

THE MANCHURIAN VOTER
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Everyone is asking the question, “With the economy tanking, with an unpopular Republican president, with an endless war in Iraq, and with 11 million more Democrats registered than Republicans, why isn’t Obama further ahead in the polls?” All the answers I have heard so far ignore the real issue.

People who do not think themselves racist still may be.

The label “racist” is so noxious to our collective consciousness that we will do anything to deny it in ourselves. It conjures up shameful ideas of rednecks, pick-up trucks, ropes, and lynching. There are some people who are comfortable with their overt racism. But for most of us, to see ourselves as “racist” is abhorrent. It defies our sense of who we are as human beings; it offends our sense of decency and justice. So, rather than look inward at this unacceptable and hated part of ourselves, we simply deny its existence.

Throughout this campaign season, I have heard otherwise rational, intelligent people express sentiments which they would never consider racist. Yet, they have “doubts” about Obama’s religious affiliations. They do not “trust” him. It is easy to dismiss them as people who would never have voted for a Democrat anyway. I disagree. Because there is a sly, subtle, insidious racism that may well play a role in this presidential election.

Obama is not the “Manchurian Candidate.” Rather, ours has become a nation of “Manchurian Voters” whose secret switches are flipped by Rovian Republican tactics. How does this work?

In his book, “Transforming Narcissism,” Frank Lachmann cites a study done in the 1950’s. Volunteers were given multiple sets of five words each and told to write sentences using only four of the five words. Embedded in these sets were “elderly

priming” words such as “Florida,” “old,” and “lonely.” After completing the study, and unbeknownst to them, participants were timed as they walked from the classroom to the elevator. Compared to the control group, students in the “elderly priming” group walked significantly slower. Researchers concluded that those who were “primed” behaved in a way that was consistent with the “activated stereotypic image.” All of this occurred outside the students’ conscious awareness.

There are parallels to be drawn in this presidential election. Voters are being “primed” to behave in ways that accord with their latent, biased attitudes. Daily, voters are pummeled with emails, push polls, and attack ads filled with “priming” words like “Muslim,” “ Hamas,” “Koran,” “uppity” and “that guy.”

In fact, Jewish voters in New Jersey received calls from push pollsters asking, “If you knew that Obama met with Hamas or gave money to the PLO, would that change your mind about him?” Pollsters never said Obama actually did those things. But the intent is to trigger our fears and our racism and to influence us to behave in accordance with our prejudices. Recall that those same Rovian push-poll tactics destroyed John McCain’s candidacy in South Carolina in 2000. It worked then and it is working now.

New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristoff, in his September 21, 2008 piece, reported that “one third” of voters either “know” or “believe” that Obama is a Muslim. And those numbers are rising.

It is true that, in terms of racial attitudes, our country has progressed. But there is more work to do. Given our nation’s history of anti-immigrant sentiment and slavery, it is impossible to have grown up in this country and not carry some degree of internalized racism. Who among us has not crossed the street when approached by young black men? Who among us has not, when idling at a street corner, locked our car doors when we see a black man approach?

Identification is the basis of tribal formations. We are more comfortable with people who are like us than those who are not. Differences can feel threatening. Uncertainty can stir anxieties within us.

Given how close this election is, I suspect it will be decided by how many “Manchurian Voters” these Rovian tactics will actually activate. So what can we do?

First, don’t be fooled or distracted by these “priming” methods. We must understand what their function is and expose them to the light of day. For example, those Jewish voters in New Jersey made note of the questions posed to them and contacted friends and others in the media so voters would not be tricked.

Second, and this will not be easy, we must challenge not only our own beliefs, but also those of our friends and family. If we hear someone giving voice to racist sentiments, we must intervene and name the “elephant in the room.” This may take some courage, especially if we come from a family who does not welcome dissent. We may get negative reactions. But know that those responses are intended to shut you up, so don’t let them. Please don’t let anyone convince you that it is wrong to call someone out on their racism.

For too long, Americans have been cautioned not to speak of politics and religion in polite company. Now the time has come for us to deep-six that notion. With all that is at stake in this election for our nation and the world, we are obliged to speak up and speak out on behalf of the nobler ideals of our country. We need to shine a light on these racist, Rovian tactics. Failure to do so makes us complicit.

Remember: Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.

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