

Hoodies, Racism and Newt Gingrich

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Geraldo Rivera is one of those public figures who, to those of us who do not pay too much attention to aging former celebrities, seems to pop back up every few years to say something offensive or dumb. Last week's comments were both. Rivera is, of course, a minor media personality, with no real relevance to much of anything anymore, so his comments should not, on their own, be taken too seriously. Unfortunately, his remark that Trayvon Martin's "hoodie (was) as much responsible for Trayvon Martin's death as much as George Zimmerman was," while an extraordinary overstatement, bears some truth.

Martin's killing is further evidence that for many Americans, innocence is no longer the default presumption and that something as organic as the color of one's skin, or as silly as one's choice of outer wear can be a basis on which they are judged, and in the case of Martin, according to Rivera, killed. The hooded sweatshirt has become a popular garment in recent years presumably due to passing styles as well as its usefulness and warmth. It is not, however, exclusively, or even largely, a garment worn by dangerous street thugs.

Although it is true that hoodies are occasionally worn by people who have done great damage to our country's social fabric, there are also many innocent people, of all background, ages and genders who wear hoodies. I live in a very diverse neighborhood where young men and adolescents who are African American, Latino and white, as well as the occasional middle aged academic walking his dog, wear hoodies. Most of these young men, regardless of their background have been friendly and good neighbors during the years I have lived there. Rivera's suggestion that "parents of black and Latino youngsters particularly not ... let their children go out wearing hoodies," would re-segregate my neighborhood, and many others, based on clothing, and represent a triumph of racial profiling and bigoted stereotyping over equality and community.

Rivera's comments on hoodies can be construed as a clumsy attempt to offer helpful advice to parents while still recognizing the problems of racism which confront our society. There is, however, no way to interpret Newt Gingrich's comment "What the president said, in a sense, is disgraceful ... Trying to turn it into a racial issue is fundamentally wrong. I really find it appalling," in response to President Obama's statement that "If I had a son he would look like Trayvon Martin," as anything other than racial insensitivity and campaign posturing of the worst kind.

Gingrich is a fringe political figure enjoying a national retirement tour, so his opinions should not be weighed too heavily. Nonetheless, the sentiment he expressed speaks to one of the key, if often unmentioned, pillars of today's Republican Party, that racism is something from the past. This belief allows the Republican Party to ignore any attempts to strengthen racial equality in America and to dismiss any accusation of racism as playing the race card.

In Newt Gingrich's America, if a young African American male is killed for nothing more than being in the wrong neighborhood at the wrong time, it is somehow a problem if the President suggests, barely, that there might have been a racial dynamic to the events. If Obama's comments were inappropriate, as Gingrich seemed to feel, then race is something that simply cannot be discussed in America, and racism should be ignored altogether.

Race is obviously at the center of this tragic incident; and that cannot be changed by the comments of a self-important has-been winding down his political career. Moreover, and more significantly, race is never too far from the center of American politics more broadly. Having an African American president, while a tremendous stride forward for racial equality by any measure, does not, unfortunately, make racism go away. It just changes the nature of racism, and the way it is understood and discussed.

The tragic killing of Trayvon Martin is a reminder of this. It is also a reminder that regardless of who sits in the White House, ordinary African Americans can still get killed for walking through a neighborhood, and ordinary right wing politicians will still try to excuse away the racial component of this.

It is axiomatic that the racism-is-over trope makes it easier to ignore racism, even when it is plain as day, but in the context of today's extremely partisan political environment, the extent to which people will go to avoid making the obvious conclusion that racism, as evidenced by the killing of Trayvon Martin, is alive and still too powerful in America is extraordinary. President Obama's cautious, but powerful, words regarding this killing indicate the delicate nature of any discussion of racism in even in its most obvious incarnation. Gingrich's and Rivera's comments, however, demonstrate their discomfort with the role of racism in this killing and demonstrate what some will do to avoid confronting the enduring role of racism in America.