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Time is now for state to hold open dialogue on race

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THE **nomination of Barack Obama as the Democratic candidate** for president of the United States is a landmark that all should celebrate regardless of party affiliation. It is amazing that 143 years after the 13th Amendment's emancipation of the slaves and 45 years after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. challenged America to live up to its promise we have a major party candidate who is an African-American.

Over the past year I had the privilege of serving as staff attorney for one of the country's premier federal bankruptcy jurists, an outstanding African-American judge in Cleveland, Ohio. Because of the federal judiciary rules, I observed without comment as our beloved state was under the national microscope in ways that exposed our stereotypes and flaws. For instance, Vice President Cheney expressed his elitism by repeating the insensitive and humorless characterization that West Virginians are all related due to incest. More seriously, our inadequate conversation on race was revealed to a national audience.

West Virginia has been inconsistent in the area of race since its inception. Our first governor approved a shameful act forbidding residency to any slave who entered the state after June 20, 1863. This was in conflict with the state's newly minted motto of Montani Semper Liberi, "Mountaineers are Always Free." Later, on July 15, 1863, the governor approved a principled act granting African-Americans the same right to criminal trials as whites, but unfortunately they were also denied the right to serve on juries. Still yet, on Feb. 3, 1865, the governor approved an affirmative act abolishing slavery, a full 10 months before the 13th Amendment.

The enigmatic conduct continued into the 20th century. Our state produced national African-American champions Booker T. Washington, Carter Woodson, the Rev. Dr. Leon Sullivan and most recently Bishop T.D. Jakes. Local legends such as businessman C.H. James and attorney Herbert Henderson received national attention for their contributions. We also produced caucasians like the late Paul and Rose Jean Kaufman, James and Virginia McIntyre and A. James Manchin, while attracting others like Ken Hechler who were progressive, even heroic, on the race issue.

Conversely, there were strong pockets of racism where the Ku Klux Klan found allegiance with politicians and their constituencies. Diversity was not celebrated, as illustrated in the West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette case where the U.S. Supreme Court had to assert a Jehovah's Witness' right not to salute the flag. In higher education, West Virginia University's record of racial diversity was appalling as late as the 1980s. Nevertheless, West Virginia State College (now University) was nationally celebrated much earlier as a "living laboratory of race relations." This is our history.

My father was born in Alabama in 1896, while my mother, a woman of intelligence and grace who is now 96, was reared in this state.

Dad experienced the brutality of Southern segregation and, after escaping a potential lynching there, found a haven in the West Virginia hills. Although mindful of its imperfections, my parents loved the Mountain State and extolled its virtues. It is undeniable that West Virginia has some of the kindest and most sincere people in the nation. However, there is an underside in the area of race that we must improve to strive for Dr. King's "beloved community."

Why has West Virginia been so ambivalent on the race question? I suggest that because there weren't large numbers of African-Americans, the more blatant tools used to control large populations of people of color, i.e. brutal segregation, were not consistently used. Conversely, when other Southern states were dealing with the tensions of integration, West Virginians often did not go through the difficult conflicts and conversations necessary for an authentic approach to the race question. This lack of dialog is now seen in the insensitivity of many in the white community who suggest a progress that is not reality. It is also revealed in the ineffectual representations from some African-Americans who are, at best, afraid to speak truth to power or, worse, willing to be used as pawns to further the status quo. We simply do not have an adequate conversation on race.

Last summer, the kidnapping, rape and torture of a young African-American woman exposed our ineffective dialog. Although there was a public outcry over the degrading acts, the local press coverage was often less than principled and the government response was inept. It was also very disappointing to see the leadership of the Black Ministerial Alliance and local NAACP fail to provide advocacy for the victim and align with a mayor who has a history of racial manipulation.

The recent Democratic primary revealed another aspect to our race issues. While the Clinton campaign was widely criticized for its manipulation of race, we should be embarrassed it was here that these tactics found such fertile ground. Only those in abject denial can say it was not an issue when more than two out of 10 West Virginia voters admitted race played a major role in their ultimate choice of candidate.

We have another opportunity this fall to show the nation that our opinions are not necessarily as narrow as our country roads. The nation views our state as being racist, and it is up to us to reverse this perception. Sen. Robert C. Byrd's endorsement of the candidacy of Sen. Obama was significant because it shows progress from the racial alienation of his affiliation with the KKK and filibuster of the 1964 Civil Rights Acts. Others of Sen. Byrd's background should emulate his growth.

This is not to suggest a vote for Sen. McCain is indicative of racism - that would be unfair. Nevertheless, it is difficult to reconcile a race-neutral reason for the polls here that reveal a large percentage of Clinton voters will choose McCain in the general election when Obama and Clinton are so very closely aligned on the issues.

Part of the answer is exposure. A recent ABC poll indicated that people who have close friends of another race are much less apt to harbor racist views. In a state that is 95 percent white it is incumbent upon the majority to step outside of their comfort level, limit their exposure to Rush Limbaugh and Shawn Hannity and accept that the world has changed. It is time to reveal the best of who we are and move beyond our enigmatic past.

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