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Whoa! MLK was a what? FALKENBERG: Would he align with GOP now?

BYLINE: Lisa Falkenberg, Houston Chronicle

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Republicans know they have much work to do extending the big tent to minority voters, and there are a few groups that have rightly made this issue a priority.

But there's got to be a better strategy than this: a billboard off the MLK Boulevard exit of the South Loop featuring a rendering of the slain civil rights leader next to the all-caps message, "Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Republican!"

The billboard, which appeared over the July Fourth weekend and was sponsored by the Houston-based conservative group Raging Elephants, is, as best I can tell, the first of its kind in Houston, although similar ones have gone up in recent years across the country.

"The billboard is a huge accomplishment for us," wrote Raging Elephants leader Apostle Claver T. Kamau-Imani in an e-mail. "It's just a first step. It's just the first salvo in an effort to let the communities of color know that 'Conservatives are coming!' We are no longer going to ignore their issues, ignore their votes, and surrender them to liberals."

Last year, a Florida-based group called the National Black Republican Association put up 50 such billboards around Denver just before the Democratic National Convention in anticipation of Barack Obama's speech accepting his nomination.

In 2006, a radio ad sponsored by the same group made a similar claim about King being a "real man" so he must have been a Republican. At the time, the Washington Post reported that even then-Maryland Lt. Gov. Michael Steele, who was running for U.S. Senate at the time and is now Republican National Committee chairman, denounced it.

Despite the billboard's unsavory and opportunistic alignment of King's non-partisan message to a certain political party, the accuracy of its claim is the subject of some ambiguity, which is probably why the billboards have persisted.

"These guys never give up, do they," the Rev. Joseph Lowery, who co-founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with King, told the St. Petersburg Times last year when the billboards popped up there.

King backed LBJ

Others, such as King's niece, anti-abortion activist Alveda King, have strongly maintained King was indeed a Republican, as was his father. And it certainly is probable that King, like many blacks before the 1960s, cast Republican votes.

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However, King's enthusiasm for Democrat Lyndon Baines Johnson and his disparaging of 1964 Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater were well-known.

"He absolutely deplored the Republican Party of Goldwater and Reagan," King biographer and University of North Carolina-Greensboro history professor Thomas Jackson told me. He called the billboard's claim "pretty absurd," but said it's become common for different factions to deploy certain aspects of King's politics for their own purposes.

"I have a T-shirt that says MLK was a socialist," Jackson said, adding that he believes that's probably closer to the truth than the GOP label.

But whether King ever voted Republican misses a more important question here, which is whether he'd align with the GOP today. The answer is probably not.

While the GOP makes valid points about the racist, segregationist history of the Democratic Party in the South, and the strides the GOP made in supporting rights for blacks, both parties have reinvented themselves in the last half-century.

Democratic state Rep. Garnet Coleman, who represents the area near the billboard, called it "misleading."

"It's like saying Lincoln was a Republican. Well, that wasn't the same Republican Party," he said. And he pointed out that Republican Richard Nixon actually helped start initiatives like a minority business program and an early form of affirmative action. "If he were around now, he'd be considered a liberal," Coleman said.

For his part, Harris County Republican Chairman Jared Woodfill embraced the billboard as a "good idea."

"What they're probably trying to say is the principles he adhered to were conservative, Republican principles," Woodfill said. And trying to spread the party's message in a heavily Democratic area is "to be commended."

On the last point, I agree. But there are plenty of ways for conservatives to start a conversation with black voters that doesn't begin with sensational half-truths.

lisa.falkenberg@chron.com

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