Impossible, Ridiculous, Repugnant

By BOB HERBERT

A lot of people are upset over comments made on the radio by the former education secretary and guardian of all things virtuous, Bill Bennett.

A Republican who served in the Reagan cabinet, Mr. Bennett told his listeners: "I do know that it's true that if you wanted to reduce crime, you could - if that were your sole purpose - you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down."

After making the point that exterminating blacks would be a most effective crime-fighting tool, he quickly added, "That would be an impossible, ridiculous and morally reprehensible thing to do, but your crime rate would go down."

When I first heard about Mr. Bennett's comments, I wondered why anyone was surprised. I've come to expect racial effrontery from big shots in the Republican Party. The G.O.P. has happily replaced the Democratic Party as a safe haven for bigotry, racially divisive tactics and strategies and outright anti-black policies. That someone who's been a stalwart of that outfit might muse publicly about the potential benefits of exterminating blacks is not surprising to me at all.

Listen to the late Lee Atwater in a 1981 interview explaining the evolution of the G.O.P.'s Southern strategy:

"You start out in 1954 by saying, 'Nigger, nigger, nigger.' By 1968 you can't say 'nigger' - that hurts you. So you say stuff like forced busing, states' rights and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract now [that] you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites.

"And subconsciously maybe that is part of it. I'm not saying that. But I'm saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me - because obviously sitting around saying, 'We want to cut this,' is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than 'Nigger, nigger.'"

Atwater, who would manage George H. W. Bush's successful run for the presidency in 1988 (the Willie Horton campaign) and then serve as national party chairman, was talking with Alexander P. Lamis, a political-science professor at Case Western Reserve University. Mr. Lamis quoted Atwater in the book "Southern Politics in the 1990's."

The truth is that there was very little that was subconscious about the G.O.P.'s relentless appeal to racist whites. Tired of losing elections, it saw an opportunity to renew itself by opening its arms wide to white voters who could never forgive the Democratic Party for its support of civil rights and voting rights for blacks.

The payoff has been huge. Just as the Democratic Party would have been crippled in the old days without the support of the segregationist South, today's Republicans would have only a fraction of their current political power without the near-solid support of voters who are hostile to blacks.

When Democrats revolted against racism, the G.O.P. rallied to its banner.
Ronald Reagan, the G.O.P.'s biggest hero, opposed both the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of the mid-1960's. And he began his general election campaign in 1980 with a powerfully symbolic appearance in Philadelphia, Miss., where three young civil rights workers were murdered in the summer of 1964. He drove the crowd wild when he declared: "I believe in states' rights."

Bill Bennett's musings about the extermination of blacks in America (it would be "impossible, ridiculous ... morally reprehensible") is all of a piece with a Republican Party philosophy that is endlessly insulting to black people and overwhelmingly hostile to their interests.

But that white racist vote, once so important to the Democrats and now so important to the G.O.P., has been steadily shrinking. The U.S. is less prejudiced than it was 20 or 30 or 40 years ago, which is why George W. Bush had to try so hard to disenfranchise black voters in Florida in 2000; and why Jeb Bush had to call out the state police to try to intimidate black voters in Orlando, Fla., in 2004; and why Republicans in Georgia have come up with the equivalent of a poll tax (requiring people without a driver's license to pay $20 for a voter identification card), which will hurt poor, black and elderly voters.

Bill Bennett's twisted fantasies are a malignant outgrowth of our polarized past. Our job is to keep them from spreading into the future.