

# Obama is Lucky It Was Steele Who Said It

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Posted: July 7, 2010 12:02 PM

President Obama's tenure in the White House has not been an easy one, but he has been buoyed by a few lucky breaks. It seems like every time things look particularly bad, Dick Cheney re-emerges and does an interview to remind people just how bad things could be. When the electoral outlook has looked particularly bleak, the Republicans have helped the President by nominating unelectable candidates like Sharron Angle who make it easy for the President and his allies to portray the Republican Party as extremists.

Most recently, Michael Steele, the gaffe prone Chair of the Republican Party has given Obama a lucky break, and jeopardized his position, by [making a statement that, at least in part, is reasonably obvious](#). Much of Steele's statement is simply wrong and at odds with almost all of the Republican Party. Arguing that the war in Afghanistan is "not something the United States has actively prosecuted" is both nonsensical and wrong. Moreover, the defeatist tone of his remarks, while perhaps borne out of a frustration which is shared by many Americans of all political persuasions is somewhat off-message for a leader of the Republican Party. The Republicans have consistently [criticized Obama for not believing the US can win the war in Afghanistan](#), so hearing that sentiment from the chair of their party, understandably angered many in that party.

Lost in some of the controversy surrounding Steele's statements is the rather obvious nature of at least one thing he said, that the war in Afghanistan is "a war of Obama's choosing." Obama spent much of 2009 rather publicly trying to determine how to handle the situation which he inherited in Afghanistan. He entertained a range of options including getting out of Afghanistan, but chose to increase the U.S. presence there and to continue the war, at least for a few years. If that does not make the war today one of Obama's choosing, it is not clear what would. Obama, for his part, has not sought to skirt responsibility for his decisions and has said and done little to suggest that he would not agree with Steele's assertion that this is now his war.

Steele's attempt to frame the war in Afghanistan as Obama's is consistent with the criticism many Republicans have aimed at supporters of Obama for blaming his predecessor for the mess which the current president faces. However, many of the problems the country faces, notably the ongoing economic crisis, fiscal weakness of many state and local governments, looming debt problems and challenging diplomatic environments around much of the globe can, in fact, be substantially attributed to the administration of George W. Bush.

The war in Afghanistan is different. Obama campaigned on the import of the war and decided to expand the effort there himself. The Obama administration has ownership of the war in Afghanistan now. If the economy does not recover soon, Obama will be somewhat to blame, but supporters of the president will still be justified in blaming Bush as well. Obama's choices regarding the economy, after all, were severely constricted by the mess he found when he came into office. The same is not entirely true regarding the war in Afghanistan. Obama inherited a

difficult situation there, but he also had far more options and policy space in which to maneuver with regards to the war in Afghanistan. Obama examined the situation closely and decided to expand, rather than reverse, Bush's policies. Thus, it is now his, not Bush's war.

Obama is extremely fortunate that the first high profile person to point this out is not a respected Republican lawmaker with strong foreign policy credentials or a popular fellow Democrat seeking to criticize the president from the left, but the clownish Chair of the RNC who is not viewed very seriously outside of his party's base. Obama is additionally lucky that respected Republican leaders such as [Senators John McCain \(R-AZ\) and Lindsey Graham \(R-SC\) have led the reaction against Steele](#) thus further marginalizing the Republican leader's comments.

Steele's comments have been helpful to the president because they have made the subject of Obama's responsibility and ownership over the future of the war in Afghanistan, a question which should be at the absolute center of any evaluation of the president and his party, off the table, at least for now. In this regard, Steele has helped Obama buy some time with the midterm elections only four months away. Nonetheless, the basic point that Steele made, that the war in Afghanistan is Obama's, is not going to go away simply because it was articulated so poorly from an unexpected source. Inevitably other more respected voices will make this same argument. At that time, Obama will need better answers about why he has chosen this war and how the U.S. can win it.