

End of the rainbow

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By Gary Younge

GENERAL Colin Powell is missing in action. At the Republican convention in 2000 he led from the front, opening a line up that could have been set up by Jesse Jackson's Rainbow coalition.

Of the three co-chairs in 2000 one was black and another Hispanic; national security adviser Condoleezza Rice kicked off prime-time coverage one night while Chaka Khan serenaded George Bush. "Make no mistake about it," said a Republican strategist at the time. "Bush is personally obsessed with diversity." That obsession, even at this cosmetic level, seems to have long passed.

Powell, the secretary of state, was absent last week — not just from the podium but from the entire convention. The White House says his absence was a matter of "custom and tradition" that prevents the national security team from attending.

This must have been news to Bush's father, who had secretary of state James Baker at his side at the 1992 convention. Powell did not come either because, given his misgivings on the war, the party did not want him there or because, given his misgivings about the party, he did not want to be there.

Either way, this year the most prominent black speaker was the education secretary, Rod Paige — whose low public profile only a Google search could save from oblivion. And it was downhill from there. After Paige came the lieutenant governor of Maryland and finally Erika Harold, last year's Miss America.

The promotion of so many

week you wouldn't know it. They pointed to the sharp increase in black delegates to the convention (the highest presence on record) as proof that they are making strides.

Showcasing polls indicating black Americans are more likely to attend church regularly, oppose abortion and gay marriage and support school vouchers than their white counterparts, they claimed that the Republican party was more in tune with black values than the Democrats could ever be.

Ask any of them why more than 90% of African-Americans will vote Democrat and they claim that their friends and family members have simply been duped. "Most African-Americans grow up in a family where their parents are Democratic and it's so easy to follow the group rather than think of what is in their best interests," says Don McLaurin, a black Republican from Trotwood, Ohio.

Such statements are ironic since they echo precisely what many liberals say about black Republicans — namely, that their inability to fathom their own interests is the only rational explanation for their misguided political choice. Both are wrong. People's interests are not determined by their melanin count but shaped by their experience. To suggest otherwise is both obnoxious and patronising.

Moreover, it offers little help in understanding the Republican party's racial exclusivity. The rise in black convention delegates is a diversion. It came from a pathetically low base (2.6% in 1996, 4.7% in 2000) and tells us little. Shortly before South Africa's first demo-

black faces four years ago was essentially symbolic. Its aim was not to woo the African-American vote, but to soothe the consciences of moderate whites who would not vote for a party that went openly negative on race. The absence of prominent black figures on stage this year was equally symbolic. For Bush's reelection effort marks the virtual completion of the racial realignment of the Republican party.

In the last presidential election Republicans received only 8% of the black vote — the lowest percentage for 40 years. Recent polls indicate that this year the figure will reach 4% — the lowest ever. Black Americans make up 12% of the national population. Yet Republicans have no black congressmen and fare only slightly better at a local level, where African-Americans comprise 0.4% of all Republican state legislators.

So the party of Lincoln, the president credited with freeing the slaves, is now essentially the White People's party — a race-based initiative that has reestablished the segregation of American political culture. Ethnically they are less exclusive. With around a third of the Hispanic vote (Hispanics may be black or white) Republicans still have a toe-hold there, although they are struggling to keep it.

But there are only so many people you can alienate at one time, and the decline in black supporters was not an accident. This was the intended consequence of Richard Nixon's "southern strategy". The party put race at the centre of a project to radically reconfigure its base after the civil rights era by appealing to racist white southerners who felt betrayed by the Democrats. It worked, handing the south to the Republicans and forcing black voters into the arms of the Democrats.

Now Bush is closing the deal. His policies and platform will ensure all but the most negligible support from African-Americans, and transforming the Republicans into a monoracial party in one of the world's most multi-racial nations.

To hear the gathering at the African-Americans for Bush rally at the Waldorf Astoria last

cratic elections 20% of the delegates to the convention of the National party, the architect of apartheid, were black.

The fact that, both there and in the US, the rise coincided with negligible black support at the polls simply suggests a growing dislocation between black people in their chosen party and those outside it.

It also suggests that African-Americans have the same narrow understanding of "values" as the Republican party. They don't. In particular, they seem to value honesty and hard work sufficiently highly to frown upon on a president who took them into a war based on lies, while marshalling an economy that denies them jobs. Unemployment among black people remains double the percentage for whites, while one in four African-Americans lives in poverty.

Meanwhile, polls show three-quarters of black Americans agree at least somewhat with the proposition that Bush intentionally misled the country into war. Finally, black Americans are understandably keen on racial equality, a cause not best argued by the party which opposes affirmative action and harbours the likes of the racist Mississippi senator Trent Lott, who lamented the end of segregation less than two years ago.

In fact, black Republicans are right on only one count: the Democrats certainly take the black vote for granted. The Democrats have only won one election (in 1964) with a majority of white support since the second world war. This time round African-Americans make up more than 10% of the vote in a third of the crucial battleground states.

"When the public is anxious or angry, turnout tends to increase," argues David Bositis of the joint centre for political and economic studies in a recent report. African-Americans are clearly angry with President Bush and want him out."

The question is not who they will vote for but whether they will vote at all. Bush has given them several reasons to loathe the Republicans; they are still waiting for Kerry to give them some to love the Democrats. — *Dawn/Guardian Service*