



COMMENTARY

Racism is alive and well

By [V.B. Price](#) 9/16/09 5:00 AM



I remember hearing people saying after President Obama's election "There is no racism in America anymore." But as we've seen repeatedly since the beginning of the year, and especially last week in the anti-health care march in Washington, the exact opposite is the case.

Some people at that rally were openly using the "N-word" in a association with the President of the United States as if it were somehow acceptable and not despicable. Expressions of Antisemitism were heard at that rally too.

Those aren't just a few crazy people. Politics in America has become so hateful and intellectually violent that bigoted people have been given permission to scream the vilest words of racial derision as if all of America were the 1950s Jim Crow South.

A white legislator from a southern state actually insulted the President during a speech to Congress, calling him a liar. If President Obama weren't African American, do you think that would ever have happened? I do not. If President Obama were as white as Ronald Reagan, do you think the far-right would have dared claim that he was planning to fill the heads of school children with socialist propaganda instead—of giving them an uplifting pep talk about hard work and study on the opening day of school?

If "reverse racism" is used to attack "affirmative action" and counter charges of racial and ethnic hatred, then surely you can't have reverse racism if racism itself doesn't exist.

Racism has been a brutal reality in our country since the beginning. But racism is not only a matter of terrorist violence, flagrant intimidation and grotesque hate speech. It has its covert and all pervasive aspects as well.

Even in the relatively prosperous 1980s and 1990s, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, for instance, routinely discriminated against Hispanics, African Americans, and women when it came extending credit and financial advice to small farmers and ranchers through the Farm Service Agency. No one ever hears about that, but it had a devastating financial impact on the family farm, and on hardworking Americans who suffered economic injustices because of their ethnicity and gender.

In the class-action suit *Guadalupe L. Garcia v. Tom Vilsack*, claimants contend that the USDA violated the Equal Credit Opportunity Act. According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the USDA had “a long, sordid and well-documented history of discrimination against minorities in connection with farm credit and benefits programs.” Garcia claimants hold that in the 1980s the “USDA secretly dismantled its apparatus for civil rights enforcement. As a result, for approximately 15 years, minority farmers who complained of discrimination” in lending practices, “found their complaints relegated to a bureaucratic black hole.”

The discrimination was so blatant that African American farmers in a nearly identical suit to *Garcia v. Vilsack* known as *Pigford v. Glickman* won a settlement from the government to the tune of almost \$2.5 billion. But no such settlement has yet been reached for Hispanic farmers and ranchers.

Politicians from New Mexico and Colorado, including New Mexico Congressmen Ben Ray Lujan and Martin Heinrich, and Senator Tom Udall and his cousin Mark Udall from Colorado, have joined many others in signing a letter urging President Obama to settle the Garcia suit expeditiously.

In Garcia’s class action, more than 82,000 Hispanic farmers could be affected, more than 90 percent of them owning small family farms. This includes the 8,073 Hispanic farmers in our state, most of whom form the backbone of local agriculture in northern New Mexico.

Guadalupe Garcia, himself, was repeatedly denied operating loans, despite a positive cash flow and good collateral. Farms are small businesses. Without the operating capital to hold him over through the farming cycle, Garcia was forced to give up his farm in 1999.

One can hear the rumblings already about “affirmative action lending,” and “reverse racism.” But some groups did get financial aid and credit from the USDA. If it wasn’t African American, Hispanic, or women farmers, who was it?

Covert racial bias as represented in both *Pigford* and *Garcia* give us a clue as to what lies beneath all manner of governmental, financial, and corporate bureaucracies—a hard-to-detect red lining depriving certain people of needed capital and services, and rewarding others for the color

of their skin. It's a painful irony, indeed, to realize that, while financial institutions were inducing all kinds of Americans to take out large, unpayable loans on housing to create the illusion of home ownership and Reaganesque prosperity, hard working small farmers were denied loans because of their race. That's sickening.

Covert racism takes many forms. If we looked hard, I imagine we'd find hundreds if not thousands of cases in which civil rights and equal opportunity legislation was ignored or violated.

Some say racism is all in the eye of the beholder. But when people use racial jokes, racial taunts, and the winks and smirks of rudeness and disrespect, when people resort to the most rancid rhetoric imaginable, it becomes clear that racism is still our national sin, despite all the good work that's been done to deprive it of energy and kill it off.

Some may not see it this way, but racism in New Mexico is still working its sordid and terrible way through our lives. In the not too distant past, the state's two most prominent Hispanic legislators, both Democrats, one the Speaker of the House and the other the President Pro Tem of the Senate were subjected to endless harassment, racial jokes and slurs, and savage accusations by their political opponents. After a decade of such treatment, they were effectively driven from office.

The Republican U.S. Attorney here in the mid 1980's spent four years harassing Democratic Governor Toney Anaya, trying to get something on him, to no avail.

Mention bilingual education in bilingual New Mexico and you'll often hear people say that monolingual persons who only speak English are somehow better educated than multilingual people who speak both Spanish and English.

Racism simmers along doing its covert damage for years. Small human rights and equal opportunity victories are recorded, but can really do nothing get at the core infection.

And then suddenly bigotry rises up out of the slime and makes itself embarrassingly and detestably apparent again. We are in such a time. The hardest thing for people of good will to bear – people on both the left and the right, of all parties, and of all races, ethnicities, and genders – is their awareness of the deep rooted realities of prejudice and discrimination, their knowledge of the terrible harm it does, and their impotence to do anything to end it in America.