

OP/ED

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Post-racial? We don't think so!

It's ironic that racism – an evil that the majority on the U.S. Supreme Court seems to believe doesn't exist – revealed its ugly head in several forms this past week, colliding with the High Court's decision Tuesday to virtually kill the Voting Rights Act.

Established in 1965, the VRA helped to ensure that generations of African Americans were not denied their right to vote by giving the federal government the ability to veto state measures enacted to deny blacks the vote. In the 1960s, the Act made it impossible for Southern states to make blacks take competency exams and jump through other hoops. In recent years, the act has prevented some states from implementing voter ID laws.

With its decision this week, the Court gave states a one-way ticket back to Dixie Land. Now, with states no longer subject to such federal oversight, it is painful to imagine what will come next. The opinion of the majority – made up of Conservative justices Antonin Scalia, Anthony Kennedy, Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito and Chief Justice John Roberts – is that since "things have changed dramatically" in the South since the VRA was signed into law, much of it is no longer relevant. Really?

The parents of Trayvon Martin would disagree. They were sitting in a Florida courtroom Tuesday as the Court's opinion was handed down, trying to contain themselves as pictures of Trayvon's lifeless body were shown to a jury.

George Zimmerman, the "white Hispanic," who shot and killed the black unarmed teenager on Feb. 26, 2012 is finally being tried for second-degree murder. The fact that Zimmerman was not arrested and barely questioned by cops after gunning down a black teen is a side effect of racism. Black lives mean little to many whites (and sadly some blacks as well), and every teenager of color is presumed guilty on sight.

The morning of the ruling, some of the 120 people who were arrested at this week's Moral Monday protest at the General Assembly were just being released from jail. The N.C. NAACP and other organizations have staged the weekly rallies to take a stand against measures by Republican lawmakers that are clearly minority unfriendly.

The GOP-controlled General Assembly – surely sensing that the VRA ruling would swing toward conservatives – has already pushed through a voter ID law and moved to curb early voting days and sites. An American history test for prospective black and brown voters may be on the horizon. Why not? The highest court in the land has given Southern lawmakers carte blanche.

Southern cholesterol queen Paula Deen was probably downing her favorite deep-fried comfort food Tuesday as the ruling was announced. Unless you are living under a rock, you have heard that the renowned chef is in hot water after admitting to using the word "nigger." She made the admission in a deposition she gave for a lawsuit that has been filed against her and her brother by a former manager of one of the family's Augusta, Ga. eateries. The plaintiff, a white woman, claims that Deen, her brother and top associates practice racism wantonly and throw out the N-word with ease and frequency.

Of course, such behavior contradicts the Deen we see on television, the one who has made tens of millions selling her cookbooks, cookware and a wholesome image as a genteel Southern belle.

The permanently glued smile upon Deen's face is the new face of racism – folks who seem sweet as pie (pun intended) on the outside but are covertly whistling "Dixie."

Apparently these undercover bigots have convinced the Supreme Court and countless others that racism died with Separate but Equal.

Two Fathers, No Shortage of Love

Mark Maxwell
Guest Columnist

When the daughter of close friends received her medical degree a few weekends ago, I worked long and hard to make sure our tribe of teenage boys looked sharp for the celebration. But their behavior needed no help at all. My husband, Tim, and I watched proudly as our boys chatted easily with guests, checked each other's table manners and politely thanked kind women who swooned over their good looks and gentlemanly ways. Yes, we are proud dads. Our boys are smart, loving kids and good citizens.

Our concerns go beyond manners, of course: Tim and I make sure that our boys are safe and loved, that they work diligently at school and look for other ways to expand their horizons, and that they always know they can turn to us. In short, we are their parents. The fact that we are a gay couple is beside the point – but we face obstacles every day because of who we are.

Tim and I were legally married in the District of Columbia in January after more than two decades together, but in our home state of North

Carolina, we are legal strangers. Because of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and North Carolina's ban on marriages like ours, we can't even both be legal parents to our four boys, three of whom were adopted from North Carolina's foster care system.

In practical terms, this means logistical challenges with schools and hospitals. "Who's the father?" is a constant refrain. It means thousands of dollars more each year on health insurance and a legal bill for documents proving our relationship, which opposite-sex couples don't even have to worry about. But most important, it means our sons – Torin (13), Justin (16), Derrick (17), and Brandon (24) – face second-class status every day, even after finally finding their forever family.

Tim and I are good citizens. We've worked hard to educate ourselves, and we give back to our community because we care. Still, a family member once said to me, "I love you, but I don't agree with your lifestyle." I replied: "My lifestyle is probably no different than yours. We go to work, care for our children, meet with teachers, cheer at our kids sporting events and negotiate with them to wear something besides skinny jeans."

The bottom line is,

our children see us as their parents, not their gay dads, and we are working every day to be the best parents we can be. Tim's parents raised three boys in their 50 years together before his dad's death. My parents, a Korean War veteran and a homemaker, raised nine children. Our families taught us the value of hard work and family.

Today, we are working to teach our children the same values, but we stand on a shaky foundation. If Tim or I were to die, our children would be left in legal limbo, because of the adoption laws, and financial straits because we are not entitled to receive Social Security survivor benefits, even though we are legally married.

We have done our part. Our children deserve to be raised in a family that is not treated as second-class just because of who we are. If we truly believe that we must put children first, then we must respect all families.

Mark Maxwell and Timothy Young speak regularly on the topic of marriage equality and child advocacy. Mark is a Ph.D. candidate at Walden University. His dissertation describes the impact of North Carolina's second-parent adoption policy on same-sex couples who adopt children from foster care.

Taxes

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homeowners who disagree with the values their homes were given to file a formal appeal asking for the Board to review their individual case. Affected Monticello Park residents and all those whose homes' values have been changed as a result of an appeal will be given additional time to appeal, Burgiss said.

Rev. Willard Bass, president of the Ministers Conference of Winston-Salem and Vicinity, said the changes taking place in Monticello Park are evidence that the public's response to the revaluation has had an impact.

"I'm just glad that we've gone through the process, that we were persistent," he said of the Conference, which banded with representatives from local neighborhood organizations to highlight the revaluation process and encourage owners to file appeals. "There were some things that weren't right, and I think our process worked. We got some positive results out of that."

The Ministers Conference has been outspoken in its criticism of the revaluation process, which many say disproportionately affects black and brown communities. Bass said many homeowners have reported regaining much of the value they'd lost in their homes through the appeals process – and now through the Board's actions in Monticello Park – but he still objects to the tax assessors' methods.

"It's an archaic, old process and now that we've had the experience with the financial fallout, we definitely need to look at this revaluation process," he said.

Konnoak Hills resident Carolyn Highsmith has worked closely with the Ministers Conference to inform and engage affected communities about issues surrounding the revaluation and helped to amass close to 400 informal appeals from homeowners. Highsmith says residents of her diverse community were affected by the revaluation, losing 30-40 percent of their home values on average. Though they were far from being the hardest hit neighborhoods, the devaluation was still a difficult burden for Konnoak homeowners to bear, Highsmith said.

"I had sticker shock when I first saw my reappraisal because my home was devalued by \$60,000 and I knew I had to put a roof on it in the next two or three years," she commented. "...This reappraisal wasn't in line with the market value because of the low number of home sales (in the area)."

Highsmith filed an informal appeal and was able to recoup over 80 percent of the value she'd lost. Many others in the community reported similar results from their appeals, Highsmith said, but other neighborhoods' appeals brought little change in value. She added that the stability of her neighborhood had hurt homeowners in the revaluation process because there was little material to go by in assessing value.

Board of Equalization and Review member David Shaw said the tax assessors did a "superb job" with the revaluation, and that both the assessors office and the board are committed to accuracy in assigning home values.

"It's a massive undertaking and I think for the most part, their tally is



John Burgiss speaks to taxpayers earlier this year.

more right than wrong," said Shaw, who has served on the Board off and on for more than 20 years.

Shaw, a city native and longtime realtor, said home values plummeted this time around because of the housing market crisis that has taken place since the last revaluation, both locally and in many communities across the US.

"There were some pretty dramatic changes in some areas, even in the best case situation, it's been pretty dramatic," he said. "...We're accustomed to seeing values going up. In other years, we've seen almost exclusively requests to lower

the value, and this year we're seeing requests to increase."

For those who have weathered the 2013 revaluation, there's good news on the horizon: the housing market is on the mend, the Wake Forest University alumnus said. He added that the board will continue to strive for excellence – and accuracy – as it hears appeals and reviews any further recommendations Burgiss makes on Friday.

"The board is deeply committed to doing the right thing and getting those values current," he declared. "That's what we're there to do, whether we're raising the values or lowering the values."

The Tax Assessor's Office is slated to conduct its next revaluation in 2017.



Rosa Nell Eaton, 92, was among those arrested this week at the Moral Monday protest.

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