

Dueling 'racist' claims defuse once powerful word



By JESSE WASHINGTON, AP National Writer - Friday, September 18

Everybody's racist, it seems.

Republican Rep. Joe Wilson? Racist, because he shouted "You lie!" at the first black president. Health care protesters, affirmative action supporters? Racist. And Barack Obama? He's the "Racist in Chief," wrote a leader of the recent conservative protest in Washington.

But if everybody's racist, is anyone?

The word is being sprayed in all directions, creating a hall of mirrors that is draining the scarlet R of its meaning and its power, turning it into more of a spitball than a stigma.

"It gets to the point where we don't have a word that we use to call people racist who actually are," said John McWhorter, who studies race and language at the conservative Manhattan Institute.

"The more abstract and the more abusive we get in the way we use the words, then the harder it is to talk about what we originally meant by those terms," he said.

What the word once meant _ and still does in Webster's dictionary _ is someone who believes in the inherent superiority of a particular race or is prejudiced against others.

This definition was ammunition for the civil rights movement, which 50 years ago used a strategy of confronting racism to build moral leverage and obtain equal rights.

Overt bigotry waned, but many still see shadows of prejudice across the landscape and cry racism. Obama's spokesman has rejected suggestions that racism is behind criticism of the president, but others saw Wilson's eruption during the presidents' speech as just that.

"I think (Wilson's outburst) is based on racism," former President Jimmy Carter said at a town hall meeting. "There is an inherent feeling among many in this country that an African-American should not be president."

That's an easy charge to make against the rare individual carrying an "Obamacare" sign depicting the president as an African witch doctor with a bone through his nose. But it's almost impossible to prove _ or refute _ assertions that bias, and not raw politics, fuels opposition to Obama.

"You have to be very careful about going down that road. You've cried wolf," said Sean Wilentz, a Princeton University professor who studies U.S. political and social history.

"It's a way of interpreting the world, where race runs through everything _ everything is about race," said Wilentz, who supported Hillary Clinton in 2008 and claimed Obama's campaign falsely accused her of stoking racial fears.

"Everything is not about race," he said. "It's not Mississippi in 1965 any more. Even in Mississippi it's not Mississippi in 1965 any more."

Still, race remains a major factor in American life, said Brian D. Smedley, director of the health policy institute at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, which focuses on people of color.

"We know from a large body of social science that a large portion of Americans harbor racial bias," Smedley said. "In the context of health reform, it's quite evident that race plays a very large role in helping shape public opinion."

Yet Smedley chooses not to deploy the R-word: "It's difficult to say racism is the reason (for objections to health care) because people don't believe they are racist."

Many, though, have no doubt that other people are racist _ even when those other people are black.

The Manhattan Institute's McWhorter said that during the affirmative action battles of the 1990s, "racism" and "racist" began to be applied to liberal policies designed to redress past discrimination, then were extended to people who believed in those policies.

That's how they have come to be wielded against Obama.

"A racist is a person who discriminates or holds prejudices based on race. Discrimination is treatment based on category rather than individual merit," said Tom Molloy, a 65-year-old retired financial services executive from Brentwood, N.H. Barack Obama favors policies that will give preference to groups based on race rather than individual merit. It's called affirmative action.

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Mark Williams, one of the leaders of the Sept. 12 rallies in Washington D.C., headlined a blog entry about the arrest of black scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. at his own home by a white police officer, "Racist In Chief Obama Fanning Flames of Racism." And too many bloggers to count are saying that Congressman Jim Clyburn, who marched with Martin Luther King Jr. and has called Wilson and other health care protesters racist, is the real racist himself.

This infinite loop is the inevitable result of years of black identity politics, which created a blueprint for whites who feel threatened by America's changing demographics, says Carol Swain, a Vanderbilt University professor and author of "The New White Nationalism In America."

"We need to rethink what is racist and who can legitimately call whom racist," Swain said, citing the argument that blacks can't be racist because racism requires power.

"With a black president, a black attorney general, and blacks holding various power positions around the country, now might be a time when we can concede that anyone can express attitudes and actions that others can justifiably characterize as racist."

Perhaps this is even a strange symbol of racial progress _ equal-opportunity victimization, so to speak.

"In 100 years, when people chronicle how America got past race," said McWhorter, "the uptick in white people calling blacks racist is going to be seen as a symptom of the end."

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