

Racism in America: “It’s Not Polite to Say Nigger in Public....”

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“Racism, we are not cured of it. And, and, and it’s not just a matter of, uh, it [not being polite to say nigger](#) in public. That’s not the measure of whether racism still exists or not. It’s not just a matter of overt discrimination. Societies don’t, overnight, completely erase everything that happened two to three hundred years prior.” – President Obama, June 22, on Marc Maron podcast

This piece will end with a brief personal experience I had recently, an experience that illuminates what the President is saying and raises the question of whether it’s polite to say “nigger” in private. My experience underscores that what the President is saying is [obviously and profoundly true](#), and has been since long before he was born. And my recent experience illustrates the abiding armor of denial and determined ignorance that allows people to enjoy the advantages of a racist society without having to acknowledge that it exists.

An unintendedly brilliant example of [self-induced moral blindness](#) to racist behavior comes from [Pat Boone](#), the octogenarian multi-millionaire musician whose fortune was built on racist exploitation of black music in a racist music industry devoted to catering to America’s white racism. Boone’s fundamentalist Christian self-delusions about race appeared on WND (aka WorldNetDaily), self-described as “an independent news company dedicated to uncompromising journalism, seeking truth and justice and revitalizing the role of the free press as a guardian of liberty.”

According to Boone, it’s President Obama’s fault for not preaching that “racial divides and prejudice had greatly diminished and that our society was truly becoming colorblind.” Having said that, Boone provided a white racist analysis of the killing of two black children, Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, unarmed and shot by reckless white men. As for Charleston, where an avowed white racist killed nine black people in church in hope of starting a race war, Boone explains it away as having a “racist element,” but being “inspired by Satan”! While blaming Obama for “erasing” God from public life, Boone pleads for a return to America as a Christian nation – but he does not mention that American Christianity was a powerful defender of American slavery.

This mode of thinking, or rather this mode of avoiding real thought, is endemic to a large section of the American population and has been, in one form or another, since before there was a United States. How else do you get a Constitution in which slaves don’t get to vote, but do get counted as three-fifths of a person in order to inflate Congressional representation of slave owners? Orwell called it Doublethink in “1984,” but it’s a much older American tradition.

One form of denial is feigned shock that “Obama said the N-word!”

Assorted television babble-heads on CNN, NBC, MSNBC, CBS, Fox and elsewhere got all a-twitter over the President’s saying “nigger,” which they sanitized to “the N-word” with such characterizations as “extremely direct language” and “shock value” and “jarring comment” and “electric” and “one of the most charged racial slurs in the English language” – all of which are projections of the commentators’ subjectivity. They are not at all accurate descriptions of what the President said, which was detached, measured, analytical, and precisely accurate. But who wants to hear that on TV? As Wolf Blitzer put it [on CNN](#), “Many people may find this offensive.” CNN’s black legal analyst said the word should never be used. In sharp disagreement, CNN black [anchor Don Lemon](#) articulately defended adult conversation about difficult issues on television (for example, [on Democracy NOW](#)).

By paying attention only to the President’s use of the word “nigger” and not to his much broader context, television’s purveyors of conventional wisdom manage to deny the relevance of the President’s larger point: that racism has been endemic to American (and pre-American) culture for some 300 years, and that racist thinking remains alive and well in many forms. Focusing on the President’s use of “nigger” as an excuse not to talk about racism in America is, arguably, just another form of racism in America.

Larry Wilmore on [The Nightly Show](#) reduced the TV babble to its ultimate [Fox-accusing absurdity](#), President Obama saying “nigger” in a State of the Union speech. Wilmore also played clips of [other presidents saying “nigger,”](#) albeit in a less thoughtful way than Obama:

- Nixon: “Our niggers are better than their niggers”
- LBJ: “there’s more niggers voting there than white folks”

Wilmore also indicated that, while there’s apparently no record of presidents like Washington or Jefferson saying “nigger,” they did own one or more.

Another effect of all the empty blather about the President saying “nigger” is to distract from the empty gestures about various Confederate flags. American devotion to the Confederate flag is, literally, insane or dishonest or hypocritical, or all three, or pick your word. Why? All Confederate flags are symbols of treason against the United States of America, and somehow it’s OK to celebrate them and merchandise them and pretend they’re something they never were. The Confederacy committed treason as defined by the Constitution and too many people would do it all over again, for the same racist reasons.

What does one young South Carolinian tell us about America today?

So here’s the personal experience I mentioned. Over the weekend of June 20-21, I was at a family wedding in northern Maryland. The Sunday before Obama’s podcast became public, I was at a post-wedding cookout with maybe 20 people of various ages, many in their twenties. It was a definitely non-political social gathering.

One young man in his mid-twenties was there as the new beau of the bride’s sister. He was pleasant, attractive, well-spoken, polite, and had grown up in South Carolina. During our first conversation with several other people in the kitchen, David (not his real name) spoke enthusiastically of his work with horses and Brahma cattle. He described a roping gone wrong when he was forced to jump his horse over a fallen Brahma cow, whose horn scored

his horse's underbelly. He seemed comfortable and at ease as the conversation shifted from person to person. He gave no hint of any socially disruptive opinions or behavior. But he was drinking.

Some time later I wandered into a conversation David was having with the bride's mother on the screen porch. This conversation was already political. David was complaining about [Jon Stewart](#) on [The Daily Show](#) for calling out Charleston for having streets named after Civil War generals and otherwise ridiculing South Carolina's history. Stewart was about to start a race war, David argued, without mentioning Dylann Roof killing nine people. David said he was concerned about a race war because someone had already shot at the Confederate flag at the Capitol. David said we should just let history be history, and besides some people treated their slaves well.

By the time our hostess came into this conversation, David was talking about Obama being Kenyan and like that. Our hostess told him firmly not to talk like that in her house. When he didn't seem to get the point, I leaned in and suggested that maybe we should both be quiet. He admitted he'd been drinking, but throughout this conversation he remained polite, friendly, quiet, apparently sincere in beliefs he didn't seem to think anyone would find unusual. He came across as a basically sweet kid.

The last thing he said to me, before others took him swimming, he said with the same earnest pleasantness. He said, "I don't hate niggers."

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