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## GOP Chairman Steele Says Tea Party Not Racist

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Are the Tea Parties racist? The NAACP answered in the affirmative last week. The African-American Chairman of the Republican Party, an avowed admirer of the Tea Party, replied in an interview with *The Louisiana Weekly* that the very notion "was nonsense".

The question of whether the rise in political opposition to President Obama and the ruling Democratic Party, embodied by the Tea Party Movement, has been driven by a racist sentiment was the focus of a report by Institute for Research & Education on Human Rights. Its findings, released two weeks ago by the NAACP, argued that Tea Party leaders had links with "white supremacist groups" and so-called "birthers" who deny that Barack Obama has the native-born right to hold the Presidency. (The original article can be found at

<http://www.louisianaweekly.com/news.php?viewStory=3451>)

The concept that the driving force for Republican candidates in 2010 has been motivated by "racist people trying to take down a Black President" is absurd to the current African-American head of the GOP.

Interviewed by the *Weekly* as he traveled through Louisiana on the "Fire Pelosi" bus, Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele replied, "I don't subscribe to that view. I don't think you can paint with such a broad brush that the tea party is largely this white organization that is designed to take down a Black President. That, to me, is just unfortunate thinking. That has been propelled by some in the media who have taken one or two actions or words by an individual and blown it up and made it that everyone who has attended a rally or participating in a particular program."

Steele referred to the comments of former *Tea Party Express* spokesman Mark Williams. In what Williams described as a "satirical" letter, he wrote

that the NAACP has made "more money off of race than any slave trader, ever" and called out the NAACP for continuing to use the word "Colored" in its name.

In a post on his personal blog, Williams called NAACP President Ben Jealous "Tom's Nephew" and ties tea party calls for smaller government to "emancipation" then added further in the post, (which is written in the form of a mock letter to President Abraham Lincoln from 'Jealous'), "We Colored People have taken a vote and decided that we don't cotton to that whole emancipation thing. Freedom means having to work for real, think for ourselves, and take consequences along with the rewards. That is just far too much to ask of us Colored People and we demand that it stop!"

There is just one problem. As Steele noted, Williams, whom the Chairman has openly condemned, was expelled by the National Tea Party Federation. Not only did the umbrella group strip Williams of his membership in the Tea Party Movement, it also expelled the group with which he was associated--the Tea Party Express.

Williams and his cohorts were an aberration, not the norm for the Tea Party, as Chairman Steele explained, "I've run into as many African-Americans at Tea Party rallies as I have any one else of any other group. Meetings that I have had at the RNC with members of the Tea Party movement have included African-Americans and people of color from all backgrounds. I think it is a little shortsighted and the height of desperation to paint with such a broad brush when you know that's not the reality."

"The reality is that you have a cross section of individuals from all backgrounds that are part of this great American movement. This is not something that has been manufactured by some political class looking to take control, or looking to control the agenda. This is the American people looking to take back control of what they consider a wayward government--an aggressive government. And, that for me, is the most profound part of this whole effort."

The fact that the Tea Parties are a grassroots effort, and therefore a non-centralized & a somewhat disorganized conglomeration, means, Steele maintained, that some unscrupulous individuals have tried to twist its relatively libertarian message to their own ends. Yet, the GOP Chairman noted, more often than

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The Mark Williams example, though, is the exception that proves the rule. In Steele's view. The Tea Parties aren't racist, or else Williams and his ilk would still be involved. That he and others like him are shunned by the umbrella organization and the local chapters gets very little press. It is negative perception that must be constantly fought in the media, the Chairman declared. As an African-American Republican, Steele said that he himself often he had to deal with similar stereotypes of race-from his own people.

The argument, made by some in the Black leadership, that Steele "sold out" his race, or was an "Uncle Tom" by being a member of the GOP, has been a reality with which he has had to contend throughout his political career. The comments levied by African-American Democrats in Steele's (successful) bid for Lt. Governor of Maryland and his (unsuccessful) race to become that state's US Senator shows how the perceptions of race can "unfairly" color any political contest.

"My whole 35 years have been the ups and downs of race, and the ups and downs of being a Republican. It's particularly interesting when they combine. Not everyone is going to welcome you. You have to engage with people. The way you beat back on the stereotype of Blacks, of Republicans, of Black Republicans is to engage people one on one."

"My view of it was, 'you're not going to define me'. I'm going to define me for you. I'm going to let you know who I am and what I believe.' And, then you will have context."

It is advice that the Chairman has not only given to the Tea Party leadership, but to African-American GOP candidates running under Tea Party banner.

Steele argued that in practical terms it was hard to call the Tea Parties racist when many of their successful candidates were Black. The best example, in the Chairman's mind, lay in the fact that Black Republican Tim Scott won the GOP nomination for the US House in South Carolina in a race against the son of Strom Thurmond.

That the Tea Parties backed, not the heir to the Dixiecrat Party founder, but the African-American contender—who is the overwhelming favorite to win the safe GOP seat on November 2nd., should be proof enough, in the Chairman's view.

And Scott is not alone, according to Steele. Black Republican pickups are likely in Congressional contests in Barack Obama's home state of Illinois and in multiple other state races, most especially in the competitive Florida Lt. Governor's contest, where GOP State Rep. Jennifer Carroll stands to be the first African-American ever to be elected to the Sunshine State's number two job. She and gubernatorial candidate Rick Scott won nominations with strong Tea Party support.

As for the racial attitudes of rank and file of Tea Party members, in August, U.C.L.A. graduate student Emily Elkins spent hours roaming a Tea Party rally on the Washington Mall, photographing every sign she saw.

Elkins, a former CATO Institute intern, was specifically examining the conceit that Tea Party marches are rife with racism and conspiracy theorizing. *The Washington Post* reported on her findings: just 5 percent of the 250 signs referenced Barack Obama's race or religion, and 1 percent brought up his birth certificate. The majority focused on bailouts, deficits and spending — exactly the issues the Tea Parties claim inspired their movement in the first place. (The NAACP report notes that its problem is with the questionable connections of many of the leaders of the Tea Party, not the movement's rank and file.) One of the more fascinating elements of the Tea Party story, untouched by the NAACP report, is the number of people that voted for Barack Obama in 2008, and yet, are tea party members today. It is a trend seen across the electorate.

A recent AP poll noted that nearly two years after putting Obama in the White House, one-quarter of those who voted for the Democrat are defecting to the GOP or considering voting against the party in power this fall. Just half of them say they definitely will show up Nov. 2. (The Associated Press-Knowledge Networks poll was released two weeks before Obama's first midterm elections.) (This trend is less surprising that it might seem—at first glance. It fits in the historical narrative. The percentage of people who claimed to back Bush in 2004 and Obama in 2008 is 17%, roughly where the Obama defection rate is right now, according to the AP. Similarly, in 2000 George W. Bush stole about 15% of the Clinton '96 vote while Gore stole just 7% of the Dole vote. Bill Clinton took 21% of the 1988 George H.W. Bush electorate in 1992, and Ronald Reagan captured 29% of Carter's 1976 vote in 1980.) This swing of working class whites to the GOP has not help to create the Tea Parties, but it is also made a racial motivation for their rising appeal with swing voters a difficult contention, an argument underscored by two decades of data from Democratic pollster Stan Greenberg.

Over the past twenty years, Greenberg has studied the blue-collar white voters of Macomb County near Detroit. In 1984 they voted by two to one for Ronald Reagan because, as Greenberg found, "when such voters heard Democrats talk about economic 'fairness', they saw this as code for transferring money to Blacks". Nonetheless, in 2008 Mr Obama won Macomb County with a margin of eight points.

Over the course of his campaign, the proportion of Macomb voters who said they were "comfortable" with the idea of Mr Obama as president rose from 40% to 60%. Having watched Mr Obama closely, Mr Greenberg concluded, they "became confident he would work for all Americans and be the steady leader the times required."

As the *Economist* magazine's "Lexington" columnist Peter David stated, "If such voters have now changed their minds, the reason is not that Mr Obama is black—he was black in 2008. And for all its momentous symbolism, his election is not the most recent evidence that America has turned the page on race. In June, in South Carolina of all states, Tim Scott, a Black Republican, defeated the son of the segregationist Strom Thurmond in a primary, and is on his way to a seat in the House. Compare that to 1983, when a disgraceful number of Democrats in Chicago voted for the Republican rather than send the black Harold Washington to city hall."

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All of that has gone. The electorate may be divided by race, but no longer mainly because of race.

Some of Mr Obama's enemies have tried to harness pockets of bigotry by painting him in various ways as un-American. But outright racism in politics is now beyond the pale and will probably have little to do with the coming rejection of the Democrats by the white working class. A wrecked economy and the feeling that their president is out of touch are reason enough. It has, after all, happened before. In two short years from 1992 to 1994, when Bill Clinton was president, white working-class support for the Republicans soared like a rocket from 47% to 61%. Nobody blamed that on skin colour."

Currently, polls show that 54% of Americans view the Tea Parties positively.

Still, while Michael Steele defended the Tea Parties, he noted that racism has made itself known in California Congressional race with ethnic implications in Louisiana's Second Congressional District contest. Vietnamese-American Republican Van Tran is attempting to capture the Orange County Congressional seat now held by Democrat Loretta Sanchez. The race is close.

In September, Sanchez went on the Spanish language station *Univision* and stated (in Spanish, translated here), "the Vietnamese and the Republicans are--with an *intensity* (emphasis hers)--trying to take away this seat, this seat that we [Democrats] have done so much for our community, take away this seat from us and give it to this Van Tran, who's very anti-immigrant and very anti-Latino."

Tran, a supporter of immigrants rights and himself like Joseph Cao the son of parents who fled South Vietnam, was a surprising target for Sanchez's rage. Yet, Democratic Congressperson's comments, centering on Tran's ethnicity versus her own Latino heritage, brought no reproach from either civil rights groups or the NAACP.

Steele sees this as something of a double standard.. As he told *The Louisiana Weekly*, "It's so ignorant to play race, and shame on Congressman Sanchez. If that is how she feels about her election, and how she feels about the people in her district to elect her--you know, elect one of us, not one of them.

Really. This is 2010. This is the attitude that you are promoting as an elected official. It's unbecoming, and I hope that it will end."

"We're still a nation that is still very much tied to matters of race. We're still very sensitive about matters of race. Whether you're talking about a Charles Djou in Hawaii, or a Congressman Cao here in Louisiana, or a number of African-American candidates that we have running across the country from Issac Hayes in Illinois to Tim Scott in South Carolina."

"These are Americans who have decided to rise up and serve. And, give them a chance and give them an opportunity to engage the people of their state in an honest way, and let their merits be the reason they are elected or not elected. When you bring it down to the lowest common demoninator, it says a lot about your desperation and your politics, and I think it is unfortunate."

**The full interview with Steele is available in the "Previous Shows" section of [www.gtmorning.com](http://www.gtmorning.com). Christopher Tidmore discusses politics on the radio weekday mornings, 7-8 AM on WSLA 1560 AM Slidell/New Orleans and KKAY 1590 AM White Castle/Baton Rouge.**

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