



THE VIEW

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WE MAY NO LONGER AVOID THE RACE ISSUE

BY

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A disclaimer is not necessarily the best way to begin a conversation, but sometimes I am compelled to offer one as a means of foreshadowing the discussion of a difficult subject. One would have had to be out of touch with all of civilization to have missed at least one showing of a clip of Reverend Jeremiah Wright's animated sermon from the pulpit of Barack Obama's Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. There is no condoning this eardrum assaulting language used from the pulpit. That is not the purpose here, nor is it the goal, to heap any more condemnation on Reverend Wright for making these unfortunate remarks. Rather it is hoped that we may take a moment to reflect on the context of these remarks and that we give due consideration to the prying open of the previously airtight seal on the vault containing our race based artifacts.

We have reached the point where the open and frank discussion of the racial divide in this country is unavoidable. The old cliché that the "genie has been let out of the bottle" is certainly appropriate to describe this current situation. For decades we have avoided dissecting the emotions that both whites and blacks felt since the passing of the bad ole Jim Crow days. Such avoidance of a decidedly unpleasant topic was accomplished because it was the polite thing to do. Race as a social and political issue has not disappeared, but has been hidden behind a veil of concern that since the remaining issues could not be easily solved why discuss it at all? Many have perhaps mistaken silence for acceptance of that all has been forgiven and forgotten by offender and offended alike. Events of the current presidential campaign have now forced the issue.

Reverend Wright's words have simply brought into the sunlight feelings that may not have been as uncommon as we think. The fact that a church was the setting may not be as important as the sentiment behind what was said. There are two factors that all of us over the age of 55 and who are products of the South should recall. First, the indignities that were visited on African-Americans in the South up until the end of the 1970's were numerous, and the memories of them are still painful to those on the receiving end and now even to those on the giving end. Water fountains and waiting rooms labeled "Whites Only" and "Colored" were only small reminders. Signs in restaurant windows stating in graphic terms who would not be served were the written version of insults routinely served up verbally. Most of these warnings carried the force of law all across the South, but the customs and rituals that were a part of "knowing one's place" were equally as effective. Secondly, there was one place that became a sanctuary, literally and figuratively, where African-Americans could gather and share their experiences and express hopes that a new day would come. The black church was a haven where not only salvation was discussed, but it was also a place where testimonies of injustices were voiced and political strategies were formulated. No doubt the voices uttered in many of these settings were tinged with anger. News of the bombing or burning of black churches was common place.

While the energetic sermon by Reverend Jeremiah Wright and the unfortunate words that he used proved to be a shock to many, as did the affirming response of many in his congregation, the event can't be discounted as simply a singular happening tied to one preacher who happens to be Barack Obama's pastor. Rather these sermons and Barack Obama's subsequent explanation of the context in which they were given kicked open the door to a dark room that many of us felt if it stayed locked long enough we may forget it was there at all. The problem is that race has been slyly used as a wedge issue in this campaign and many other recent ones. Perhaps it was inevitable that something like this would happen that would make the issue of race, the lingering anger from another day, and the frank explanations of why many feel as they do the major topic of discussion during this historic campaign. It may indeed be time to clear the air and it is perhaps altogether fitting that the discussion was started from the sanctuary of a church during the "most segregated hour of the week".

Now that we have commenced the dialogue we should use this opportunity to thoroughly discuss these issues. Those who wish to keep the discussion alive merely for political advantage may be foolish in continuing to pursue this old and now transparent strategy. Like Reverend Wright we have all spoken words



in haste and in anger. The words of Barack Obama and his pastor may be of some use if they help us realize whether the reasons for that anger have been totally eliminated. If not, then perhaps their utility is in letting us know how much farther we have to go. At least the events of recent days will enable us to speak frankly about race and for many of us this may be the first time.

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