

No, Oprah, America isn't racist: Column

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Shortly before receiving the medal of freedom from President Obama, Oprah Winfrey gave an interview to the BBC in which she seemed to chalk up much of the opposition to the president to racism: "I think there's a level of disrespect for the office that occurs ... because he's African American," she said.

Her claim reminded me of the times when, as a child of the '70s, my father would ask an odd question about my friends, "What is he?"

"Huh?" I'd ask.

"You know, what is he — Italian? German? Lebanese? What is he?" my father replied.

Colorblind eyes

I had no idea what my friends' ethnic origins were. It was only when I traveled with my father to the north side of Chicago where he grew up, and he pointed out which ethnic groups had lived in various parts of town, that I understood.

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To be sure, I was well aware of racism. I had read *Black Like Me* as a third-grader. But the idea of discriminating on the basis of race simply made no sense to my young mind.

Oprah's pronouncement produced another "huh?" moment for me, considering the fact that it was millions of Americans that gave their colorblind eyes to her show for a quarter-century, famous enough to be interviewed by the BBC.

As communism wound down in the Soviet Union, President Reagan was asked whether he still considered it an evil empire. "You are talking about another time, another era," he replied.

Oprah is still living in that other time and era in which people separated themselves from one another primarily on the basis of race — a real time to be sure — but one that is, for the most part, not our reality today. That's especially so at the highest levels of politics and entertainment.

Tea Party racism

Because it is more often than not Tea Party types who are accused of racial hostility toward Obama, I have a parlor game I play with my white conservative friends that tells me everything I need to know about the state of race relations in America.

"If your daughter were thinking of marrying a man like Clarence Thomas or one like Chris Matthews, which would you choose?" I ask.

The answer is quick and unanimous: They'd choose to spend their holidays with a son-in-law who looks nothing like them but shares their values rather than one who merely shares their skin color.

Oprah might want us to believe Obama faces extraordinary opposition that can largely be explained by his race, but she conveniently forgets that in the past 100 years, six presidents were shot at, one killed, another impeached and two driven from office. All were loathed by millions. Some more than others.

Our first black president is actually accorded more respect than some past presidents have received. At the height of his health care reform failure, Obama has the lowest popularity of his presidency, yet the past eight (white) presidents in a row were all less popular at their own low points.

The success of the civil rights movement and the widespread acceptance of interracial marriage has fundamentally changed America's racial equation.

Some day soon, when we all look like actor and TV host Mario Lopez, it will simply be impossible to find people of a different skin color, let alone hate on the basis of it.

Mark Joseph is an author and producer. His next book is *Rock Gets Religion: The Battle for the Soul of the Devil's Music*.

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