

## OPINION

## The Problem We All (Still) Live With

Anti-black  
bigotry in the  
political arena

BY LEE A. DANIELS

When is a painting not just a painting — but a mirror?

That's the question which leaps out of the current

controversy over a painting that President Obama secured to hang in a well-trafficked corridor outside the Oval Office that first appeared 47 years ago in one of the most widely-read magazines in America and has been exhibited numerous times throughout the country ever since.

The answer — of course — is when the subject of that painting — Norman Rockwell's famous "The Problem We All Live With" — is America's ongoing racial crisis.

In November 1960 four six-year-old African-American girls enrolled in the first grade of two New Orleans public schools which until then had enrolled only white students. That "desegregation" precipitated the New Orleans schools crisis. Howling mobs of white men, women, teenagers and children, protesting that violation of the bedrock principle of Jim Crow, gathered daily to curse and threaten the girls, who were escorted into and out of the schools by a brace of federal marshals.

Four years later, Norman Rockwell stunned American society with what quickly became the most iconic painterly depiction of the Civil Rights Movement. "The Problem We All Live With," focusing on Ruby Bridges, the lone black student at the William Frantz Elementary School, appeared in *Look Magazine*, another widely-read publication, on Jan. 14, 1964. It showed an immaculately dressed black girl, carrying her school textbook and ruler, walking between four U.S. marshals. On the wall of the school behind them were some of the traditional markers of white racism — the word "nigger" and the acronym "KKK" stand out, and the wall is stained from the remnants of a recently-thrown tomato.

The painting, now in the permanent collection of the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Mass., was the more stunning because it came from Rockwell, whose considerable public esteem rested on the more than 300 paintings of sometimes humorous and some-



President Barack Obama joins Ruby Bridges to view Norman Rockwell's "The Problem We All Live With," hanging in a West Wing hallway near the Oval Office. Bridges inspired Rockwell's 1964 illustration.

times poignant scenes embodying homespun American values he had been painting for the covers of the conservative-oriented *Saturday Evening Post* magazine for more than 40 years.

But Rockwell was a more complex figure than his paintings for the *Saturday Evening Post* indicated. Further, in 1963, having ended his long relationship with the *Post* and signed on with the more cosmopolitan *Look Magazine*, his publicly-exhibited work began to reflect his broader interests in poverty, space exploration — and civil rights.

In that regard, for an artist whose sympathies lay with the civil rights struggle, 1963 was a year of profound provocation: It included, among other events, the Birmingham demonstrations of May 1963; the assassination of Medgar Evers in June 1963; the March on Wash-

ington in August 1963; the murderous bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church three weeks later; and the assassination of President Kennedy that November.

One result was "The Problem We All Live With."

Two years later Rockwell produced another, even more haunting painting — "Murder in Mississippi," depicting the infamous 1964 murder of the three civil rights workers.

Long before he took office, it was apparent that the political successes of Barack Obama and other African-American politicians in securing enough votes from whites to break new ground in blacks' gaining elective office did not mean America had entered a "post-racial" promised land.

Indeed, Obama's success has provoked an outpouring of sustained overt appeals to anti-black

bigotry in the political arena not seen since George Wallace's campaign for the presidency in the 1960s and 1970s.

As it was in the civil rights years of the 1950s and 1960s, some of the deluge of racist comment coursing through the public arena is just politics at its most cynical. Their spiritual ancestors are the Southern segregationists who temporarily bolted the Democratic Party to form the Dixiecrat Party in 1948 and who were to later sign the so-called Southern Manifestos of 1956 opposing the Brown decision. Perhaps the smoothest practitioner of that cynicism was Sen. James Eastland, the Mississippi Democrat whose 1957 interview with journalist Mike Wallace remains a classic justification of segregationist politics at its most dishonest.

But, as many of the more than 1,100 reader responses to the Politico.com article about "The Problem" now hanging in the White House underscore, the reality of a black American presidency has deeply unsettled a significant minority of white Americans and provoked them to indulge in the same kind of illogical, vicious and bizarre racial assertions that fueled the mobs that tried to intimidate four little black American girls in New Orleans 51 years ago.

That reaction indicates that, although the particulars of the scene have changed, Norman Rockwell's "The Problem We All Live With" continues to stand in significant ways for the problem we all still live with.

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