

Wishful thinking for Black America

By Bill Fletcher Jr.
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There is an interesting tendency within Black America to engage in wishful thinking when it comes to our feelings about many of our leaders. Let me give you an example. When Clarence Thomas was nominated to the Supreme Court, there was a split within Black America. Despite a very conservative record — and actually very little demonstration of legal vision — there were some of us who took the position that being Black, soon-to-be Justice Thomas deserved our support. I can remember the debates now. Very sincere people suggested that we needed to give the “brother” a chance; that once he was appointed to the Supreme Court and had secured job security he would do the “right” thing by Black America.

I hate to break it to you, but the results have been terrible. As you and I both know, Justice Thomas has failed to distinguish himself as a visionary jurist, but it is far worse than that. His opinions, and those that he

supports, have been so bad, that I pray for mediocrity compared to what we have sitting on that bench. His decisions have helped to set back the cause of Black freedom, and other progressive efforts, rather than advance our interests.

Yet, why was it that so many of us believed that Thomas would be far different than his history indicated he was capable of being? I asked myself this question recently in the context of the Senatorial race in Maryland. Lt. Gov. Michael Steele (an African-American by birth; a Republican by choice) is making a run for a vacant U.S. Senate seat. Much to my surprise, Steele has received endorsements from otherwise progressive African-Americans like Russell Simmons, as well as noted African-American media entrepreneur Cathy Hughes. Why, I asked myself, is Steele deserving of support?



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My answer is that he is not; therefore, what is it that people I admire, such as Simmons and Hughes, see in Steele? As far as I can tell, all it seems to be is that he is Black and appears to be a nice guy. As a current TV ad by Steele's opponent — Democrat Ben Cardin — points out, while Steele may like puppies (Steele has been running an ad mockingly saying that some people will accuse him of not liking puppies), Steele is in President Bush's corner. He supports the Iraq war; is against a woman's right to choose, etc. In other words, there is nothing in terms of Steele's actual practice or ideas that distinguish him from the politics of the Bush administration, an administration that has us trapped in war, growing wealth inequality, and environmental disaster.

Why do we engage in wishful thinking? Are we so desperate to have credible leaders

that we are willing to throw caution and principle to the wind and embrace a Clarence Thomas; a Colin Powell, whose performance at the United Nations provided the cover for the Iraq invasion; a Condoleezza Rice, who sat back and supported the destruction of Lebanon by Israel; or a Michael Steele, who has done little in his political career to warrant the notion that he is a champion of Black freedom? Yet, when many of us raise these concerns, if not criticisms, we are attacked for being insufficiently supportive of other “brothers” and “sisters.”

My response to this comes from a song from my youth: “Don't pat me on my back, stick your hands in my pocket, and call me your ‘brother.’” I want to know what someone is doing for Black people rather than fixating on their outward appearance and what they might do if the stars are properly aligned, the tide is on schedule. Let's deal with reality, not what we would like reality to be.

Bill Fletcher, Jr. is a Washington, DC-based activist involved with labor and international issues.

Candidates' remarks often haunt them

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Highlighting candidates' race-tinged comments seems to be the campaign gotcha of this political season, even if the words were uttered decades ago.

Republican Sen. George Allen of Virginia has been fending off charges of racism for almost two months and now he's on the spot for allegedly making offensive comments about Blacks and other groups in the 1970s. His Democrat opponent, Jim Webb, has had to answer for writing dialogue in a novel that includes a common racial slur.

The finger also has been pointed at another candidate, entertainer Kinky Friedman, who's making a bid for governor in Texas. He's publicly made blunt, sometimes ethnically offensive, comments as far back as a 1980 nightclub act.

Whether it's fair game to scrutinize such remarks — and whether it works to turn voters against a candidate — seems to depend on the indi-

Friedman called Hurricane Katrina evacuees, most of whom are Black, “crackheads and thugs.”

— Kinky Friedman
Candidate for Texas Gov.



vidual case.

“The American people try to be fair — people will give you a chance to explain,” said Frederick J. Antczak, an expert on political rhetoric at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Mich. “It all depends on whether people can connect this to previous incidents or to a voting record.

“I just don't think that the majority of Americans are inclined anymore to tolerate open and unapologetic instances of racism,” he said.

Friedman, a country singer and humorist, is an independent candidate. Last month, he called Hurricane

Katrina evacuees, most of whom are Black, “crackheads and thugs,” but later apologized. On a 1980 audio tape that resurfaced last month, he mocked several ethnic groups and used a racial slur for Blacks: He insisted he was joking, though the Texas NAACP demanded an apology.

A fictional character in Webb's 2001 novel “Fields of Fire,” about the Vietnam War, uses the slur for Blacks as well. “It would be disingenuous to say he (Webb) has never used the term before,” said Jessica Smith, his spokeswoman, “but never in a derogatory way.”

Allen has faced criticism for a string of remarks in recent weeks. On Aug. 11, he called a Webb campaign volunteer of Indian descent “macaca,” a type of monkey, and a few weeks later seemed irritated when asked about new revelations that his maternal grandfather was Jewish. Allen said he loves eating pork, which violates Jewish dietary laws.

Last month, Allen's college classmates and acquaintances went public with stories from the 1970s and '80s that he routinely made racist comments about Blacks. He has said the stories are untrue. His campaign did not respond to requests for further comment.

“Of course I would want to know where my candidate stands on his sensitivities or insensitivities, and I think it's appropriate to bring those things up — candidates should address that,” said Tara Wall, a spokeswoman for the Republican National Committee. “But Sen. Allen has been the butt of a campaign of hate. He's been a governor, he's been a senator and all this is coming up now?”

Not only is it coming up — it seems to be having an effect. A recent MSNBC/McClatchy Poll conducted by Mason-Dixon Polling & Research Inc. had Allen and Webb in a dead heat. Two months ago, a Mason-Dixon poll had Allen leading by 16 percentage points.

“The ‘macaca’ moment was certainly a turning point in the campaign,” Smith said.

No matter when they're uttered, verbal missteps re-

garding race have long been political weapons.

Earlier this year, Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney and White House spokesman Tony Snow were quickly criticized for using the term “tar baby” in separate incidents to describe sticky situations. Both said they were unaware that some consider it a derogatory term for Blacks.

Sen. Trent Lott, a Republican from Mississippi, said in 2002 the country would be better off if Sen. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina had been elected during his

broader stage, Antczak said. “There's an inability to handle the nationalization of the rhetoric,” he said.

When an elected official is repeatedly accused of making offensive comments — even if the comments are years old and unproven — they can have a cumulative effect, said Dianne M. Pinderghughes, a political scientist at the University of Notre Dame.

Voters begin to believe that “something is there. You don't know what it is, you don't know how substantive it is, but every time you dig,

Allen called a Webb campaign volunteer of Indian descent “macaca,” a type of monkey.

Sen. George Allen
(R-Virginia)



bid for president in 1948. Thurmond had promised to preserve racial segregation during that run but changed that stance later in life. He died in 2003.

Even though Lott had quietly supported groups and issues in the South that many civil rights activists condemned, he was pressured to quit as Senate majority leader after his comments about Thurmond reverberated across the nation.

As Lott's experience showed, politicians sometimes make comments that are well received among sympathetic listeners but don't go over well on a

more stuff comes out,” she said. “People start asking, ‘Who is this person? Does he have values that are problematic?’”

Voters, especially minorities, often re-examine a candidate's voting record on issues concerning their communities when racially sensitive comments get a lot of attention, said Hilary Shelton, director of the Washington, D.C., office of the NAACP.

“The question will be,” Shelton said, “if he (a candidate) is indeed that insensitive to their issues and concerns, will he advocate for their needs on Capitol Hill?”

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Macoutes, his secret police that squashed dissent and inflicted violence on his political opponents. The dictator declared himself president for life. Upon his death in 1971, his 19-year-old son succeeded him. The younger president for life was deposed in 1986, forcing him to flee the country.

Things seemed to take a turn for the better in 1991 when Jean-Bertrand Aristide became the first democratically elected president. True to Haiti's political upheaval, he, too, was soon deposed in a coup. A military junta controlled by Raul Cedras ruled the country until the U.S. invaded the country, returning Aristide to power and dissolving the military. After his term, Aristide was suc-

ceeded in 1996 by Rene Preval, his prime minister. After his term, Aristide was elected again in 2001, an election marred by charges that Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas party improperly counted votes. In 2004, Aristide was the victim of what Ron Daniels calls an “orchestrated ouster.” Orchestrated, of course, by the United States. And, once again, Rene Preval became the reluctant president.

Daniels, founder of the New York-based Haiti Support Project, observed that Haiti is deeply divided along class and color lines. And its problems will not be solved until there is fundamental justice for all levels of Haitian society.

George E. Curry is editor-in-chief of the NNPA News Service.