

Cif America

Winning over West Virginia

Why are Appalachians different from other working-class whites? It isn't that they're more racist

**Ed Tallman**

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As [EJ Dionne points out](#), it's a good time to be a small swing state, like New Hampshire, in the electoral college sweepstakes - unless you're West Virginia, the only state entirely within officially designated Appalachia, which stretches from south-western New York to north-central Alabama, and, until 2000, was a safe Democratic haven in any year other than a Republican landslide.

West Virginia's defection to George Bush was lethal in 2000, but the idea that America's Little Switzerland – five electoral votes, one more than New Hampshire – has been crucial in the election of Democratic presidents since 1916 is a myth. Wilson, Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, Johnson, Carter and Clinton would all have been elected without West Virginia's support, [as Charles Blow documents](#) in the New York Times.)

These days, the Mountain State just can't seem to catch a break. Four dollars-plus-per-gallon at the pump is bad news, and nowhere more so than in the rural parts of the state. There, the nearest four-lane highway is a county or two away for the guys who drive Ford-Tough gas guzzlers - with a huntin' rifle packed away in there for damn sure - over tortuous country roads to low-wage jobs in sawmills and poultry plants. Their thrifty wives tend toward small Chevys or aging sub-compacts on their way to work as secretaries or convenience store clerks or underpaid angels in the booming healthcare-for-the-aging sector of the state's economy. When everyone gets home dog tired at

night - unless they're also pulling an evening shift, of course - they take care of the kids (daycare's a rare luxury, indeed), and many of these good folks will also be awaiting their summons to neighbourly duties as volunteer firemen or rescue squad workers. As the state firemen's association is pointing out these days, the cost of being a volunteer now rises daily with the price of gas.

The run of bad news for the state that's become Appalachia's political emblem (along with eastern Kentucky) started on December 1, when West Virginia University blew a shot at qualifying for the national championship football game appearance by losing, at home, to the University of Pittsburgh, the Mountaineers' hated big-city rival. That debacle was followed quickly by native son Rich Rodriguez's shattering decision to bolt for greener pastures in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It was the second time in less than a year that the elite Big 10 school had raided WVU like a minor league farm team for a major-sport head coach, but this time it felt like rape, and a mini neo-McCarthyist climate sprouted up in little West Virginia for anyone foolish enough to suggest that Rodriguez was less than a back-stabbing traitor for bolting to Michigan.

Within days of the Rodriguez defection, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette published a blockbuster expose alleging that high WVU officials had manufactured a master's degree for the daughter of the state's powerful governor, Joe Manchin III. Oh, and it was around this time that the state supreme court's reputation was gravely tarnished by the international publication of photos showing a politically powerful justice, Elliott "Spike" Maynard, cavorting in Monaco with Don Blankenship, a notoriously controversial coal company magnate. (Blankenship's part in thwarting liberal Democrat Warren McGraw's supreme court re-election bid in 2004 was the plot inspiration for John Grisham's bestseller, *The Appeal*.) The shoddy affair and its continuing aftermath reinforce perceptions of the state as a crony-infested, quasi-Third World political backwater.

By the time an independent panel confirmed in late April that grades were plucked "from thin air" for courses the governor's eldest had neither taken nor paid for, more trouble happened along, and this time it was none other than History Himself who'd come calling. He tapped West Virginia on the shoulder and, heaving a weary sigh,

parsed the dilemma in mountain-ese: "Look, we're in the endgame of the longest primary fight in party history. You fellers have to play. Remember when you struck a blow for religious tolerance in 1960? How about racial tolerance now? You up to that? Look, this Obama - yeah, his middle name's 'Hussein' - he don't have to win, just place or show. Can ya ... git-'er-done?"

The answer came on May 13. Barack Obama didn't carry a single county, and Hillary Clinton's margin of victory was 41 points. A week later, Kentucky sang lead on the second refrain: Clinton 65, Obama 30. The two counties he carried, homes to the University of Louisville and the University of Kentucky, lay outside the state's Appalachian area codes.

Jon Stewart, on his Daily Show, made West Virginia a national punchline for jokes about backward, racist hillbillies, but it was the Observer's Paul Harris who delivered the coup de grace. His interview with a Mingo County resident who called himself "Johnny Telvor" - a name not found in the local telephone book, as a caller to the liberal Charleston Gazette was quick to point out - provoked this from the US writer Richard Reeves: "In the end, if the most ignorant kind of racism comes to the fore in this campaign - and it probably will - I doubt that we as a nation are going to choose to stand with the Johnny Telvors." Ouch.

Whether or not someone named Johnny Telvor exists, the sentiment doesn't need to be invented. Consider the words of a long-time county Democratic party chieftain as he talks politics over lunch in a pretty, one-stoplight Mayberry of a town less than an hour from the Virginia state line. (One enters a different, demographically evolving political world in Virginia, as the Washington Post detailed on Sunday. There, the state's three leading Democrats, governor Tim Kaine, senator Jim Webb and sure-thing senator-to-be Mark Warner are all Obama veep candidates, even though the state hasn't gone Democratic since LBJ's landslide in 1964.) The grey-haired chairman lowers his voice to a we're-speaking-of-the-terminally-ill hush and explains: "It's the 'coloureds.' When they're in power, they take care of themselves and that's it. I'm sorry, but that's the facts." In support of these "facts," he cites Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton.

"Coloureds" is a term almost unheard of since Bill Cosby was doing Fat Albert monologues, and, a few weeks earlier, at lunch on the day before Good Friday, that same party elder could only grin quiescently when a local racist said "the black sonuvabitch Muslim should be shot if he gets the nomination over Clinton." A wittier local man likes to call Obama "Holiday Waitin' to Happen," and he's an African-American who's voting for him. "Johnny Telvor," meet your less diffident kin.

As for the county chairman, he's nothing if not a yellow dog Democrat, and he supports Obama now. Asked how he might carry the state, where his negatives are off the chart (57% unfavourable) yet trails the almost equally deplored McCain (48% unfavourable) by only eight points, the canny old pol answers, with a who-knows shrug: "Have Hillary campaign in as many places as he can get her to go?"

But his concerns about "the 'coloureds' taking everything for themselves" are commonplace and have been reported since the primary campaign moved to its Ohio/Pennsylvania/West Virginia/Kentucky phase.

Interesting thing, though: whites in the agricultural Midwest and the small towns of New Hampshire are receptive to Obama in ways blue-collar Appalachians aren't. This is an intriguing question, but the answer that it's as simple as racial prejudice betrays a profound ignorance about the Appalachian region, its history and its people, an ignorance dispelled by reading Jim Webb's 2004 book, *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America*.

Fatalism is a common Appalachian trait, and quite a few of the region's working-class whites see politics as a stark zero-sum game pitting losers against winners. Upper-middle-class professionals and the wealthy will be fine no matter who the president is. But a lot of white Appalachians wonder: if Obama is in the White House and the competition for left-over scraps is between us and blacks, will we be screwed yet again? That point of view is less a reflection on Obama than it is a cynicism born of hard experience in a region with a long history of exploitation by social, political and economic elites, as the late John O'Brien documented in *At Home in the Heart of Appalachia*.

Alvy Humphreys is self-employed, a blue-collar jack-of-all-trades who operates a small sawmill in the same town as the county chairman.

Humphreys is putting three daughters through college while having lived his life "not much caring whether I have 10 cents in my bank account or \$10,000." He's proud of his self-reliance and flinty independence - he lives in a house he built with his own two hands on a dirt road he and his wife, Tammy, named Freedom Lane. And he's proud of the fierce Jacksonian egalitarianism that he learned was part of his Scots-Irish heritage when he read Webb's book. Humphreys wants Obama to come to Appalachia, plant his feet and tell corrupt corporations that their days of profiteering from labour by undocumented aliens and importing of substandard consumer goods from China "are over the moment he places his hand on the Holy Bible" and turns John Edwards loose as his attorney general.

But since Obama's style is neither populist nor incendiary, Humphreys hopes instead for an Obama/Webb ticket. He hopes even more for an Obama/Webb administration, which he believes could broker an historic alliance between working-class blacks and Appalachian whites, especially if Obama backs Webb's call for moving affirmative action from race- to class-based standards.

Beyond Clinton and Webb, there's a more important name here - Robert Byrd - and it's hard not to wax Aaron Sorkin-esque in imagining the stagecraft of how the 90-year-old embodiment of his state and of Senate history and tradition might help Obama have a chance to carry West Virginia.

It's likely that only a select few ever have been asked for any kind of political absolution by Byrd, but Obama is one who has. In 2005, the former University of Chicago constitutional law professor was granted his first private audience with the US Senate's constitutional Pope. Byrd, a Ku Klux Klan member in his 20s whose swift rise to congressional power almost 50 years ago was owed to loyal membership in senator Richard Russell's Southern Bloc, fumbled for the right words. As Obama recounts in *The Audacity of Hope*: Byrd said: "'There's not much I wouldn't do over.' Suddenly he paused and looked squarely into my eyes. 'I have only one regret, you know. The foolishness of youth' We sat there for a moment, considering the gap of years and experience between us. 'We all have regrets, Senator,' I said finally. 'We just ask that in the end, God's grace shines upon us.'"

The biggest annual Democratic party event in West Virginia is the Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner. When it's held in Charleston this year on September 20, the man called the greatest West Virginian who ever lived could draw not only on his own past, but on the state's - its fundamentally honourable history of amicable race relations, its history of having promptly pursued desegregation with relatively few disturbances following Brown v Board of Education in 1954. And he and only he could lovingly admonish the people of his state to see past the colour of his friend Barack Obama's skin.

For a man in the twilight of a 62-year political career, a man whose national reputation with liberals soared when he mounted his lonely campaign of Senate opposition to George Bush and the Iraq war in 2002, it would complete his book, the magnum opus entitled Robert Byrd: American Hero.

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