

Voting Rights: Philadelphia Story

By [STAFF REPORTS](#)

Published: August 27, 2009

Conservatives have been joyously stoking partisan outrage over an Election Day case of voter intimidation in Philadelphia. But their schadenfreude shouldn't obscure the importance of an episode over which outrage seems justified.

The incident concerns members of the New Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, who showed up at a polling place in paramilitary uniforms and carrying nightsticks. In January, the Justice Department filed a voting-rights lawsuit against the group -- only to withdraw it later after none of the defendants appeared in court to answer the charges. A political appointee of the Obama administration apparently overruled career lawyers who had wanted to pursue the case. Now the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights -- an institution nobody would consider a Fox News fan club -- has decided to look into the matter.

For that, Americans might have Virginia Rep. Frank Wolf to thank. In July, Wolf sent a letter to Attorney General Eric Holder, asking a number of pointed questions about the Justice Department's handling of the case. (E.g.: "On what grounds did you find that the appearance of members of a widely recognized hate group wearing paramilitary-style uniforms did not constitute intimidation?" And since when does failure to appear in court absolve someone of the charges against him?)

While there's an unseemly subliminal side to the right-wing froth over the Philadelphia incident -- look at the scary black men with their clenched power-fists and funny Zulu-warrior names! -- Wolf can hardly be accused of playing politics, racial or otherwise. (His letter to Holder even includes a 1981

Times-Dispatch editorial denouncing him for voting to extend preclearance oversight by the Justice Department of changes to Virginia voting laws.) The same goes for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Both have dug into the Philadelphia story because it constitutes a clear case of voter intimidation that should not have occurred -- and the Justice Department's decision to paper over the affair leaves a blot on the young administration's record.