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THE INDUSTRY

## It Was Too Easy for Brian Kemp's Last-Minute Dog Whistle About Stacey Abrams to Go Viral

BY APRIL GLASER

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Kemp knew what he was doing. Photos by Jessica McGowan/Getty Images

Somehow, the Georgia gubernatorial race only got uglier and uglier. After a weekend in which Republican Brian Kemp—now likely the state's next governor—accused Democrats of “potential cybercrimes” without citing any evidence, on Monday the candidate issued a tweet in which he tried to associate his opponent, Democrat Stacey Abrams, with the New Black Panther Party, a radical organization described as a militant hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Kemp latched onto photos that surfaced after some members of the New Black Panther Party were photographed marching in support of Abrams on Nov. 3. The photos quickly percolated into far-right Facebook groups, according

to research from Media Matters, and eventually achieved viral liftoff with help from Kemp and conservative websites—a depressing example of how loudly a racist dog whistle can resonate with voters over social media.



The next day, Monday, the Kemp campaign posted the photos to its accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. “How radical is my opponent? Just look at who is backing her campaign for governor,” Kemp wrote in his captions on Instagram and Facebook. “The New Black Panther Party is ‘a virulently racist and antisemitic organization whose leaders have encouraged violence against whites, Jews and law enforcement officers.’ SHARE if you agree that Abrams and the Black Panthers are TOO EXTREME for Georgia!” The Facebook post was shared more than 38,000 times. From there, dozens of news articles from conservative sites, YouTube videos, and memes on Facebook pages have gone viral. On Tuesday, Kemp ran an ad on Facebook promoting the image, continuing to call Abrams a “radical.”

Breitbart went with the headline “Armed Black Panthers Lobby for Democrat Gubernatorial Candidate Stacey Abrams,” though they were not lobbying by any definition. Still, the post was shared more than 22,000 times on Facebook. The Daily Caller’s post associating the New Black Panthers with Abrams was shared more than 16,000 times. Conservative YouTube personality Anthony Brian Logan made a video on Monday that was viewed more

than 20,000 times. For perspective, a post about Kemp's investigation of the state's Democratic party for cybercrime on the New York Times' Facebook page was shared fewer than 1,800 times.

Abrams has never associated with the New Black Panther Party, but the optics of armed black radicals marching for a black Democratic candidate were apparently simply too juicy for the Kemp campaign, conservative media organizations, and their fans on social media to avoid sharing. Conservatives hammered on the attack through Tuesday, probably because it simply seemed to be working, taking it further and further. One meme on the Facebook page Trump Train warned that the New Black Panther Party may try to block voters at polling places, imploring people to call the police if it happens.

Social media is perfect for promoting false narratives driven by engaging visuals, and the photos of armed black men supporting a black woman running for office were incredibly easy for voters to draw false conclusions about. People share things that they think will concern others. Fears multiply as media consumers turn to stereotypes to understand the imagery they're presented with. And when the conservative media machine revs up, it offers just enough context for people to stay convinced that their fears are justified. It doesn't matter if one side corrects the record, because corrections never travel as far. Perhaps in a healthier media environment, fearmongering and blatant misinformation wouldn't get as much oxygen. But Facebook isn't a healthy media environment, and it's working exactly the way it was designed—to pluck emotions and confirm biases. That's what played out in Georgians' social media feeds over the past few days. There's no nice way to spin it. ■

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