

OPINION

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Public Discourse Driven by Race

A most despicable tradition of American history

BY LEE A. DANIELS

Do you remember when many pundits and other commentators were trumpeting Barack Obama's spectacular rise as proof that America was about to jettison its obsessive, and, they claimed, outdated discussion about race and color?

My favorite was one columnist's confident declaration in January 2008 just after Obama had won the Iowa Democratic caucus vote that his victory in "a state that is 94 percent white, is perhaps the clearest indication so far that the racial division Mr. Obama promises to end has largely been put to rest."

Such disingenuous pronouncements aside, it remains revealing how few of the purveyors of those, at best, foolish predictions have taken to their computers to explain how they could have been so wrong.

Today it's obvious they were completely off the mark.

Today's public discourse is more driven by issues of race, color and ethnicity than at any time since the 1960s. Today, American



society is flooded with virulent, racially-driven images and rhetoric hurled against the President, saturated with the demonizing of undocumented Latino immigrants and calls for scrapping the constitutional protection all children born in America should enjoy, and degraded by cynical assertions that guilt-by-association is valid principle to apply to people who are not white.

It has so infected the public mood and mind that a recent survey from the Pew Research Center found that since the President's inauguration a substantial and growing number of white Americans have come to believe a Big Lie: That Barack Obama is a Muslim.

The Pew poll found that 18 percent of Americans now say that Obama is a Muslim, up from 11 percent in March 2009. About a third of those polled say he is a Christian, a sharp decline from the 48 percent who believed so in March 2009; and 43 percent say they don't know what Obama's religious beliefs are, up from 34 percent over the same period.

The overall increase in the Obama-as-Muslim notion is being driven by the substantial increases in the number of Republicans, those hostile to the administration, who say so.

These changes have occurred despite the denials of the White House, and the growing mountain of books written about his past.

And they have occurred despite the exhaustive investigations into Obama's past by news media the world over since his electrifying speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention catapulted him into the front ranks of American politicians.

Despite all of this, more white Americans than before have chosen to believe The Big Lie.

The Pew report makes clear that the Obama-as-Muslim phenomenon is at work among whites only. Just 7 percent of blacks say they believe Obama is a Muslim, up one point from March 2009.

That many whites look upon Islam and Muslim Americans in negative terms was underscored by another poll by Time Magazine. It found that 43 percent of those polled had a "somewhat" or "very" unfavorable opinion of Islam; that 25 percent don't believe most Muslims in the U.S. are patriotic Americans who share American values; and that a third would oppose a mosque being located within two blocks of their home.

In one sense, it is astonishing that in the American society of today white Americans would be so susceptible to applying what many of them consider a negative demographic characterization to the President of the United States.

But, on the other hand, this development shouldn't be so surprising. For the Big Lie dynamic has been used many times in Ameri-

can history against many different groups. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants used it for centuries against Jews, Irish-Catholic and southern and eastern European immigrants, Native Americans, Japanese, Chinese and other Asian immigrants, and Latino Americans.

And, of course, until the mid-1960s, American society was rooted in the Big Lies about African Americans.

No matter the group or the era, the essence of the Big Lie is the same: "They" do not deserve to be treated as fellow citizens, or even with respect.

That is what the Obama-as-Muslim belief represents. It is an attempt to, yes, attack him politically. But it goes much deeper than that. It bespeaks a rejection of the reality of America as a multi-racial nation — one now in which Americans of color have an equal right to compete for the status and resources of the society. It represents a reverting back to the most despicable tradition of American history — the labeling of someone or some group as The Other in an effort to hide one's own fear of "the competition."

This new outbreak of that virus is a test, of course, not just of the President's ability to lead, but of the quality of the American people's character.

Lee A. Daniels is director of communications for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund.

Letter to the Editor

A Public Good

We need to ensure net neutrality and declassify the Internet as a communications service under current law. It should be declared a public good.

Google and Verizon are pushing to control which websites load quickly and dump everyone else onto an Internet slow lane. Under their plan, Internet service providers would be allowed to charge steep fees to post data on the Internet. Websites that don't pay could travel at dial-up speed or worse.

The FCC must act now to preserve the Internet as an open marketplace of ideas and free speech. The web is a public good, like libraries and public schools and should be declared as much.

James Clark

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Helping Americans in Need

Obama sits on right side of debate

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

Over the years, many, if not most, Republicans have gone on record protesting federal funding of many social programs designed to help Americans in need. With the country hit hard by recession, the need for these types of programs have increased and, you guessed it, conservative politicians and pundits alike have made their displeasure known.

Thankfully, President Obama sits on the right side of this debate and has advocated for and signed into law legislation that increases these public support programs.

If you were lucky enough to not have suffered a lay off or home loss during this recession, it's easy to overlook just how many have fallen victim to the decline in the economy. According to USA Today, government funded programs designed to reduce poverty have grown during the recession; such programs now one in six Americans — a record. Experts predict those numbers will continue to grow. Currently, close to 10 million Americans receive unemployment



benefits, while the Medicaid rolls have grown 17 percent since the recession began. That number, too, will rise as the new health care law is predicted to add another 16 million recipients to the list in the next few years. The number who receive food stamps has grown over the last couple of years as well, nearly 40 million Americans — a 50 percent increase since the start of the recession — currently receive food stamp benefits.

These numbers are sobering. It's easy for Republicans and others to talk about 'small government' and cry that anti-poverty spending jeopardizes the future health of our economy. The reality is that our present economy is in shambles and we have no real idea of when it will rebound. Americans are suffering and it is the government's duty to provide for its people until the economy gets to a point where they can then provide for themselves.

We are entering a critical mid-term election period and many offices across the country are up for grabs. As a voter, you can support anti-poverty programs by supporting those lawmakers who not only agree that government should provide economic safety nets but fight to make sure that it does.

Greg Mathis is a former Michigan District Court judge and currently is a syndicated television show judge.

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