

Using Republican As An Epithet

by Susan Reefer

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This summer, in the race to succeed former State Senator Guy Velella in The Bronx; or in the jockeying for position among those who would seek the mayor's office next year, it seems there is no better way to cast doubt on your opponent than by using the R Word: Republican.

Of course, State Senator Guy Velella is a Republican who was forced to resign in disgrace and is currently serving time in Rikers Island prison for accepting bribes. So maybe it's not too surprising that his credibility, and that of his party, might not be at its peak right at the moment.

When it comes to the mayor's race, it is always a little strange to see a Republican mayor in New York City, where Democrats have a five-to-one registration advantage over Republicans. This is the third Republican mayoral administration in a row (since Giuliani was elected twice), which is a first in New York City politics.

Then, summer in New York this year meant all those parties -- no, not political parties, actual parties: book parties for Bill Clinton, premiere parties for Michael Moore, a huge, glamorous, star-studded blowout fundraiser at Radio City for the newly conceived Kerry-Edwards ticket. Whatever else may be true, the Democrats sure are having a lot of fun here this summer.

From a public relations standpoint, all of this is unfortunate timing, considering that thousands of red, white, and blue-clad, elephant wearing, George W. Bush loving, dyed in the wool, partisan, loyalist Republicans are going to descend into the city of New York just next month.

But then again, New York has always been home to a vast array of diverse populations, and if they could learn to live in peace, there may yet be hope for the Ds and Rs.

The R Word

The particular ways in which the Republican label has been used as an epithet in recent weeks were highlighted at a press conference early this month.

Standing on the steps of City Hall, two former rivals for the Democratic mayoral nomination, Mark Green and Fernando Ferrer, were seen doing what they have rarely been known to do: agreeing. They held a press conference to announce their joint endorsement for Assemblyman Jeffrey Klein, one of the Democratic candidates running in the open State Senate seat in The Bronx, which had formerly been held by Guy Velella.

Not only did both Green and Ferrer indicate their support for Klein, they both expressed their disregard for Klein's opponent, Democratic Assemblyman Stephen B. Kaufman. Because Kaufman has received public support from Republican elected officials, and financial support from Republican donors, he is apparently no longer considered a bona fide Democrat.

Talking about Jeffrey Klein, Mark Green said, "He's a real Democrat. It's important that real Democrats come out and endorse real Democrats."

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Which left little room for doubt that there were no fake Democrats on the steps of City Hall that day.

The Three Ds

But it's not just the state senate contest in which the Republican shadow looms large. The race for the mayor's office, set to be decided in November 2005, will begin almost as soon as the results of this year's election are counted.

Michael Bloomberg, the Republican first-term mayor, has had to do his own share of defining, distancing, and defending.

Defining, because quite often, Michael Bloomberg will seek out particular policy positions or advocate for particular issues that are in direct contrast to the national Republican agenda.

Distancing, because Bloomberg finds himself drawing closer and closer to a re-election campaign while the city draws farther and farther from the party whose banner he is forced to carry.

Defending, because for all his reticence, Bloomberg does support some of his fellow Republicans both financially and politically. And his rivals haven't failed to notice.

One man who would like to replace Bloomberg, Council Speaker Gifford Miller, took Bloomberg to task earlier this month. He called on the mayor to lobby his fellow Republicans in Congress for increased federal aid. Other Democrats with their sights set on Gracie Mansion have made similar statements, designed to remind voters that the mayor is in the same political party as George W. Bush.

Of course, in politics, things can change. It's possible that by next year, Republican will no longer be the R word it has become this summer.

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