

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

Charleston Gazette (West Virginia)

October 14, 2008, Tuesday

**OP-ED;**  
**'Racism' term still loaded****BYLINE:** David M. Fryson**SECTION:** EDITORIAL; Pg. P4A**LENGTH:** 738 words

As West Virginia's cultural conservatism and perceived racial polarization continue to be under the national glare, there is an important element that needs to be discussed. The citizens of our state are some of the nicest, kindest and decent people in the nation and often epitomize a simple grace that is difficult to ignore.

As an African-American who was reared in this state of little diversity, I was provided a close view of this dichotomy. The kindness of so many West Virginians, on the one hand, was often countered by the brutality of racism on the other. I well remember as a child being confused by the cruel behavior of white people that I had never met.

For instance, as a little boy I experienced having a can of beer thrown at me from a car with the accompanying "n-word" as I rode my bicycle on Route 25 between my West Dunbar home and Institute.

Yet, on the way home I was also comforted by other whites such as the elderly Mrs. Burgess, the proprietor of the local grocery store.

This is indicative of the West Virginia enigma of race relations.

Niceness is one of the reasons for West Virginia's unexpected vote for George Bush during the last two presidential elections. After a long history of voting Democratic, why did West Virginians vote for the Republican Bush? In addition to the country's move to the right and other political issues, Bush was seen as a "nicer" candidate than either Al Gore or John Kerry.

I thought about this during the first presidential debate. Anyone watching would conclude that Sen. Obama is a qualified candidate, but that he is also a very "nice" person who did not demonize his opponent while exhibiting Christian ideals. Obama refused to engage Sen. McCain in disrespectful ways and even admitted agreement with him on relevant points. Although pundits suggested disagreement in all areas with McCain would show his aggressive side, Obama ultimately benefited because he revealed himself as a kind and caring, yet firm, candidate.

Perhaps the recent national conversation regarding the racial attitudes in West Virginia is obscuring some salient facts. While I initially firmly disagreed with the usage of "cultural conservatism" as a replacement for the term "racism," I have rethought the issue. Since we have progressed from the most degrading forms of discrimination and overt bigotry to more subtle expressions of intolerance perhaps

we all need to rethink how we discuss current issues.

For instance, most reasonable people would agree that racism exists in our society. Yet virtually no one will admit to being racist. We therefore have a term of limited utility that immediately puts us at odds. Perhaps the term "racism" evokes brutal images of lynching, the KKK and segregation. Therefore, when the term is used, there is always an immediate need to protect oneself from links to this violent past. The moment the term racist or racism is introduced, hearts close, territory is protected and meaningful dialogue is difficult. Virtually no one who holds conservative views on race sees themselves in this way. Thus the term becomes a barrier to the meaningful conversation needed to overcome the legacy of the past.

Ian Ayres of Yale Law School, the author of "Pervasive Prejudice?" suggests that "[t]here's a growing consensus that a large proportion of racialized decisions are not driven by any conscious race discrimination, but that it is often just driven by unconscious, or subconscious, attitudes." He was quoted in The New York Times about the much-maligned study that reveals that white referees in the NBA called fouls at a greater rate against black players than against white players. He went on to say that "[w]hen you force people to make snap decisions, they often can't keep themselves from subconsciously treating blacks different than whites, men different from women."

There is no wonder for the confusion and backlash over the term "racism." When the initial behavior is not consciously bigoted, a person feels maligned when their behavior is labeled racist.

Supporters of Barack Obama would do well to heed this lesson during the remaining days of this campaign. Rather than pointing out the potential for racism in West Virginia and other culturally conservative areas, the campaign and other supporters should point out Obama's likeability, his position on issues that would positively affect the region and, yes, his adherence to Christian ideals.

**LOAD-DATE:** October 14, 2008

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newspaper

Copyright 2008 Charleston Newspapers