

Is it really all about blackface?

Wearing blackface has been in the news these last couple weeks after a photo of a young man in blackface was found on Virginia Governor Ralph Northam's medical school yearbook page. Initially, the Governor admitted the photo was of him, but later changed his mind and retracted his statement. Many have called for his resignation for doing what many young men in Virginia have done since reconstruction. I know. I know. That doesn't make it right, and I agree, but the real question is, "Is this transgression from over three decades ago serious enough to justify destroying a man's career?" Personally, I don't think so.

We've all done stupid things in our lives, especially when we were younger, but wearing blackface hardly qualifies for the Governor's inclusion on the FBI's most wanted list. What is bothersome to many of us is that the young man in blackface was standing next to another young man wearing a Ku Klux Klan outfit. The unwritten caption is the inference that the Klansman is about to string up the blackfaced man. The problem here is 'intent.' We don't know what the intent of either or both individuals appearing in the photo was.

Could they have been making a statement about the racial situation in Virginia; that it was unacceptable and getting worse? Could they have been trying to symbolize the two opposite poles of racial thought in the state? Or were they just being stupid and not thinking of how dressing up in two highly objectionable costumes would be viewed years later? Anyway, it's out there now, and it's my opinion that Governor Northam's future should be left up to the voters that elected him and not to political pundits, special interest groups or citizens of other states.

Let's explore this from a different angle. How many mixed race American Blacks have spent the better part of their lives trying to pass for White? While I understand their reasons for doing so - a wish to be accepted by the White community and to avoid discrimination - the fact of the matter is that they have engaged in a duplicitous act. I hasten to add that this is not to be equated with wearing blackface by Whites, but it is duplicitous, irrespective of their motives. Personally, I have no objections when mixed race persons choose one or the other race as their primary identity (Barack Obama chose to be called 'Black' when his mother was White), but it is dishonest to claim you are something you're not, like a Massachusetts senator claiming she was an American Indian, for example.

There is no question that White America is having a tough time with its past. Statues of the Confederacy are being toppled and accusations of White privilege are being levied against us while we are being vilified for controlling the levers of economic power in the U.S. and putting, as Joe Biden said to a predominantly Black audience, "you all back in chains." Some Americans have, regrettably, abused Blacks for generations, and I get it that Black America has had enough, but the Civil War has been over for 154 years. Civil Rights legislation has been in effect for over fifty years, and we've made great strides towards racial harmony since then.

Unfortunately, there is still much anger out there about our slave-holding inheritance, chiefly among our younger citizens who have little or no frame of reference or world experience. Many have let themselves be convinced that America's *original sin* is alive and growing by partisan separatists or trouble-makers that totally ignore our racial progress, but prefer to paint racism in America as systemic. The anger of our young people has been stoked by liberals who now see racial animus as a tool they can use to defeat the *White power structure* (read: Republicans) at the ballot box. This is a perversion and will do nothing except roll back the gains we have made over the decades. Maybe this is why the Left is so vocally protesting Governor Northam's decision to stay in office; if he stays they cannot throw down the 'race card' because the Governor is one of them (a Democrat). They're afraid of something else, too...that should he choose to use the remainder of his time in office to speak of racism in America, the truth about our racial progress will come out and that it will show that our original sin is rapidly fading.

The bottom line is that our sensitivity to things racial is a good thing, but we must never let stupidity, ignorance of the facts or lapses of judgment control or derail an important discussion such as race relations. Tomorrow is Abraham Lincoln's birthday. We owe it to his memory, his wisdom and courage to speak openly and honestly about race. We are one people no matter who our parents were or on which side of the political divide we choose to live. America must strive to be color-blind, not totally blind.

Stephan Helgesen is a former career U.S. diplomat who lived and worked in thirty different countries, specializing in export promotion. He is now a political analyst and strategist and author of over 900 articles and nine books on politics, the economy and social trends. He can be reached at: stephan@stephanhelgesen.com