

Shame on China for US envoy slurs

March 9, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

As we contemplate the recent shot in the foot that the government of the People's Republic of China gave itself, it is useful to remember how the scourge of prejudice appears in nearly every culture under the sun.

Before I point a finger at anyone else, I have to glance at my passport.

As a high school student, I became aware of actions President Roosevelt and the U.S. government took against Japanese-Americans after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. I was 16 years old when I first learned of internment camps the U.S. government set up in early 1942 in the western part of the country. Later I dug deeper and read about Executive Order 9066. That command railroaded, with horrendous rapidity, over 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry into internment camps (easier on the ear than "prison camps"). A full 62 per cent of those interred were American citizens.

The Carter administration initiated new scrutiny of those actions in 1980. On his watch, survivors of the camps received reparation checks for US \$ 20,000.

It was Ronald Reagan, however, who in 1988 recognized in writing that racial bigotry, laced with war hysteria, had led to the persecution. He made apologized on behalf of the government to the victims. Some US \$ 1.6 billion were distributed to survivors and their heirs.

I lived about half my life between the end of World War II and the middle of the Reagan era. As a youth, I could sense the aftermath of some of that war in the form of racial prejudice against Japanese people. The prejudice was not, however, merely against Japanese. Nor was it a thing unto itself, cut off and segmented from other evils. I saw early on that racism was inherently a form of violence.

As a college student, I felt as if violence was as "everyday" as peanut butter and jelly. John F. Kennedy was assassinated in my sophomore year of high school. Martin Luther King, a man I still highly admire, was shot to death when I was in college. Very soon, Bobby Kennedy left us in the same way.

Violence was in the air. We watched violence on the nightly TV news. We saw napalm fall from Vietnamese skies. We blinked our eyes as naked children ran in agony, their mouths open as they screamed, their skin aglow in flames.

In my mind, the violence of Vietnam was always tinged with racism. Some of the talk you heard at the time! In the 60s and 70s I was aware of some of my race who claimed life was cheap for "Asians. You know, there are so many of them, and they don't cherish life like we do." Older now, I realize that no government or culture is perfect.

After two and a half hard years, American ambassador to China Gary Locke now returns to the United States as we prepare for the new man, former senator Max Baucus.

Last Sunday, two of our local English papers took seriously the PRC government's farewell words to Ambassador Locke. One ran the story on page 1. The China Post highlighted it at the top of page 2, and provided more details, more fodder for shame for our friends at the top of the pecking order in Beijing.

An editorial in the China News Service went after Locke hammer and tong. It mocked him for his lack of fluency in a Chinese language. It hit below the belt by wishing his ancestors would punish him from the afterlife. By calling Locke "a rotten banana" (wording for a person "Asian on the outside" but "white within"), "a guide dog for the blind" (a stab at Locke's help for blind Chinese civil rights activist Chen Gwangcheng) and "a plague" (an insinuation, perhaps, that the evil wizard-ambassador was magically responsible for Beijing's smog), the government bathed itself in mud.

No one can untie knots of stupidity in the past. But in time people may be able to open their eyes and recognize shameful behavior. The US government couldn't take away the hurt it caused to persons of Japanese ancestry in World War II. The day did come when it could say it was sorry.

Beijing's treatment of Gary Locke cannot of course be truly compared to Executive Order 9066. Still, the venom in that editorial was an embarrassing mistake dripping with racist slurs. Authorities across the strait might one day see that, and say so out loud.

That would be very nice. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. The Beijing government's attack on the American ambassador in this news event is fierce and rude because of the language it used. Government spokespeople are usually polite and somewhat sophisticated in their words. Do you ever experience people trully 'screaming' or 'cursing' at others or you? What is the effect of violent language on people?
2. Part of the Chinese government's attack on the ambassador is due to his ancestry: his grand-parents were Chinese who immigrated to the USA. Beijing says he was "not Chinese enough." What does it mean to belong to a nationality or a race? Is it so important where our parents or grand-parents were born?
3. Words . . . words . . . words. We use words all the time. Do you sometimes stop and think about the power of words that you speak to others? Words of anger or words soft with care or words . . .???

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