



Comments from the Clintons and Clinton supporters are spurring a racial backlash.

Racial tensions roil Democratic race

By BEN SMITH | 01/11/08 03:04 PM EST | Updated 01/11/08 06:41 PM EST



A series of comments from Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, her husband and her supporters are spurring a racial backlash and adding a divisive edge to the presidential primary as the candidates head south to heavily African-American South Carolina.

The comments, which ranged from the New York senator appearing to diminish the role of Martin Luther King Jr. in the civil rights movement — an aide later said she misspoke — to Bill Clinton dismissing Sen. Barack Obama's image in the media as a "fairy tale" — generated outrage on black radio, black blogs and cable television. And now they've drawn the attention of prominent African-American politicians.



"A cross-section of voters are alarmed at the tenor of some of these statements," said Obama spokeswoman Candice Tolliver, who said that Clinton would have to decide whether she owed anyone an apology.

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"There's a groundswell of reaction to these comments — and not just these latest comments but really a pattern, or a series of comments that we've heard for several months," she said. "Folks are beginning to wonder: Is this really an isolated situation, or is there

something bigger behind all of this?"

Clinton supporters responded to that suggestion with their own outrage.

"To say that there is a pattern of racist comments coming out of the Hillary campaign is ridiculous," said Ohio Rep. Stephanie Tubbs Jones. "All of the world knows the commitment of President Clinton and Sen. Clinton to civil rights issues — and not only the commitment in terms of words but in terms of deeds."

Referring to the King quote, Sheila Jackson Lee, another Clinton supporter, said Clinton was trying to contrast King and Obama, not to diminish King: "It really is a question of focusing on the suggestion that you can inspire without deeds — what is well-known to the child who studies Dr. King in school is that yes, he spoke, but he also moved people to action."

But other black Clinton supporters found themselves wincing at the Clintons' words, if not questioning their intent.

A Harlem-based consultant to the Clinton campaign, Bill Lynch, called the former president's comments "a mistake" and said his own phone had been ringing with friends around the country voicing their concern.

"I've been concerned about some of those comments — and that there might be a backlash," he said.

Illinois State Senate President Emil Jones, a prominent Obama supporter, echoed those sentiments.

"It's very unfortunate that the president would make a statement like that," he said of Bill Clinton's criticism of Obama's experience, adding that the African-American community had "saved his presidency" after the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

"They owe the African-American community — not the reverse," he said. "Maybe Hillary and Bill should get behind Sen. Barack Obama."

Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr., through a spokesman, used even stronger language. "Following Barack Obama's victory in Iowa and historic voter turnout in New Hampshire, the cynics unfortunately have stepped up their efforts to decry his uplifting message of hope and fundamental change.

"Regrettably, they have resorted to distasteful and condescending language that appeals to our fears rather than our hopes. I sincerely hope that they'll turn away from such reactionary, disparaging rhetoric."

Many analysts think Clinton won New Hampshire on the back of a feminist backlash against criticism from her rivals and the media, and now, after his own defeat, it's Obama's turn. Race is particularly complicated turf this year, however, in a contest that features two towering figures who pride themselves for breaking racial barriers in American politics.

The first is Bill Clinton, sometimes referred to as "the first black president," who now finds himself on the same uncertain ground as any other white politician speaking dismissively of an African-American rival.

He was expected to call in to the Rev. Al Sharpton's radio show, which airs in South Carolina, Friday afternoon, to explain his "fairy tale" comment.



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