

Time's up: Jimmy Carter is on to something

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Was former president Jimmy Carter identifying the elephant in the room or seeing a phantom when he charged that much of the opposition to President Obama's health-care reform is motivated by racism? Whatever the wisdom of Carter's comments, Obama himself has refused to be drawn into the debate. Obama said he'd prefer to think that the election of a black man as president is the true measure of where the country stands on race.

Besides, Obama said, any president's effort to make significant political changes, especially during an economic crisis, will spark strenuous resistance. Franklin Roosevelt, for example, was labeled a communist when he introduced his New Deal legislation.

It is a sign of some social progress that Obama's critics are quick to vehemently deny being racists. Racism of a blatant kind is now impolitic. However, researchers Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler have evidence that Carter is on to something. They analyzed a late 2008 survey that asked people if they favored a government-run health-care system, a system like the one we have now, or something in between. The same survey also asked four questions on race designed to measure racial resentment. The findings revealed a strong correlation between racial resentment and opposition to health-care reform. They say that no such correlation existed in the 1990s when the Clinton administration was making a similar effort at health-care reform.

Even more troubling are reports from the Southern Poverty Law Center on the resurgence of antigovernment militias, white supremacist groups and nativist vigilantes. One law enforcement agency has identified 50 new militia-training groups (one of them consists of former soldiers and police officers). The Internet has given these groups a new tool for promoting their cause. Videos of militia training events can be viewed on YouTube.

These far-right extremists were a threat in the 1990s, but they had faded away in recent years. Now they are back with a vengeance, perhaps because their primary target of hate—the federal government—is headed by a black man.

President Obama is wise to stick to the issues and to invite vigorous, civil debate on his proposals. But others have the responsibility to challenge racism when it surfaces. That means challenging Rush Limbaugh when he blames Obama for an incident in which black kids beat up a white kid on a school bus in Illinois—saying that this is what happens “in Obama’s America.” It means speaking out against those who fly the Confederate flag at antigovernment “tea party” rallies.

In the 1960s William F. Buckley Jr. helped the conservative movement become part of mainstream politics when he demanded that its leaders condemn the radical antigovernment organization known as the John Birch Society. A similar courage is needed on the part of conservatives, and others, to ostracize the racist elements of political life.