

Michael Steele's failing GOP makeover

Contributed by JOY-ANN REID

Michael Steele's historic election as the first black chairman of the Republican National Committee was supposed to usher in a new era of broad-tent GOP politics, while signaling that the

Democrats aren't the only ones with a "brother" out front (never mind that President Barack Obama won 69 million votes, while Steele took six ballots to get 91 from party insiders.)

Yet less than two months into his tenure, Steele — the guy who was supposed to make the dispirited and rejected Republican Party cool again — is in trouble. His promise to give the GOP an "off-the-hook," Hip-Hop makeover made him an instant punch line.

His statement to D.L. Hughley on CNN that Rush Limbaugh is not the leader of the Republican Party led to an outcry which forced Steele, in short order, to become the latest GOP official forced to grovel for forgiveness (having no doubt been reminded that Limbaugh's "Dittoheads" are a key part of the party's small donor base).

An interview released last week by GQ magazine included Steele calling abortion "an individual choice" and saying pro-choicers "absolutely" have a place in the party; touching off a near-revolt by leaders of the Christian right. (Steele issued a statement clarifying his position as unambiguously pro-life, and in support of a Constitutional amendment banning abortion.)

Steele's gaffes highlight the danger of seeking the Klieg lights too much (many Republicans wish Steele would just stop doing media interviews and get to work rebuilding party infrastructure.)

But they also illustrate the state of the GOP, which seems to be fighting hardest, not against Democrats, or even against Steele (who has already weathered one call to resign from Dr. Ada Fisher, a fellow black Republican and the RNC's national committeewoman from South Carolina), but against reality itself.

For starters, the idea of a political party led by a radio talk show host should be ridiculous. Not so for today's GOP, which is clinging to failed ideas that Limbaugh has been peddling since the 1980s.

Steele was panned for referring to his party as a drunk in need of a "12-step program" and a big elephant mired in its own muck. But the country did sink from surplus to over \$1 trillion in deficits during the Bush years, and Treasury Department figures show that from 2001 to 2005, when Republicans controlled Congress and the White House, the U.S. borrowed more money from overseas (\$1.05 trillion) than the previous 42 presidents combined (\$1.01 trillion) did in 224 years.

And while more than \$656 billion has been spent to date on Bush's war of choice in Iraq, during that same five-year period (2001 to 2005), Bush's tax cuts, which mostly benefited the top 5 percent income earners, cost \$940.8 billion, according to the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy.

Demographically, while the electorate is getting younger, browner and more moderate, the Republican Party is getting

older, whiter and angrier (and more geographically confined.)

The GOP's fix?

Hapless Louisiana Governor Piyush "Bobby" Jindal, the party's Great Brown Hope; a former Rhodes Scholar whom Limbaugh has called "the next Ronald Reagan" — and an Indian-American who for some reason talks like Forrest Gump. Steele offered him "slum love" after his disastrous national TV debut in February, an apparent reference to the India-based film, Slumdog Millionaire.

Of course, this is the same Michael Steele who ran for the Senate in 2006 without mentioning in his advertising that he was a Republican, and who in the same GQ interview in which he made his remarks on abortion said he was having his RNC office redecorated because it's "way too male" for him.

But Republicans didn't hire the political one-hit wonder who came up with "drill baby drill," to give the party the kind of makeover that might genuinely appeal to younger voters and minorities, or, for that matter, to create fodder for "Saturday Night Live." For now, at least, Republicans don't want to change from things like tax cuts for the rich, weakening of labor versus corporations, or state control of pregnancy.

Steele's job is to take those oldies, slap a brown face on them, and somehow find a way to win elections. Welcome to your new job, Mr. Steele.

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