

Dr. Laura and Racism in the Age of Obama

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Radio personality [Dr. Laura Schlessinger's recent racially tinged comments](#) are in some respects, just another offensive reactionary rant at a time when radio talk shows seem more filled with hate and vitriol than ever before. However, these remarks, which were in response to an African American caller who was upset about racist remarks made by her white husband and his family, also offer some insight into how race and racism is understood today when for the first time in history the president is African American.

While Dr. Laura's comments are initially most shocking because of the frequency with which she used the N-Word as well as apparent pleasure she seemed to be experiencing by saying it, some of her comments were more disturbing. Moreover, these comments should not be dismissed too quickly as the rantings of just one radio host because they reflect a great deal about contemporary understandings of race.

Before Dr. Laura ever pronounced the N-Word on her show she asked the caller to "give an example of a racist comment". She asked for this not to understand the story better or to empathize with the caller but because, according to Dr. Laura "some people are hypersensitive". This is important because it reflects an approach to racism that burdens the victim even more. Dr. Laura's approach, which unfortunately is not hers alone, suggests that if an African American person is experiencing racism, the appropriate response is not concern, but suspicion.

A few seconds later Schlessinger made a comment that is both baffling and disturbing, as well as something of a non-sequiter: "Without giving much thought, a lot of blacks voted for Obama simply because he was half black...It was a black thing." This was Dr. Laura's response to the caller being upset that white guests in her home seem obsessed with talking about what African Americans do and like. Leaving aside Schlessinger's use of the phrase "half black", a strange phrase to use in a country where apartheid was always enforced based on the [one drop rule](#), the comment bears closer scrutiny.

Many casual listeners would agree with the good doctor's assertions as Obama did very well with African American voters who, according to a racist way of thinking, couldn't possibly have voted for Obama based on his positions on the issues. The data, however, suggests that Obama's African American support was based on more than racial affinity. African American voters cast 95% of their votes for Obama, but this was consistent with [the support African Americans generally give to Democratic candidates, regardless of race](#). It was only a slight uptick from the 88% they cast for John Kerry in 2004 or the 90% they cast for Al Gore in 2000. The reason why African American support for Obama is relevant to a question about enduring racism in your own home is not clear, but the association between the two in the mind of Dr. Laura suggests her resentment runs pretty deep.

After these comments, Schlessinger noted that African Americans use the N-Word but that it is not all right for white people to use that same word. This may seem, in Schlessinger's words "very confusing", but to genuinely be confused by this one would have to have absolutely no understanding of context, intent, narrative or any of the other concepts that undergird human communication. Even without an understanding of any of that, a simpler notion that you shouldn't call people names they have made clear they don't like seemed to elude Schlessinger as well.

For many people, noting that the election of Barack Obama does not mean that racism is a thing of the past is so obvious that it borders on being pedantic. Dr. Laura's comment after her burst of using the N-Word, "we've got a black man as president and we've got more complaining about racism than ever. I think that's hilarious", indicates that this may not be so obvious for everybody. It cannot escape notice that the caller, seeking help for a difficult personal situation focused on specific incidents that have occurred in her home and the homes of her friends and family. The caller is obviously not the first person to have encountered racism of this kind. Dr. Laura, however, on two separate occasions in a brief conversation brings the discussion back to our African American president. The question the caller raised was personal, not political, but Schlessinger seemed to have a hard time keeping her distaste and resentment for the president under wraps. Given that her comments about President Obama are bracketed by liberal use of the N-Word, it is difficult to conclude that there is not a racial component to this.

Dr. Laura's later half apologized for her use of the N-Word, expressing regret for "losing the point I was trying to make." However, Schlessinger made her point all too clearly, touching on all the major talking points of the new racism: the real problem is that African Americans are over-sensitive; knowing whether or not it is okay to use the N-Word is "very confusing"; and African Americans should stop complaining because the President, for whom they mindlessly voted is African American.