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Charleston Gazette (West Virginia)

May 30, 2008, Friday

Racism; Appalachian pattern?

BYLINE: Gzedit

SECTION: EDITORIAL; Pg. P4A

LENGTH: 638 words

DIXIE once was called the "Solid South" because southern states constantly voted Democratic. But many white southerners weren't genuine Democrats. They ostracized blacks and supported racial segregation.

Around 1970, as the civil rights movement snowballed, President Richard Nixon's famed "southern strategy" swung Dixie to the Republican Party by subtly appealing to white prejudice. Nixon strategist Kevin Phillips told The New York Times in 1970 that the GOP plan would work because "Negrophobe whites will quit the Democrats and become Republicans." Referring to such bigoted southern whites, he said: "That's where the votes are."

The southern strategy continued when Ronald Reagan launched his 1980 campaign in Philadelphia, Miss. - where three civil rights workers had been murdered - by vowing to support "states' rights," meaning white local resistance to federal integration laws.

This Republican plan succeeded. Dixie became the "Solid South" a second time - solid Republican. Only recently have a few exceptions to this reversal emerged.

Now the racial-political spotlight seems to be shifting to Appalachia. This year's Democratic primaries revealed disturbing white, working-class prejudice in West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, rural Pennsylvania, parts of Tennessee, and environs. Numerous national newspaper and TV reports featured white **Appalachians** saying they couldn't vote for a black like Barack Obama.

Former Gazette reporter Linda Blackford, now at the Lexington Herald-Leader, wrote:

"Polling before and after Kentucky's May 20 primary showed that Obama's race was a big issue for voters in Kentucky. More than one in five said it would make him less electable.... Of those, only a third said they'd vote for Obama in a general election.... In Magoffin County, the whitest county in the nation at 98.9 percent, [Hillary] Clinton won with 93 percent of the vote....

"The race issue is complicated by false, but rampant, rumors that Obama is Muslim. In Leslie County, a Republican county where Obama won 5 percent of the Democratic vote, the county's judge-executive doesn't hesitate before mischaracterizing Obama's religion. 'I think one of the big problems for him is he's Muslim,' said Jimmy Sizemore, the highest elected official in the county."

Such woeful ignorance and insidious blue-collar **racism** afflict a certain number of less-educated **Appalachian** whites. And now Republicans are ready to capitalize on it, to bring Appalachia permanently into the GOP fold, as Nixon's southern strategy did for Dixie.

State GOP Chairman Doug McKinney implied that West Virginia has become a GOP "red state." He said Obama should mostly ignore the Mountain State and "concentrate on places where he actually has support" - meaning, evidently, that hill-country whites won't back a black for president.

Other factors - such as gun-carrying and Bible Belt fundamentalist taboos - helped swing West Virginia to President George Bush in 2000 and 2004. It will be a shame if white **racism** joins those elements to keep this state in the GOP camp.

Some Democratic leaders say lower-income, less-educated, white mountaineers should be natural allies of U.S. blacks, because both groups have been partly excluded from America's prosperity. Sen. Jim Webb, D-Va., commented on MSNBC last week:

"They both missed the boat when it came to the larger benefits that other people received. If this cultural group could get at the same table as black America, you could change populist American politics, because they have so much in common in terms of what they need out of government."

Racism has faded greatly across America. It is dying in West Virginia, where most people are friendly and tolerant. We hope more West Virginians realize that their best hope lies in a truly equal society, where both blacks and mountaineers have a fair chance.

LOAD-DATE: May 30, 2008

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

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