

ATLANTA POLITICIANS SHOW THAT RACISM IS ALIVE AND WELL

Congratulations to Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin, U.S. Congressman John Lewis and former UN Ambassador Andy Young. Just when I thought political advertising couldn't get any sleazier and the truth any looser, they proved me wrong. In an environment where standards are lower than low, they set a new record.

Lee Morris, a former member of the Atlanta City Council, was running for chairman of the Fulton County Commission on the Republican ticket, to replace Karen Handel, who was elected Secretary of State. Handel is also Republican. Morris is by all accounts very moderate in his politics. He was endorsed by the liberal-leaning Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and by Creative Loafing, an alternative newspaper in the city that makes the AJC look positively conservative. Several mayors throughout the county supported Morris, along with current and former members of the Atlanta City Council — black and white, male and female.

Morris' opponent was Dr. John Eaves, a former regional director of the Peace Corps, a Morehouse graduate and a seemingly qualified candidate as well, who was seeking political office for the first time. Dr. Eaves received endorsements from former Gov. Roy Barnes, the Atlanta Labor Council, members of the Fulton County Commission and Sherry Franks, former executive director of the America Jewish Committee's Atlanta chapter. In short, it seemed that two good people were running for office, a rare event these days. One might have hoped that Morris and Eaves could have run on their records and their platforms. In this case, one would have been wrong.

This is Atlanta, and in Atlanta, it is always about race. Always. You see, Morris is white and Eaves is black. As the campaign neared the end, Lewis, Young and Franklin felt compelled to support Eaves with a blatantly racist ad that went over the top and hit rock bottom. Lewis said, "If you think fighting off dogs and water hoses in the '60s was bad, imagine if we sit idly by and let the right-wing Republicans take control of the Fulton County Commission." Lee Morris? A right-wing Republican? Is Lewis saying that Morris would make Fulton County the Birmingham of the '60s? How about Sonny Perdue? He's a Republican. Does John Lewis think the governor is about to unleash the dogs and water cannons?

Andy Young said if Eaves wasn't elected it would "turn back the clock on equal rights and human rights and economic opportunity for all of us." What a crock. Even for Andy Young. Franklin said she participated in the race-baiting because she was "infuriated by partisan and divisive politics," failing to see the irony in her own partisan and divisive comments.

I'm really not surprised at John Lewis and Andy Young. An icon in the civil rights struggle, John Lewis lost track of the real world years ago. He can't exist if whites and blacks get along, as most of us do these days. Lewis must manufacture racial tension. It is the oxygen that keeps him breathing. Andrew Young, another major force in the civil rights movement and a personal hero of mine, shoots from the hip faster than the Lone Ranger. Just ask Wal-Mart.

The real disappointment is Shirley Franklin. I worked closely with her during our days at the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games. I was responsible for federal and state government matters. Shirley handled city and county politics. We got along famously, and I was delighted when she replaced Bill Campbell as mayor of Atlanta. Not anymore. Campbell could make a racial issue out of a pecan tree, and Franklin is sounding more like Campbell every day.

John Eaves won the election. But there are no winners here. Lewis, Young and Franklin showed us that racism is alive and well. For short-term political gain they were willing to resort to the basest racial pandering and insult the intelligence of thoughtful black and white Americans in the process. I thought we had moved beyond this kind of stuff in Georgia. I thought wrong. The only thing that has changed is the players. And they won't hesitate to play the race card. They ought to be ashamed of themselves.