

State GOP leaders pledging support for Steele

WASHINGTON (AP) — Brash and ready to brawl, Republican Party Chairman Michael Steele stands as a lightning rod for critics and comedians, but he's being embraced by state GOP leaders and grass-roots activists still reeling after crushing losses on George W. Bush's watch.

"His election has been overwhelmingly received by the rank-and-file Republicans," said

Colorado GOP chief Dick Wadhams. "They see him as an articulate party leader who can go toe-to-toe with the Democrats, and they don't share the perception that some in the confines of Washington have."

Added Rick Beltram, the Spartanburg County GOP chairman in South Carolina: "I don't think anyone is ready to throw Steele to the wolves."

Steele's situation echoes that of Howard Dean, the former Vermont governor, presidential candidate and outsider who in 2005 was elected Democratic chairman much to the chagrin of the party establishment. Dean later was vindicated when his 50-state organizational strategy was credited with helping Barack Obama reach the White House.

Three months after the nation elected its first Black president, Republicans chose their first Black chairman in Steele, a former Maryland lieutenant governor. He promised a complete overhaul of the GOP, just like Dean did with the Democrats after a series of losses.

In the nearly six weeks since his election, Steele's organizational shake-up, off-the-cuff style and criticism of fellow Republicans have conflicted with his predecessors' buttoned-down Washington approach.

The contrast is so wide that the capital's party insid-

ers privately call Steele an embarrassment and fret about the organization's fundraising, recruiting and communications strategy.

At least one member of the Republican National Committee, longtime Steele opponent Ada Fisher, has publicly called for his resignation, while Steele's presence on the talk-show circuit and his eyebrow-raising commentary has made him a punch line on late-night comedy shows and earned him a spoof on NBC's "Saturday Night Live."

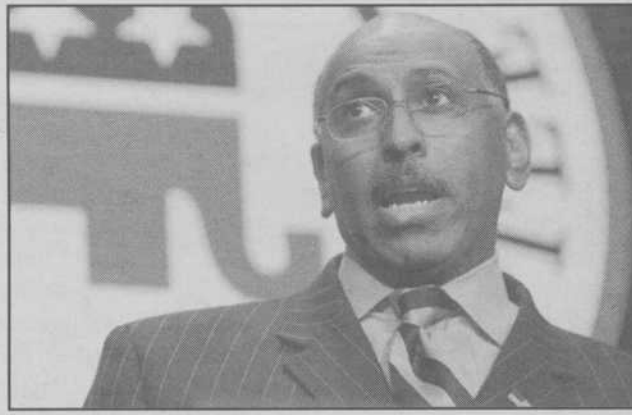
Sounding more like his former brother-in-law, boxer Mike Tyson, Steele has drawn ridicule for using street phrases like "playa" and "bling, bling."

Yet, interviews with more than a dozen GOP loyalists across the country, many of whom initially voted for Steele's opponents in the multi-ballot January election, indicate that the party's hardcore supporters are more than willing to give their new leader the benefit of the doubt.

They are standing behind Steele — at least for now — as he charts a new course for a GOP that just three years ago controlled both the White House and Congress, but now finds itself out of power.

"There's a transition period. Every new executive is going to have their own style, their own set of strengths and weaknesses, and they deserve time to get a feel for the organization and to imprint their own image upon it," said Fergus Cullen, a former New Hampshire party chairman.

Steele's challenge: Turning a GOP that had carried water for the Bush administration for eight years into a loyal opposition able to go up against Obama, while preparing for next year's congressional elections and the presi-



Michael Steele's first six weeks as Republican National Committee chairman have distracted the party from rebuilding and presenting a viable option to Democrats.

dential race in 2012. The smooth-talking, media-loving Steele has acknowledged missteps in his first weeks. Yet, the 50-year-old has attributed them to a personal style intended to get a rise out of people and an effort to revamp GOP headquarters.

Shortly after winning, he fired much of the staff and embarked on what his advisers call a top-to-bottom overhaul of operations they say are woefully outdated. Critics gripe he got rid of people with institutional knowledge. But state party leaders challenged the notion

that vacant positions at the hulking Capitol Hill headquarters could hurt the party's prospects in upcoming elections.

"It's a huge operation. It's like any new CEO who comes into a company and assesses it," Chris Healy, Connecticut's GOP chief, said. He chalked up the criticism to "internal Beltway navel-gazing" that "will be all but forgotten in another week."

He added: "I have every confidence he will do well. We're headed in the right direction."

State GOP activists also

dismissed hubbub in Washington over Steele's slang-tongued vernacular and his shoot-from-the-hip comments. In a stream of radio, TV and print interviews, Steele promised to give the party a "hip-hop makeover" that would be "off the hook" and would attract even "one-armed midgets."

"He's trying to shake it up a little bit. I see no objection to him. I like his approach," said Jerry Roe, a former Michigan GOP executive director. "This party's going to have to make some major changes to come back, and that's what he's trying to do" — both in style and substance.

Washington outsiders also brushed aside Steele's criticism of fellow Republicans.

The chairman raised the prospect of primary challenges for moderate senators from the Northeast who sided with Democrats on the economic stimulus plan. Steele also compared Republicans to alcoholics on a 12-step program and called Rush Limbaugh "incendiary and ugly," though then apolo-

gized to the conservative radio personality to Democrats' delight.

"We don't have the presidency, so we need an outspoken, visible party chair. We can have family squabbles. I don't have a problem with that," said Mark Fahleson, Nebraska's Republican chairman. "There's been a lack of internal debate with the past eight years, so I think this is healthy."

Overall, there's a sense in states that Steele seems to be exactly the change agent the party needs after eight years of taking their marching orders from Bush and his political guru, Karl Rove, and following the 2006 and 2008 shellackings.

Given that record, "there's probably a mix of hope and optimism that a fresh face and somebody of African-American descent will be a good thing," said Chuck Hurley, the head of the Iowa Family Policy Center and a delegate to the GOP convention last year.

Still, he added: "It's kind of a wait-and-see attitude with most people."

Your Horoscope Says... March 19-25

ARIES

Watching the sunrise will help quell any impatience that may arise within you this week. As you watch the sun kiss the sky, imagine that the universe is embracing you with love.

Soul Affirmation: I judge no one, especially myself this week.

Lucky Numbers: 3, 5, 54

TAURUS

A surge in your personal power enables you to slay any dragons that you happen to meet this week. If you keep your attention on your own personal dragons, you'll be advancing your own best self by knocking out some less than healthy habits. Use the force for good!

Soul Affirmation: Shining brightly is something that I can do even in shadows.

Lucky Numbers: 20, 33, 51

GEMINI

Here's a chance to get to the bottom of an issue that's been bothering you for quite some time. This week you'll feel objective enough to focus on the situation, and not the person who may unwittingly have caused the situation. Go for it!

Soul Affirmation: The enjoyment of good food is high on my agenda this week.

Lucky Numbers: 15, 43, 55

CANCER

Information flows smoothly to and from you this week. You are in your element as communications come and go. You'll learn much as you listen

and observe others. Be easy on yourself this week.

Soul Affirmation: I enjoy flirting with new ideas.

Lucky Numbers: 7, 14, 32

LEO

Someone may try to push your buttons this week. Don't let it get on your nerves. You have the power to focus your attention on positive thoughts and ideas. They will prove much more worthwhile in the long run than a short-term blow-out with an unequal adversary.

Soul Affirmation: When I am clear about who I am, the world becomes clearer.

Lucky Numbers: 2, 45, 50

LIBRA

Conclusions can be reached; but don't jump to them. Things are working out in your best interests. Ignore any negative attitudes and stay focused on your goals and plans. You are winning!

Soul Affirmation: My hunches pay all week this week.

Lucky Numbers: 6, 11, 13

SCORPIO

This is a perfect week for some fun. You know how to have fun and it's calling you out to play. Say what you need and the rest will follow in perfect order! Have a good time!

Soul Affirmation: The search for fun occupies my time. Enjoy!

Lucky Numbers: 1, 19, 33

SAGITTARIUS

You may receive some news that troubles you, but recognize what you

can and can't do about the situation. As powerful as you are, you are still not required to do everything for everyone. Do what feels most loving.

Soul Affirmation: I smile and trust in the powers beyond myself.

Lucky Numbers: 11, 29, 43

CAPRICORN

Your leadership skills are shining this week, so get out there and glimmer with good vibrations. Others are looking to you for guidance and as a path to follow. Let your journey through the week provide a good model.

Soul Affirmation: I let worry fly away.

Lucky Numbers: 15, 16, 39

AQUARIUS

You are brilliant this week as you gather materials and resources together for an important project. There's a good probability for wonderful news late in the afternoon. Ride the vibes and be gentle with your own feelings.

Soul Affirmation: There are plenty of fish in the sea waiting for me.

Lucky Numbers: 1, 42, 50

PISCES

A date or meeting that is unexpectedly canceled may make someone very unhappy. Recognize that all things work for good, and that a better solution is being provided in the space between what you think you want and what you are getting.

Soul Affirmation: This week silence speaks loudest and truest.

Lucky Numbers: 20, 40, 41

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