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## **In defense of West Virginians; Poor, hardworking, white or black, there's more to the Mountain State than meets the eye**

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I would like to come to the defense of some of my fellow poor and hardworking white West Virginians in Appalachia and rural West Virginia. These hardworking West Virginians have been the brunt of jokes by political satirists and subject of intensive ridicule, analysis and scrutiny by political pollsters and pundits.

The sin for which they have been lambasted and excoriated is that they told the truth to news reporters and pollsters as they exited the voting booth on May 13. The truth was that race was a significant factor influencing some of their voting decisions for the Democratic presidential nominee. Some went as far as to say that they did not vote for Barack Obama because of his race.

Why are we criticizing these hardworking patriotic West Virginians for telling the truth? It is that in this politically correct world in which we live today, long gone are the days when truth telling is a virtue? Would we prefer a politically correct "white lie" over the naked inflammatory truths? George Orwell once wrote that in a world of mass deception, the truth sounds revolutionary. Had these voters told the reporters and pollsters that they did not vote for Obama because he was too young or too inexperienced or that they strongly disagreed with him on some major policy issue, they would have escaped the wrath of the political pundits and the press, and they would have safely avoided being labeled backwoods, uneducated and unenlightened racists. But they had the courage to tell the truth because they had nothing to lose. What they may not have understood was that to have the courage to act like a free person and speak the truth in America is almost anathema.

The Appalachian rural and hardworking poor voters in West Virginia have much more in common with blacks than they realize. As quiet as it has been kept, most blacks had great reluctance in voting for Obama when he first announced his candidacy. The reason was because we simply did not believe that he had a chance to win. We were not particularly interested in throwing our vote away on another symbolic presidential bid of a black candidate. We had already "been there and done that" with the Rev. Jesse Jackson twice (1988 and 1994) and in 2004 with the Rev. Al Sharpton. We were poised and ready with our voting pens cocked to cast our lot for Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton as the Democratic presidential nominee because we felt that she was the candidate that would best represent the interest of blacks, the poor and the working class. Mind you that the average black person, particularly black men, do not readily ascribe to females being in positions of leadership, authority and power. This is a quietly kept truth that I will explore at a later time. That being said, blacks were poised to vote for Clinton in large numbers even with Barack Obama's name on the ballot.

What changed black people's minds were the voting decisions of white poor, working-class, middle-class and upper-class voters of Iowa. When the white voters of Iowa went to the polls and gave Obama a resounding victory in the Iowa primary, it sent a signal to blacks all across the country that Obama was a legitimate candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination because hardworking white Americans were willing to vote for him. You could say that whites credentialed Obama in the eyes of blacks as being more than a "symbolic black candidate." Therefore, hardworking poor West Virginians should not be criticized, nor should they feel ashamed of their reluctance to initially vote for Obama because they had a viable alternative in Clinton, whose policies represented their best interest. Furthermore, the Clintons are extremely popular in West Virginia and there was no compelling reason for hardworking white voters in West Virginia to have any allegiance to Obama.

But with Clinton out of the race, hardworking poor West Virginians must now ask themselves which of the remaining two candidates has policy positions closest to Clinton's. That answer is easy: Barack Obama. Clinton and Obama have both said that there is not much difference between the two of them on most major policy issues, and the political pundits agree.

If hardworking poor West Virginians choose to select their presidential candidate based on policy positions, then Obama is the logical choice.

The second criteria that hardworking poor whites should consider in choosing their presidential candidate should be their own current plight. Furthermore, they should consider aligning themselves with those who share the same plight. When one examines the political, economic, educational, judicial and social landscape, there are two groups that share the same lot. What groups have the least political power? What groups are at the bottom of the economic ladder? What groups have the highest unemployment rate? What groups are at the bottom rung of the educational ladder? What groups are over-represented in courts, jails and prisons? What groups have the least access to quality, affordable health care and housing? The answer to all of those questions is hardworking, poor whites and blacks.

Both groups face the same challenges in West Virginia, and it is high time for them to come together and form a political alliance to advance their mutual self-interest. We don't have to necessarily like each other. We simply need to recognize that we are bound together by a common thread called destiny. The bottom line is this: Poor whites and blacks may have come over on different ships, but we are both in the same boat now.

When I was 13 years old, I almost drowned in the Atlantic Ocean at Rockaway Beach in New York. I was trying to save my cousin, Eric, who had gotten caught in the undertow. Being an inexperienced swimmer, and unfamiliar with the undertow current, I did not know that you had to swim parallel to the current, not perpendicular. Totally exhausted and resigned that I would die, I heard a voice saying, "You need any help?" and I saw a white hand extend downward to me and grasp my hand. A little white girl playing on the beach had the presence of mind to run and get help, and three young white men who were surfing nearby came to my cousin's and my rescue.

I don't know their names, but I think about them occasionally. I hope to see them in heaven someday so that I can shake their hands and say, "Thank you."

I learned a valuable lesson that day. That lesson was that when you're going down, you don't get to choose the color of the hand that reaches down to help you. You only get to choose whether or not you accept the helping hand.

To my hardworking poor white West Virginians and fellow Mountaineers, I say: Don't look at the color of the hand of the presidential candidate, but rather examine the content of their proposed policies. It is OK and wise to be selfish and vote for your own selfish interest rather than holding on to your cultural prejudice.

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