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Opinion

## The 'real' America, really

America today looks less and less like the one extolled by GOP mythmakers.  
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Will the "real" America please stand up?

According to Sarah Palin, she and John McCain "believe that the best of America is in these small towns that we get to visit, and in these wonderful little pockets of what I call the real America, being here with all of you hardworking, very patriotic, um, very, um, pro-America areas of this great nation."

Um, very, um. ... Yeah.

Palin later backed away from these remarks, but the McCain-Palin campaign's staff and surrogates -- and even the guy at the top of the ticket -- keep hammering the same message: Some parts of America -- and some Americans -- are just more authentic and "pro-America" than others.

On Saturday, for instance, McCain advisor Nancy Pfotenhauer suggested that although northern Virginia may have "gone more Democratic," "real Virginia" (the "part of the state that's more Southern in nature") will be "very responsive" to McCain. Rep. Robin Hayes (R-N.C.) joined the chorus, telling the crowd at a McCain rally, "Liberals hate real Americans that work, and accomplish, and achieve, and believe in God."

Hayes, like Palin, later forswore his remarks, but on Tuesday in western Pennsylvania -- one of the few parts of the state where Barack Obama doesn't hold a clear lead -- McCain worked the same theme: Western Pennsylvania "is the most God-loving, most patriotic part of America."

The GOP code isn't hard to crack: There's the America that might vote for Obama (a suspect America populated by people with liberal notions, big-city ways and, no doubt, dark skin), and then there's the "real" America, where people live in small towns, believe in God and country, and are ... well ... *white*.

The divisive GOP rhetoric we've been hearing lately is hardly new. But with each passing year, the "real" America of GOP mythmaking bears less and less resemblance to the America most Americans live in.

About 80% of Americans live in metropolitan areas, not small towns. A third of us are ethnic and racial minorities, but that's changing: Already, nearly 45% of children under 5 are minorities. Although 88% of us believe in God, 70% think that religions other than our own are equally valid routes to truth. And while 59% of us think that wearing an American flag pin is a decent way to show patriotism, even more of us (66%) think that protesting U.S. policies we oppose is a good way to show patriotism. These days, more than half of us say we prefer the Democratic Party to the Republican Party.

Given this, why do McCain, Palin and their team keep pushing the message that the America where most of the electorate lives isn't "real"?

The GOP hasn't been the party of reality-based thinking for some time now. "When we act, we create our own reality," a "senior Bush advisor" (assumed to be Karl Rove) told journalist Ron Suskind in 2002, and this became the administration's version of a game plan. Thus Donald Rumsfeld's conviction -- shared by McCain -- that we would be "greeted as liberators" in Iraq. For GOP leaders, the Iraq that erupted into a violent insurgency just wasn't the "real" Iraq.

We're now seeing the same pathology at work in the McCain-Palin campaign. McCain and Palin look at America and see what they wish was there, rather than what's actually there: an America in which they'll be greeted as liberators and rightful heirs to the mantle of leadership. America, after all, has been led by white Anglo-Saxons for the last two-plus centuries and, for the last 40 years, mostly by Republicans. For that to change is almost unthinkable. And so Team McCain just edits out the inconvenient America that doesn't seem likely to vote GOP. That America's not real. It just can't be.

I'm not entirely without sympathy. Behind the anger and the us-versus-them rhetoric we've seen at recent McCain-Palin rallies, there's a palpable sense of dislocation and anxiety: the anxiety of those who feel that things are slipping away from them, that the world is changing too quickly and too uncomfortably. Change has come fast -- and change hurts.

But that's how it's always been. Our culture was built by immigrants and shaped by wars, social upheavals, economic crises and further rounds of immigration, each time from places that seemed deeply "foreign" to those who had already settled in. Each round of change was painful to those used to the temporary status quo -- but each round of change also gave us a richer, stronger nation.

*That's* the real America: a land of change and perpetual renewal.

Let's stand up for it.

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