

GOP's Steele rejects Obama 'coat tailing' theory; Sets out to 'engage' Black community

Written by Hazel Trice Edney, NNPA Editor-in-Chief
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WASHINGTON (NNPA)— New Republican Party Chairman Michael Steele, the first African-American to hold the seat, rejects the notion that his Jan. 30 win was largely due to political “coat tailing” of the celebrated Barack Obama, America’s first Black president.

“I firmly believe that if Hilary Clinton had been the [Democratic] nominee and had won or Joe Biden or any of them, I think that it was a moment in time just as it was for Barack in which various things came together to create this moment,” Steele said in an interview with the NNPA News Service. “Now we will see what we do with it. Now we’ll see what we’ll both do with it.”

A widely-held belief is that the Republican strategy is now to glean from the Obama euphoria in order to win back defected Republicans and African-American votes in four years.

“While I congratulate Steele, I am also aware that it probably would never have happened if Barack Obama had not won the presidency,” wrote NNPA columnist Ron Walters. “So now that he is chair, the biggest question he confronts is how to turn around the strong perception that Republicans are actively opposed to Black interests. Steele himself said just after the recent election while campaigning for the office that Republican Party officials ‘just don’t give a damn’.”

Steele concedes that galvanizing the Republican vote enough to take back the White House in four years will be nearly impossible.

“It will be like climbing Mount Rushmore in a pair of shorts and a T-Shirt. It’s going to be very, very, very tough,” he said. “You’re fully exposed. And it’s a very difficult thing to do. You’re laid bare in many respects as a party because you’re trying to say, ‘Look, this is what we’ve done wrong in the past’.”

But, he actually believes it’s doable.

“They didn’t have Michael Steele,” he said.

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Known for his outspokenness, Steele said, “We did a lot of things that led the people to distrust our leadership.”

By that, he not only meant violating Republican principles of frugality and fiscal conservatism, but outrightly demonstrating the insensitivity toward Black concerns for which the Republican Party has gained a reputation.

“I got in trouble in 2006 when I ran for the Senate because I called out the failure of a Republican administration to appropriately and affectively deal with [Hurricane] Katrina,” Steele says. He lost that election despite his earlier win as Maryland’s first Black lieutenant governor.

Now, he says, he will use his outspokenness to start an energetic conversation within the largely southern white male party that he believes will attract others to the table.

Most Blacks were registered Republicans until Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “New Deal” from 1933-1938. As late as the early 1960s, it was not unusual for Republican candidates to get 30 percent of the Black vote, particularly moderate Republicans such as New York City Mayor John V. Lindsay and Connecticut Sen. Lowell Weicker.

A major turning point for the party and its relationship with African-Americans came when Republicans chose Sen. Barry Goldwater, an archconservative from Arizona, as its presidential candidate in 1964, smack in the middle of the civil rights movement. Goldwater ran on a states’ right platform, an overt attempt to court Southern segregationists. Only 6 percent of Blacks voted for Goldwater.

By contrast, 94 percent of African-Americans supported incumbent Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson, who was elected in a landslide. Since that time, Republicans have never received more than 15 percent of the Black vote. In 2000, George W. Bush received only 8 percent of the African-American vote, the weakest support a GOP nominee had received since Goldwater until the Obama election when the Republicans got about 2 percent of the Black vote. The more the GOP has shifted to the right, the less support it receives from African-Americans.

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Steele is determined to cause another shift.

“I’ve got to be the leader that will call the party to its great sense of self and its greater sense of responsibility to all communities,” he says, describing it as the “Courage of [my] convictions...You can do it if you believe it and you think it needs to be done.”

The key over the next four years, he says, will be the Republican Party’s ability to confess, “We’ve spent too much money, we’ve behaved irresponsibly once in leadership and then to look the voter in the eye and say we’ve learned from that.”

Steele will have help.

David Avella, executive director of the 30-year-old GOPAC, formerly chaired by Steele for two years, says the organization is gearing up to galvanize a “new generation of Republican leaders,” he describes.

“We have to, as a party, do a good job at training our candidates on how to connect with voters, how to make sure their message is getting to voters across their districts or across their states,” says Avella, “We’ve got to do a good job on training them how to run winning campaigns, how to do the fundamentals, how to raise the money, how to put together door to door campaigns...We don’t have to just do that with Black Republicans. We have to do that with all Republicans.”

Avella adds, “I will do whatever Chairman Steele desires me to do to help make him successful and to help grow the Republican Party.”

Steele says he will need help not only engaging the Party, but the Black community.

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“I think that we failed when we stopped engaging, when we took an attitude that, ‘Well they won’t vote for us so why bother?’ I think Black people have been largely dissed by both parties. Not just over the last eight years, but over the last 40 years.”

Despite the overwhelming popularity of President Obama, Steele says he will not back down from addressing Blacks from a Republican standpoint on the issues that concern them most:

“Talk to them, talk to them, engage them, be challenged by them, have them express their frustration and anger directly to us; have us to express why our solutions affect the Black community: Poverty, poor education, joblessness, incarceration, drug addiction, HIV AIDS Infection,” he listed.

Obama has said he desires bi-partisanship. But, so far, he hasn’t been able to draw that level of support from Republican lawmakers with both houses of Congress dominated by Democrats.

Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine, Democratic National Committee Chairman, released a congratulatory note when Steele won, saying, “I look forward to working with Chairman Steele as we set out to put partisanship and the politics of the past aside to get our economy working again. The American people have sent a clear message that the challenges we face are too great for us to get bogged down by outmoded ideological divides.”

Hearing of the release, Steele’s response indicated what will likely be the tone over the next four years:

“I have a lot in common with Kaine. He’s pro-life, pro-Second Amendment, and pro-business,” he said. “I applaud the fact that he is now chairman of the Democratic Party. But I am not duped into believing that the Democratic Party is now suddenly going to be pro-life, pro-gun, and pro-business...Bi-partisanship is easy when you outnumber your opponent two to one.”