

The Harbour League



RACISM REVISITED

By Herbert I. London

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Former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani is quoted recently as noting that the election of Barack Obama will make the United States "an honest nation and not a hypocritical one." He went on to note that

Even those who voted against him, like me, say "We're very thankful this has happened. This is the consolation prize. In having lost in terms of the ideology we wanted, or the person we wanted – John McCain – the benefit that we got was an America that can say to the world we've overcome the worst thing in our history.'

If you look at America which I believe is a great nation, a beautiful nation, a nation of altruistic goals and very often great altruistic accomplishments – one of the terrible marks against us is slavery and racism, and I think that's a great thing for America to have overcome.

And I believe that will gain us a tremendous amount in the world community. We can now be an honest nation and not a hypocritical one.

As I see it this comment is representative of a stripe of conventional opinion. Presumably the issue of race is now behind us. How can people criticize America on this score when its people elected a person of color.

While I understand the sentiment; I don't understand the logic. Michele Obama once noted she didn't have any pride in America until now, the moment her husband was nominated for president. In a sense, Mayor Giuliani is in agreement for at last we can "overcome the worst thing in our history." Remarkably this comment is devoid of historical texture.

Barack Obama may be the first black president, but he is not the first black to serve in public life. After all Virginia, the seat of the Confederacy, elected a governor who was the grandchild of slaves. The 13th and 14th Amendments were designed specifically to provide rights to blacks emancipated during the Civil War. American forces were integrated during World War II. The color barrier in major league baseball was eliminated in 1947.

While racism was not eliminated, in fact cannot be eliminated through fiat, the United States has been a remarkable racial laboratory for a century, even though these accomplishments have often been ignored, very often, of course, by those who might benefit most from pretending the accomplishments didn't exist.

It is remarkable that this society bent over backwards to address racism by emphasizing race as a source of privilege with affirmative action programs for university admission and job applications. Sure, slavery, using contemporary standards, was an abomination, but that along with hideous Jim Crow laws were eliminated long before Barack Obama was born.

If one were to take the Giuliani argument at face value, strides against slavery and racism weren't meaningful until the Obama election as president.

This statement, perhaps inadvertently, is yet another example of reflexive American defensiveness. Americans are so inured to criticism that they accept without response the claims made against this nation. Yes, America is an imperfect nation, but with all its blemishes it has done more to establish equality among the races than any place on the globe.

Consider Africa itself where tribal warfare, race hatred and religious intolerance are rampant. Consider Europeans, who often point fingers patronizing the United States, yet discriminating in wholesale fashion against Laplanders, Moroccans and Turks.

Recently a French friend said, "At long last America overcame racism and elected a black man." My response: "Please let me know when the French will elect an Algerian president."

We have been cowed into submission by the continual drum beat of guilt. And even Giuliani, who should know better, has fallen into the ideological trap. Having made mistakes, doesn't mean we should feel guilty about our past. I think we should hail the Chief of State and our President Elect Obama, but he is not the messiah; he did not end racist thought and he isn't the first example of the American spirit for fair play.

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Lexington Books, 2001) and ***America's Secular Challenge: The Rise of a New National Religion*** (Encounter Books, 2008). London maintains a website, www.herblondon.org.