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When it comes to race, U.S. politicians talk in code

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By [Matthew Bigg](#)

ATLANTA (Reuters) - The issue of race in U.S. politics is so sensitive and explosive that it has a language all its own. For outsiders, the code can be hard to break.

Indirect words, phrases and euphemisms have long been used to discuss race in the United States, and the subject has drawn more attention this election cycle because Democratic candidate Barack Obama is black.

Obama has been accused of making subtle references to race in to bid to manipulate sentiment, most recently by saying he would look different than other U.S. presidents.

At the same time, references to his alleged "inexperience" as a one-term U.S. senator and perceived "arrogance" on a trip to Europe and the Middle East last month could also be seen as subtle racial digs, political commentators say.

Inexperience might be a substitute for an idea with roots in the era of U.S. slavery that African Americans couldn't be trusted, while arrogance can be a way of suggesting that black people are "uppity" or above their station, they said.

"The issue (of race) is there in political campaigns and not just this one. People talk in code. It is the 800-pound gorilla in the room that is ignored by mutual agreement so it never gets dealt with head on," said Andrew Taylor, professor of political science at North Carolina State University.

Understanding that code can be difficult, but Taylor said it was common because discussions about race in public forums in America were fraught with pitfalls.

"It is very difficult to have a frank conversation about race. Even when you tiptoe around the periphery it ... (can) degenerate into a shouting match," he said.

Obama faces Republican John McCain in the November 4 election to succeed President George W. Bush and race is a factor in the contest, not least because Obama would be the first black U.S. president in a country where few blacks are elected to national office.

'TABOO'

During the primary campaign when parties chose their general election nominee, there were several instances in which candidates were criticized for using covert -- and at times inadvertent -- language to talk about race.

When he announced his candidacy in February 2007, then Democratic hopeful Joseph Biden described Obama as "articulate and bright and clean."

Critics said his words were patronizing and suggested he was surprised a black man could be articulate and clean. Biden apologized. He now supports Obama and is considered a possible vice-presidential candidate.

In May, Hillary Clinton said Obama's support was weakening "among working, hard-working Americans, white Americans." Her comments were read by some as implying that blacks were lazy but also as a subtle appeal to white racial solidarity.

Clinton said her remark was misinterpreted.

Obama gave a high-profile speech about race in March that was praised in some quarters as bold because politicians rarely address the issue directly.

"Blacks feel like they have more responsibility for exposing and discussing racism. Whites generally feel that they don't want to be involved," said Leslie Harris, a history professor at Emory University in Atlanta.

Racial references touch raw nerves when they allude to negative stereotypes about African Americans to do with laziness, criminality, untrustworthiness or sexuality.

An advertisement run by McCain's campaign this month, which portrayed Obama as a celebrity who was not ready to lead, sent a subtle racial message by flashing images of Paris Hilton and Britney Spears, according to Ronald Walters, professor of politics at the University of Maryland.

Walters said the ad played on deep cultural fears about inter-racial dating and marriage, which was illegal until the 1960s in some U.S. states.

"The code is used to remind people that the opponent is black. One of the reasons why people talk about it in muted terms is

because it's an old racial taboo, particularly in the South," he said.



Instead, they left the media -- and voters -- to decipher what they meant.

(Editing by [Todd Eastham](#))

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