

Chased by Race

Written by Walter Fields
Thursday, 01 November 2012 10:04 -



One of the more enduring aspects of the 2012 presidential campaign has been the underlying effect that the issue of race and the prevalence of racist behavior have played in shaping public opinion. Though the election of Barack Obama in November 2008 was hailed as a moment of post-racial triumph in America, his presidency has been marked by episodic racism reminiscent of the worst forms of bigotry from the Jim Crow era. In both explicit and more coded fashion, race has been a constant factor in certain media's treatment of the Obama administration, the fashion in which the Republican Party has communicated to its conservative base, and the outward disdain many white voters have displayed toward the First Family.

The latest Washington Post-ABC News tracking poll confirms just how much race is affecting this campaign. The polling data shows the President trailing Mitt Romney 59 to 38 percent among white voters while winning 79 percent of the non-white vote. At this time in the 2008 campaign the President trailed the Republican candidate Senator John McCain by just 8 percentage points among white voters. The poll points to the largest racial divide in the electorate since the 1988 campaign. That year Republican Vice President, and ultimate victor, George H. Bush, and Democrat Michael Dukakis squared off in a campaign that also had racial overtones. So, what happened to cause this massive abandonment of President Obama among the white electorate?

Some of the drift away from President Obama by white voters can certainly be attributed to economic anxiety but concerns over the economy can hardly explain such a massive shift. One development that belies the economic anxiety argument is that in crucial swing states such as Ohio the economy is recovering at a faster pace than elsewhere in the country. If the economy is the cause of white voter flight then it doesn't make sense that it would be universal and that the margin between the President and Mitt Romney in these swing states would be as close as polls currently suggest. The more likely and obvious reason for the President's poor performance among white voters is the subliminally racial and coordinated four-year attack

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upon President Obama instigated by the Republican Party's right-wing. The constant drumbeat of racist messages and disrespect has planted the seeds of doubt and fear among white voters, who now see the President as a "threat" and not the symbol of hope he represented four years ago.

The imagery and rhetoric used by the right to depict this President and the First Lady is reminiscent of antebellum characterizations of African-Americans. Worse, this new age racism is fueled by talk radio and the Republican Party's cable television media arm – the Fox News Channel. As social media has developed, the level of racist vitriol has risen as the worst and cowardly offenders can hide behind the anonymity of the Internet. The attacks on the President's citizenship, religion and intelligence have come from various pockets of the right; from elected officials, right-wing pundits and entertainers, to the zaniness of a Donald Trump who has become a caricature for buffoonery. Given the racial assault on President Obama, his strong support among Black voters is almost a gag reaction. Where else can Black voters go given the utter disrespect shown the nation's first African-American President by the Republican political machinery?

This development is all the more perplexing and frustrating because this President, knowing the burden of race he shoulders as the first African-American occupant of the White House, has gone to extraordinary lengths to avoid wearing his race on his sleeve. He attempted to cast off the shackles of race with his 2008 speech in Philadelphia in response to the frenzy over Rev. Jeremiah Wright, a racial flashpoint that almost sabotaged his historic candidacy. As President he has made few direct references to race, save his awkward "beer summit" when he tried to mediate the dispute between Harvard Professor Henry Louis "Skip" Gates and the Cambridge police officer who accosted the professor. Perhaps his most direct foray into the racial waters was his remarks empathizing with slain Florida teenager Trayvon Martin. Both incidents were out of character for a President who has sought to downplay race, knowing full well that any attention paid to his African-American heritage had the potential to cause collateral damage politically.

Ironically, it is the President's cautiousness on confronting racism and directly addressing racial disparities that has frustrated his core constituency – African-Americans. The primary complaint among many Blacks, frequently discussed within closed circles, is the seeming lack of attention President Obama has paid to what are perceived as "Black" issues. Many African-Americans have wanted the President to specifically focus on Black unemployment, the crisis of young Black men, mass incarceration and gun violence. The absence of a "Black agenda" has caused many African-Americans to be less enthusiastic toward the President's re-election bid though he continues to command the Black vote. What is likely maddening to the White House is that many of the President's initiatives will help African-Americans without explicitly identifying the policies as intentionally designed to do so.

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Herein is the tragedy in the current racial divide. Many African-Americans feel that the first President elected from their own community has forfeited his racial obligation though they remain prideful of his historic election. Meanwhile, whites don't trust the President because they have been conditioned to believe that an African-American can't possibly be fair in governing the nation and can't be trusted. The President can't win philosophically either way. His only hope is to split the difference, and that's what this election is sadly coming to represent. If he wins, President Obama will not have a mandate, as he deserves. He will have simply survived and will govern a nation where many whites will still question his birth, citizenship and his right and ability to govern.

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