

The GOP and the black vote in '08

by Jack_Kemp

Watching the third debate between the Democratic candidates for president on PBS at Howard University, I was struck by the juxtaposition of mostly white men and women discussing issues primarily related to people of color. It struck me vividly that if the GOP is ever to regain its lost ground with African-American voters, a good place to start would be to commit itself to debating the very same issues before a largely black audience at any one of our great Historically Black Colleges and Universities with Tavis Smiley as the interlocutor.

Now the party of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass - and at one time the party of Daddy King and Jackie Robinson - will have an opportunity to do just that at Morgan State University on Sept. 27. This event should be a showcase of progressive Republican ideas that will appeal to people of color as well as to all Americans who care about a just and fair society.

It isn't good for our nation that one party (the Democrats) all too often take the black vote for granted and the GOP has been afraid to even compete. This debate at Morgan State is a tremendous opportunity for GOP candidates to present a positive platform of strong economic growth, full employment for all, educational excellence, social and civil justice and with access to capital for those who all too often have been denied the benefits of our democratic capitalistic system - a real ownership and stakeholder society where all who want to work hard can get a college education, own their homes, own their own jobs and look forward someday to owning their own businesses.

If the Republican Party is really to get into this political battle for every vote, its candidates need to commit themselves to making America truly a land of equal opportunity, a nation of racial and ethnic reconciliation with everyone having access to upward mobility and wealth creation for themselves and their families.

This would shake our body politic to its very core. Just think of a Republican Party standing tall and proud before people of color to pledge an agenda of turbo-charged enterprise zones (aka empowerment zones), educational choice, a fair and flat tax code with payroll taxes totally deductible, access to capital and ownership opportunities for low-income families while pledging to make sure everyone has the right to vote and assuring that every vote will count. This type of pledge can make the Republican Party competitive with the socialistic ideas and paternalistic policies of the leading Democratic candidates.

To the members of the GOP who say we can't compete with the class warfare rhetoric and the redistribute-the-wealth policies of the left, I say hogwash! After spending 13 years of my professional career in football and 30 years in a political career interfacing with and working alongside people of color, I'm firmly convinced that by far the vast majority of people are not interested in soaking the rich. Instead, they want to get rich - not just in terms of creature comforts but with opportunities for people to prosper educationally and socially, with upward mobility for themselves and their children.

This is why I'm so radically democratic (with a small "d") in my belief that if the GOP would offer up a Lincolnian platform of how to truly democratize our system of entrepreneurial capitalism, we would compete successfully with the stale and static vision of America given by everyone on that stage at Howard. All they offered, ultimately, was the view that Americans are undertaxed. For the record, America is overtaxed, overregulated and overlitigated.

One of my favorite political stories involved Sen. George McGovern of South Dakota running for president in 1972 on but two issues - bringing the troops home from Vietnam and his "Demogrant" program to reform welfare. His idea was to give a \$1,000 tax credit to everyone in America earning less than \$17,000 a year. Upon announcing this dramatic proposal that he thought would appeal to the middle- and lower-middle income Americans, McGovern dropped precipitously in the public opinion polls, culminating in a disastrous electoral defeat.

He was later asked why he dropped so far in the polls after offering such a significant tax break to the majority of people earning less than \$17,000 a year. McGovern said he just never realized there were so many people earning less than \$17,000 a year who someday hoped to earn \$18,000 or \$20,000.

That's exactly the right way to look at the electorate of whatever race and color. Offer people the highest and best vision of an America where children can grow up to be whatever they are born to be, with nothing standing between them and their aspiration.

I can't wait for Sept. 27. Indeed, I can't wait for someone in the GOP to make a positive and progressive case for voting Republican in 2008 instead of appealing only to our fears and trepidations on immigration and Iraq. Republican candidates, let's act and sound more like Abraham Lincoln than Tom Tancredo.

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