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Reaction to Obama was a shock

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Over the years I've come to appreciate the many fine qualities that typically characterize the people of Appalachia, including their neighborliness, graciousness, love of family and kindred spirit. Embedded in this unique culture, however, is a disturbing character trait that unfortunately for some, occasionally tends to raise its ugly head.

I'm not an anthropologist, and I find it puzzling to see such reluctance among many to accept change of any magnitude when it is perceived to be an infringement upon the so-called "Appalachian culture."

Most recently in both West Virginia and Kentucky we've seen this manifest itself in an outright rejection of Barack Obama as a viable and acceptable candidate for president. The question then becomes, is this bigotry, or is it someone who is rejected simply because the culture is exclusive of anything or anyone who disturbs the deep-seated biases and beliefs that lie dormant until an "Obama-like event" occurs?

This is tantamount to a generational gap that has evolved over time into a somewhat isolated electorate that chooses not be burdened with the facts or, at the very least, is not interested in the facts at all. It appears to be a culture that has remained static in many respects while the rest of the world has moved on.

The Charleston Gazette recently characterized this unspoken racial divide as the "elephant in the room," while the national press has been far less complimentary in its coverage. Whatever description one chooses, West Virginia continues to be stigmatized with this unflattering stereotype allowing the media, in turn, to categorize us demographically as a Third World country.

Why is there such a dichotomy of values that, on the surface, appear normal until something that doesn't quite "fit the pattern" disturbs (in this case) the political landscape? What arouses the fear, the anxieties and the skepticism about a black man choosing to run for the highest office in the land? Pundits provide a daily dearth of information as to why, for instance, white voters in Oregon react differently to the possibility of a black person becoming president than do many voters in Appalachia as they approach the voting booth.

The pundits may well be correct in their analysis by citing a multitude of reasons for this cultural behavior. Frequently the lack of an adequate education and/or below average income are given as reasons why this isolationist form of bigotry exists. However, I believe it to be much more convoluted. I see it as a collage of generation after generation of life experiences which cocoon them from intrusive ideas, personalities and essentially anything else atypical that is often threatening to their culture.

I recently watched a video interviewing two female voters in Man. One woman remarked in a very loud voice that she could not vote for anyone with a name like Hussein. The second lady, while a little more cautious in selecting her words, noted that she just didn't feel comfortable voting for a black man. I'm certain that exit polling in many West Virginia and Kentucky precincts would likely echo these same sentiments. This in spite of the fact that there is a wealth of multimedia information available providing a range of perspectives, facts and insights about any candidate.

This genial image I have of a place I call home has withstood somewhat of a shocking revelation since the West Virginia primary election. What I thought I knew to be true has been redefined. I live among some who I really didn't know at all. I am hopeful, however, as this campaign moves on to the general election, that prejudices will not prevail. I am hopeful that a candidate's message will trump any false misrepresentations of the true qualities of the candidate. I am hopeful that unsubstantiated skepticism about a candidate's background or genealogy can be put aside in favor of the truth.

My remarks should not be construed as being judgmental regarding who someone chooses to vote for. That is a personal choice. What is hoped for, however, is that narrowness of thought is not the reason for a choice. Be receptive to what a candidate has to say and influenced by his deeds, not by the color of skin or by fear based on prejudice. I hope my neighbors, known and unknown, in West Virginia will take the time to do the research and judge him on his merits and his message and not by rumor and innuendo.

Gossard is a retired supply chain manager at Union Carbide and Dow Chemical.

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