

Understanding Perry's Hunting Camp Controversy

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The [report](#) that Rick Perry's family leased a hunting property named "Niggerhead" illustrates two noteworthy dynamics of the Texan's candidacy. One is simply that entering a presidential race as late as Perry did causes every pockmark to be magnified by an eager press corps and judged harshly by an impressionable public just getting to know the candidate. Since joining the fray in August, the Perry campaign has seen media maelstroms kicked up over his views on Social Security, the HPV vaccination mandate he instituted in Texas, and in-state college tuition for illegal immigrants. Meanwhile, the skeletons in chief rival Mitt Romney's closet—the dog on the car roof, companies gutted by Bain Capital, the Massachusetts health reform that laid track for Obama's national overhaul, etc.—are old news. Romney has been running for President almost non-stop for four years and his past, while important, simply doesn't command the same level of attention. (It's safe to say that Chris Christie, should he make a rumored last-minute leap into the race, would, like Perry, face a wave of scrutiny.)

But the other, more significant aspect of the Perry story is that it displays the painful racial tensions that linger in the South and the inevitable culture shock when Southern politicians of a certain age enter the national arena. One-time presidential flirt Haley Barbour drew criticism last year when he praised '60s-era anti-segregation Citizens' Councils and said of that tense, violent chapter in Mississippi's history, "I just don't remember it as being that bad." In 2010, conservative darling and then newly elected Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell omitted any mention of slavery in his official declaration of Confederate History Month, attracting national scrutiny that forced him to issue an apology along with a new proclamation. (At the time, Barbour said McDonnell's omission didn't "matter for diddly.")

Neither of these things were new phenomena. In the 1980s, Barbour warned an aide who spouted racial epithets that "he would be reincarnated as a watermelon and placed at the mercy of blacks." McDonnell hails from a state that for 16 years spanning the '80s and '90s combined the federal holiday honoring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with another one celebrating confederate generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. It was in this same time period that Perry's family began leasing a Texas property casually called "Niggerhead."

The details of the new controversy are a bit fuzzy: There are conflicting accounts of how long Perry, whose father leased the ranch in 1983, frequented the property while the offensive name was still there. Perry says it was painted over in the first year of the lease, while others say it was at least partially visible through the 1990s when Perry took groups of colleagues there to hunt. It's not clear to me that Perry's limited connection with the name warrants rebuke. But that's not really the point. Here's what might be the most telling part of the [Washington Post's story](#), a description of Throckmorton, the Texas town near to which the the property is located:

She said it was not uncommon in the 1950s and '60s for whites to greet blacks with, "Morning, nigger!" "I heard that so much it's like a broken record," said Yeldell, who had never heard of the hunting spot by the river. Racial attitudes here have shifted slowly.

Haskell County began observing Martin Luther King Jr. Day two years ago, according to a county commissioner. And many older white residents understand the civil rights movement as a struggle that addressed problems elsewhere.

"It wasn't the same issues here you were dealing with," said Don Ballard, the superintendent of the Paint Creek school district. "Certainly were no picketing signs. Blacks were perfectly satisfied with what was happening..."

It's just a name," said Haskell County Judge David Davis, sitting in his courtroom and looking at a window. "Like those are vertical blinds. It's just what it was called. There was no significance other than as a hunting deal..."

Many Americans just aren't exposed to this sort of story until a son of the South (Texas is borderline, granted) swaggers onto the national stage. Barbour, McDonnell and Perry aren't perpetrating any grand modern-day racial malice. Rather, they're from places where some whites don't see what was "that bad" about the segregated South, why Blacks wouldn't be "perfectly satisfied" in the 1960s, what slavery has to do with the confederacy, or that "Niggerhead" is not "just" a name. This is the world that Perry is from. It doesn't make him guilty of anything, but it's part of understanding a man who wants to be President.

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