

The Content of Character  
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I sit to write this on the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and I am thinking about his idea that people ought to be judged by the content of their characters and not by the color of their skins. This leads me to think that the recent dustup over race between the Clinton and Obama presidential campaigns is not about race; it is about character.

Virtue ethics is an important aspect of ethical reasoning. Ethics basically asks the questions: What is right to do? How do we know? Virtue ethics says we act according to the kind of excellences of character we want to develop and to display. The ancient Greeks taught four cardinal virtues – justice, wisdom, courage and temperance. Ancient Egypt taught Maat – balance, harmony, justice. Early Christian thinkers added faith, hope and love to the list. In my own work as a womanist scholar I extrapolate the virtues of responsibility, love, commitment, and complexity from Alice Walker’s definition of womanism.

In my opinion, the virtue that ought to guide our analysis of this situation is responsibility. Serious people are accountable. They are moral agents capable of making decisions and then acting upon those decisions. They must face the consequences of their thinking and doing. Responsibility requires the courage to tell the truth about what one has done, and then to stand-up to the consequences. Truth-telling is important to responsibility.

Very often our virtues are tested in times of stress. Bill Clinton’s remarks about the narrative around the Obama campaign as being a “fairy tale” happened on the day of the New Hampshire primary when all the polls pointed to an Obama win. Rather than Clinton placing responsibility for this state of affairs on the Clinton campaign, he lashed out at the media by saying that it had not adequately examined the consistency of Obama’s statements against the Iraq war. However, in his comments, Clinton sought to find inconsistency where there was none. He took Obama’s comments out of context to make it seem that in 2004 Obama agreed with George Bush over the war and had somehow been less clear about his opposition to the war. In fact, Obama was going easy on his own opposition to the war out of party loyalty to the Democratic nominees, both of whom voted to give President Bush authority to go to war. So now we see Bill Clinton blaming the press for not distorting Obama’s record.

When Hillary Clinton made her comments regarding Martin Luther King Jr and Lyndon Johnson, I do not believe her intent was in any way racial. She wanted to draw the distinction between rhetoric and results. While Obama has been praised for his capacity to inspire, she wanted to say the nation needs someone who can get legislation passed. As an African-American woman, I am not offended. I do however, get a glimpse into her character when she is willing to misrepresent Obama’s positions in an attempt to show inconsistency. She has criticized him for speaking against the Patriot Act at one point and then voting for it at another point. The truth is that he voted for it after it has been amended to address his concerns

over civil liberties. This is not an inconsistency.

Further, when this controversy is understood through the lens of race, it becomes a distraction that keeps us from staying focused on the candidates' records, positions and their defense of these positions. For example, in her appearance on Meet the Press, Sunday, January 13, Hillary Clinton said that she did not expect the Bush administration to use congressional authority to use force against Saddam Hussein as permission to go to war. She said: "I was told by the White House personally that the point of the authority was to send a clear message to Saddam Hussein that he was going to have to be held accountable finally, that we would know once and for all what he had there that could be used as he had used it in the past."

Rather than take responsibility for her vote to take this country to war, Hillary Clinton sought to rewrite history, to make the vote something that it was not. Either this or she was extremely naive to believe the Bush administration. I think Barack Obama has been straightforward in explaining his positions. I would like to hear more about the votes in the Illinois legislature where he voted present. Even so, he takes responsibility with far more grace than do the Clintons.

And we voters have a responsibility as well. We have a responsibility to listen for truth-telling. We ought to insist upon honesty, especially in representing an opponent's record. This is especially important because after an administration that has taken this country to war on half-truths and outright lies, we need a president who will tell the truth and take responsibility for his or her actions. The content of character matters.

Full disclosure. I support Barack Obama for president.