

# The Washington Post

## On Leadership



LEGAL SCHOLAR

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### THE QUESTION

#### **Zero tolerance on race talk?**

**Like Trent Lott before him, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid is in political hot water over his comments about Barack Obama's race. Should leaders, in particular, be held to a "zero tolerance" policy on potentially offensive racial comments, or does that have a chilling effect, silencing all discussion of racial issues?**

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#### **No double standard**

Four direct statements apply to Harry Reid's 2008 remarks about candidate Obama's race.

First, it is morally wrong to use dehumanizing stereotypes about any group, especially stereotypes about black Americans, given our nation's history. Both Trent Lott and Harry Reid were wrong.

Second, Lott's offensive remarks were far more blameworthy than Reid's offensive remarks. After more than 50 years of hard-won racial progress, Lott, incredibly, expressed his personal judgment that the nation would have been better off if it had elected segregationist Strom Thurmond president in 1948.

Two years ago, Reid was crudely, superficially and thus inappropriately describing the political impact of a black man on the politics of the presidential election, but was not expressing his own personal values (which are progressive on racial equality and were strongly supportive of candidate Obama.)

Third, given this sharp difference, there is no reason for Reid, whose apology has been accepted by the president, to resign as Majority Leader.

Fourth, the Republicans, from their party chair to senior senators, are shouting "double standard" from the roof-tops for the purely political reason of creating as much trouble as possible for the opposition party both in Washington today and in Nevada during next fall's senatorial election. But, beyond the moral differences, are differences in political context unrelated to the remarks: Lott's exit was due, in important part, to his prior troubles in his own party in the Senate and at the White House; Reid has strong party support at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue.

There are many profound issues about race in America to address with deep thought and concern. Indefensible as it is, this incident is not one of them.

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