

Southerners have two long traditions. One, we are slow of wit, to put it nicely and two we are racists. Both of these have been reinforced by countless movies and television shows. And, of course, there is some truth in both. Consequently, when a Southerner encounters a new acquaintance it is sometimes necessary to dispel or at least confront these traditions.

The former is sometimes easily dispelled especially in professional circles. A few question and answer volleys and competence is established. So, the accent/drawl is merely an affectation accompanying an otherwise acceptable and intelligent specimen.

The second tradition is more tricky. In this case the issue it is not merely what you say and how you field questions but rather what is in your soul. And, if years of behavior show not the slightest trace of what we call racism, a single word can lead one to believe all that behavior was a ruse. Then, incidents that would be immaterial are now interpreted through the racist filter. And before you know it, someone you have known and admired for years was a closet racist all of that time.

A predicament. What with the accent and all, you must somehow prove you are not a racist from the beginning. This situation or profiling is understandable. After all, non-racists have a pretty good idea how to spot a racist. Aside from being just a bit insulting, you must now prove your innocence using speech that is characteristic of the guilty. And, you must convince the listener that even though you may have the accent of a racist it is not a ruse and really, really your soul is pure.

Now, I digress. I believe this was Jeff Sessions's predicament. He prosecuted a case years ago in which Perry County, Alabama with a population of some 15,000 turned in more absentee ballots than Jefferson County with a population of some 700,000. This finding along with local voting irregularity complaints led to the investigation. According to Sessions there were complaints from other counties but nothing of this magnitude. His office was understaffed so, apparently, they investigated those instances where the size of the fraud could make a difference in the outcome of the race, e.g., Perry County. Only two lawyers were assigned to the case versus ten experienced lawyers for the defense. The defendants were acquitted.

So a large number of absentee ballots and other data suggested voter fraud, a case was brought and lost, and the defendants were acquitted. So what? Exactly. So what? The so what is this incident along with the observation that Sessions allegedly did not zealously prosecute civil rights cases was used to argue that he would not be a fair Attorney General. So, a man with an otherwise exemplary record is asked to prove he is not a racist because he investigated a voting irregularity. And, one would think this degree of irregularity would appear suspicious to anyone looking at the data. And, by the way, Sessions does sound quite Southern and his middle name is Beauregard, a fact that made its way into the discussion.

The argument against Sessions goes further. The fact that he even brought the case to trial is presented as evidence of his racist soul, his other behavior notwithstanding. Now, I suppose if I had been beaten half senseless in Selma and had lived through an era when White people had in fact designed a system to keep me in my place or to have no place at all, I would be on the lookout for any behavior that seemed to resemble backtracking and would be determined to stop it in its tracks. So,

some sensitization is understandable. But, the observer with that horrendous experience is no more accurate diviner of a man's soul than the observer whose only datum is the behavior. Digression over.

Well I don't have an answer fellow pure-of-soul Southerners. My advice, though, is to keep a sharp eye and notice if your friends nod knowingly to each other as you drawl. Also, be sure to scatter liberally phrases such as "..and this affects everyone.." and "..of course no race has a corner on that market.."