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Margin of win or loss will tell tale on W.Va.

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Before and after the drubbing Sen. Barack Obama took from Sen. Hillary Clinton in the West Virginia primary, I have listened to two divergent perspectives. Neither is absolutely correct, but time and the fall election results will go a long way to unravel how race impacts our state and what posture people of color should strike now and in the future.

Before the primary election, I listened to a West Virginia Public Radio broadcast from Man, and in more recent days, I have heard many broadcasts from the national press, as well as the mayor of Charleston talking on a national conservative radio show from Los Angeles.

The first perspective, coming from Man, piqued my interest intently. I was born in 1959 at the Man Appalachian Hospital. Man is the main town along Buffalo Creek, where the 1972 flood disaster took 126 lives and left 4,000 of us homeless and many lives destroyed. I cannot begin to tell you how hurtful and embarrassing it was to listen to that broadcast. Hearing the ignorant, hateful and discriminating comments coming from these people was so surreal. It felt like I had been catapulted back into the Deep South in the early '60s.

Many of the national broadcasters interviewing people exiting the polls on Election Day were not much better. Every unfounded rumor, innuendo, stereotype or outright lie about Barack Obama was alive and well here in West Virginia. The worst thing is some of these people injected God in their pronouncements of misinformation. They attempted to speak with some justified moral standing. The country was saturated with this image, and the full extent of the damage to our state is yet to be realized. This type of asinine rhetoric adds to the smorgasbord of jokes the late night comedians and commentators heap on West Virginia. I am always amazed by the silence of the majority proclaiming not to think or speak as these unlearned people do.

The Daily Mail recently reported on Charleston Mayor Danny Jones' appearance on Lee Elder's conservative, nationally broadcast radio show. The mayor spoke about how advanced West Virginia is and how Kanawha County had elected two black circuit judges and the city of Charleston had elected five black members of City Council. That information is correct, but the mayor left the impression with this national audience that what occurred in Kanawha County was somehow the norm for our entire state, rather than the exception. I know the mayor, and he knows firsthand that certain forms of discrimination continue to plague our state in many places. What happens in our larger metropolitan areas and some college towns such as Charleston, Huntington and Morgantown in no way reflect the attitudes of those living in the predominantly rural areas. Very few areas of the state enjoy the percent of diversity among our citizens or the level of academic achievement the Charleston metro area.

I will agree with the mayor to a point, on some assumptions as to why Barack Obama did not get a better turnout in West Virginia. Many Democrats in this state, including me, were glad to see Bill and Hillary Clinton in the White House during the 1990s. I fully understand why so many Democratic women across the country and here in our state have such an affinity for Sen. Clinton. She fought for the rights of so many people her entire life. And yes, Rev. Jeremiah Wright and the comments from the San Francisco fundraiser may have given some reason to pause and take a hard look at Sen. Obama; but, if you study these issues more closely, some startling facts cannot be overlooked.

Internal and public polls gave Senator Obama very little chance for a victory in West Virginia long before anyone knew about Reverend Wright or the fundraiser. Some of the underlying concerns could have everything to do with unfamiliarity or perceived lack of experience; however, to discount the factor of race is at best naive or purposefully disingenuous.

I ran two successful campaigns for City Council in Huntington and one unsuccessful race as the Democratic nominee for mayor of Huntington. I won eight successful elections and was elected to the Legislature four times from Huntington and other parts of Cabell and Lincoln counties. My race as a black man was a factor in every one of those races. I confronted and endured some of the most ignorant and belligerent statements, stunts and threats, anonymously at times and in my face at other times. Obviously, I found enough support in the community from steady campaigning and an army of supporters to win. I am happy to say that my support was always diverse and multicultural. It had to be. My delegate district was 97 percent white. There were some close elections, but we kept winning. My constituents had to get to know me and as I became better known the re-elections became much easier.

I point these things out because I believe we have an opportunity to strike a massive blow to discrimination in this state in the fall election. Many have pointed out the need for Sen. Obama to spend more time in our state. The Clintons certainly did blanket the state and West Virginians are excited when we get attention. But if every voter takes an honest assessment of Sen. Obama and Sen. Clinton and the plans and programs they are offering to our country, their positions are very similar.

Another honest assessment would bring us all to the realization that the Democratic nominee is Barack Obama. How well he does in November is the barometer of where we are in West Virginia; not only if he wins or not, but the **margins of the win** or loss. If Sen. Obama gets blown out again in this predominantly Democratic state after running a good campaign, free of any major mistakes, then we cannot discount that race played a significant role in the election defeat.

If Democrats alone vote for Sen. Obama in the fall, he would win; however, in the past two presidential elections in 2000 and 2004, the Republican candidate bested Democrats by margins of less than 10 percent. If Sen. Obama loses within similar margins, then it has more to do with the state trending conservative rather than Democrats abandoning Sen. Obama's candidacy because of race. I am very confident Sen. Obama's campaign will thoroughly give enough truth and evidence to dispel the false rumors concerning his religious beliefs or some ridiculous charge of elitism. Democratic women will also be moved by strong issues that concern them, and Sen. Obama's positions on those issues would be more in line with their concerns.

After the dust from the primary settles and we coalesce around our nominee, it would be good to witness a spirited, principled and honorable campaign in the fall. The last thing we need to hear is any more of this hateful race-based poison spewing out of the mouths of these ignorant antiquies from an age that should be long extinct. If Sen. Obama wins or loses, let it be said that the people of West Virginia collectively lifted their voices and spoke on the "high plane of dignity and discipline," as Dr. Martin Luther King exhorted his followers to act.

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