

Downside UP

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It's Not Just About Race

In photo after photo, their eyes are actually buggy. They are cartoons of themselves. In the worst cases, they are talking about killing the President of the United States. Idaho is not alone for having people like gubernatorial candidate Rex Rammell "joking" about taking out a permit to kill Obama, adding that, "Anyone who understands the law, knows I was just joking, because Idaho has no jurisdiction to issue hunting tags in Washington, D.C."

The hatred is visceral and scary. It runs deep throughout the country, especially in rural areas and the South. It is about race and it is racism but it is not just that. It is about the power of stereotypes and people feeling left behind in a country whose racial and ethnic mixture as well as its social and cultural mores have changed radically since the 1960's. It is about a Corporate America which links itself with the hatred to fight corporate taxes and corporate regulation while at the same time exporting working class industrial jobs abroad, marketing to the new groups, and hiring better educated women and minorities into jobs the less educated working class can't get.

Ultimately, the hatred is also about me and people like me whom the haters hate as much as the gays and the Hispanics. It is the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement in redux. We are the well-educated and upper middle class whites who marched at Selma. We are the universities who have recruited minorities into the ruling elite. We are the ones who would kill a job to save a tree. We are the degraders of moral values who decided it was ok to be gay even before our daughters told us they were gay.

Haters and the Hated

Thus there are two groups of hated: On the one hand, all varieties of racial upstarts, sexual perverts, and hard-working immigrants. On the other hand, the people who have allowed, indeed supported, the rise of the formerly outcast. And there are two groups of haters: (1) those from the bottom of the white lower middle and working classes whose only basis for social standing has been their superiority to immigrants and people of color. (Homosexuals were beyond the pale.) (2) those from the upper middle and upper classes who see themselves as beaten out for executive and professional positions formerly reserved for their class.

Southern politics has been based forever on an alliance between planters and other wealthy classes on the one hand and poor whites on the other, all against the blacks. However thoroughly the wealthy white upper classes might exploit poor whites, poor whites always knew they were better than the slaves/niggers/blacks. Literacy requirements in the post-Civil War South for decades excluded many whites as well as blacks from voting. The Populist Movement began with black-white farmer

alliances against the wealthy classes in the late 19th century but fell apart in the face of upper class race-baiting.

So also were Mexicans disenfranchised and reduced to second class citizenship throughout the southwest after the Mexican-American War. And even the dullest wit knows that white European culture as represented by the United States stole almost all its land from the Indians. In fact, genocide, not only cultural but often physical, was a conscious and explicit policy of American states and the federal government well into the 20th century.

Because all this exploitation was undergirded by stereotypes of the lazy Mexican, the dirty Negro, and the dishonest Indian, there was no room for the truth that the primary targets of violence were not the dirty, the lazy, and the dishonest but precisely the opposite: the small business person who pulled himself up by his bootstraps, the sharecropper's son who saved enough at odd jobs to buy his own land, the housemaid's daughter who learned to read or actually got a college education.

Thus does both the upper and lower class person who feels left behind look around and think, "I should have had that job at Reed, Jones, and Simanski." "I [or my husband] should have gotten the foreman's job at the Nissan factory." These men and women, but especially men, see themselves as victims of racial, ethnic, and sexual discrimination. No matter that a disproportionate percentage of the people at the bottom of the economic scale are still minorities.

Affirmative Action Upside Down

This is the point at which "affirmative action" has become the shibboleth of those from both the upper and lower classes who hate what their country has become. And the irony of it all is that in both cases, it is not that they have been discriminated against in favor of some minority or immigrant but that they have lost their own long-standing privilege of "affirmative action for white people."

Where I come from, the Boston area, there is a reason why the Irish came to dominate the police department, the Italians the construction industries, and Anglos the corporate hierarchy. Each hired their own. Even more, they hired their own family. Prior connection was how you got into all the skilled trade unions and even industrial unions. Similarly, all the "best" private schools accepted the sons and daughters of alumni without question. The graduates in turn went on to the "best" colleges and if not into the family firm or company, into another to which they were connected by school, family, neighborhood, summer place, or club. Even if you didn't go to Amherst, Harvard would do!

That's "affirmative action," and, as Lyndon Johnson said, you don't change it by just announcing that now the rules have changed and everybody is going to be treated equally. You have to seek out a diversity of people who are qualified and if they are not there, make sure that you start educating them to be qualified.

Flaggers at road construction sites have become a highly visible button setting off hostility to affirmative action. The flagger is the bottom of the heap, entry level position for road construction. There, if anywhere, is the woman, the African American, the immigrant, the Hispanic – or here in Northeastern Oregon, the Indian. "Affirmative Action" passes through white people's minds then as surely as it does in

factories, offices, and stores around the country. "These people" are everywhere; you can hardly go anywhere in the United States without seeing hundreds of them.

Duh! That's what entry level is about; it's where you begin when you have minimal qualifications. What did the flagger job mean when it was some white guy? Now it's a big deal. It doesn't have to be a specific job someone applied for and was filled by one of "them." It's a whole psychology more like "I could have had a better career, a better life" and it boils over not just in the white working class but the white upper class. The enemy becomes not just affirmative action but everything they see "liberal" government doing to undermine their world: taxes, environmental regulations, civil rights – and, apparently, even the prospect of universal health insurance.

At least the working class, to a considerable extent, is a real victim: most of the industries in which their jobs were passed down generation to generation have disappeared. The aggrieved of the upper class, on the other hand, are simply oblivious to their own head start. They didn't get the job to which they were entitled even with the best schools, family subsidies for living without a job, and job opportunities not available to ordinary folks. And that implies they were not only less qualified, they were so much less qualified that even their privileges couldn't overcome the gap.

Stereotypes in Tatters

It was one thing when African Americans became powerful forces in sports and music. Those are OK activities for black people. I'm serious about this! There is a reason why African Americans first got a fair chance to crack the racial barrier in sports and music: the happy slave singing while he works is a hallowed image of our culture. *Gone with the Wind* and all that. White people, even if they didn't like it, could accept that Negroes might be as good as whites in physical strength and music, sports and dancing.

But brains? African American professors at Harvard! Supreme Court justices. Those Asians are one thing; they're smart and work hard (its own stereotype). But African Americans, Indians, and Hispanics? Their success crushes all the stereotypes; their mere existence in positions of power and influence is an affront to "white America," "our America," the country that privileged "us."

Now the evidence of many white Americans' failure, of their losing place in American society, is there for all to see in the highest office in the land. A black -- a foreigner, and a Muslim no less! You don't know whom to hate more: him or the country club set, the lawyers, the universities, and the college professors who made him possible. For those of the upper class left behind, the irony is almost tragedy: the hatred is self-hatred. The Obamas – Columbia, Princeton, Harvard Law – are in and you are out, betrayed by your own kind.

Today, the people who most "hate America" are the ones who claim most to love it. For me, their America is long dead. Thank goodness and good riddance. I love our country as it is becoming: diverse, open, and interesting. For all the apparent failure of Obama's Government to pass nation-changing legislation, the country is going to go right on changing.