

# The Washington Post

## Dialing it down

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By Howard Kurtz  
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The political posturing over Harry Reid's "Negro dialect" blunder has, improbably, given way to a potentially thoughtful debate.

Conservatives tried and failed to cast the Senate majority leader as racially insensitive, in part by depicting him as the second coming of Trent Lott. But President Obama and (most) fellow Democrats closed ranks behind the Nevadan, and it looks like he has ridden this out (while still facing a tough reelection). Mitch McConnell made it official yesterday when he repeatedly deflected questions about Reid, saying, "That's an issue for the Democratic conference."

Many in the media seem to delight at picking at the scab of race, especially if it can bleed into some political kerfuffle. But Reid's dumb remarks have sparked a slightly more elevated debate about African American skin color and diction that is usually deemed way off-limits in polite society.

I sometimes have the feeling that there are two levels of debate in this country: the hour-by-hour sound bite warfare in which pols and pundits jockey for temporary advantage, and a deeper discussion that goes beyond point-scoring and finger-pointing.

Questions about race are hemmed in by a P.C. code that is only rarely breached. Darker-skinned blacks face greater discrimination, even disrespect from other African Americans? Blacks who talk street talk risk alienating voters and potential employers? Who really wants to go there? Even those trying to say positive things can trip over their tongues. Remember Joe Biden praising Obama as "clean" and "articulate"?

In the Nation, [Melissa Harris-Lacewell](#) says the sensitive subject should not be off-limits:

"President Obama may be unconcerned and the GOP may be transparently race baiting, but Reid's comments did create a legitimate queasiness among many Americans that is worth exploring.

"President Obama is a forgiving, beer summit kind of leader, but I am less likely to give Democrats a free pass on issues of racial bias. . . . Any implication that racism is the sole purview of the Right obscures the continuing and troubling realities of racism within the Democratic Party and progressive political movements.

"Still, I remain entirely uninterested in a racial McCarthyism that plays 'gotcha politics' with elected officials' public utterances. Yes, public officials should be particularly careful when talking about race to media (on or off the record). The opportunities for misunderstanding, divisiveness and assumption of ill intent are heightened in this area of political discussion.

"But let's be honest, if we weeded out every public official guilty of racial insensitivity, the halls of Congress would echo with utter emptiness. The point is not so much public gaffes as it is the creation, support, and maintenance of systemic and structural inequalities. This is why Trent Lott's wistfulness about a Strom Thurmond presidency is in a different class than Reid's comments. Lott was longing for a bygone era when structural barriers and entrenched inequality were the norm. Reid was enthusiastic that the same barriers were

lessening and that America was ready, albeit with caveats, for a new racial reality."

[Gene Robinson](#), in his WP column, speaks from personal experience:

"Color bias has always existed in this country. We don't talk about it because we think of color as subordinate to racial identification. There are African Americans with skin so light-hued that only contextual clues speak to the question of race. I remember once looking up some distant cousins on my father's side. They were so fair of hair and ruddy of cheek that I thought I'd gone to the wrong house, until one of them greeted me in what I guess Reid would call 'Negro dialect.' . . .

"Advertising is a reliable window into the American psyche, so look at the images we're presented on television and in glossy magazines. The black models tend to be caramel-skinned or lighter, with hair that's not really kinky -- which is how I'd describe mine -- but wavy, even flowing."

On the right, the double-standard argument persists. But some, such as [Ward Connerly](#), who has led several initiatives against affirmative action, are questioning the nature of the "offense":

"It's certainly true that racial incidents are not all created equal. What one individual finds offensive may not be to another. Thus, the words of Mr. Lott may have been more insensitive to some than the comments of Mr. Reid. Nonetheless, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that the spirit of forgiveness is universal -- except when it comes to conservatives.

"For my part, I am having a difficult time determining what it was that Mr. Reid said that was so offensive.

"Was it because he suggested that lighter-skinned blacks fare better in American life than their darker brothers and sisters? If so, ask blacks whether they find this to be true. Even the lighter-skinned ones, if they are honest with themselves, will agree that there is a different level of acceptance.

"Was it because he used the politically incorrect term 'negro'? If so, it should be noted that there are many blacks of my generation who continue to embrace this term. In fact, 'negro' is an option along with 'black' and 'African-American' on the 2010 Census. . . .

"We are too quick to take offense about race when none was intended. Some are too anxious to manufacture outrage over matters that do not justify the attention that we give them. And we are too quick to politicize race."

[Rich Lowry](#) argues such controversies are overblown, even as he rips Reid:

"The furor over Reid's comments about then-candidate Barack Obama being 'light-skinned' and not speaking in 'a Negro dialect' says less about the Senate majority leader's racial attitudes than his already well-advertised tin -- or is it iron? titanium? some metallic substance yet unknown to man? -- ear. If nuance and verbal intelligence were necessary to success on Capitol Hill, Reid would have quit long ago.

"But since when is a history of saying dumb things a defense in a racial controversy? Since when is the truth even a defense? . . .

"No conservative Republican should test this tolerance for archaic speech. Reid's idiocy is excused, fundamentally, by his political positions. In absolving him, Obama cited 'the passionate leadership he's shown on issues of social justice.' . . .

"Real racism has been almost entirely eliminated from respectable American public life. With no one defending segregated lunch counters anymore, the accusation of racism is left mostly to hang on infelicitous phrases, legitimate policy disagreements, or the airing of uncomfortable truths."

At the brand new Daily Caller, [Tucker Carlson](#) pounces on the liberals getting cover from Reverend Al:

"To some extent, the strategy has worked: If Al Sharpton says you're not a racist, then what's the problem?"

"For one thing, Sharpton himself. Now, I take a back seat to no man in my affection for Al Sharpton as a person and a character study (evidence here: The league of extraordinary gentlemen). Sharpton is a smart guy. In some ways he's a good guy. But a moral arbiter? Let's not get carried away.

"You could write a book about Sharpton's brushes with the dark side, and indeed some have. The headlines are faded but still resonant to those who lived them: Tawana Brawley, Crowne Heights, Freddie's Fashion Mart."

(By the way, I'm not sure I get why Tucker, in an interview with me, challenged the notion that most of his opinion columnists would be on the right. The first two days of the Daily Caller have featured Andrew Breitbart, the man behind the ACORN sting; conservative commentators Tony Blankley, Tara Wall and S.E. Cupp; Republican Gov. Tim Pawlenty; Republican Sen. John Barrasso; Republican House members Eric Cantor, Pete Sessions and Thaddeus McCotter; the Cato Institute's Ed Crane, and the Family Research Council's Ken Blackwell. Oh, and Arianna.)

Meanwhile, a [Pew Research](#) survey suggests that African American attitudes are changing in the Obama era:

"Nearly twice as many blacks now (39%) as in 2007 (20%) say that the 'situation of black people in this country' is better than it was five years earlier, and this more positive view is apparent among blacks of all age groups and income levels. Looking ahead, blacks are even more upbeat. More than half (53%) say that life for blacks in the future will be better than it is now, while just 10% say it will be worse."

Overall, though, "President Obama's job approval rating has fallen to 46 percent, according to a new [CBS News](#) poll. That rating is Mr. Obama's lowest yet in CBS News polling, and the poll marks the first time his approval rating has fallen below the 50 percent mark."

### **Palin the pundit**

In her debut on the "O'Reilly Factor" last night, Sarah Palin did what many Fox folks routinely do: slammed the MSM.

Asked about the new John Heilemann/Mark Halperin book, she said: "I think that these are the political establishment reporters who love to gin up controversy and spin up gossip. The rest of America doesn't care about that kind of crap."

In fairness, the former governor was asked to respond to former McCain deputy Steve Schmidt's account on "60 Minutes" that she was confused and not focused during debate prep. "It's a bunch of B.S. from Schmidt and from some of those," Palin said.

She also took her shots at Obama, Reid and Nancy Pelosi.

As it was winding up, O'Reilly asked what she thought about him -- that is, the interview he'd just conducted. Palin pronounced him the Big Man on Campus.

### **Massachusetts miracle?**

Republicans are excited by the prospect that Scott Brown might just pull off an upset next week in the special election for Ted Kennedy's seat. Although polls vary, an overconfident state attorney general, Martha Coakley, clearly has more of a race on her hands. Which raises the question: If Brown wins, could he derail

the health-care bill?

The New Republic's [Jonathan Chait](#) examines the scenarios:

"The first is to rush a bill through both chambers before Brown takes office. The second would be for the House of Representatives to pass the Senate bill unchanged, which would require no further vote by the Senate.

"The third possibility. . . would be to go back to Olympia Snowe. My hunch is that Snowe wants reform to pass but doesn't want to take the heat of voting for it. She might be willing to deal if she suddenly became the sixtieth vote rather than the unnecessary sixty-first. But she might also need to save face by demanding some concession which, in turn, could extend and possibly blow up the negotiations.

"That's why possibility #2 strikes me as most likely. The House wants leverage over health care reform, but if the alternative is nothing, then you'll find 218 Democrats to support the Senate bill."

But here's possibility # 4: If Brown wins, could his seating be [delayed](#) until after the health-care vote?

At the Washington Examiner, [Byron York](#) sees an effort to Palinize the race:

"Frantic over the possibility that a Democrat might lose the race to replace Sen. Ted Kennedy in Massachusetts, the Democratic National Committee has sent its top spinner, Hari Sevugan, to the aid of Democratic candidate Martha Coakley, who appears to be rapidly losing ground to Republican Scott Brown. But what can Sevugan do to shore up Coakley's struggling campaign? Well, he spent his first day on the job trying to tie Brown to Sarah Palin.

"Early Monday afternoon, Sevugan sent out an email to reporters featuring a link to a story on the lefty website TPM. The headline: 'Is Sarah Palin Avoiding Mass Senate Race?' The story quoted a Democratic strategist saying that 'it's interesting' that Palin is 'nowhere to be found in this race.' TPM conceded that GOP sources say there has been 'no talk' about Palin visiting Massachusetts. But that didn't stop Sevugan." (Here are the latest [ads](#) in the race.)

Speaking of Palin, check out this Minneapolis [Star Tribune](#) item:

"It looks like the revolution will not be televised, after all.

"At least not the Tea Party's revolution.

"Word from Nashville on Monday was that the First National Tea Party Convention next month will be closed to the press, other than for a limited number of 'selected' journalists. No word on who or how many.

"This from the people who brought us last summer's media-saturated Town Hall meetings.

"The restrictions apparently apply to the much-anticipated speeches by Sarah Palin and Minnesota's own Michele Bachmann."

Sure, why should Palin give it away when Fox is now paying her? And I wonder who the "selected" journalists will be.

### **The Bill factor**

I have no idea whether Bill Clinton has engaged in any extracurricular activities since that woman. The question has surfaced because John Heilemann and Mark Halperin report in their new book that some of

Hillary Clinton's campaign aides concluded that the former president was indeed straying and they were gearing up to deal with it.

Now comes this posting by [Mayhill Fowler](#), the liberal Huffington Post blogger who, you may recall, slipped into a closed Obama fundraiser and reported his remarks that "bitter" small-town Americans "cling to guns or religion." She now writes that in 2008:

"I had decided not to follow up on another story about Bill Clinton that had come my way -- one involving his longtime mistress. I mention the nature of the Clinton story with some specificity now only because months later, after the Democratic primaries, the National Enquirer wrote about the relationship. In Texas, staring this story in the face, immediately I turned aside. *If I know all about this woman, then surely every national reporter does and is as wary of the story as I am.* Nevertheless, I was careful never to mention anything to anybody at OffTheBus. I rationalized the refusal to follow through by telling myself that Clinton's private life was peripheral to the race. . . .

"Executing such a story could have had consequences for the mistress's children, who were still minors. There was no way I would write something that I knew in advance would mortify a high school student in front of his peers. My mother's outrage and pain at the political sex scandal that had blighted her adolescence was just too vivid a presence. . . . In the 1930s, E. H. Crump, boss of the Memphis political machine, hired a man to woo my grandmother and then used the ensuing billets-doux to blackmail my grandfather, who was mayor."

### **In brief, selling out**

I had imagined Twitter being a refuge from crass commercialism, but noooo. As [Isabel Wilkinson](#) writes about Kim Kardashian:

"Recently, Kardashian--who has a formidable 2.7 million followers--began including advertisements in her 140-character updates: a tweet leading to a Nestle commercial, a banner ad on her Twitter page sponsoring the fast-food chain Carl's Jr. The price for Kardashian's tweets? \$10,000 or more per post.

"Kardashian is one of many celebrities who now command substantial fees for peppering their posts with commercial name-dropping. Dr. Drew Pinsky, Lauren Conrad, and Samantha Ronson earn four figures per tweet, a spokesperson from Ad.ly--a popular Twitter advertising service--told The Daily Beast.

"Sponsored tweets may seem like an easy way of striking it rich -- but there are dangers as well. All sponsored posts must, by the laws of the Federal Trade Commission, be fully disclosed by the person who owns the account. Serena Williams recently attracted attention (though avoided punishment) last fall when she tweeted about Nabisco's 100 Calorie Packs, which she is paid to endorse. 'Venus and I are shooting a campaign for Nabisco 100 Calorie Packs!!' Williams tweeted, 'They r soooo amazingly good we keep eating them. But we arnt worried. . . . We r not worried about staying fit because the Nabiso Calorie Packs are only 100 calories!! U guys must run out and try them!!' "

Subtle, isn't she?

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