

# Daily News Opinion

## Alaskans can rise above petty politics, hateful acts

Both of my grandfathers left Southern Germany for America in the 1880s to escape what George Washington called in his Farewell Address "the toils of European ambition, rivalry and caprice."

German was the first language I heard at home. This changed when my older sister Gertrude returned from her first day at school, where her classmates made fun of her broken English. From then on, I rarely heard a German word spoken at home.

My family and their relatives lived through the Dust Bowl in Kansas, the Great Depression, and two world wars when their new homeland fought against the land of their ancestors.

Some Americans today are uncomfortable with the changing face of America. Anger and frustration are invading our national discourse. I urge us all to study our roots.

America's greatness is not in spite of our immigrants. It's because of our immigrants.

We are a mongrel nation. We are not a thoroughbred. We're not German or Irish, Hispanic or Asian, black or white, Christian or Jew. We are all those things and many more, and we don't all get fired at once. That's why America has always out-worked our competition.

During the presidential primaries last year, I liked what I saw in Barack Obama. I didn't see him as black. I saw him as a young American with a deep understanding of what America was meant to be and how we could regain



**WALLY HICKEL**

COMMENT

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When Gov. Sarah Palin surprised us by joining Sen. John McCain on the Republican ticket, I agreed to support her, sticking to my commitment to put "Alaska first." When she took the podium at the Republican National Convention, however, I was greatly disappointed. The race-against-race and class-against-class message of the McCain/Palin campaign was transparent.

I urged Sarah to take control of her message and appealed to her in this column "to rise above the worn-out, negative tactics of presidential politics and assume the role of stateswoman." (Op Ed of September 14, 2008).

My hopes were dashed. Palin became the spokesperson for the divisive voices in American politics. She dismissed the greatness of our immigrant heritage, indeed of today's Alaska, where in Anchorage alone nearly 100 languages are spoken in the homes of the children in our public schools.

She missed a golden opportunity to challenge the rest of the country to adopt the welcoming spirit of the Alaska frontier and the message of mutual respect championed by Bridge Builders of Anchorage and the School District that helped us win All-America City honors in 2002.

I believe that Alaska can be a model for America. We have much to offer, but we will fail if we don't deal with prejudice, not only against newly arrived immigrants but against anyone.

My wife Ermalee, a lifelong Alaskan, and I were outraged several years ago when high school students videotaped Alaska Natives as they shot them with paintball guns, and again this summer when Anchorage teenagers attacked a man apparently for no reason other than he was Eskimo.

These hateful acts must be strongly dealt with and condemned. They are especially offensive in light of the remarkable leadership today's Alaska Native community provides in business, politics and honoring cultural values.

When we represent Alaska to the rest of the country, let's go beyond our stereotypes. Let's explain that Alaska is a place of environmental excellence and spiritual renewal, a vast source of energy and resources, and a model for how commonly owned lands can benefit the people who live on them.

Let's also make Alaska known for respect for all people and reject those who would use racial and class division for personal or political reasons. Because those who do so are playing with forces in the souls of men that could sink our country into that pit of conflict and violence George Washington warned us about more than 200 years ago.

Walter J. Hickel served as governor of Alaska from 1966 to 1968 and from 1990 to 1994 and as U.S. Secretary of the Interior from 1969 to 1970. He is the founder of the Institute of the North. His latest book is "Crisis in the Commons: the Alaska Solution."