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Everybody's been talking—and celebrating—Chris Matthews for calling out Reince Priebus on the way the GOP has been playing the race card, both with its welfare reform ad campaign and with Romney's joke about Obama's birth certificate. (Tom Edsall's piece on racism has also gotten a lot of attention this morning.)

Yeah, it's a rare and welcome occurrence.

But the focus on Matthews has distracted from the response.

Mika Brzezinski: Because he's an awkward joker.

Joe Scarborough: Because he misfired badly on a joke.

Tom Brokaw: I think it was a demonstration of his awkward sense of humor.

Reince Priebus: You know what? We've gotten to a place in politics that any moment of levity is totally frowned upon by guys like you just so that you can push your brand. You know what? Good for you. It's a moment of levity. Everybody gets it.

Every other participant in this panel turned on Matthews because he refused to overlook the racist presumption of the joke. "Everybody gets it." Mitt's problem, these pundits argue, was not in nodding to the racist ravings of a significant portion of the right, but instead in his poor delivery, his awkward sense of humor. And then Priebus upped the ante, arguing that politicians should be allowed to make these kinds of jokes, and if they're not it must be just self-promotion of the guy calling them out.

This is where the game the pundits have made of presidential elections gets exposed most

starkly. It's a tragedy it's a game in the first place. It's never about how ending Medicare will result in spiking senior poverty; it's never about how increasing tax cuts for the super-rich will continue to strip our country.

But here we have three pundits and the head of a major party assuming—even demanding—that candidates be allowed to make racist jokes with no censure.