

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

Charleston Gazette (West Virginia)

June 1, 2008, Sunday

## Campaign reinvigorates old sickness of racism

**BYLINE:** Gerald Beller

**SECTION:** EDITORIAL; Pg. P1E

**LENGTH:** 1067 words

When Hillary Clinton proclaimed a few days before the West Virginia primary that she did better with "working Americans, hardworking Americans, white Americans," she may have given new life to an old virus in American politics. The fact that the virus received its greatest apparent publicity in our own state should frighten us all.

Racially tinged comments voluntarily given in Logan County to public radio interviewers who weren't asking about race brought the virus into full public view. We discovered that there are West Virginians who assume that it is socially acceptable in front of their neighbors and before a larger audience to vent their racial spleen and/or utter nonsense about Obama's supposed opposition to their "religious" values as committed "Christians."

Neither Obama's constant reiteration of his Christian faith nor his desire to move beyond racial "distractions" could overcome openly expressed doubts about someone who is black, lived for a few years as a child in a Muslim nation, had an (absent) Kenyan father and retained Hussein as a middle name. (As Obama realized, it is hopeless when appealing to "low-information" voters to suggest that stigmatization of Muslims is a form of bigotry not much different from racial bigotry, or that Hussein is as common a name among Middle Eastern Christians as it is among Muslims.)

It is not as if we are unaware that many people in this state reject a wider knowledge of the world, or have little tolerance for people of other races or faiths. People who challenge such West Virginia attitudes are often seen as too "liberal" or even "elitist." How often have we encountered racial and religious xenophobia in letters to the editor or the vent line of this newspaper? How often have local preachers or religious talk radio voices spouted comparable nonsense? How often have we heard similar attitudes expressed among social acquaintances?

Unless you live in a usually closed social environment, there is no reason to be surprised by the unapologetic display of old-fashioned bigotry before a national audience. Nor, as some might believe, should such a display be seen as evidence of social innocence among otherwise good souls.

Of course, similar attitudes are not unique to our state or to Appalachia. Reporters uncovered comparable beliefs in other states that held primaries, most noticeably Pennsylvania and Ohio. Unlike those states, however, West Virginia has a much-higher proportion of people who share the social characteristics of those most likely to express racially or religiously narrow-minded beliefs - leaving the rest of the nation with the impression that this is what we are all about.

Indeed, West Virginia may be the most homogeneous state in the nation - the fourth-"whitest," the least likely to have bilingual speakers, the second-lowest income per-capita and the lowest percentage with a college education. (This is what is meant when some commentators claim "Appalachia" is defined more by its "social conditions" than its "culture.")

Most readers know these things, but may be afraid to plainly acknowledge the implications. Let me be perfectly clear: Among people who share certain social characteristics, one will always find certain opinions more commonly held than others. This simple fact drives our entire marketing culture and the carefully aimed messages of politicians during an election year.

However, this does not mean that all, or even most, people who share these characteristics will openly express them. Nor is there any necessary connection between white, poor, less-traveled or less-educated people and racial or religious bigotry. Nonetheless, there is a greater likelihood, if we live among people who share these characteristics, that we will hear more expressions of religious or racial intolerance than if we live in a community which is more racially integrated, more educated or more cosmopolitan.

More to the point: If we live in a neighborhood or a state where prevailing social conditions ensure that bigoted attitudes are more common, people who know better may want to ignore them or feel afraid to challenge them. They will especially want to avoid being embarrassed by having such attitudes displayed before a national audience. Perhaps this explains the decision of West Virginia Public Radio to halt its blog on the racial comments its interviewers encountered, and the anger of so many who would prefer that such bigoted comments were allowed no public expression at all.

There is a widespread perception that the open airing of bigoted private opinions will confirm widely held prejudices. There is a more deadly possibility, however - that bigotry becomes most dangerous when it is evoked in a coded, albeit covert, manner in order to gain an electoral advantage, while people who know what is happening refuse to acknowledge what lies seething beneath the surface. This may be what happened in West Virginia with Sen. Clinton's direct appeals to a "working class" which plainly does not include African-Americans.

To be sure, this does not go nearly as far as then-Gov. Bill Clinton did in 1992 by taking time off from his presidential campaign to appeal to white voters by making sure he was back in Arkansas when a mentally impaired black man on death row was executed. But it does suggest that racial sentiments can be manipulated even where they are not openly expressed. It is better that racial or religious bigotries be brought into the open where they can be addressed, rather than hidden within a subtle political appeal, where they can be evoked by those who do not take responsibility for them.

It is highly significant that Bill Clinton's behavior in 1992 received little comment at that time or since. Everyone understood that African Americans would never vote for a Republican anyway, and the greater political need was to pull in white "Reagan Democrats" who might appreciate an implied but formally unacknowledged appeal to their own racial anger. We should not let this happen again.

We have a moral obligation to bring racial and religious bigotry out into the open where we can see it and challenge it for what it is. We should not sweep uncomfortable opinions under the rug. We should expose them to full public view and refuse to let our silence imply our consent.

Dr. Beller, a professor at West Virginia State University, is a Gazette contributing columnist.

**LOAD-DATE:** June 5, 2008

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newspaper

Copyright 2008 Charleston Newspapers

