

Is Brewing Tea Dangerous?

✖ A few weeks ago, Colbert King of *The Washington Post* wrote an incendiary op-ed about the Tea Party movement. Titled “In the Faces of Tea Party Shouters, Images of Hate and History,” the piece was incredibly skewed. The article’s condescending tone called the protesters “racists.”

King equated the people that rallied in D.C. (just before the health care vote) with the folks who wanted to block the first black student from entering the University of Alabama in 1956. Further, he suggested that those who blocked nine black kids from entering a Little Rock, Ark., high school in 1959 resembled Tea Party members. Most shockingly, he compared the faces he witnessed nearly 20 years ago at a David Duke rally in Metairie, L.A. with the party faithful. He went on to describe the folks at the Duke rally as “sullen with resentment, wallowing in victim-hood, then exploding with yells of excitement as the ex-Klansman and Republican gubernatorial candidate spewed vitriolic white-power rhetoric.”

King ended his op-ed by blaming Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity for the out-of-control behavior of Tea Party members. In fact he declared that the cultural conditioning of entitlement is what is passed on to these people by these thought leaders. Listeners are encouraged, according to King, to do “whatever they want, and to whomever they want” because they are the “real Americans.”

The question I would like to pose to the Tea Party is this, “Now that you know how you are perceived, what are you going to do”?

Time and time again during the last two years, the critics of the Obama administration have been tagged “racist.” This labeling has always been initiated by liberal media or high-

level Democratic Party elite. The first victims of this kind of labeling were the critics of Jeremiah Wright. Despite his consistent anti-American rhetoric, the nation was told that they just did not understand the black church. On the wings of these accusations concerning Wright, candidate Obama gave an historic speech about race and the need for a national dialogue.

The next victim of malicious accusations of racism was Hillary Clinton. Most of us remember the "fairy tale" comments made by Bill Clinton. Ironically, just 16 years earlier Clinton had been hailed as "the first black president." The accusation of racism is so damaging to a person that it became the final blow that felled the giant Clinton political machine. Further, in early October of 2008 Senator John McCain's reference to candidate Obama as "that one" made him the recipient of the "racist" label as well.

More recently, the president's comments about professor Skip Gates and the Cambridge police officer once again stirred the specter of racism and class warfare in America. As an African-American, I am concerned that when the claim of racism is levied, it serves to divide us as fellow Americans, instead of allowing civil democratic debate. Not only is it deceptive, it also may affect the nation like the mythical boy who cried "wolf." In situations in which racism is really at work, the charge will be taken less seriously in the future because of the frivolous and manipulative use of the way the charge of racism is being used now.

Just two weeks ago, Congressman Emmanuel Cleaver II was harassed by a Tea Party participant at a rally in Washington, D.C. There is also video footage recording the exchange of this unruly, angry rally participant. Conservative analysts have wasted time asking whether the man spit on Cleaver or whether it was an unintentional spray.

Cleaver has a long history of public service. First, he has

served Kansas City as the pastor of St. James United Methodist Church with a membership of 2,800 since 1974. After three terms as city council member he was elected the first African-American mayor of his city. He also served two terms as president of the National Conference of Black Mayors. Finally, he has been in Congress since 2004 and supported Hillary Clinton versus Barack Obama until the end of the presidential primary. In light of his history and credibility, I believe Cleaver was actually called the "N" word. Despite the machinations of a handful of fringe participants, I am sure that racism is not the source of the movement's energy.

In response to Tea Party critics, conservative media pundits have spent countless hours defending the movement and its motives. I believe that the Tea Party deserves the benefit of the doubt. Nonetheless, it must dispel the idea that it's a new manifestation of older racist movements.

Ironically, the Tea Party movement has become a victim of its own success. Its popularity represents a threat to "business as usual" inside the beltway. It is time for real, collaborative leadership to emerge and give direction to the Tea Party. As someone who believes that the Tea Party movement is a return to foundational American values, I suggest a PR makeover. The worst thing that could happen to this movement is that its important message gets marginalized because of poor messaging and management.

Specifically, I recommend that the movement do three things immediately. First, they should apologize for the disrespect many of its members showed Emmanuel Cleaver and other members of Congress two weeks ago. Second, the movement should have rally leaders go through media training and establish a message for each and every event. Third, as the movement grows, it should feature more black and Hispanic speakers. This is not window dressing because millions of minorities share Tea Party concerns but are put off by the movement's

disparaging mainstream media image.

The good news is that if the Tea Party resists the temptation to become an official third party and formalizes its operations, its maximum short-term impact can be realized.