

ON HARRY REID: WEB DU BOIS WAS RIGHT BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX

The problem of the twentieth century, wrote scholar-activist WEB DuBois in 1903, is the problem of the color line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." WEB DuBois was right, and he was wrong. Certainly race matters were critically important in the United States and in the world (think decolonization) in the latter part of the twentieth century, but Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid's (D-NV) foolish comments about President Barack Obama suggest that we are dragging twentieth century problems into the twenty-first century.

In 2008, Reid said that President Obama could win the Presidency because he was "light skinned" with "no Negro dialect unless he wanted to have one". The comments, somewhat demeaning and disappointing, were revealed in **Game Change**, the book by Mark Halperin and John Heilmann that was released last week. Senator Reid has since apologized directly to President Obama, who has accepted the apology. Senator Dianne Feinstein says this should be the end of it. With health care legislation on the line, Democrats are wishing this matter would go away, and republicans are working it for all they can. At least three prominent Republicans, including RNC Chairman Michael Steele, who happens to be African American, are calling for Reid's resignation. Steele cites the Trent Lott brouhaha, when Lott said the country would have been better had Strom Thurmond, the Dixiecrat segregationist, been elected President, as evidence of double standards. But Lott actually said he wished that segregation had prevailed, and he said this in 2002! There's a big difference between factually, if awkwardly, describing someone as light-skinned, and wishing for segregation.

In some ways, this comment is not a big deal. Except beneath the description of the President as light-skinned and well spoken is a comparative disregard for those who might be darker skinned and more ebonic. Truth be told, though, could a darker skinned African American candidate have been able to capture the hearts, minds, and votes of so many Americans? I think not. "The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line."

Harry Reid's comment, and the reaction to it, puts to rest any notion that our nation is "post-racial". We remain racial, and we are not above using race for political gain. Thus the Republicans, who could likely care less about this comment, but more about weakening Democrats, are looking for blood. The party whose renegade Vice Presidential nominee Sarah Palin was blatantly racial during her campaign, but never reigned in, is suddenly offended by Reid's comments, which are mild by their standards. Michael Steele, who has implored his party to reach out to people of color, to no avail, is mired in hypocrisy when he calls for Reid's resignation. Post-racial? We aren't there yet.

There is plenty to say about race and Democrats, as well. For all the supposed liberalism of the President's party, many were disparaging of President Obama's

candidacy. President Bill Clinton was furious, derisive, and turned South Carolina away from Senator Hillary Clinton with his ill-advised comments about President Obama. According to the same authors who outed Harry Reid, he told Senator Ted Kennedy, "A few years ago, this guy would have been getting us coffee."

Vice President Joe Biden, just three years ago, made comments not too different from Reid's, "I mean, you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy." How condescending! And yet how real and how reflective of the way many whites feel about African American people. I don't know how often an accomplished African American is described as "articulate" as if it is possible to be inarticulate and also a television commentator, a corporate leader, or an educator. This is subtle racism, but those African Americans who get along manage, like President Obama, not to appear too outraged at these comments. Biden, Clinton, and Reid have gotten away with their comments because Obama is magnanimous and others are magnanimous in his stead. We say we know their intent, and it is not ill. Still, the words are inappropriate and they sting.

We know what is in their hearts, but we also know what came out of their mouths. Their words suggest that WEB DuBois was painfully right. We are still stuck on the color line in these United States.

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