, usually champions of white supremacy, wielded in Washington during the middle third of the 20th century. Their political descendants migrated into the Republican Party, which today leads its congressional majority with a lot of white Southern politicians (DeLay, Frist and others) who, in turn, rely on white voters.

While considering how the right wing of the GOP depends on the South to maintain its current grip on the Senate and the White House, we may want to ponder something that Mississippi Gov. Paul Johnson said four decades ago at a rally of 10,000 people in Jackson.

It was the early summer of 1964, and Johnson was hosting a fellow segregationist governor, Alabama's George Wallace, who trumpeted the potential power of the South's electoral votes. During the joint appearance, Wallace opined that the 1954 Supreme Court decision for school desegregation was "ridiculous and asinine," adding

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that "any person who made such a ruling should have a psychiatric examination." And Gov. Johnson declared: "It's time the white people of our various states started bloc voting."

Today, although quite a few anti-racist and progressive white voters live in the South, they – along with the vast preponderance of black voters – are routinely on the losing side in lopsided statewide races and presidential contests. While it's certainly true that there's an abundance of personal and institutional racism in every state of the union, Southern states are home to the highest proportions of reactionary and bigoted whites. As a region, the South is the national stronghold for political agendas most hostile to the aspirations of African Americans and other people of color for economic justice, social equality and legal parity.

Now, Southern senators are prominent in leading the charge against the filibuster in clashes over nominees to the federal bench – warmups for senatorial struggles over Supreme Court nominations that are expected sooner rather than later. The outcome is likely to guide the direction of the nation's judiciary for decades to come. And journalism rarely seems capable of conveying the enormity of the implications.

To the extent that this political battle is framed as a test of wills between the Republican majority and Democratic minority in the Senate, journalists are missing the bigger story. Forty years after landmark civil rights bills became law, the codes for a non-discriminatory society are often trumped on the ground by countless realities of discrimination that will persist in the absence of legal remedies. Constitutional protections for racial minorities, gay people, and women – including their reproductive rights – are at stake. Overall, many civil liberties hang in the balance.

"Filibuster" sounds like a Washington word, and it is. But in 2005, this is not a Washington story – it's a story about the future of the United States. If the Bush forces are able to kill the filibuster, they will be a lot closer to transforming the judicial system of this country. It's hard to think of a story that less deserves to be reported merely as a dispute raging inside the Beltway.

Norman Solomon's latest book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," will be published in early summer. His columns and other writings can be found at: www.normansolomon.com