

Newsweek

How We Got Pulled Into a War Between Rush Limbaugh and Maureen Dowd ☆☆☆☆☆



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New social-science research suggests that parents and educators need to preach racial tolerance to young children overtly and explicitly. Platitudes such as "Everybody's equal" and "God made us all the same" are too vague for children to understand they refer to skin color. Multicultural television shows, as well, carry their message too implicitly: they don't actually improve children's racial attitudes. The overall message of this science was, "Stop speaking in code about race," because kids don't understand the code.

When we reported on that research, we'd hoped to start a thoughtful dialogue, but there wasn't much chance of that when the piece was published with a controversial title: "Is Your Baby Racist?" The controversy, though, went in a very different direction than we expected.

Our article — which warned of speaking about race in code — was itself accused of speaking in code. Memes of racism and anti-white reverse racism have echoed in the mediasphere between liberals and conservatives since Obama was elected and Sotomayor was nominated.

Last week, *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd suggested that Joe Wilson's "You lie!" outburst during Obama's health-care address was not spontaneous lunacy, but rather code for "You lie, boy!" — invoking a century's worth of Civil War South's defiance against racial equality.

In return, on two consecutive days, Rush Limbaugh struck back, using our NEWSWEEK cover as ammunition. He accused the NEWSWEEK story of speaking in code to liberals. "Is Your Baby Racist?" was code for "Republicans Don't Support Obama Because They've Been Racist From Birth." He alleged that the article was "page one of the Democrat Party playbook. They're out of ideas ... they have tried to impugn my casualty and credibility by saying I'm a racist." He went from that to talking about how any criticism of Obama was labeled by liberals as a manifestation of racism. His Web site contained a badly Photoshopped picture of Dowd holding our cover story.

Our society is so used to speaking in code, that when we specifically admonished, "Stop speaking in code about race," people thought we were speaking in code.

So we're going to try this one more time.

First, no babies are racist. As we explain in the piece, babies learn to tell differences between races from young ages. If we fail to address that, we can unwittingly foster an environment where racism or discrimination can take root.

Second, preach tolerance of skin-color differences to children early and explicitly.

Third, we never meant to provide any fodder for the divide between Republicans and Democrats, or liberals and conservatives. The science suggests liberal white parents are just as guilty of speaking in code to their children about race as conservative white parents. This is a concern that ought to be owned up to equally, on both sides of the aisle.

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