



post-gazette **NOW**
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Opinion

Cheney's insult

Appalachians: the slur-able Americans

Friday, June 06, 2008

By Jerome Dobson

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

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 ... 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 and tolerance.

The answer, of course, is rural people (hicks, bumpkins, yokels), 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, to characterize them as ignorant no matter how much schooling they've had, to make fun of their food and speech.

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

The depth of bigotry against Appalachian people, my people, was brought home to me in a 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 and friends back home.

I asked, "What do you think would have happened if you had said that about any other group in this country?" Indeed, if Mr. Cheney had accused any other group of Americans of incest, there would have been indignant calls for his resignation.

Jerome Dobson is president of the American Geographical Society and a professor of geography at the University of Kansas (dobson@ku.edu).

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 due to 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 this 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 their ancestors. Most of all, as James Webb stated 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! Imagine the headline, "Veep accuses Americans of incest!"

First published on June 6, 2008 at 12:00 am