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Republicans Should Now Reclaim Their Strong History on Civil Rights

By Matt A. Mayer

If you want a perfect example of how the progressive mindset betrays African Americans, look at the [now viral video](#) of two white women spray-painting a Starbucks with Black Lives Matter slogans while a black woman pleads for them to stop. ‘Y’all doing that for us and we didn’t ask you do that,’ says the black woman. ‘Don’t spray stuff on here when they gonna blame black people...and black people didn’t do it.’ ‘Don’t police people’s way of expressing themselves,’ says the white woman’s white friend. That is a neat metaphor for how white liberal Americans have behaved for the last 40 years, taking actions they think show support for minorities but which only hurt them more.

This is where the Democratic party’s approach to racial justice has led us. The current crisis gives Republicans a real opportunity to reclaim their natural position as the natural party of American civil rights.

Everyone of course knows that Abraham Lincoln founded the Republican party in his quest for the White House. It is also well known that Lincoln then moved to free America’s slaves. Less well known among Americans is that Gen. Ulysses S. Grant fully supported Lincoln’s actions as he led the North to victory at Appomattox Courthouse in April 1865. Even fewer people know that, upon being elected president in 1868, Grant spent his eight years in office working tirelessly to ensure that the Confederate states didn’t infringe on the freedoms of African Americans, including their right to vote. Grant went to war against the Ku Klux Klan by sending federal troops across the former Confederacy led by Civil War generals William Sherman and Phil Sheridan.

Grant’s efforts resulted in large numbers of African Americans being elected to offices ranging from county sheriff to US senator in the American South. Without question, the Republican party became the party of African Americans across the South. As Grant said, ‘Under existing conditions the Negro votes the republican ticket because he knows his friends are of that party.’ It was only after Grant’s presidency ended that Democrats came back to power with a vengeance, as Reconstruction lost support in the North.

Once back in control, Democrats ushered in the Jim Crow Era in which African Americans became second-class citizens across the South. In many ways, Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox Courthouse only represented a loss of the military aspect of the Civil War, as the larger battle was then fought in ballot boxes and legislatures in the coming decades. Unquestionably, the Confederacy won that larger battle as African Americans spent the next 100 years largely kept under

the thumb of Democrat politicians and their constituents. It was Democrat Woodrow Wilson who showcased the Klan movie, *Birth of a Nation*, at the White House and who pushed eugenic policies aimed at African Americans.

After Grant won most of the southern states on the strength of African American votes in 1872, no Republican won a majority of those states again until Richard Nixon did 100 years later in 1972. Democrats controlled the American South and denied African Americans their freedoms during that entire span. Recall also it was Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower who sent federal troops into the South to deal with segregationist Democrat politicians in 1957.

Despite more Republicans than Democrats voting for the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the leadership of Democrat Lyndon Johnson led to a change in which African Americans firmly became aligned with the Democratic party. At the same time as the civil rights movement was growing in strength, the Democratic party increasingly became aligned with liberal policies while the Republican party moved towards more conservative policies. As a result, conservative Democrats in the South starting becoming Republicans as liberal Republicans in the North became Democrats in a great political realignment.

Unfortunately, instead of fighting back by focusing on the conservative policies many African Americans agree with, the Republican party allowed former Democrats like Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond to define the party as hostile to African Americans. Democrat Robert Byrd from West Virginia was no less hostile to African Americans than Helms or Thurmond and had even been a member of the KKK, but the Democratic party with the mainstream media’s help did a better job of hiding Byrd’s biography.

When the Republican party then accepted scores of former southern Democrats into the party without requiring them to renounce their racist views and adopt Nixon’s ‘southern strategy’ to win those states by leveraging white animosity towards African Americans, the long history of the Republican party’s fight on behalf of African Americans got swept into the dust bin of history. When the 1990s brought forth ‘three strikes’ and truth in sentencing laws pushed mainly by Republicans, but also by Democrats such as Biden, the hole Republicans had dug only got deeper.

Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush made efforts to help the African American community via educational choice

policies, yet it truly wasn't until Trump pushed aggressively for sweeping criminal justice reform that a Republican president signed major legislation that would benefit the African American community in significant and meaningful ways. With the strong economy brought by Trump's tax and regulatory reforms, African American unemployment reached an historic low in February 2020. These victories are precisely why Trump's favorability rating among African Americans rose to over 30 percent and also why Democrats attacked him relentlessly as a racist. After all, they knew that if Trump increased his share of the African American vote from the 8 percent he got in 2016 to 16 percent in 2020, Democrats couldn't find enough replacement votes in the key states which would seal Trump's reelection.

For example, it is well established that the media and Democrats grossly distorted what Trump said about white nationalists after the events in Charlottesville in 2017. The irony few have recognized is that the entire issue arose because people wanted to remove a statute of Confederate hero Robert E. Lee — a statute erected by Democrats in 1924 at a time Democrats totally controlled the American South. Despite these facts, in the name of freedom, history, and free speech, Republicans found themselves defending keeping the Lee statue up, as well as other Confederate generals elsewhere, and predictably played the part of being insensitive to racial issues.

The terrible reality is that the extreme loyalty shown by African Americans to Democratic politicians over the last 50 years simply hasn't translated into a commensurate level of improvements in their lives and communities. Too many African Americans still attend failing schools; too many African Americans still end up in the criminal justice system; too many African American children still grew up in broken and dysfunctional homes; too many African Americans still haven't climb the economic ladder of success; too many African Americans still suffer poor health outcomes at higher rates than whites; and, yes, too many African Americans still die at the hands of law enforcement.

Republicans should take back the historic role they played in freeing America's slaves and fighting for African Americans to have the same rights as white Americans during Reconstruction. Biden's 'you ain't black' comment wasn't just offensive. It was also wholly ignorant of the long history in which the Democratic party did all it could for over 100 years to keep African Americans enslaved in the South, including killing and maiming thousands of our fellow citizens.

George Floyd's death is certainly tragic. The rioting further harming African American communities is making that tragedy worse. It would be even more tragic if his death didn't result in fundamental reforms that ultimately bettered the lives of the millions of African Americans still trapped in the generational and systemic dysfunction and poverty that is a legacy of slavery and Democrat Jim Crow laws. Fifty years of failed Democratic policies haven't worked.

Perhaps it is time for Republicans to truly get into the debate by speaking forcefully against the racists among them and build upon the advances put in place by Trump over the last

few years. It isn't coincidental that the riots are occurring in places that have been governed by Democrats for decades. If Democratic policies worked so well, why are those places and the people living in them still so underprivileged? Fifty years of failed leadership and ideas is enough. It is time Republicans stepped up and fought again for African Americans as Grant did during Reconstruction.

Republicans should act not because it might get them African American votes. They should act because it is the right thing to do. It will help move America closer to that 'more perfect Union' promised in our Constitution and rescue the next generation of African American kids so they can live up to their full potential. Republicans have a powerful story to tell on civil rights. They should reclaim that story, tell it widely, push for change, and not hesitate to purge their party of racists who undermine their efforts.

Matt A. Mayer is President of Opportunity Ohio and Contributor to The Spectator USA.