

# Anything But Straight

by Wayne Besen . Contributing Writer

## The changing face of the GOP

It would be wrong to say that the majority of Republicans are racist. But, it is fair to say that racists have comfortably nested in the GOP for quite some time. Since President Richard Nixon employed his infamous "Southern Strategy," bigots, xenophobes and homophobes have been sought-after Republican constituencies.

Beginning in the late 1960s and extending through the present day, the GOP reframed its racism, branding itself "conservative." A word that once stood for small government came to stand for small minds that voted in large numbers. This new political deformity hid its hatred behind calls for "states' rights" and "personal responsibility." (To be fair, in the early days, many Democrats were also segregationists.)

Notorious Republican dirty tricks artist, the late Lee Atwater, explained the party's tactics.

*"You start out in 1954 by saying, 'Nigger, nigger, nigger,' said Atwater. "By 1968 you can't say 'nigger' — that hurts you. Backfires. 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."*



In a stunning repudiation of its recent history, the Republican Party elected Maryland Lt. Gov. Michael Steele, who is African-American, as its chairman. He defeat-

ed a repugnant, nose-holding cluster of clowns, including Katon Dawson, head of the South Carolina GOP, who had recently quit his membership in an all-white country club, and Chip Saltsman, the Tennessee party leader who handed out a Christmas CD that featured the song, "Barack the Magic Negro."

Sure, it took more than five hours and six ballots for Steele to win. The outcome shows, however, that many GOP leaders understand that the party must change or face continued failure at the ballot box. Of course, Steele's ascension does raise serious questions: Will white supremacists continue to support a party that is led by a black man? If they do exit the party, will a new, reformed GOP be able to attract enough new voters to replace them?

To answer the first question, former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke sent out a press release headlined, "To Hell with the Republican Party," and said that, "GOP traitors appoint Obama Junior as Chairman of the Republican Party."

Steele tried to answer the second question by saying, "We're going to bring this party to every corner, every boardroom, every neighborhood, every community."

Every community? Does this mean we should expect to see official GOP booths at Gay Pride?

The Stonewall Democrats don't seem to think so. The group stressed that as Lt. Governor, "Steele made himself a public advocate for the Alliance for Marriage, a radical anti-marriage group which initiated efforts to pass a federal constitutional amendment to bar same-sex couples the freedom to marry." In 2005, Steele also "headlined a 'Defend Marriage Rally.'"

While this is not encouraging, it is clear that in its selection of Steele, the GOP was not simply looking to replace racism with homophobia by selecting the most anti-gay black candidate they could find. If that were the case, they could have chosen former Ohio Secretary of State, Kenneth Blackwell, who once compared gay people to "arsonists and kleptomaniacs."

So, it is clear that the GOP chose to embark upon a strategy to win back mainstream voters and Independents, rather than simply pander to the Bible-thumping base.

The big question the mainstream media is afraid to ask is: Will Steele's election sour the Party's relationship with the Religious Right?

While most social conservatives are not

racist, it would be naïve to deny a connection exists. Indeed, a map of GOP strongholds is essentially a map of the old confederacy — which happens to be called "The Bible Belt."

In 2001, the Family Research Council's Tony Perkins addressed the Council of Conservative Citizens, which was formed as the successor organization to the White Citizens Council. *The Nation* magazine claimed

that in 1996, Perkins paid Duke \$82,000 for use of his mailing list.

The most powerful man on the right is Rush Limbaugh, widely known for his racial insensitivity. And, let's not forget the former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, who stepped down from his leadership position after he was broadly criticized for toasting, a little too enthusiastically, the career of segregationist Strom Thurmond.

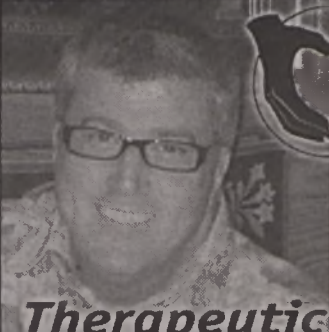
To rebuild the GOP, Steele will have to choose between the inclusive Big Tent and the intolerant Big Steeple. The religious right won't accept a party that supports even modest rights for

gay people, while moderate and younger voters will never trust a party that is anti-gay. The sooner Steele realizes that to get Republicans elected, social conservatives must be ejected from the party — the quicker he will be able to save the GOP. ▀



**Former Maryland Lt. Gov. Michael Steele is now chairman of the Republican Party.**

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