

Racists Don't Like Being Called Racists

Written by Julian Bond
Wednesday, 22 May 2013 00:00



I have always suspected that racists didn't like being called out for their racism. Now I have proof.

When I told MSNBC's Thomas Roberts on May 14th that the Tea Party was "the Taliban wing of American politics," a firestorm erupted.

Arguing the IRS was correct to target them for extra scrutiny, I also said, "Here are a group of people who are admittedly racist, who are overtly political" and therefore worthy of IRS concern.

I was not prepared for the slew of angry emails, including two from self-identified Black people (your worst nightmare, one said) I received.

Many of them suggested I leave the country, reminiscent of the "Go back to Africa" chants racist crowds of Whites shouted at Black protestors in my youth.

One said my advanced age – I am 73 – meant I would not be around to make such mischief much longer, and I should prepare for that quick eventuality.

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A few suggested my employer fire me, not knowing that I retired from that job a year ago. Several of the messages were poorly written with misspelled words, including one from a relative by marriage – you can't choose your in-laws – reading "Your calling folks Talabans borders on Traitorism."

This same correspondent noted I had been "head of the most classic Racist group in our country," referring to the NAACP, whose board I chaired for eleven years. Others characterized the NAACP, the nation's oldest civil rights group, interracial in membership and dedicated to racial integration since 1909, in the same way.

After an exchange of messages with some of them, trying to convince them that while I opposed it, I didn't condemn every member of the Tea Party, the interactions became more civil and less hostile. Some even wished me well.

But to a person they rejected the labels "racism" and "racist," even as I thought I had proved that the Tea Party has had racist, anti-Semitic and nativist elements from its beginning until today.

One source is a study conducted for the NAACP by the Institute for Research and Education for Human Rights.

Their study, called "Tea Party Nationalism," found "Tea Party ranks to be permeated with concerns about race and national identity and other so-called social issues. In these ranks, an abiding obsession with Barack Obama's birth certificate is often a stand-in for the belief that the first black president of the United States is not a "real American."

It says Tea Party organizations have given platforms to anti-Semites, racists and bigots and "hard-core white nationalists have been attracted" to Tea Party protests.

The link between the Tea Party and the Taliban was made by a prominent Republican office holder.

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In 2008, the Washington Post reported that former Chairman of the Republican Congressional Committee and present day Congressman Pete Sessions likened the GOP House minority to the Taliban, saying, "Insurgency, we understand perhaps a bit more because of the Taliban."

Just as my arguments failed to convince my correspondents, so apparently does the actual evidence: Not the ugly racist signs and placards displayed at Tea Party rallies, not the shouts of the "n" word aimed at members of the Congressional Black Caucus, not the spittle hurled at civil rights icon and Congressman John Lewis, not the racists expelled from the Tea Party for their venom, not the association of many members with the Council of Conservative Citizens, a lineal descendant of the White Citizen Council, not the anti-gay slurs aimed at former Congressman Barney Frank, not the members whose racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia should be an embarrassment – not all or any of this could get them to acknowledge the label "racist."

My Black correspondents even claimed that their race prohibited them from being racists, as if skin color was a proscription against ignorance. And many of my presumably non-Black correspondents accused me of being a racist, so my race apparently offered me no protection from this evil.

What is the lesson here?

That the label "racist" has become so toxic that almost everyone rejects it? That the toxicity makes the label unacceptable but its actual practice is still tolerable for many?

Or that it is a defense against itself? As the relative-I-try-not-to-claim wrote, "I don't know any White people who hate Blacks like you advocate Blacks should hate whites."

Or only that while the United States has made much progress in race relations, we still have a long, long way to go?

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