

Steele Must Be Fired – Up

In recent weeks, several leading Republicans have been crying for the ouster of party Chairman Michael Steele. If Steele is fired or resigns before he completes a critical stabilization plan for the party, it may spell doom for the Republican National Committee (RNC) in 2010 and beyond. Let me say it simply: Steele must be kept in place until there is a clear vision and mandate that is created for the party's future.

His situation is very reminiscent of what happened to world-class CEO and businesswoman Carly Fiorina in 2005. During the time in which the technology powerhouse Hewlett-Packard felt that they needed to change their image and revitalize their brand, they sought to circumvent the normal painstaking process of self-analysis, restructuring and rebuilding by bringing in a management superstar – Fiorina. Her academics were impeccable, framed at Stanford University, University of Maryland and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. But all of this was inconsequential because the board of directors had made an improper assessment of where the business was. Their vision was murky. Their mandate was muddled. Therefore the corporate message was unclear. Thus in a few short years, they fired the woman who once graced the covers of major national periodicals in their name.

If I am correct, the RNC organization must work at reaching an internal consensus of what it means to be a true Republican. They have got to answer the question of how will their values positively affect the nation. Once this is done, a cogent and compelling vision can be crafted.

It is very clear that the GOP leadership has not slowed down and given much thought to its long term problems. Instead, it has reacted to fears about the Obama administration in something of a knee-jerk fashion. Unfortunately, the reactive nature of many of the party's actions over the last 18 months

has earned them the label of being the party of “no.” The party has actually continued in a sharp downward spiral for two of the last two and a half years. Only the six months under Steele’s leadership has there been any sign of real turn-around. This sign I am referring to is the fact that independent voters seem to be willing to take a chance on Republican candidates again.

To help clarify the GOP situation, let me share five stages of decline articulated by Jim Collins in the book *How the Mighty Fall*.

Stage 1: Hubris Born of Success

Stage 2: Undisciplined Pursuit of More

Stage 3: Denial of Risk and Peril

Stage 4: Grasping for Salvation

Stage 5: Capitulation to Irrelevance or Death

Fortunately, based on Collins’ research, each step of decline can be reversed by positive steps of action – if implemented in a timely fashion.

If the RNC does not seize this moment, it could enter into stage four immediately, grasping for salvation. This stage is marked by attempts to find a silver bullet, an extraordinary leader or savior, which often only leads to a temporary sense of euphoria. The euphoria masks but does not address the potentially fatal problems in an organization. Now is not the time for the RNC to abruptly change course.

When Steele was selected as the chairman, there were many who believed that an overemphasis on “divisive” social issues like protecting marriage and preventing abortions was causing the party to be marginalized. Others believed that the Bush administration’s over-engagement in the war had been the primary reason for the party’s fall from grace. Another group felt that Bush was never a true conservative, while evangelicals felt that moral inconsistencies had caused the

Republican brand to be devalued. In fact, the rise of the Tea Party movement is an expression of the frustration among many conservatives who feel as though the party has lost its way and cannot be rehabilitated.

From the beginning, Steele could not win. Like Fiorina, he was not truly given the freedom to clarify the group's vision. Thus when he took on radio personality Rush Limbaugh early in his tenure, he had no real authority to call media icons like Limbaugh to any form of accountability. The chart below compares what was given to President Barack Obama as he became head of his party versus what Steele received.

Obama:

1. Elected by a landslide within his party
2. He was given a mandate for change
3. Liberals saw the election of a black man as a sign of progress
4. Consensus on what their big goal was
5. Determined to push their agenda

Steele:

1. Elected as a compromise candidate
2. Was given a mandate to analyze losses
3. May have been seen as a token black
4. Rebranding in the wake of scandal was acknowledged but not acted upon
5. Determined not to lose the Supreme Court and major legislation

Based on this comparison Steele, who is an excellent communicator, was never given a mandate to lead from day one. His biggest mistake has simply been that he attempted to rebrand the party without the consensus of the members. Social conservatives abandoned the party first simply because they felt abandoned themselves. Numerous conversations were held about the chairman's stand on marriage and abortion. They had felt marginalized by Bush, because only lip service was given

to their issues. Further, pro-gay marriage protests led by Cindy McCain earlier this year confirms the inconsistencies in the GOP. Therefore Steele did not create the ambivalence in the Republican Party, it was handed to him.

In conclusion, the GOP needs to commission the chairman and his staff to host a three-day summit with the brightest, best and most committed members of the party. Their goal should be to 1.) write down a value statement and operational game plan for the next six months, 2.) immediately develop a clear, unifying platform with priorities and talking points, 3.) make a vow to put bickering aside and 4.) set up a national tour, including speakers from fiscal conservative, military conservative and social conservative branches of the party.

Steele has made some mistakes, as he admitted in his speech last Saturday at the Southern Republican Leadership Convention, but simultaneously under his leadership, amazing victories have been achieved in Virginia, New Jersey and Massachusetts. Now is not the time to fire Steele. This is simply the time to fire him up to unify and to do the hard work of laboring as one collaborative group that puts forth great candidates for conservatives, Tea Party members and independents.