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Open letter to Gen. Colin Powell

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By Lenora B. Fulani

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Dear Gen. Powell,

I saw your speech at the Republican Convention last week. Like many Americans, I was touched by it. Providing leadership means insisting that we look squarely at social problems -- especially those that result from explicit failures or inattention. Your willingness to take the Republican Party to task for its cold shoulder to black America exemplified that kind of leadership.

As you know, liberal political and journalistic commentary on your appearance and on the Republican Convention called it a "minstrel show" referencing numerous blacks and Hispanics who appeared on stage. In certain respects that commentary is accurate. The Republican Party -- as you said pointedly -- does not have a genuine record of concern for minorities. The convention was packaged to offer compassionate window dressing for what has been a largely anti-compassionate political machine. But I suspect that what is most agonizing for the liberal commentators is that you, in particular, were on that stage.

Why does that upset them so? Because someone of your stature cannot easily be reduced to a "minstrel" or to window dressing. And so you violate a basic axiom of American politics -- that black leadership properly belongs in the Democratic Party and only in the Democratic Party.

Though the public criticism of you for defying the conventional wisdom is muted in comparison

to what some other black leaders (myself included) have endured for the crime of political incorrectness, the message is still the same. Ironically, America has made more progress in being able to accept us as doctors, lawyers, businesspeople and generals than it has in being able to accept us as anything other than Democrats.

You alluded, in your address, to some of the rifts that are increasingly apparent between black America and the Democratic Party. When you call for experimentation with school voucher programs, for example, you are responsive to what the clear majority of black and Hispanic parents want for their kids.

But the Democrats, in thrall to the anti-voucher teachers unions and their tremendous vote getting capacity, are unable to take the steps that will so obviously benefit poor and minority youth. Instead, the Democrats continue to offer forms of under-financed and over-bureaucratized welfare statism, including a public school system which is under-performing for all American kids, and devastatingly so for black kids. The traditional Democratic Party coalition has become a brake on -- not an accelerator for -- black progress. The crisis in education is only one example.

You have presumably chosen to become a Republican as your way of acknowledging that political fact of life. Many in the black community respect that, though many -- because of the Republican Party's anti-black history and continued embrace of its own set of special interests, both citizen and corporate -- still hope that someday you will become an independent.

On this score, I was especially struck by your insistence that Republican minority outreach be authentic. "It must be a sustained effort," you said. "It must be every day. It must be for real. The party must listen to and speak with all leaders of the black community, regardless of political affiliation or philosophy." And all of this must occur, you emphasized, "not just during an election year campaign."

As a black leader whose philosophy and political independence goes against the grain of both the Republican and Democratic parties, your admonition against partisan sectarianism is welcome. Will you now take it upon yourself to reach out -- not only to the black Democrat, but to the black independent and the vast, vast majority of black Americans who do not participate in politics at all? I hope so.

America's young people -- for whom you and I share a passionate concern -- increasingly identify with neither political party. Polls show that 44 percent of African American youth between the ages of 18 and 29 consider themselves politically independent. Your voice can make a huge difference to them and for them if you include the full range of political diversity in your efforts to "show the rest of the world the beauty and potential of democracy."