

This is Your Nation on White Privilege

By Tim Wise

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For those who still can't grasp the concept of white privilege, or who are looking for some easy-to-understand examples of it, perhaps this list will help.

White privilege is when you can get pregnant at seventeen like Bristol Palin and everyone is quick to insist that your life and that of your family is a personal matter, and that no one has a right to judge you or your parents, because "every family has challenges," even as black and Latino families with similar "challenges" are regularly typified as irresponsible, pathological and arbiters of social decay.

White privilege is when you can call yourself a "fuckin' redneck," like Bristol Palin's boyfriend does, and talk about how if anyone messes with you, you'll "kick their fuckin' ass," and talk about how you like to "shoot shit" for fun, and still be viewed as a responsible, all-American boy (and a great son-in-law to be) rather than a thug.

White privilege is when you can attend four different colleges in six years like Sarah Palin did (one of which you basically failed out of, then returned to after making up some coursework at a community college), and no one questions your intelligence or commitment to achievement, whereas a person of color who did this would be viewed as unfit for college, and probably someone who only got in in the first place because of affirmative action.

White privilege is when you can claim that being mayor of a town smaller than most medium-sized colleges, and then Governor of a state with about the same number of people as the lower fifth of the island of Manhattan, makes you ready to potentially be president, and people don't all piss on themselves with laughter, while being a black U.S. Senator, two-term state Senator, and constitutional law scholar, means you're "untested."

White privilege is being able to say that you support the words "under God" in the pledge of allegiance because "if it was good enough for the founding fathers, it's good enough for me," and not be immediately disqualified from holding office--since, after all, the pledge was written in the late 1800s and the "under God" part wasn't added until the 1950s--while believing that reading accused criminals and terrorists their rights (because, ya know, the Constitution, which you used to teach at a prestigious law school requires it), is a dangerous and silly idea only supported by mushy liberals.

White privilege is being able to be a gun enthusiast and not make people immediately scared of you.

White privilege is being able to have a husband who was a member of an extremist political party that wants your state to secede from the Union, and whose motto is "Alaska first," and no one questions your patriotism or that of your family, while if you're black and your spouse merely fails to come to a 9/11 memorial so she can be home with her kids on the first day of school, people immediately think she's being disrespectful.

White privilege is being able to make fun of community organizers and the work they do--like, among other things, fight for the right of women to vote, or for civil rights, or the 8-hour workday, or an end to child labor--and people think you're being pithy and tough, but if you merely question the experience of a small town mayor and 18-month governor with no foreign policy expertise beyond a class she took in college and the fact that she lives close to Russia--you're somehow being mean, or even sexist.

White privilege is being able to convince white women who don't even agree with you on any substantive issue to vote for you and your running mate anyway, because suddenly your presence on the ticket has inspired confidence in these same white women, and made them give your party a "second look."

White privilege is being able to fire people who didn't support your political campaigns and not be accused of abusing your power or being a typical politician who engages in favoritism, while being black and merely knowing some folks from the old-line political machines in Chicago means you must be corrupt.

White privilege is when you can take nearly twenty-four hours to get to a hospital after beginning to leak amniotic fluid, and still be viewed as a great mom whose commitment to her children is unquestionable, and whose "next door neighbor" qualities make her ready to be VP, while if you're a black candidate for president and you let your children be interviewed for a few seconds on TV, you're irresponsibly exploiting them.

White privilege is being able to give a 36 minute speech in which you talk about lipstick and make fun of your opponent, while laying out no substantive policy positions on any issue at all, and still manage to be considered a legitimate candidate, while a black person who gives an hour speech the week before, in which he lays out specific policy proposals on several issues, is still criticized for being too vague about what he would do if elected.

White privilege is being able to attend churches over the years whose pastors say that people who voted for John Kerry or merely criticize George W. Bush are going to hell, and that the U.S. is an explicitly Christian nation and the job of Christians is to bring Christian theological principles into government, and who bring in speakers who say the conflict in the Middle East is God's punishment on Jews for rejecting Jesus, and everyone can still think you're just a good church-going Christian, but if you're black and friends with a black pastor who has noted (as have Colin Powell and the U.S. Department of Defense) that terrorist attacks are often the result of U.S. foreign policy and who talks about the history of racism and its effect on black people, you're an extremist who probably hates America.

White privilege is not knowing what the Bush Doctrine is when asked by a reporter, and then people get angry at the reporter for asking you such a "trick question," while being black and merely refusing to give one-word answers to the queries of Bill O'Reilly means you're dodging the question, or trying to seem overly intellectual and nuanced.

White privilege is being able to go to a prestigious prep school, then to Yale and then Harvard Business school, and yet, still be seen as just an average guy (George W. Bush) while being black, going to a prestigious prep school, then Occidental College, then Columbia, and then to Harvard Law, makes you "uppity," and a snob who probably looks down on regular folks.

White privilege is being able to graduate near the bottom of your college class (McCain), or graduate with a C average from Yale (W.) and that's OK, and you're cut out to be president, but if you're black and you graduate near the top of your class from Harvard Law, you can't be trusted to make good decisions in office.

White privilege is being able to dump your first wife after she's disfigured in a car crash so you can take up with a multi-millionaire beauty queen (who you go on to call the c-word in public) and still be thought of as a man of strong family values, while if you're black and married for nearly twenty years to the same woman, your family is viewed as un-American and your gestures of affection for each other are called "terrorist fist bumps."

White privilege is being able to sing a song about bombing Iran and still be viewed as a sober and rational statesman, with the maturity to be president, while being black and suggesting that the U.S. should speak with other nations, even when we have disagreements with them, makes you "dangerously naive and immature."

White privilege is being able to claim your experience as a POW has anything at all to do with your fitness for president, while being black and experiencing racism and an absent father is apparently among the "lesser adversities" faced by other politicians, as Sarah Palin explained in her convention speech.

And finally, white privilege is the only thing that could possibly allow someone to become president when he has voted with George W. Bush 90 percent of the time, even as unemployment is skyrocketing, people are losing their homes, inflation is rising, and the U.S. is increasingly isolated from world opinion, just because white voters aren't sure about that whole "change" thing. Ya know, it's just too vague and ill-defined, unlike, say, four more years of the same, which is very concrete and certain.

White privilege is, in short, the problem.

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