

Obama's 'flattery' offers a lesson

April 14, 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

Just because a fellow is sharp and respected enough to win a second term as president of the United States does not mean he is immune to an occasional goof. Just mention the name of California attorney general Kamala Harris to Barack Obama these days, and ask how someone with his perspicacity could have stumbled so badly.

At a recent fundraiser, Mr. Obama praised Ms. Harris as “brilliant,” “dedicated,” and “tough” (CP 4-7-13 p. 3). He should have left it at that, but did not. Instead, the president went on to say California's top lawyer “happens to be, by far, the best looking attorney general in the country. It's true! C'mon.”

His remarks were a lit match tossed carelessly into a barrel of gasoline. Within hours he called Ms. Harris and apologized. White House press secretary Jay Carney told reporters that the president “did not want in any way to diminish the attorney general's professional accomplishments and her capabilities.”

My hunch is that a slip like that on the part of a prominent leader would have gone largely unnoticed here in Taiwan and, perhaps, in most countries in Asia. I wish I did not feel that way.

A sports-related phrase in English describes a particularly candid way of treating a subject. Native speakers with an interest in boxing (such as me, and, yes, I do feel conflicted about the sport on moral grounds) may talk of “taking off the gloves” to discuss a sensitive issue. They mean they want to deal with a topic very directly, with no padding, so to speak.

I took off the gloves long ago in talking with students about the gross injustice of over-emphasizing the importance of physical appearance, especially for girls and women. Regardless of where we may be, London, Paris, Taipei or Shanghai, it makes no difference. It is patently unfair and wrong to summarily reduce the value of an entire block of humanity (in this case females, obviously) to the single question of their “looks” (Mr. Obama's word).

A few years ago, some colleagues and I were discussing a language-teaching video that opened with a story about a young woman who happened to be a university student. She also just happened to be

very beautiful. The plot featured her as the winner of a “Miss Photogenic” contest at her school. The school in the author's mind happened to be our university. In the story, males in the presence of this “doll” suddenly found their knees wobbling, their hearts palpitating and, ah, you get the idea.

A female colleague at the meeting table suddenly expressed what she termed were mixed feelings about this instruction tool, this video.

“When I was a student,” she said, “one day I was dressed in sloppy clothes and had to handle routine business at the post office. The woman at the counter scoffed at me because of how I looked. 'Are you a Fu Jen girl?' she asked me. 'Fu Jen is famous for its beautiful women students. You don't - -.' Well, it was a cloudy day and maybe I was a little tired,” my colleague went on, “but those words really upset me.”

Then she took off her gloves.

“I have two daughters. I don't think I want them to study English with some kind of media presentation about a gorgeous model who is a college student. How would my girls feel, watching this English lesson? Would they think they've got to measure up to this beauty?”

How we look does of course make a difference on the people around us. There is a time and a place for everything, so choosing what to wear for the right occasion is in fact important. Personal hygiene always matters.

Lifestyle helps to shape appearance, too. Regular exercise, proper sleep, and a healthy diet all matter. So, fine: we all do the best we can with what nature gives us.

We who are male can assume that people are apt to judge us by our accomplishments and our character. But the rules may change for girls and women. Society may well demand that they be “the best looking” in whatever profession they find themselves. That is neither fair nor right, and all of us, male or female, should say so.

President Obama was right to apologize to Kamala Harris.

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