

Race and Racism

A Brief History

by Tom Landess

Today, many Americans presume that the debate over slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries turned on the question of race. Though race was an ingredient in the Great Debate, it was no more than a pinch of salt. Both proponents and opponents of slavery tended to hold the same view of blacks. The superiority of the white race was a given from colonial times to long after the passage of the 13th and 14th amendments.

In 1784, Thomas Jefferson clearly believed in white supremacy. In a segment of *Notes on the State of Virginia* often cited as an illustration of his opposition to slavery, he wrote,

Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior; as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous.

Abraham Lincoln took great care in his ongoing quarrel with Stephen Douglas to suggest the ways in which he believed blacks to be inferior to whites. In 1857, in a speech criticizing the *Dred Scott* decision, he said,

I think the authors of [the Declaration of Independence] intended to include all men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness, in what respects they did consider all men created equal—equal in “certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

In 1858, he said the following during the first Lincoln-Douglas debate:

I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and the black races. There is a physical difference between the two which, in my judgment, will probably forever forbid

their living together upon the footing of perfect equality; and inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there must be a difference, I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong having the superior position.

This statement should come as no surprise to students of history. Lincoln was a man of his time and place. Just five years earlier, Illinois had passed legislation prohibiting any black immigration into the state. It was the third such Illinois statute directed against blacks *per se*. These laws, motivated by intense racial animosity, were common in the territories and newer states.

By the turn of the next century, much of the comment on race came from the South. In 1900, Benjamin “Pitchfork Ben” Tillman—whose statue, a gift in part of the South Carolina Democratic Party, broods over the State House in Columbia—said in a speech to the U.S. Senate,

We of the South have never recognized the right of the negro to govern white men, and we never will. We have never believed him to be equal to the white man, and we will not submit to his gratifying his lust on our wives and daughters without lynching him. I would to God the last one of them was in Africa and that none of them had ever been brought to our shores.

All three men believed blacks were less intelligent than whites. All three advocated shipping blacks back to Africa rather than allowing them to remain among whites to “amalgamate” or “mongrelize” the races. And all three accepted without question the same stereotypical view of blacks—one that, until the second half of the 20th century, supported *de jure* segregation in the South and parts of the North, *de facto* segregation elsewhere.

While Tillman presumed to speak for white Southerners in his diatribe, throughout the body of the speech he suggested that senators representing the rest of the country shared the same prejudices. Indeed, he made this point with a smug sense of superiority, as if to say, “We are open and honest about our racial attitudes. You aren’t.”

In fact, when the second Ku Klux Klan was organized in 1915, Northern states led the nation in recruitment. Here are the top five states in number of members, as reported in Kenneth T. Jackson’s *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-*

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1930, the period in which the Klan was at the height of its political power: Indiana, 240,000; Ohio, 195,000; Texas, 190,000; Pennsylvania, 150,000; and Illinois, 95,000. (In 2009, estimates of Klan membership hover around 5,000.)

Today, no senator, Northern or Southern, would admit to membership in an overtly racist organization or publicly endorse white supremacy. If he did, he might well be expelled from the Senate. Indeed, racism is now the greatest of all political sins, and the N-word has replaced the F-word as the most obscene utterance in the language.

The foundation for this change was laid in 1948, when a group of liberal Democrats captured their party's national convention and, with a series of high-decibel speeches, made civil rights the focal issue of the campaign. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., of New York; Blair Moody of Michigan; and Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota led the charge, excoriating the South for its racism and Jim Crow laws, capturing the high ground for the liberal wing of the party.

Strom Thurmond, then the Democratic governor of South Carolina, led 35 Southern delegates out of the convention and formed a third party, known by its nickname, the Dixiecrats. Seeing a fragmented Democratic Party, the far left formed yet a fourth party, the Progressives, and nominated former Vice President Henry Wallace, called Old Bubblehead because of his dreamy vision of a socialist America. Harry Truman, who fell into the NONE OF THE ABOVE category, ran on the civil-rights platform the convention had handed him—and won, to the surprise of just about everybody. Thus, the 1948 convention may well have signaled a new era, one in which the charge of “racism” played an increasingly important role in the political debate.

As Americans entered the second half of the 20th century, some Southern politicians were still defending *de jure* segregation, arguing that whites should not be forced to attend school with blacks, sit next to them in buses, drink out of the same water fountain, and eat at the same lunch counters. The implication of these Jim Crow laws was clear to both races: The law was affirming the superiority, and therefore the supremacy, of the white race. In that sense, legalized segregation may have been more mean-spirited than slavery, since it mandated an artificial separation of the races to protect the sensibilities of white folks.

It is interesting to note that, in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Tom's second benevolent Southern master, Augustine St. Clare, defends the institution of slavery but reproves Ophelia, his New England abolitionist cousin, for her aversion to blacks, which is so strong that she feels uncomfortable in their presence and avoids their touch. In Mrs. Stowe's novel, then, it is the Yankee whose sensibilities are offended. Stowe was not the last writer to take the measure of Northern racism. (By the way, Simon Legree was a transplanted Northerner.)

The second and more important change in racial poli-

tics occurred when Congress passed the 1964 Voting Rights Act, which effectively ended the Democrats' disenfranchisement of blacks in the South. Suddenly, they were allowed to vote in the primary where “nomination was tantamount to election”—and with the Department of Justice standing behind them, pistols cocked.

A lot of Southern politicians were caught off base. Those who had ritualistically demonized “nigras” and “niggers” saw the Democratic precincts flooded with black voters. Like Old Pharaoh, many politicians got drowned. Others, like Strom Thurmond and George Wallace, turned on a dime and began to reach out to the black community—hiring black staff members and delivering sides of pork to black constituents. Within a nanosecond of the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1964, the Democratic Party in the South began denouncing Republicans as the party of racism and reaction. At last, Northern and Southern Democrats were on the same page again, singing as one harmonious choir for the first time since 1895.

And it worked. Sort of. Blacks flocked to the Democratic Party, despite the fact that between 1876 and 1964 the GOP had been the welcome wagon of Southern blacks, who were the beneficiaries of what little patronage Republicans had to offer.

However, the change ultimately proved an electoral setback for the Democrats. The essentially conservative nature of the Republican Party, coupled with the fierce anti-Southern rhetoric of Northern Democrats—which impugned the moral integrity of every man, woman, and newborn baby in the region—drove millions of white voters into the ranks of the GOP, once hated by Southerners as the architect of Reconstruction.

Liberal Democrats saw this shift as proof that Nixon's so-called Southern Strategy was an appeal to the South's inimitable racism—the true motive, they argued, for every conservative dissent to the inevitable march of America toward statism. Thus, criticism of Obama has become for left-leaning ideologues an expression of racial bigotry, whatever the stated motive.

Actress Janeane Garofalo, appearing on Keith Olbermann's show, called those who demonstrated against Obama's agenda “a bunch of teabagging rednecks,” and then added that “this is about hating a black man in the White House. This is racism straight up.”

Colbert King, a *Washington Post* columnist, wrote, “There's something loose in the land, an ugliness and hatred directed toward Barack Obama, the nation's first African American president, that takes the breath away.”

And Maureen Dowd, writing in the *New York Times*, said of Rep. Joe Wilson's now-famous outburst,

Surrounded by middle-aged white guys—a sepia snapshot of the days when such pols ran Washington like their own men's club—Joe Wilson yelled “You lie!” at a president who didn't.

But, fair or not, what I heard was an unspoken word in the air: You lie, boy! . . .

This president is the ultimate civil rights figure—a black man whose legitimacy is constantly challenged by a loco fringe.

For generations, genteel Southerners would bow their heads in shame at accusations of this sort. Today, many of them, examining such extravagant illogic, have come to reject the stereotyping of their region and its citizens—and to regard Garofalo, King, and Dowd as irrelevant airheads, not because the South is free of racism, but because it is more so than other parts of the country.

In addition, black scholars, like Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (who recently complained about racism in Boston), have questioned the myth of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator and of the North as the savior of the black race—as did Frederick Douglass more than 100 years ago. Suddenly, the history of the question has become more complicated—and, consequently, a little less important.

More to the point, tens of thousands of blacks who have little contact with formal history are expressing their own dissent in opinion and in behavior. Several years ago a Gallup Poll found that in only one region did a majority of blacks believe they were treated equally: the South. A Harvard study reported that in only one region did a majority of white children attend integrated schools: the South. And the 2000 Census revealed that, in recent decades, more blacks have moved into the South than out of the South, while the reverse is true in all other regions. If you had only facts to guide you, you might well conclude that the Northeast is the citadel of racism in America—and you might be right.

Thus will it be increasingly difficult for leftist Democrats to sustain the myth of rampant Southern racism and to explain electoral losses in the region on this factor.

In the recent past, it has been relatively easy to play the race card. Here are some fresh comments gleaned from the airways by Rush Limbaugh:

CAMPBELL BROWN: (music) . . . vicious, racist imagery attacking our first African-American president.

LAWRENCE O'DONNELL: (newsroom noise)
Gentleman Joe Wilson has done much to make the racist history of South Carolina jump back into our present consciousness.

CANDY CROWLEY: (b-roll) Critics think this is about resistance to a black man as president.

JAMES CARVILLE: People are upset with President Obama because of the color of his skin. Who cannot believe that?

CHRIS MATTHEWS: Could there be a refusal to accept the legitimacy of Barack Obama as president

because of his race?

WOLF BLITZER: A small but disturbing minority within the tea party movement is also blatantly anti-black.

JOHN RIDLEY: When you talk about racial image, this is not just standard debate.

ELAINE QUIJANO: (b-roll) A small but passionate minority is also voicing what some see as racist rhetoric.

JOHN AVLON: Hitler. Communism. Racism. All this ugliness is bubbling up.

ANDERSON COOPER: There is an undercurrent of racism in some of the criticism of the president.

And remember that Trent Lott lost his position as Senate majority leader because, at Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday party, he paid the old man a meaningless compliment:

I want to say this about my state. When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years either.

Lott was no segregationist. He wasn't even a strong defender of his state's cultural conservatism. In the House and Senate he was a trimmer—a dealmaker who could reach across the aisle when principle was on the block. He was the last person to suggest that segregation was anything but wicked. As a Mississippian, he knew better. If, in his little speech, he meant anything at all, he was referring to Thurmond's fiscal conservatism and his support of a strong military. Lott's fellow senators and President Bush knew what kind of cautious animal he was. Yet they forced him to surrender his leadership post anyway—because a charge of racism, however farfetched, was still the hydrogen bomb of political warfare.

Despite these frantic accusations the charge of racism is bound to lose its power to wound and destroy in the years immediately ahead. After all, Americans have elected a black president, so the nation can't be too racist, can it? And if—like a pair of French fops in the court of Louis XIV—the Reverend Jesse and the Reverend Al continue to make a profession of getting their feelings hurt, then it will be easier and easier to brush them off like a couple of houseflies. We may even be approaching a time when charges of racism will seem as bland and dull as unsalted oatmeal, when even the *New York Times* will read Maureen Dowd's name-calling, clear the phlegm from its magisterial throat, and yawn.

But we're not there yet.



Saving French in Quebec

When Language Isn't Enough

by Luc Gagnon



Christophe Finot

In 1976, when the separatist Parti Québécois (PQ) won the majority of seats in Quebec's National Assembly, giving it control of the provincial government, many thought that the party's goal was to save French culture and the French language in Canada. It is, however, much more complicated than that.

The PQ was founded in 1967 by the ex-Liberal minister René Lévesque. It espoused three principles: social democracy, "sovereignty association" (a separate government that maintains economic ties with Canada), and the preservation of the French language. But the Parti Québécois was not a nationalist party created to separate Quebec from the rest of Canada. The charismatic Lévesque had served as a war correspondent in France and Germany during World War II, and his experience of Nazism turned him against nationalist movements.

The PQ sought to establish a secular modern state defined by "civic nationalism," not a state linked to a specific ethnic group. A few months after taking power, the PQ passed Bill 101, *La charte de la langue française* (The Charter of the French Language). The Liberal government's Bill 22 (1974) had declared French to be the only official language of Quebec, but this law had been challenged by McGill University legal scholars as a violation of the British North America Act (1867), which made English an official language of Canada, and the Official Languages Act of 1969, which guaranteed bilingualism. The PQ's Bill 101 reaffirmed Bill 22's elevation of French as the official lan-

guage of Quebec. It mandated that all commercial signs be in French and that all francophone and non-English-speaking children go to French-speaking elementary and high schools. The historic English-speaking minority of Quebec, around 20 percent of the population, could keep its institutions, schools, and hospitals, but these could be used only by members of the English-speaking community. The hysteria among anglophones in Quebec that followed the passage of this bill led to an exodus of hundreds of thousands of citizens to Toronto or New York. Many important businesses also left Montreal for Toronto, increasing the demographic and economic gap between the two cities. (While both had the same population in 1960, Toronto now has twice that of Montreal.)

The PQ minister of culture, Dr. Camille Laurin, was the author of much of Bill 101. Some extremist members of the PQ plainly wanted to abolish the English-speaking schools and hospitals, as did the great orator of the separatist movement, Pierre Bourgault. But Lévesque, who felt some sympathy for the English-speaking community, threatened to resign as leader if the PQ adopted such a hard line. Lévesque was perfectly bilingual, raised in an English-speaking village of the Gaspésie. He had a great admiration for the Americans, who had, after all, won World War II, as well as for their democratic institutions. However, Laurin convinced Lévesque to accept Bill 101 in order to maintain the unity of the party and the government.

Before 1976, most immigrants—Jews, Greeks, Italians—would, upon arrival, join the English-speaking community of Montreal. The French Canadians were

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