

OPINION

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Firsts among the Politically Elite

Barack Obama and now Michael Steele

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS
Former Maryland Lt. Gov. Michael Steele, a black man, was recently elected Chairman of the Republican National Committee to oversee the Republican Party's agenda items, rally members around issues, and lead party fundraising and campaign efforts across the country.



elite. It is amazing that given this country's history with African Americans and voting rights, two black men have ascended to such powerful political positions. Certainly, you've had blacks in high-powered political roles but never this high and definitely not within both the Republican and Democratic parties.

There are still many African Americans who remember an America where their right to vote was not secured by law and who risked injury, even death, to fight for that right.

What's most fascinating about Steele's leadership role at the RNC is that the country will

While you or your friends may never support Steele or any

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have an opportunity to witness the distinct leadership styles of two African Americans who, along with their parties, are pushing vastly different agendas.

For generations, Republicans have advocated for less government, tax breaks for the wealthy and less protections for society's most vulnerable members. Democrats on the other hand, transformed themselves into the party that works to provide safety nets for the poor and marginalized.

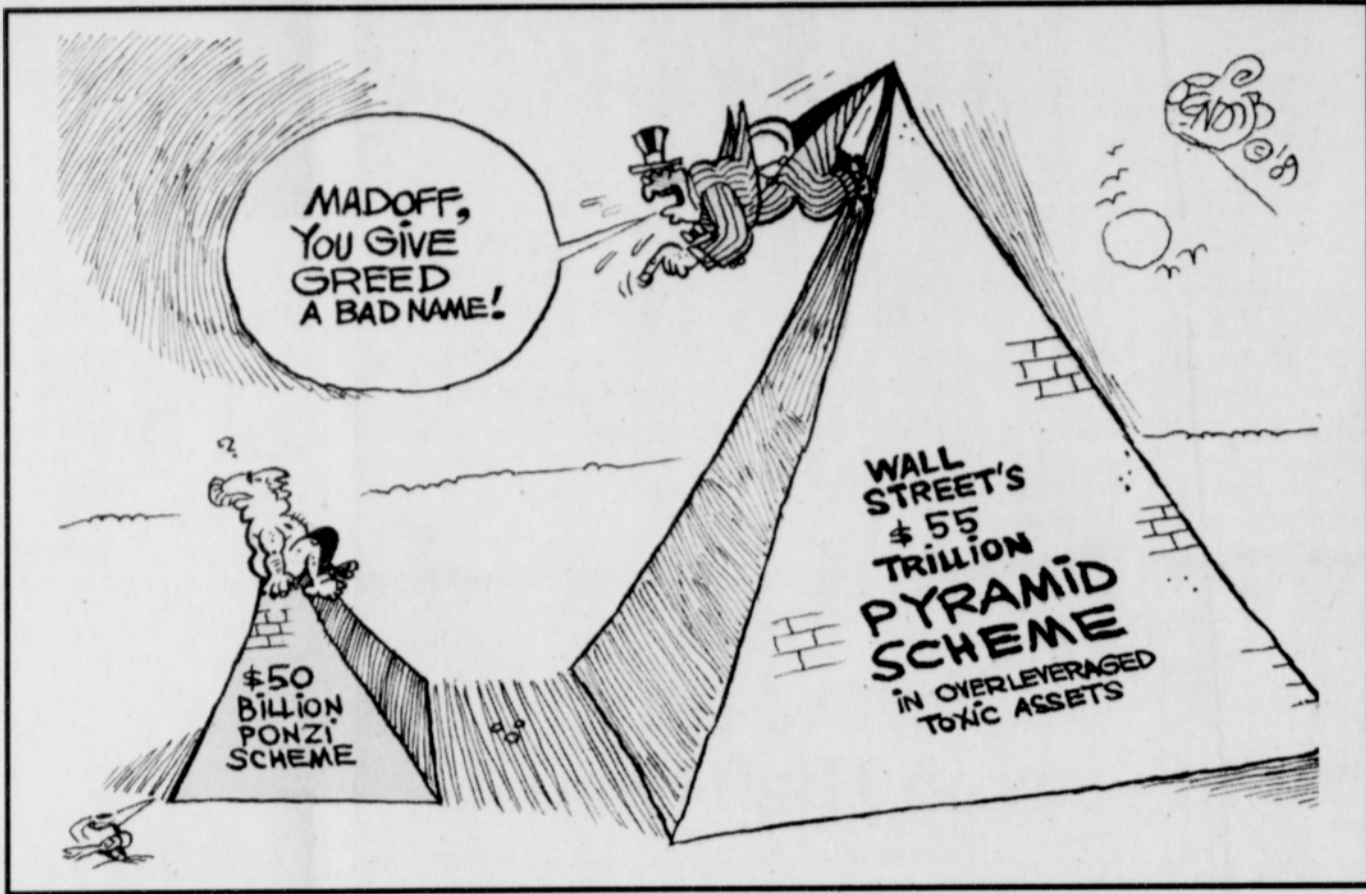
Regardless of your feelings about Steele or the Republican Party for that matter, his appointment is a notable accomplishment. Thought to be too conservative by liberals and deemed not conservative enough by the religious right, Steele stands with President Obama as one of few African Americans among the politically

of his party's initiatives, rest assured that the country will be watching him closely. His appointment, along with President Obama's historic election, have swung the door of American politics wide open, making it that much easier for blacks to walk on through.

As politics diversify, so too will the viewpoints and agendas pushed by the parties that dominate them.

Look at how far we have come. Frederick Douglas once said "If there is no struggle, there is no progress." As a people, we have struggled and endured. While true equality has not yet arrived, we have made many gains.

Judge Greg Mathis is vice president of Rainbow PUSH and a board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.



CASCADE CONNECTIONS Steering Through Rough Waters

BY ALGIE C. GATEWOOD



By any measure, the upcoming year will be a challenging one. However, as hopeful we may feel as a people entering a new era in America politics, that optimism is tempered by the magnitude of the obstacles before us. For many of us, the story of 2009 will in large part be about how we weather the current economic crisis.

It's no secret that many more Americans are without jobs now than at almost any time in memory. More and more people face the grim prospects of foreclosure and bankruptcy every day, and many feel that events have spiraled out of their control. And that feeling is not without cause - many of the economic forces in motion now are indeed outside of the control of the average person, and it is easy to feel as if you have been cut adrift.

But there's no need to feel that way. Certainly, times are tough, but you don't have to feel as if there are no options.

You don't have to feel as if you cannot exert some control over your future, even when resources are tight and choices seem limited.

As my mother used to tell me in North Carolina - and still does, truth be told - when one door closes, another one opens.

It may seem paradoxical, but

curve, and as President Obama enacts his program of widespread infrastructure investment.

"Epic changes are ahead in the business landscape," Rob McGovern, CEO of JobFox Inc. (an online job search service), told BusinessWeek magazine recently about the impact of

that choice, there is no better place to go than your local community college campus.

Simply put, community colleges are the most accessible, most economical way to further your education or acquire new skills training. As the demand for tomorrow's skills increases, community colleges are where industry will turn for highly-trained workers.

So do it. Make the choice. Invest in your future. Steer your own course through the rough economic waters. Take the time to learn about the jobs of tomorrow, visit your local community college campus, talk to an adviser, and enroll.

You won't find more bang for your educational buck anywhere else, and if your budget is tight, financial aid is available.

The story of 2009 will indeed be about how we weather the current economic crisis. But with the right choices and the right education, your time in the sun can come sooner.

Algie C. Gatewood is president of Portland Community College's Cascade Campus.

Certainly, times are tough, but you don't have to feel as if there are no options.

a time of economic stress can be a time of opportunity. What better time to retool your skill set than when you're out of work? What better time to prepare for a change of careers? And let's face it - the economy is not just in a slump, the very nature of the goods and services we produce is changing.

This change will only intensify as our culture continues on its steep technological growth

Obama's plans.

"It's just like 1991, when we didn't know the Internet was coming," McGovern went on to say. "New job titles will emerge, many of which haven't been invented yet. Savvy professionals will be prepared to take advantage of new opportunities."

So the question is - will you be prepared to take advantage of these new opportunities? If so, how will you prepare yourself? And perhaps most importantly, if you're feeling the economic pinch - what are you waiting for?

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Leveling the Field Justice served with Lilly Ledbetter Act

The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act was the very first piece of legislation signed into law by President Barack Obama.

The bill will combat wage discrimination and helps begin leveling the field of compensation, regardless of the race, ethnicity, religion or gender of who receives the pay.

For every dollar made by a Caucasian male in the U.S. today, it is estimated [by the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics] that an African American male makes 79 cents for equal work, an African American woman 77 cents and a white woman slightly more than 80 cents. That is blatant economic discrimination in its plainest sense and cents.

The act addresses the reckless Supreme Court decision, nearly two years ago in Ledbetter v. Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co. that an individual who is receiving less pay for equal work due to his or her race, ethnic background, gender or age, must file a lawsuit within 180 days of his or her first discriminatory paycheck in order for the suit to be considered by the courts.

That ruling ignored the fact that individuals who are receiving less pay often do not realize that they are being discriminated against in the first three months and often can only confirm such discrimination after months, years or even decades of investigation.

The law reinstates the original intent of Congress in the 1964 Civil Rights Act, by mandating that an individual may file a discrimination suit against an employer (or former employer) within 180 days of the end of his or her employment, thereby restoring the ability of victims of pay discrimination to obtain effective remedies.

At the signing ceremony President Obama said, "It's bad for business to pay somebody less because of their gender or their age or their race or their ethnicity, religion or disability; and that justice isn't about some abstract legal theory, or footnote in a casebook. It's about how our laws affect the daily lives and the daily realities of people: their ability to make a living and care for their families and achieve their goals."

The NAACP applauds President Obama for signing this bill.

Benjamin T. Jealous is NAACP president and chief executive officer.

