

At no one's expense

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

With the Democratic presidential field narrowing to a race between an African-American and a woman, perhaps it was inevitable that the discussion would turn to race and gender - hardly settled issues in today's America.

But there is useful discussion, and then there is debate that is distinctly less so. The national conversation between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama has been less so, with the press acting as inept intervenor - for instance, focusing 24/7, it seemed, on Clinton's teary moment in New Hampshire.

Unless there is a surge by former Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina, the Democratic nomination will go to either a woman or an African-American man. The candidates should celebrate this. Here's how not to: by using race or gender as sniping points. Done by candidates or surrogates, it is dangerous territory given the racial and gender divides remaining in the country. The hard-hearted debate on immigration among the GOP field turned off much of America. So will it be if either Democratic candidate consistently invokes race or gender to gain advantage or put the other at a disadvantage. Race has been the most heated flash point in recent days. "Dr. King's dream began to be realized when President Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act," Clinton said last week. "It took a president to get it done."

Obama decried her remarks as "unfortunate" and "ill-advised." Clinton accused the Obama campaign of misrepresenting her views as diminishing King's role.

Clinton and Obama have apparently agreed to tone it down. Good. Democrats and everyone else understand perfectly the potential for a historic "first" with either candidate. That either got to this point says much good about them, the party and the nation. It should prompt an appreciation that the nation's progress on race and gender, while unfortunately not lifting nearly enough boats, still has lifted many.

And it should signal a recognition that we should not view the gain by any one member of a traditionally disadvantaged group - even unto the presidency - as another group's loss.

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