



## Fold Up the RNC Tent

In Tennessee's U.S. senate election, "it clearly was dirty business as usual."

**T**he Republican National Committee constantly argues that their political tent is big and there is room for all.

At a meeting a little over a year ago, then-Chairman Ken Mehlman even apologized for his party's past history of discrimination, racism, and its practice of excluding minorities in general and African Americans in particular. Last July, President Bush made essentially the same argument — that people should give the national Republican Party an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment on a range of issues important to African Americans.

But if the party really wants to understand why millions of African Americans view it with disdain, it should check its actions in the senatorial campaign in the state of Tennessee. There, the actions of the national Republican Party — under the leadership of Mehlman and Bush — denied the state the opportunity to prove that it could move from the dark days of racism to a brighter future for every citizen of that state.

**POISED TO MAKE HISTORY.** Former House Speaker Tip O'Neill said that all politics is local, and to a great degree that is true. In the recent senatorial election, the state of Tennessee was poised to make history for *every* segment of its society — rich and poor; working people; professionals; religious and business leaders; and young people seeking to believe in the process — every slice of our society that makes us who we are.

During a primary that bruised both parties, Tennessee's voters selected two candidates, who met their criteria for leadership, to carry their party's banner

into the general election: Congressman Harold Ford Jr. of Memphis, and Robert Corker, former mayor of Chattanooga.

The state was poised to make history. And I don't mean by electing Harold Ford Jr. I mean the state could have made history by having a campaign for one of the most important offices in our nation based on the issues, leadership, vision, capacity, experience and history of public service.

From small towns to big cities, the candidates shared their views and their visions for their state and this nation with people from every walk of life. From small cafes and donut shops to the large churches and mass meetings, from town hall meetings to statewide debates, the candidates went out and spoke with the people of Tennessee about the issues. In each campaign, there were seniors who had never participated before; there were young people who had said they would never participate again, but became excited by what they saw happening right there in Tennessee.

**RACISM IS ALIVE & WELL.** Anyone who believes Mehlman and Bush, and thinks that things have changed, need look no further than the Republican National Committee's anti-Ford *Playboy* ad — one so sleazy, so distasteful, so well-designed to dredge up the old hatreds so prevalent in the South. Clearly, it was *dirty* business as usual for them.

The fact that Harold Ford Jr. lost the election is not the issue that leaves me troubled. It is the fact that Tennessee lost an opportunity to elect an individual to high office based on the issues most important to Tennesseans, whether that individual was Robert Corker or Harold Ford Jr.

Unfortunately, I must thank Ken Mehlman and the Republican National Committee for creatively reminding us that at the highest level of their party, racism is alive and well and just waiting for the opportunity to be used.



Rick Reinhard

With then-incoming Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) (right) who visited AFSCME headquarters in December to thank members of the International Executive Board for the union's decisive role in the 2006 elections.