

# The Pointlessness of the Racism Debate

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The question of whether or not some of the attacks on President Obama are racist is not likely to end anytime soon. There is little that can be done to persuade some supporters of President Obama that comparing the African American president to a witch doctor is not racist, or that the disrespect shown to Obama during his address to congress on health care would not have been on display if the president had been white. Similarly, critics of the president will continue to insist that this is simply all about the issues and that race has nothing to do with it.

Part of the difficulty is that on issues of race, there is a deep, but usually unspoken disagreement which runs through most of America. A substantial proportion of Americans see racism as something that is firmly in the past. This originates both from justifiable pride in how far we have come in this area, but unfortunately also prevents many people from recognizing or confronting the racism that still persists. Another large group of Americans sees racism as an ongoing problem which is less acute than a generation or two ago, but has certainly not gone away. The tension between these two views is apparent whenever a racial incident occurs; and it seems like half the country cries racism while the other half accuses the first half of playing the race card.

It is reasonably obvious that some of the attacks on President Obama will always be motivated by racism, but it is equally apparent that attributing all criticism to racism, something that Barack Obama, as both candidate and president, has never done, would be wrong. As such, the racism debate serves little real purpose. Nobody is going to be convinced. Nor is anybody is going to stop or change their behavior or their accusations.

The debate about racism is currently being used by the right wing to distract from the important issue of health care reform. The last week, during which we all talked more about whether or not Joe Wilson is a racist than about the merits of Obama's proposed reform or the speech with Wilson so vulgarly interrupted, was, in the context of the extraordinarily low bar that party has set for themselves, a good week for the Republicans.

Opponents of the president are being a little disingenuous demanding, correctly, that it should be possible to disagree with Obama on the issues without being called a racist, while eschewing any serious discussion of the issues, unless organizing supporters to shout down elected officials and call opponents Nazis qualifies as a discussion of the issues.

The phony outrage expressed by some on the far right when confronted with charges of racism is motivated by a broader, and more powerful, attempt to pillory Obama, not for the color of his skin, but for being part of the liberal elite. On right wing talk radio, the blogosphere and Fox News, in recent years any talk of racism is dismissed as elitist nonsense from people who are out of touch with, as Bill O'Reilly eerily calls them, "the folks." This is a potent line of attack that is

consistent with all the other efforts the Republican Party and the right wing have made to mobilize their base to attack Obama as aggressively and nastily as possible.

The more important issue is, as Nancy Pelosi pointed out in her recent comments about San Francisco in the 1970s, the tone of political dialog in the US. This may or may not have anything to do with race, but it is still troubling. It is a real break with our past that a member of Congress feels comfortable yelling "you lie" at the president in the middle of a formal speech to Congress, or that it is no longer necessary for officials from the opposition party to show outrage when the President of the United States is called a Nazi. By drawing attention to that, Pelosi is making a valuable contribution to the dialog, but don't be surprised to hear Republican members of Congress start attacking Pelosi and accusing her of implying that they are all like Dan White.

My point here is not that the attacks on Obama are not racist; it is pretty clear that some are racist. However, it is far less clear what supporters of the president gain from making this argument. It is extremely difficult to convince somebody that racism exists when they don't want to see it. Moreover, nothing would change if this effort were successful. The right wing and much of the Republican Party have made it clear these last few months that they will stop at almost nothing to cripple the Obama presidency, which indicates that even if they were persuaded that they were racist, they probably wouldn't stop.