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From the Baltimore Sun

Worse than Richards' rant: America's refusal to acknowledge racism

By Leonard Pitts Jr.

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"Throw his ass out! He's a nigger! He's a nigger! He's a nigger! A nigger! Look, there's a nigger!" - Michael Richards, The Laugh Factory in Hollywood, Nov. 17

"I'm not a racist. That's what's so insane about this." - Michael Richards, "The Late Show with David Letterman," Nov. 20.

You'd think one of the first things a stand-up comic learns is how to deal with hecklers. One recalls Richard Pryor's jab at some fool who blew a whistle in the middle of his monologue. "This ain't Kool & the Gang, mother ----!"

Apparently, Michael Richards was absent from Comedy 101 the day they studied Heckler Management. Hence, the epic, headline-making meltdown quoted above. It happened earlier this month after Mr. Richards was razzed - benignly, by most accounts - by some black folks in the crowd.

As a result, a pointed question is now being debated on the air, online and in print: Is Michael Richards a racist? Let me save us all a lot of time: Yes. It seems obvious that Seinfeld's Kramer, his claims to the contrary notwithstanding, has no use for, as he put it in his rambling, painful-to-watch apology on Letterman, "Afro-Americans."

I have a reader who would disagree with me on that. She sent an e-mail a few days ago hoping to pre-empt my calling Mr. Richards racist. In it, she asked that I consider the possibility he's no bigot but simply a man who, in anger, reached instinctively for the most hurtful language he could find. We've all been there, right?

Well, no. Mr. Richards' rant, according to the cellphone video of it posted online, lasted a good 2 1/2 minutes. You might angrily snap that somebody is a "fat so-and-so" without really meaning it. You don't spend 2 1/2 minutes calling them fat unless fat is exactly what you mean.

Truth to tell, what bothers me most about my reader's explanation is simply that she felt compelled to make it, to postulate an alternate reason for Mr. Richards' behavior. Evidently, she found the likeliest reason too hard to accept. Nor is she alone. TMZ.com, the Web site that obtained the footage of Mr. Richards, polled its users with this question: Is Mr. Richards a racist? Forty percent of the respondents said no.

Granted, the survey is not scientific, but it is instructive. And no, it makes no difference to me that some black people freely use the same word Mr. Richards did. I consider them just as hateful as I do him, except with them, it's hatred of self.

But frankly, Mr. Richards is not the point here. He's just a TV used-to-be who has likely immolated what remains of his career. So be it.

No, here's what bothers me: If so many of my white countrymen refuse to recognize racism when it is this blatant and unmistakable, what expectation can we have that they will do so when it is subtle and covert? In other words, when it is what it usually is.

After all, modern bigotry usually isn't some nitwit screaming the N-word. It is jobs you don't get and loans you don't get and apartments you don't get and health care you don't get and justice you don't get - for reasons you get all too clearly, though no one ever quite speaks them. It is smiles in your face and knives in your back. And it is, yes, a sitcom - like Seinfeld - that presents New York City, of all places, as a black-free zone.

These are complaints blacks have sought for years to drive home to their fellow Americans, only to be met largely by indifference, the defensive apathy of those who are free to ignore or diminish any claim on conscience that makes them uncomfortable. At the risk of metaphor abuse, the response to this debacle makes clear that you can't explain Advanced Racism to those who haven't passed Racism 101.

And, with all due respect to my correspondent, that need to make excuses gets old. The man spent 2 1/2 minutes screaming racial insults. You say that's not racism?

Then, pray tell, what is?

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