

No One Wants To Be Called a Racist

Once again university administrators and faculty in the United States and elsewhere are confronted by the problem of how to address actions and utterances that are held to be past wrongs. The wider underlying problem is whether pressure on them prevents an honest dialogue on race relations. Certainly the ill-advised comment of former Attorney General Eric Holder that we are essentially a nation of cowards on matters of race is unacceptable.

The latest demand on universities is to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes at Oriel College, Oxford University which he attended as a student in the 1870s. Already, a plaque dedicated to him has been removed from the college. In South Africa, excrement has been smeared on his memorial at Cape Town University, and agitation to destroy the monument continues.

Rhodes was born, the son of a vicar, in Britain, and left for South Africa for his health. He became a very wealthy man, founding the De Beers diamond empire, that for a long time controlled the world diamond trade, and becoming prime minister of what was then called the Cape Colony, 1890-1896. He gave a part of his fortune to Oxford University to set up a scholarship in his name, the world's first international study program, and the recipients are known as Rhodes scholars.

Rhodes was a man of enormous achievement, the founder of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe and Zambia), but a highly controversial figure.

Rhodes, a man of his times, was a believer in the Anglo-Saxon race as the master race, and a colonialist who wanted a united South Africa and a Cape to Cairo railroad running through

British territory. He was also a confirmed racist. He began the policy of enforced racial segregation, an early form of apartheid, in South Africa. His private army, the British South Africa Company's Police (BSACP) murdered thousands, perhaps as many as 60,000 Africans. He acquired land through armed force. He prevented Africans from voting for the House of Assembly in the new political system.

Today no one doubts that racism, in behavior and expression, is a moral evil, and no rational person would endorse it as previous generations did. Nevertheless, the controversial problem arises once again as it did in November 2015 in the case of Princeton University and the removal of the tributes and name of Woodrow Wilson because of his racist views.

It may be the case that the student campaign to remove statues of Rhodes, as in the case of Wilson, is driven less by animosity toward the racism of the individual than by a justifiable demand for demographic changes of faculty and students, and for changes in the university curriculum to make it more "diverse."

Nevertheless, the meaninglessness of putting excrement on statues of Rhodes, or removing the statues, ought to be pointed out especially by those who have benefited from past generosity of Rhodes's legacy. Rhodes scholarships are international post-graduate awards to non-British students to study for a year at the University of Oxford. They are given supposedly on the basis of an applicant's moral force of character and instincts to lead, in the hopes of promoting understanding between the great powers. They are among the world's most prestigious scholarships. Interestingly, those who have benefited from them are among the most vehement critics of racism today.

Among the 8,000 awards given so far, many have been awarded to American individuals who later became renowned. In the past they have included a Supreme Court Justice, university presidents, U.S. Senators, and editors of newspapers. In

recent years recipients have included three Australian prime ministers, Bill Clinton, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, National Security Advisor Susan Rice, Bobby Jindal, Bill Bradley, Director of Central Intelligence Stansfield Turner, a mayor of Los Angeles, a Librarian of Congress, and journalists such as George Stephanopoulos and Peter Beinart.

One might expect all or some of these eminent people to explain to the students that disrespect to past controversial figures serves no real purpose, and that the task of universities is to seek truth and objective inquiry. They should not allow dislike of the views of 19th-century figures to override that primary function and become advocates of the politically correct imposition of anti-establishment contemporary orthodoxies.

The critical students are not barbarians or doctrinal lunatics within the gates of democratic societies. They do not resemble the brutal, uncivilized barbarians of the past like the Visigoths led by Alaric who sacked Rome in 410 or Attila the Hun at the gates of Rome in 453. Nor do they resemble the brutal Islamist terrorists, ISIS and al-Qaeda, with their violence and assaults on non-Muslims and civilians in Iraq and Syria, and their threat to Western civilization ignoring all moral rules and compunctions.

Yet, if the recent student actions are not similar to the destruction by ISIS and al-Qaeda of monuments, artifacts, and memory of Middle East heritage, the students are too eager to remove memory of the past to which they are opposed. Perhaps not all will agree, but a line must be drawn. In his unduly neglected book *Barbarians at the Gate* published in 1939, on the threshold of World War II, Leonard Woolf wrote there is a point up to which the sane person believes a doctrine and says "yes," beyond which that person disbelieves it and says "no."

It is unseemly for Oriel College to begin discussion of the removal of the plaque for Rhodes, on the grounds it is

inconsistent with its principles, and can be regarded as an uncritical celebration of a controversial figure. Since when have genuine universities been afraid of controversial figures?

Clearly Rhodes should be criticized for his racist views but equally clearly one can conclude he would not hold or express those 19th-century views on race today. The dissenting students might be reminded that in 2003 the Rhodes Trust was partly responsible for the creation of the Nelson Mandela Foundation that provides scholarships for students to study at African universities.

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