Michael Steele's Challenge

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It is possible that the job facing Michael Steele, the newly elected chair of the Republican Party, is even more difficult, albeit far less important, than the one facing Barack Obama. Moving the Republican Party forward after two successive drubbings in national elections would be challenging under any circumstances, but Steele's task has not been made any easier by the inability of the Republican Party, and its supporters in the media, to adapt to the new political context.

Since the inauguration, a series of comments by Republican supporters demonstrate just how poorly the right wing's message is resonating right now. Rush Limbaugh recently outdid his own august standard for hypocritical bombasity by declaring that he wanted to see the new president fail. This occurred after eight years of right wing media voices, including Limbaugh's, accusing the Democrats of wanting to see Bush fail in Iraq and elsewhere and after a political campaign in which the Republican candidate, on his way to being resoundingly defeated, accused the democrat of preferring losing a war to losing an election. These comments from one of the most powerful voices on the right don't exactly demonstrate a willingness, or ability, of the right to move in new and constructive directions.

Andrew Card, the former Chief of Staff to President Bush, also underscored what seems like an almost principled inability among some in the Republican Party to understand the concerns of ordinary American voters with his comments about the new president. After the first week or so of the administration, Card weighed in with his critique of Obama's decision to occasionally go jacketless in the Oval Office. According to him, as the country is in the middle of extraordinarily difficult economic times, what matters are not the efforts of the new administration to solve these complex problems, but rather what they wear while they are doing it.

The comments by Card and Steele pale compared to Rudy Giuliani's observation that using stimulus money to give large bonuses for people on Wall Street is a fine idea because that money will be spent and will therefore strengthen the economy. Again this comment, from somebody who a year ago was considered too liberal to win the Republican Party nomination for president, demonstrates both the sensitivity to the needs of ordinary Americans and the fine understanding of economics which the party Michael Steele has to lead, lacks.

Steele will take over a party whose public faces have not only spent the last few weeks making comments like those by Giuliani, Card and Limbaugh, but whose relatively small congressional representation is still trying to find its footing in our new political world. Although, I am in favor of President Obama's stimulus package, I can certainly understand why some Republicans would be opposed to it, and believe a consultative process between the two parties might lead to a better stimulus package. However, listening to Republican opposition in congress has been like taking a trip back in time. After years of neglect, our social services and infrastructure are crumbling,
the need to transform our economy is drastic and the Republicans are using Cold War era
rhetoric about tax and spend Democrats to oppose the bill. One gets the feeling that if you asked
the congressional leadership of Michael Steele's party if they thought it was going to rain
tomorrow, they would tell you to cut taxes.

While some Republicans, like Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell have recognized that
the party will benefit from not being dragged down by an extremely unpopular president
anymore, these comments suggest that Bush was simply a public relations problem. The key to
Steele's success in rebuilding the Republican Party will be recognizing that the extraordinary
failure of the Bush administration and the drag it had on the Republican brand was not due to a
bad image for the party but to eight years of bad decisions and bad policies from the White
House with a congress that for six of those years was controlled by the Republican Party which
stood by and let these policies be pursued.

In reality, the chair of a major party has very little control of what that party's elected leaders and
supporters in the media say so Steele's ability to reshape or modernize his party's message will be
limited. However, there is something of a leadership gap in the party with no strong frontrunner
for 2012 emerging and evidence of growing division between the leading candidates. The
challenge for Steele will not only be to fill this leadership vacuum but to fill it with a message
and vision that is appropriate for the 21st century. I am not quite sure what that message should
be, but would advise that wishing supporting federally subsidized bonuses for failed Wall Street
bankers and criticizing the Oval Office dress code seem to be missing the mark.