

An ambiguous man

By Casey Lartigue, Jr.
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I should expect it, but I occasionally get blind-sided in political discussions: A critic will bring up my race.

I'm not saying that race is always irrelevant, but I reject it as a legitimate point in discussions about economic policy or North Korea. In most cases, the people who bring up my race in non-racial discussions are progressives (and usually white, although some blacks join in).

It first happened to me in print back in the 1990s when a columnist wrote a three-part series denouncing me as a sellout in response to a commentary I wrote about excessive government spending.

Based on my interactions, self-identified libertarians and conservatives will typically ask: "What was said?" Self-identified liberals and progressives will typically ask: "Who said it?"

That is, who is the speaker? Who supports her? Is there a corporation/foundation/chaebol in his background? The dancer's background gets more analyzed than the actual dance.

I rarely got such attacks when I was a college student engaged in numerous activities. I was a member of American Indians at Harvard, The Black Students Association, The Objectivist Club of Harvard, the Society of Black Professional Entrepreneurs at the Harvard Law School, the "Harvard Crimson," Harvard Democrats, and Harvard Republicans. I was a regular at debates, discussions and regularly audited classes all six years I was at Harvard.

I left Harvard, but Harvard hasn't left me. I enjoyed going across different groups and ideologies, learning, but not choosing a side, label or political party. To this day, I rarely vote, sign petitions, or affiliate with a political party or politician.

I didn't realize it then, but to liberals and progressives, I had permanently chosen the wrong side once I joined the Cato Institute.

It didn't matter, for example, that I was one of the key players helping to create a school voucher program for 1,700 low-income children in Washington, D.C. A leading progressive talk-show host dismissed me as "working against the interests of black people." I got calls from sympathetic and disgruntled school system employees warning me that public school advocates were investigating me and had launched a campaign to find "dirt" on me.

I ignored the "what's your '-ism'" attacks and continued focusing on increasing educational freedom for low-income children, collaborating with Democrats in Congress, a Democrat governor, and the Democrat Mayor of D.C. (I was the substitute speaker for Mayor Williams at a community event, the first and probably last time anyone from Cato will do that).

The only "-ism" that matters to me is metabolism. Political labels are like shortcuts: They can get you to your destination quickly, true, but they can also take you in the wrong direction.

I recently passed my 10th anniversary of not working at the Cato Institute, but progressives still attack me like I was the institute's founder. Or they respond with their "heads-I-win, tails-you-lose" argument by dismissing me as a paid flunkey.

Other organizations I have worked for and been affiliated with — Fight For Children, the Washington Scholarship Fund, the Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association — don't matter to the critics because I allegedly committed the original sin. In short: Whose side are you on? Who supports you?

I recently had a critic challenge me for quoting 19th century abolitionist Frederick Douglass' comment: "I would unite with anybody to do right and with nobody to do wrong" in my defense of NGOs.

I first read Frederick Douglass' three autobiographies when I was about 10 years old. As a teenager in Texas, I saved enough money to buy First Editions of his books published in 1845, 1855, and 1881 and was persistent enough to convince my parents to drive me to Douglass' former home in Washington, D.C.

I couldn't express my feelings when I was invited in 2003 to give the keynote address at the Frederick Douglass home in 2003 and later was invited to join the Board of Trustees of the Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association. Despite that history and connection, I get challenged by progressives and ideologues when I quote Douglass.

I used to engage them, but now I keep on keeping on. When critics target my race in non-racial discussions, I will just note that on my birth certificate issued by the state of Texas that my parents were both listed as "Negroid."

People try to nail a political label onto me, and I move on. When people guess I may be as young as 30 years of age (Haha!), I tell them they are correct no matter which age they guess. I prefer to be an Ambiguous Man judged by my actions rather than arbitrary characteristics. That is even though my critics blinded by rage keep blindsiding me by bringing up my race in non-racial discussions, engaging in "follow-the-money" games, or trying to nail a label on me.