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# Dobson: Fighting words about Appalachia

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Last week, Vice President Dick Cheney said, "So we had Cheneys on both sides of the family -- and we don't even live in West Virginia." His gratuitous insult raises again the question: What's the most scorned minority in America?

A partial list of candidates can be found in U.S. Census tables of races, origins, languages and ancestries.

To measure the level of scorn, consider the virulence of epithets and stereotypes applied to group members.

Consider whether society accords legal protections and benefits and, conversely, reprimands adversaries who openly discriminate, use racial or ethnic slurs, show bias in hiring or commit acts of hatred. Consider what people say about them and how they are portrayed in movies, television and theater.

Which minority fares worst? In this supposedly enlightened age, there is one that still can be routinely portrayed on TV as dim-witted and cruel, slandered with the foulest of stereotypes, called by ethnic epithets, reviled by people who do not regard themselves as prejudiced and who are not regarded by others as being prejudiced -- one that is clearly disadvantaged but receives no minority benefits and protections, one exempt somehow from America's passion for diversity.

The answer, of course, is rural people (hicks, bumpkins, yokels), and among them Southern whites (rednecks, bubbas, crackers, white trash), and among *them* Appalachian whites (hillbillies).

It's somehow OK in polite conversation to call them derogatory names, characterize them as ignorant no matter how much schooling they've had, slander them with stereotypes and make fun of their food and speech.

What is the vilest stereotype leveled at any minority in America? Surely nothing matches incest. Yet Appalachian people are routinely accused of incest, and there is no social rebuke for those who so demonize them.

The depth of bigotry against Appalachian people -- my people -- was brought home in a very personal way at a national meeting of an academic association.

A geographer delivered a fascinating analysis of the U.S. Census 2000, pointing out that Appalachian people typically identify themselves by "American ancestry" far more than any other group. He showed strong geographic correlations with income, education and religion.

When he finished, a colleague asked, "Did you try correlating that with incest?" I was stunned, and so was my wife -- who, by the way, is not my sister or daughter.

The speaker answered, "I don't think the government keeps figures on incest." No one else complained or even remarked on the questioner's scurrilous, unsupported indictment of our relatives, friends and neighbors back home.

I faced the offender and said, "What do you think would have happened if you had said that about any other group in this country?"

Indeed, if Cheney had accused any other Americans of incest, there would have been indignant calls for his immediate resignation.

Insults hurt even those of us who succeed in the broader society. For many others, the cost is greater, as upward mobility is hampered by bias in hiring and promotion because of widespread disdain for cultural traits such as dialect, religion and clothing.

Viewed with contempt even by many who champion other minorities, Appalachian people truly constitute a minority disadvantaged in status, income, education, wealth, power, health and other key indicators of lifestyle and welfare.

All my life, I checked the box "American" for my ethnicity or stubbornly wrote "American" if there wasn't a box for it, not knowing that the choice was characteristic of my region.

I knew why I did it, and the speaker confirmed why so many Appalachian people do: They have lived here so long that no one identifies with the places that their ancestors, chiefly Scots-Irish, came from.

Most of all, as James Webb states so convincingly in *Born Fighting*, they hold a deeply ingrained egalitarian attitude that we're all just Americans -- it doesn't matter where anyone came from.

So there you have it. The most scorned minority in America are people who call themselves simply "Americans."

How ironic!