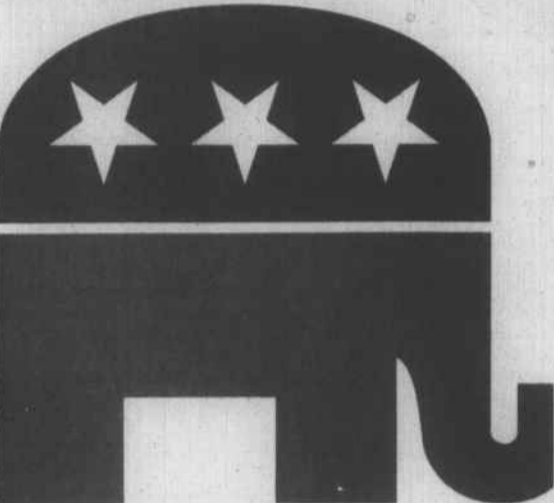


OPINION

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GOP outreach: Where's the beef?



Ron Walters
Guest Columnist

Much has been made about the fact that Trent Lott had to be removed because his racist statement complicated the ability of the Republican Party – and President George Bush – to conduct “outreach” to the black community. It is being said that Bush was on the right track with his so-called faith-based initiative and the appointments of Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice to top foreign policy positions. But it strikes me as odd that some people actually believe they can use these things to attract blacks into the party that has been regarded as racist – an impression only deepened by Lott’s remarks. But they continue with this pabulum.

Bush rolled out his faith-based initiative in the form of an executive order at a black church in Philadelphia, providing a stage for him to try and separate himself from Lott by denouncing his statement. At the same time, he was sponsoring a law that has been widely considered discriminatory because it gives churches the right to prohibit certain individuals from utilizing their services if they are not of the same faith.

Then, Powell and Rice represent the fact that conservatism can also be multicultural: that is, they can pursue policies that are just as much against black interests, but do it as part of a conservative coalition of whites, blacks, Hispanics, Asians and others. That coalition represents the ideology that has given blacks so much hell in the past three decades. Therefore, it is the ideology that will be regarded as the more important base for any attempted “outreach” rather than the complexion of those doing it.

But let’s get down to it. Any successful outreach to the black community will be based on the same principle as outreach to the white or any other community – on addressing the interests of blacks through the principles and policies pursued by the party. The question then is how much change will there be in the Republican leadership and its rank and file.

This is a legitimate question because several senators, including Mitch McConnell of Kentucky and others, already have said that they will not alter their approach to race. Right after Trent Lott had his midnight conversion and endorsed affirmative

action, seeming to put on the brakes, McConnell, who sponsored a bill eliminating affirmative action in the 104th Congress, said that he “doesn’t believe Republicans are going to start endorsing preferences and quotas.”

Furthermore, Orrin Hatch, who will be the new chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, also believes like Lott that the nomination of Judge William Pickering should be reintroduced by the White House. Pickering is a Mississippi judge whom Lott sponsored for the 5th Circuit and was defeated in the Democratic-controlled Judiciary Committee in March. Pickering had constantly scolded defendants before his bench for putting too much emphasis on racism, and, in a recent cross-burning case involving an interracial couple, he voided the mandatory minimum sentence of one of the white KKK perpetrators.

Sen. Bill Frist has taken over the reins of the Republican Party in the Senate. In his first statement addressed to “healing” after the Senate leadership confirmed his position in a telephone conference call, Frist voiced no hint of how he would heal the racial breach caused by Lott’s statement. The one issue that he mentioned of urgent concern to the black community because of increasing unemployment benefits. So, we are left not knowing whether he will heed the counsel of the senior members of his party or strike out on a new course – a course oriented toward the interests of the majority of the black community, not the black right-wing fringe.

Before his debacle, Lott was gearing up to put in play Bush’s agenda, filled with items such as renominating Pickering, beefing up the Homeland Security Department, facilitating Bush policies toward Iraq, sponsoring oil-based legislation to promote American “emergency independence” and other such proposals.

If Frist simply follows this outline, and beefs up the moderate image side of Republican “outreach” as I think he will, rather than the real beef of policy outreach, he will continue the Republican sleight of hand on the issue of outreach to blacks that has been so common – and such a failure.

Ron Walters is Distinguished Leadership Scholar, director of the African American Leadership Institute and professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland-College Park. His latest book is “African American Leadership,” with Robert Smith.



Sports still no ticket out of the ghetto



Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Guest Columnist

The sports world buzzed with the recent news that Black Entertainment Television founder Bob Johnson became the first African-American to purchase a majority ownership in a professional basketball team in Charlotte. But a few days later with little fanfare the NCAA issued a report on the academic performance of black athletes.

While Johnson’s acquisition was widely hailed as proof that blacks had finally cracked the clubby, and many say bigoted, world of white billionaire pro sports owners, for most black college basketball players their dream of stocking his team remains a cruel pipe dream.

Only a microscopic fraction of the thousands of black male college basketball and football players will ever don professional uniforms. Even more embarrassing, the majority of them won’t graduate. The NCAA report found that though 60 percent of athletes at Division I schools graduate in six years, only slightly more than 40 percent of black male athletes graduate. For basketball players, the figure is a dismal 35 percent. And even more embarrassing, many of these athletes will skip through three or four years while in college and still emerge as educational cripples.

The low graduation rate for black male athletes comes at a time when the enrollment for black males at many colleges has sharply declined.

At the University of Southern California, many black males on campus repeatedly complain that they are constantly asked whether they are athletes. The question is not necessarily racist since nearly 14 percent of black male students on the campus are football or basketball players on athletic scholarships. This compares with 2 percent or less of the white, Asian, and Latino males on campus.

The aspiring Michael Jordans in basketball and Emmitt Smiths in football spend countless hours mastering their dribbling or ball carrying skills with little thought to their futures after their sports days are finished. They live for the day when they will sign megabuck pro contracts. Few ever will.

In 1994, the Washington Post did a 10-year follow-up on 36 basketball players who played for Georgetown, the University of Maryland and the University of Virginia in



Bob Johnson is the NBA’s first African-American owner.



the 1980s. Most told sad tales of failed careers, part-time jobs, unsuccessful tryouts with NBA teams, and barnstorming tours with semi-pro or European teams. Twenty-eight eventually got their degrees and settled into careers as salesmen, teachers or counselors. Even though the story is repeated by thousands of other ex-athletes, illusions die hard today.

A group of black high school athletes were told that the odds against them making a pro team were nearly impossible. Fifty-one percent still believed that they could beat them.

The late tennis great Arthur Ashe was deeply troubled by the slavish adulation of athletes by many young blacks. During visits to black high schools, he was thunderstruck by “the obsession” with sports.

The sports obsession that Ashe spoke of tells much about the otherworldly intoxication of sports. For many it blurs the line between reality and fantasy. Coaches know this better than anyone. They wheel and deal to ram as many blacks as they can into their schools’ uniforms. The name of the game is not study, baby, study; but win, baby, win.

Major colleges have a huge vested interest in keeping their well-oiled athletic assembly lines moving smoothly. It means hard dollars. Major NCAA universities bag millions in revenues from their athletics programs. In the two major revenue-generating sports, basketball and football, blacks make up 50 and 70 percent, respectively, of the college players.

The message in this shameful sports saga is that

black parents whose sons and daughters are involved in athletic programs, and who harbor delusions of pro sports fame and fortune, must hold coaches, teachers and school administrators accountable for their children’s courses, grades and campus activities. They must make it clear that if their sons and daughters don’t perform in the classroom, they don’t get to perform on the field or the court.

Black professionals and educators must create academic self-help programs to recycle young blacks from sports junkies to serious students. They can provide educational scholarships for academically sound athletes and establish career counseling, job and skills training programs.

The ultimate responsibility, though, is on the colleges that reap fortunes off of black athletes. They must do much more to ensure that their “student-athletes” graduate or at least better prepare them for business or professional careers. This means providing them counseling, tutoring and financial assistance to encourage them to complete their studies when their eligibility ends.

Sports can be a rewarding and even profitable experience for many black athletes. But if NCAA Division I schools don’t stop solely exploiting black athletes as athletes and start educating them as students, sports will never be their ticket out of the ghetto.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is an author and columnist. Visit his news and opinion Web site: www.thehutchinsonreport.com. He is the author of “The Crisis in Black and Black” (Middle Passage Press).