

Postjudice (2008)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner, WLRH Radio Huntsville, AL USA

Much has been made this historic election year of the unique — or extremely rare — features of this campaign. On the Dem side, it's pretty remarkable that the two remaining contenders are (a) female (b) African/American... but on the other side of the aisle it's also pretty unusual that we have neither an experienced president nor vice president in the finals. What opportunities for something new!

It's also true -- and less happy — that we have unparalleled opportunities for the sneaky demons of prejudice to infect our thinking... and to display it in ways that feign noble motives and good judgment.

It works like this: you say something about one of the candidates ... slowly, reflectively, as if you're just coming to understand it after a lot of study: "I like Hillary, understand... but it's just that she's ... well, cold and tough, in a way." In the case of Senator Obama, it goes like this: "He's a fine person, you know... but I wonder if he has the background for the job."

"Cold and tough?" "Background?" I think those labels can be code language for something less savory: with Senator Clinton, the "cold and tough" adjectives can be replacements for a slang epithet about women that begins with a "b" and ends with "ch." For the Illinois senator "no background" or "inexperience" may be covering up another set of descriptors mostly out of fashion except with black comedians.

Note that it can happen with the other party, too, my rushers-to-judge! When Mr. Romney was still in the race, we sometimes heard "just don't know about his values," or "what he's really like as a person." I wonder if we peeled off the layers of politeness down to the core whether we'd find some pretty ugly religious prejudice there, some fear of a religion whose inner workings are unknown to the majority of us.

It's the fact that these people whose character we must judge in the ballot-box have all sorts of facets to their being that makes it possible for us to assess them with standards of rigorous rectitude... or those based on the unseemly passions of the past. Listen for what your language conceals, as well as what it reveals.

I confess — I contend — I aver with conviction — that my suspicions about inner prejudices lurking beneath an outer layer of impartial observation do not hold for everyone. I'm sure that many people do find Ms. Clinton or Mr. Obama or Mr. Romney unacceptable for all sorts of ethical reasons. But for some of us the spectre of a less worthy motivation is hidden just beneath the surface.

I guess you have to look in your own heart to tell the truth.