‘Obama’ Has Become a Code Word for Racists

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Racial tensions in the United States have changed since Obama’s election as president, and for the worse. As judicial opinions since 2008 have revealed, both the word “Obama” and the president’s image have become tools for harassing and otherwise discriminating, in the workplace and in places of public accommodation, against blacks and against whites in romantic relationships with blacks.

For instance, while at a company picnic, one white employee sat down next to his co-workers, held a watermelon slice in his hand, and asserted, “I’m going to sit down to eat my ‘Obama fruit.’” In a different court case, a plaintiff complained that the company’s C.E.O. once said he had a “gift for you for all the Obama people outside” — while handing a rifle to another employee. In yet another case, a white employee derided an African co-worker, calling the co-worker “boy,” threatening his life and telling him he should take Obama back to Africa to vote for him.

For other individuals, President Obama’s election has become a basis for denying and ignoring the realities of racism, both conscious and unconscious, in our country. Soon after Obama’s election, conservatives such as Gregory Coleman, a Texas lawyer, argued that the election demonstrated the obsolescence of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 — a point reiterated by the U.S. Supreme Court in its June decision invalidating a section of the act.

In fact, the results from three experiments by Stanford University researchers suggest that endorsing Obama enables some whites to feel more comfortable in favoring other whites at the expense of blacks. The Stanford researchers contended that, for these whites, supporting Obama seemed to reduce their fears about appearing racially prejudiced, giving them the “moral credentials” to exhibit favoritism toward other whites.

At least one case showed this phenomenon affecting the legal process. After admitting that he based his decision in a criminal matter upon the race of the defendant, a white juror later denied his admission. His decision could not have been racially motivated, he argued. Why he was incapable of racial bias? Because, he said, he voted for Obama.