

## America's racial temperature rising, experts say agitators must speak peace

Written by Hazel Trice Edney NNPA Editor-in-Chief  
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) - U. S. Rep. John Lewis (D-GA) was headed for the Capitol to vote on President Obama's health care bill in March when he was pelted with racial epithets when passing near a group of conservative Tea Party protestors.

Days later, reports of attacks on Democrats around the country included bricks smashing through windows and a potentially lethal gas pipe cutting at a home thought to be owned by Virginia Democratic Congressman Tom Perriello. According to reports, the FBI announced the agency would investigate Tea Partiers and a race hate group as potential suspects.

The madness continued into the spring as former Alaska governor, Sarah Palin, and others accused the Obama administration of trying to kill the elderly with death panels in the health care bill. He has also been called a Marxist, a Socialist and a Nazi by Tea partiers and associated radical conservatives.

Meanwhile, also, in March, Virginia's Republican Gov. Bob McDonnell is roundly criticized by the state's NAACP after he declares a Confederate History Month while neglecting to mention the cruelty and inhumanity of slavery – a deed for which he apologized.

Among more recent racial flare ups, Arizona passed legislation that appears to unleash racial profiling on Latinos or anyone who police might perceive as an illegal immigrant; then the state of Texas passed a law to distribute history books with a conservative bent that presents slave-owning confederates as heroes.

Finally, the Obamas' oldest daughter, 11-year-old Malia, becomes the target of mocking by a conservative talk show host after the president quotes her as asking if he had "plugged the hole" in the BP oil crisis. The mocker, Fox News' Glenn Beck, ultimately apologized.

But are apologies enough to calm the apparent smoldering atmosphere of racism that has intensified since the election of President Barack Obama? Both Black and White authorities on racial hatred say what's really needed is a voice of reason within the Republican Party.

"The reality is that the people who could really tamp this down are not doing so," says Mark Potok, spokesman for the Birmingham-based Southern Poverty Law Center, a foremost authority on race hate incidents around the country. "There are large numbers of Republican officials, so-called responsible leaders of the party, who are doing absolutely nothing to tamp down the outright falsehoods, the defamatory propaganda that's being pumped out into the political mainstream."

Potok, Jack Levin, director of the Brudnick Center on Violence and Conflict at Northeastern University in Boston, MA, and civil rights icon the Rev. Joseph Lowery all agreed on mainly two things in interviews with the NNPA News Service. One – that racial tension in America has grown since the election of President Obama. And two – that it could be quelled by a voice of reason rising from the Republican Party.

"Most White people who are on the adverse side of this question would not admit it, but absolutely, much of this is due to the fact that they simply can not accept the fact that we have a

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Black leader in this country,” said Lowery. “Without the Black president, we wouldn’t have all this heavy tension and lightening rod activity that’s driving us further and further apart.”

A civil rights stalwart who co-founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Lowery knows what it takes to quiet the currently smoldering atmosphere that he says he has not seen since the 1960s. He says it takes a person who is respected by the aggressors to rise up and call for peace.

Potok agrees, but says at this point, it will be difficult to quell the political, race and anti-government tensions.

“This genie may be very difficult to get back into the bottle. It would have been a hell of a lot better if some of the more ostensibly main stream figures in our society had said something about this long ago. Now we’re actually seeing people driving airplanes into IRS buildings and murdering Pentagon police officers and leaving coffins on the lawns of congressmen.”

Levin of the Brudnick Center, agrees with Lowery that the reason the racial temperature is out of control and will likely continue to surge is simple:

“It is the Obama factor. It is a big factor. Having an African-American as president has brought out the worse in some White Americans and it’s brought out the best in others ... There are many Whites who voted for Obama, who continue to praise him, who think he’s a great president, but then there’s the other side of the coin. The problem is that it is a small but growing number of extremists who are concerned about foreign influence and they see Obama as a Marxist, a Socialist, they question whether he was born in the United States. They see him as attempting to destroy our country. And these are the same folks who are likely to join some White supremacist group or civilian militia organization. They are so concerned about what they see as an erosion of American culture and the American economy and they blame the Black guy who holds the most powerful office in the world.”

Potok says most of the political angst is really not coming from organized militias.

“I don’t think these are organized hate groups. These are more or less every day citizens who are very fearful of the way the world is changing around them and who have been whipped up in a kind of white hot anger,” he describes. “Rather than seeing the changes in the world around us, the kind of globalization of the economy, the increasing diversity of our society and other societies as something that is simply occurring in the course of history, they are demonizing certain groups and saying they are responsible for these things. So that is the problem. It is the identifying of phantom enemies and whipping up the broad masses into a fury about it.”

The name-calling and labeling of President Obama as Marxist, Socialist, etc., have been among the worse offenses, said Potok.

“These things are all utter falsehoods and yet the people in responsible positions of the party have done almost nothing to play this down and in fact have played it up,” he said.

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The current frenzy has roots in 9-11, Levin points out.

“The war on terror is part of it. Certainly 9-11 made lots of Americans of any race feel uncomfortable or more insecure about their personal safety. But that’s a small part of the whole thing,” Levin said. “Immigrants of color come into this country from Latin American countries and other parts of the world as well. And whenever the economy goes sour, the immigrants get blamed. That’s part of it.”

In America’s history of racial strife, there have rarely been instances in which White leaders actually take the responsibility to speak against wrongs unless pressed to do so. Such was the case with President Lyndon B. Johnson as he called for the passage of the Voting Rights Act, declaring “We shall overcome” after the 1965 “Bloody Sunday” attacks on civil rights protestors in Selma.

But, Johnson was considered to be a friend of racial equality. It is even rarer when a foe rises up and speaks with a changed heart.

Levin concluded, “It would be wonderful if someone who has a reputation for extremism or racism would take the other side and would come out for tolerance and respect.”