

OPINION

Concerning Race, Power and Equality

Shirley Sherrod told the truth

BY C. NICOLE MASON

The trouble with Shirley Sherrod is that she told the truth. In a small town speech before an even smaller NAACP chapter, she grappled publicly with the discomfort of what happens when power and decisions that can impact the lives of ordinary Americans are in the hands of individuals who have traditionally been shut off from power or not had access to resources. In many ways, it is the struggle that Barack Obama has been confronting since he took office.

In our efforts to move past race, we have run right smack into it. There is no doubt about it. Despite our hopes, Obama's

election has had exactly the opposite effect on race relations in the U.S. Rather than moving us toward a post-racial society, it has made us hyper vigilant about how race and power intersect in American society.

A few days ago, Shirley's email box was filled with hate messages. Today, it is overwhelmed with apologies. There's a huge elephant in the room. While I think Ms. Sherrod deserves an apology, I think the biggest apology we owe is to ourselves for trying over the last couple of years to sweep the issues of race and racism under the rug.

Today, we know more about how blacks and racial and ethnic minorities feel about race than any other time in the history of the country. And because there

are more blacks and racial and ethnic minorities in positions of power, there is more scrutiny for now what is being called reverse racism.

In her position as the USDA Director of Rural Development for Georgia, Shirley Sherrod was in a unique position, both as an African American and as a woman, in terms of her ability to dole out much needed resources to farmers. Years ago, when Sherrod visited the white farmer, perhaps, for the first time in his life, his livelihood and the survival of his farm was dependent on the decision of an African American. This is a position that racial and ethnic minorities find themselves in all of the time. However, it is not a position that many whites find themselves in very often.

Historically, the USDA has been fraught with allegations of discrimination against racial and ethnic minority farmers. In fact, they have settled over \$2 billion in lawsuits alleging bias in loan approval rates and the lack of diversity on county committees responsible for administering USDA programs. In 1920, one in every seven farms was owned by African Americans. Today, it is only 1 in 100.

Just because we don't address race or the historical impact of racism on communities and individuals does not mean it no longer exists. What it does mean is that we will have a difficult time moving the country towards a more just and equal society.

Power is shifting in the U.S. The proverbial table is expanding and the halls of power are extending to groups who have been historically left out. Anti-immigration policies like the Arizona law and call of reverse racism from the Tea Party are attempts to maintain the historic flow of power and resources.

The lesson here is that to get to a post-racial society, we have to do the work as individuals, as communities and as a nation. And my friends, we are not there yet.

Dr. C. Nicole Mason is the executive director of the Women of Color Policy Network at the Wagner School of Public Service at New York University.

Multiple Apologies in Order Time to examine the path to justice

BY MELANIE L. CAMPBELL

We've come a long way in America as it pertains to race relations. However, when an up-standing woman that has excelled throughout her long career is forced to resign before the facts are revealed, in an effort to be politically correct; it's time to examine where our journey to justice and equality has led us.

Taking into account the fact that her father was murdered by the Ku Klux Klan, Ms. Shirley Sherrod's story of her own personal growth and racial transformation epitomizes the change many of us hope for in America and have worked for over the years.

Sherrod was the former Georgia state director for rural development at the U.S. Department of

Agriculture who was forced to resign when a right-wing blogger unjustly accused her of discrimination by taking her words out of context. The story was picked up by Fox News and other media outlets.

As an African American woman in leadership, I have to wonder if a man would have been humiliated and asked to pull over to the side of the road to text a resignation without the opportunity to tell his side of the story.

The National Coalition on Black Civic Participation calls on the USDA to make every effort to right this egregious wrong by offering Ms. Sherrod her job back, and making her feel secure that she will suffer no further repercussions due to their rush to judg-

ment.

Ms. Sherrod deserves an apology from USDA, the media, and every individual and organization that reported the story or publicly admonished her without a thorough investigation of the facts. A fast food worker would have received more respect and due diligence.

The lesson here is that if we strive to be legally and morally correct rather than politically correct, and take the time to be right instead of first, we will not taint the reputation of a reputable woman based on comments taken out of context with the intent to incite racial discord.

Melanie L. Campbell is president and chief executive officer of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation.

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