

The Huffington Post



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Faggots, Macacas and Hos - Oh My!

Posted April 16, 2007 | 07:41 PM (EST)

Don Imus is out of work, Al Sharpton logged some primo air time, and the Rutgers women have humbled us with their dignity.

As we hose off the leavings of the latest cultural food fight, we might want to sift through the slop for some lessons learned.

One is that, even though we've come far from the days when federal troops had to deploy to Little Rock to protect nine African-American high school girls, bias often flows just below the crust of our well-practiced intentions.

Why did a devastatingly succinct sexual and racial slur bring down a \$20 million earner for CBS so late in a career strewn with much of the same - or even worse. Actually - and unfortunately for Don Imus - there was a convergence: being next in a conga-line of recent affronts, media thrilled to have something besides Iraq to fill the Easter holiday, some text-book Sharpton-Jackson opportunism, rising stakes in the game of media-gotcha, maybe even critical mass in our tolerance for mean-spirited stupidity. That last one might be a reach.

There was also something else. It was a telling reveal; a peek through a rip in the curtain of racial civility.

It followed in the tradition of sportscaster Tom Brookshire insulting the intelligence of the Louisville basketball team, Jimmy (the Greek) Snyder offering his views on racial genetics, Ted Danson in blackface at the Friar's Club. Of more recent vintage -- Mel Gibson (who would Jesus insult?) blaming Jews for all the wars in the world, Michael Richards' vein-popping meltdown on the stage of a comedy club, Rosie O'Donnell spouting mock-Chinese, Sen. George Allen's campaign-wrecking "macaca" moment. On the other side of the divide were the Duke lacrosse players - prosecuted, persecuted and kicked to the curb by their university - for doing nothing more than stumbling (ok, stupidly) into a volatile mix of race, privilege, and prosecutorial misconduct.

From Brookshire on, we expected better; we expected more. Like gravity bends light, such disappointment is more pronounced and revealing when it comes from those we respect.

Yes, even Imus. You can argue he's just a shock jock. After all, he once called *New York Times* White House correspondent Gwen Ifill - who is African American - "the cleaning lady." But still there was a ready pool of influential politicians, journalists and others anxious to visit his studios. He was just serious enough, not quite mean enough, occasionally funny enough to get the A-listers. And besides, the man could sell books like nobody this side of Oprah.

Others enjoy the benefit of minimal expectation.

Of course Ann Coulter called John Edwards a "faggot"; it's how she makes a living. There was a microburst of recrimination. But Coulter remains the attack-Barbie for the Right, with an ad-sponsored web site, book sales and speaking engagements. Hip-hop is a ho-filled mire of violent misogyny, and yet the records keep selling - most of them, interestingly, to buyers who are young, white and middle class. Compared to an average day on Howard Stern ("Welcome to Black Jeopardy - today's contestants Kareem in my Coffee and Amos Alien") Imus could qualify for an NAACP Image Award.

Remembering that perspective and excuses are two different things, you know what you're getting with Coulter, with hip-hop and certainly with Howard Stern.

But when intolerance spews from places where we would hope for better - a film star, a politician, a main-stream radio host, or those who either cynically or reflexively vilified three innocent college kids, we are reminded how thin the barrier can be between what we profess and the spidery corners of what we think. For many, that reminder hits uncomfortably close to home.

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