

Michael is Man of Steel: Hero or Zero

Michael Steele has been the consummate politician for a number of years, but his recent public appearances have made people wonder what the “New Republican Party” will actually stand for. Some fear that his propensity for headline grabbing will render him less than credible as a serious leader of the party of Lincoln. Currently, he is an enigma to blacks and whites, Democrats and Republicans, and the rich and poor. It is safe to deduce that Mr. Steele is attempting to find his voice; unfortunately his movement needs bold leadership – now.

The media has said much concerning the downward spiral of the Republican Party, which has caused it to lose control of the House, the Senate, and the White House. It’s clear that the current economic policies of the Obama administration have given true conservatives an opportunity to become the “loyal opposition” and regain a sense of purpose and dignity. Unfortunately, the party is so out-gunned that it has to have a level of unity and political sagacity that is unusual in these days.

Ultimately, Steele wants to enlarge his following and make the GOP a thriving brand again. Grassroots leaders are painfully aware that the first step to building a huge movement is often making it small. Making it small means redefining the movement’s vision and its core values. It means making sure that everyone knows what it means to be a conservative or a Republican.

Last week, Rush Limbaugh helped the conservative movement by clarifying and refining the definition of current conservative principles. While Michael Steele apologized to Limbaugh for diminishing him as being “just an entertainer,” I wonder if Mr. Steele really understands the sequence that his messages

to the nation must take. Re-establishing a unifying vision comes first. Recruiting new members comes second. The unifying phase does not have to take an entire year, but it must be given some time.

Social conservatives are especially fearful that the new chairman will throw them under the bus. They believe that he has already minimized their battle to secure constitutional amendments around the nation. Since Steele is personally a social conservative, I can only deduce that his new "handlers" have coached him to avoid stereotypes. They say that he must break with the dead weight of the past. The party must become more secular and it cannot be an old boy's club for gentlemen from the south. While the need to change the party's image may be real, preserving the core values of a much-needed movement is incredibly more important.

For these reasons it concerns me that Chairman Steele seems to have been caught in the communications wars of the mainstream media. Instead of issuing a clear rallying call, he has temporarily created the potential for factions within the party. The balancing act that Steele must perform is focusing upon his current opportunities to protect the nation, without throwing his political base overboard by trying to grow the party too quickly.

For now, the GOP cannot and should not be for everybody. The chairman's current role should be used to expand his party's influence by excellence of instead of switching constituents. Last week, James Olliphant of the Chicago Tribune made an interesting assessment on Michael Steele's first days in office. He wrote: "A man of constantly colliding analogies, he compares Republicans to drunks in need of a 12-step program and to the mentally ill. He has insulted Rush Limbaugh and moderate Republican senators alike, and he has promised a 'hip-hop makeover' that would attract even 'one-armed midgets' to his party." Olliphant is hardly a Steele supporter, but his skepticism of the chairman's ability to pull off his makeover

is valid.

Again, I remind my readers that the noble goal of inclusion can come soon, but must not be rushed (no pun intended). Recently Steele's praise of Charlie Crist's work in Florida was uncharacteristically "ham handed" for the chairman. Desperate for a success story, Steele has publicly cited Crist's high approval rating and the strong majorities Republicans have in the Florida House and Senate. Although the chairman may view Crist's *modus operandi* as a model for the party, Crist is not always a unifying figure for the GOP.

Steele has unwisely attributed Crist's popularity to "his habit of working with Democrats and talking more about pocketbook issues instead of conservative social issues like abortion, gay marriage and guns." Notice that these words unnecessarily pit one group of supporters against another.

In the same Associated Press interview, Steele added insult to injury by telling reporter Brendan Farrington: "Florida is not the red state that Alabama is and it's not the red state that Mississippi is. It may be a red state, but it's a different hue of lot of folks believe that if we're not constantly beating that drum on one or other social issues, that we're somehow less Republican and my argument is quite the opposite. The beauty of our party is that we appreciate and know what we believe. It's core to who we are, and we have the flexibility and dexterity to speak to people on a broad array of issues."

Although the lawyers and strategists in the party understand that Steele's previous comments were intended to show the national party's resilience and ability to change, unfortunately no one is talking to either social conservatives or southern Republicans. This kind of oversight could prove to be political kryptonite for the man of Steele. It would be a shame for someone so talented to miss an opportunity to pull off a David-vs-Goliath-type coup around economic issues because he talked too much to the wrong audience at the wrong

time.

In conclusion, let me state that Michael Steele is a true American hero. An adopted child who was raised in the ghetto, he has achieved what few people from his background could have. After Steele's father died in 1962, his mother, Maebell, refused to go on welfare. She demonstrated a genuine "pull-yourself-up-by-your-boot-straps" philosophy, which became a part of Chairman Steele's worldview.

Because of her efforts and Michael's hard work, he attended Johns Hopkins undergraduate school and Georgetown Law School. Similar to Barack Obama, Steele emerged from statewide office (Lt. Governor of Maryland) to the national scene in a meteoric fashion. He personally embodies the values and perspective of the Republican Party over the last forty years.

With this outstanding background, Mr. Steele could undoubtedly lead the GOP into an innovative, revival of conservative influence in the nation despite his rocky start. Let's hope the chairman gathers the kind of advisors around him that will establish the proper priorities for the future of the RNC.