

Great Black Hope

Will 2006 be the year of the African-American Republican?

By W. James Antle III

"SMELL IT? It's trash from my opponent. Time to take it out." In his campaign to replace retiring Sen. Paul Sarbanes (D-Md.), Maryland Lt. Gov. Michael Steele has appeared in five television commercials, each filmed against a gray background and featuring props ranging from his now famous puppy to a set of garbage cans. The spots emphasize his one-of-the-guys likeability—and assiduously downplay his membership in the Republican Party.

Steele is the GOP's best shot for electing a high-profile black candidate in a cycle party strategists had hoped would be the breakout year for African-American Republicans. Even he, puppy ads notwithstanding, is an underdog. An Oct. 2 Mason-Dixon poll shows Steele trailing Democratic Congressman Ben Cardin by 6 points; a poll commissioned by the National Republican Senatorial Committee has the race closer but still finds Cardin ahead.

Other black Republicans running this year are faring even worse. Lynn Swann had hoped to ride his local star power as a Hall of Fame wide receiver for the Pittsburgh Steelers to the Pennsylvania governorship in an uphill fight against popular incumbent Democratic Gov. Ed Rendell. But polls show Rendell trouncing Swann by as many as 21 points. Ohio Secretary of State Ken Blackwell is also coming up short in his bid to become the Buckeye State's first black governor. The campaign-tracking website Real Clear Politics gives his Democratic opponent, Congressman Ted Strickland, an average lead of 17 points. A fourth

closely watched candidate, former Detroit City Councilman Keith Butler, lost the Republican nomination for U.S. Senate in Michigan.

In May, the *Washington Post* speculated that Steele, Blackwell, and Swann might make 2006 the "year of the black Republican." GOP operatives and conservative commentators picked up the phrase. "This could be the year that black voters finally send a strong, concerted message to Democrats," wrote conservative columnist Deborah Simmons in the *Washington Times*. "Stop taking the black vote for granted." Armstrong Williams claimed to *USA Today* columnist DeWayne Wickham that "[t]his is the year of the black conservative voice."

Republican National Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman fueled the hype in an interview with PBS commentator Tavis Smiley. "You may remember back in 1992 the number of women who were nominees for Senate, and they called it the year of the woman," he told Smiley. "The same thing is happening this year with African-Americans, and what I'm so pleased about is the majority of them are Republicans."

As the Republicans' already dismal standing in the black community was battered by events from the Florida recounts to Hurricane Katrina, the chairman of the putatively color-blind party has been quick to portray the uptick in GOP African-American statewide candidates as a deliberate strategy. "We've gone from a model of outreach to a model of inclusion," Mehlman told the *Washington Post*. "Outreach is a top-

down approach. Inclusion says, 'Let's find some really good people and encourage them to run.'"

Mehlman and his predecessor as RNC chairman, Ed Gillespie, certainly encouraged Steele. After Steele jumped from the Maryland GOP chairmanship to the state's lieutenant governorship on a ticket with Robert Ehrlich in 2002, he was repeatedly showcased by the national party. At the 2004 Republican National Convention, Steele won a primetime speaking slot and a seat near Vice President Dick Cheney.

When Maryland's senior senator announced his retirement, President George W. Bush and other party leaders turned to Steele. Bush, former President George H.W. Bush, Karl Rove, and former White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card lent fundraising support. So did Ed Gillespie, who signed on as Steele's national finance chairman and reportedly held an event in his own home to raise \$100,000 for the campaign. In eight months, Steele raised nearly \$3 million.

That makes it all the more ironic that Steele is the most coy of the major black Republicans about his party affiliation. When he declared his candidacy in predominantly black Prince George's County, he never mentioned he was a Republican. Neither do most of his ads. His campaign has been criticized for designing "Another Democrat for Steele" signs that some say appear to identify the lieutenant governor as a Democrat himself. Steele complained to reporters—in off-the-record comments

he was eventually forced to admit to making—that in Maryland the GOP label is like a “scarlet letter.”

Ken Blackwell’s task is even harder. He is trying to run as the most principled conservative while simultaneously distancing himself from his state party’s other elected officials. On the issues, Blackwell is anti-tax, tough on state spending, and pro-life—but emphatic that he is “not the second coming of Bob Taft,” Ohio’s embattled incumbent governor. This mix worked in the Republican primary, where Blackwell rolled up 56 percent of the vote against a white candidate backed by the party’s moderate establishment, but has been a tougher sell to the broader electorate.

Blackwell is in many ways the opposite of Steele and Swann. He is an experienced campaigner, having served as mayor of Cincinnati and won statewide office three times—the state treasurer’s race in 1994, elections for secretary of state in 1998 and 2002. Unlike Steele, he had little encouragement from the local GOP. “The Taft-Voinovich-DeWine wing of the party would just as soon see Ken Blackwell jump in a lake,” says David Bositis, an expert on African-American voting patterns for the Joint Center of Political and Economic Studies. And while Swann has struggled with specifics, Blackwell has detailed policy positions on almost every issue.

So why is Blackwell, someone whom Beltway conservatives have long had their eyes on, not doing better? Republican consultant Philip Stutts answers this question with one of his own: “Have you seen Taft’s numbers?” Blackwell’s gambit to distance himself from the man he would succeed has so far failed. With approval ratings hovering around 17 percent, Taft is the most unpopular governor in the country.

“The struggle has less to do with the fact that these candidates are black Republicans,” says Stutts. “The problem

is they are running in the wrong year.” Bositis says 2006’s crop of black Republicans “couldn’t have gotten the nomination at a worse time.”

Bositis questions the whole year of the black Republican concept, pointing out that the number African-American Republicans running for the House is actually lower than in 1994. As for Blackwell, Steele, and Swann, he cautions against GOP leaders getting too much undeserved credit. “The Republicans didn’t just say ‘let’s nominate a lot of black candidates,’” argues Bositis. “The party in Ohio didn’t want Blackwell and in Maryland, who else did they really have besides Steele?”

Other skeptics suggest the GOP’s financial commitment to its black candidates may be faltering. Even Steele has wondered publicly whether his national support might be tapering off. “Will my party be bold in its effort to show that its commitment is different from [the Democrats’]?” he asked reporters in late September. When the RNC announced ad buys on behalf of competitive Senate candidates, Maryland was not on the list of targeted races.

Indeed, Republican minority outreach efforts aren’t always as straightforward as they appear. In his addresses to black and Hispanic groups, Mehlman has repeatedly repudiated the party’s supposed “Southern Strategy” even as Bush and the congressional Republicans rely more heavily on the votes of Southern whites than Richard Nixon or Ronald Reagan ever did. The RNC chairman also claims that without black and Hispanic votes, his party doesn’t deserve to win—even though, as *TAC*’s Steve Sailer has often pointed out, the GOP’s gains among white voters contributed more heavily to their 2004 victories than their much smaller improvements among minorities.

Nor would 2006 be the first time a predicted breakthrough among minority

voters failed to materialize. “Almost every year now is hailed as ‘the year of the black Republican,’” American University professor Clarence Lusane recently wrote. President Bush’s outreach attempts yielded him Goldwater-like percentages among black voters in 2000, with a small increase four years later that evaporated after Katrina. In 1996, the GOP nominated Bob Dole, who voted for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and Jack Kemp, who has worked tirelessly to court African-Americans, and won just 12 percent of the black vote.

That doesn’t mean that all is lost for the GOP. Even many critics concede that all three of the major black Republican candidates running this year would have been likely to win in a more GOP-friendly cycle like 2002; Steele is still running a competitive race now. And polls have shown both Blackwell and Steele drawing between 20 and 30 percent of black voters—although experts caution that small sample sizes and other factors should keep prognosticators from drawing premature conclusions.

“When I was working for [Louisiana gubernatorial candidate] Bobby Jindal we were polling 20 percent among blacks,” Stutts recalls. “On election day, we got 9 percent. The question is whether those polling numbers will translate into actual votes.” Nevertheless, Stutts says party leaders “deserve a lot of credit from moving from defense to offense” with African-American voters.

It will take a better cycle for Republicans generally to determine whether the Mehlman strategy pays dividends. But as it stands right now, the only African-American candidates likely to win statewide are both Democrats—and the year of the black Republican is increasingly looking like the GOP’s latest 2006 disappointment. ■

Breaking the Silence

The debate ignited by Walt and Mearsheimer gathers momentum.

By Scott McConnell

SCARCELY A MONTH ago, *New Republic* editor Marty Peretz was chortling about how John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt “had a two-week run in the prints and blogs ... and then, poof, they disappeared.” How desperately Peretz, whose magazine last spring published no less than four articles maligning the pair’s essay on the Israel lobby, must have wished this to be true. And how shaken he would have been to see the line snaking around the block outside Cooper Union’s Great Hall, pressing for scarce tickets. For not only had John Mearsheimer not disappeared, he was appearing on a great New York stage with NYU professor Tony Judt and Middle East scholar Rashid Khalidi, debating the Israel lobby with former Clinton aides Dennis Ross and Martin Indyk and the Israeli Shlomo Ben Ami.

There wasn’t a TV crew in sight, and inside the ambiance was middle-aged, those with the tedious foresight to book tickets early. My friend Philip Weiss (whose blog, mondoweiss.observer.com, has the most lucid commentary in America on matters related to the debate topic) pointed out New York publishing superstars within the buzzing crowd. We had, so it seemed, been magically transported to a pre-cable era when essays or books were the ignition wires of ideological politics—except the debate can be viewed at the *London Review of Books* website, where even a computer semiliterate like myself can manage to see it.

The most common tactic of opponents of Walt and Mearsheimer is to falsify or oversimplify their argument,

knowing that the time and effort required to correct the falsehood leaves little room to advance the discussion. The pair are regularly said to accuse “Jews” of being involved in a “cabal” (or, as Marty Peretz put it, they “purported to prove that US foreign policy was run by the Jews for the interests of Israel and Israel alone”). Such was the general tenor of Indyk’s attacks during the debate, and he impressed no one. But M&W’s detractors did score occasionally. Ross argued that while the pair claimed the lobby had helped push the United States into the Iraq War, everyone knows the Democratic Party is more in thrall to AIPAC and its fundraising than the GOP. But, Ross noted triumphantly, if Gore had been elected there would have been no Iraq War. This was clever: to answer it would require a complicated unpacking of the lobby’s influence on Republicans through neo-

pean history professor of British (and Jewish) origin at the top of his field, who has burst from an academic cocoon to become one of the country’s most important essayists in the realm where culture intersects foreign policy. Early on Judt quoted Arthur Koestler in support of the idea that the proper measurement of an argument is in its truth, and that it matters not at all whether bigots might make the same case for their own reasons. Koestler, some 50-plus years ago, had been explaining to American intellectuals that just because there were demagogic and ignorant anti-communists didn’t mean that communism wasn’t a real and evil force. Judt also let drop the bombshell that a major publication (most knew it was the *New York Times*) had asked him if he was Jewish while considering an article from him last spring on the Walt-Mearsheimer essay—his point being that the editors

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cons and evangelical Zionists as opposed to Democrats—and one feels that Dennis Ross doesn’t really deserve to be lumped in with the likes of Doug Feith and David Frum. But most of the blows were glancing, and Mearsheimer and his supporters got to make effective and subtle points.

Judging by audience reaction, the best lines belonged to Tony Judt, a Euro-

only felt it safe to allow criticism of the Israel lobby in their august pages if his answer were affirmative. He further related that he was told by Amos Elon, the Israeli author, that when Elon had asked an Israeli ambassador of the 1960s what had been his greatest accomplishment, the emissary replied, “I have convinced the Americans that anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism.”