

**In the Game of Politics, Some Want to Outlaw 'Playing the Race Card'**  
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Washington. -- There is a new buzz word -- more accurately, a new buzz term -- in town: "playing the race card."

The "race card" is a "very attractive political tool," Sen. John C. Danforth, the Republican from Missouri, said in a July 11 speech on the Senate floor. But playing it "threatens the very fabric of this country," he said.

Just the day before, Sen. Bill Bradley, the Democrat from New Jersey, caught the attention of his congressional colleagues and the Washington media when he, too, went to the Senate floor to read what he called "an open letter to President Bush."

"Mr. President, this is a cry from my heart, so don't charge me with playing politics," Senator Bradley said. He added: "I'm asking you to take the issue of race out of partisan politics. . ."

And last week, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, an independent agency whose eight members are appointed through a partisan political process, voted unanimously to urge President Bush and the leaders of both Houses of Congress to "act decisively" before the 1992 elections to "prevent the use of irresponsible campaign tactics that only serve to divide the nation along racial lines."

It was clearly another plea -- mainly to Mr. Bush and the Republican party -- to put away the "race card."

The Willie Horton television commercials in the 1988 Bush campaign constituted the classic "race card" case -- or, put another way, the classic controversy over whether they constituted a "race card," since no politician was about to admit using a device aimed at fomenting racial division.

In any event, Bush campaign aides used a television commercial based on the Willie Horton case, and an allegedly independent campaign group ran one actually picturing the glowering, unshaven Horton, a black inmate of a Massachusetts prison who assaulted a Maryland couple while on furlough, to attack the furlough program of Massachusetts Gov. Michael S. Dukakis, Mr. Bush's Democratic opponent for the presidency.

Ever since, the Bush campaign team has been accused of "playing the race card" in that case. Mr. Bush and his Republican aides have insisted, however, that their ad was merely a way of depicting Governor Dukakis as an inept administrator with a overly permissive prison furlough program.

The "race card" controversy arose again last year, when Sen. Jesse Helms, the North Carolina Republican, used a television commercial to imply that affirmative-action programs approved by his opponent caused white job applicants to lose jobs to blacks.

None of the recent pleas against playing the "race card" were off-the-cuff acts. The Civil Rights Commission had worked on its letter since April in order to ensure that every member of the commission "bought into every word" of it, as the commission's chairman, Arthur A. Fletcher, a Bush appointee, put it.

Senator Bradley said in an interview that he picked up a yellow pad on a Saturday afternoon and wrote his speech in non-stop longhand. On July 16, he delivered what he called the "second half" of it at a news luncheon of the National Press Club. "What compels me to speak today," he said on that occasion, "is the state of race relations in America, which every day exacts terrible costs on all races and the nation."

Senator Danforth is the point man these days on two key issues in which race and politics threaten to

be a volatile mixture.

He is heading an effort by nine Republican senators to reach a compromise with the White House on a 1991 civil rights bill. And amid the controversy over President Bush's nomination of Judge Clarence Thomas for a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court, Senator Danforth has been acting as a kind of Senate guide for Judge Thomas, a close personal friend to whom the senator has been a political mentor for some 17 years.

With those qualifications, he was able to include everybody in his criticisms about the use of the "race card" -- Republicans and Democrats, whites and blacks, the White House and Congress.

The "race card," he said, "has been used by Republicans, has been used very recently by Republicans and has been advocated by Republicans."

That was a clear indication of his frustration over the civil rights bill, which aims to restore job-discrimination statutes diluted by Supreme Court decisions in 1988. It is Senator Danforth's second year of trying to reach a compromise; last year, his efforts fell to a veto of the bill by President Bush, who rejected the measure at that time as a "quota bill."

Mr. Bush's aides say that the president is prepared to do the same thing this year.

Senator Danforth said last week, however, that he and White House are only "one policy issue" away from a settlement of all their differences. The issue, he said, concerns the definition of "business necessity" -- the extent to which an employer may create qualifications for a job which have no bearing on an job applicant's ability to do the job.

"Now there's a philosophical question which doesn't have anything to do with quotas," Senator Danforth commented.

On Thursday, Senator Danforth met privately with President Bush to ask him to resolve personally the issue of "business necessity." Mr. Bush "listened attentively, took notes, and said he would consider it," Senator Danforth told reporters after the meeting.

A White House aide, however, told reporters she believed there were "several major policy issues" that remain unresolved on the civil rights bill.

Meanwhile, there have been reports that the president will veto -- or at least is being urged by his aides to veto -- any civil rights bill except his own, so that he would be free to "tar Democrats with the quota brush" as a means of winning some elections next year. That was the theme that seemed to work for Senator Helms last year.

That would be using the "race card," Senator Danforth said.

"But it is no less playing the race card for members of the Congressional Black Caucus to organize black politicians around the country to oppose a black judge who has been nominated for the Supreme Court on the basis that he does not have the 'right' ideology," the senator said in his July 11 speech.

"That is racial politics," he said. "That is divisive. And that is at least equally as dangerous as anything that is done with respect to a 'quota card.' "

The problem, however, is that one politician's "race card" may be another's winning hand.

The Civil Rights Commission proposed in its letter to Mr. Bush and the congressional leadership that they convene a "summit conference" of "major public officials," "the media" and "private citizens" to prepare "guidelines" for the proper conduct of the 1992 election campaigns.

But despite the bipartisan pleas of Mr. Danforth and Mr. Bradley against the "race card," there appeared

to be little optimism among Washington's political realists about the chances of such a conference to fashion a ban on the use of the "race card."

The commission's letter, however, would only have the conference adopt two "principles":

- \* A candidate should "make every effort to avoid even the appearance of the use of racial tactics" in the campaign.
  - \* A candidate should "advise his or her staff that they will be held personally accountable for any attempt to use race-baiting as a tactic."

Still, two of the commission's members, normally at opposite ends of the political spectrum, took similar views of the conference idea. Black liberal Mary Frances Berry described the idea as "ridiculous." Black conservative William A. Allen saw little hope for such a conference to come up with "guidelines" that would be acceptable all around.

In any event, there has been no response from the White House to the commission's proposal or to Senator Bradley's plea for decisive action.

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Photograph not included - photo cutline: Sen. John C. Danforth, R-Mo., left, outside the White House last year after meeting seeking a compromise on civil rights legislation.