

Mitchell's Musings: 10-19-15: Now and Then

Daniel J.B. Mitchell

Recently, California governor Jerry Brown signed a bill banning the word "Redskins" from being used as a public school team name or mascot. The name and variants were once commonly used for sports teams. Indeed, the name is still used by the Washington, DC professional football team despite its offensiveness to Native Americans. On the other hand, Brown vetoed a bill that would have banned confederate names from being used for parks and public buildings. (Various prominent figures in California history were confederate supporters.) It was up to local authorities, Brown indicated, to determine whose names were commemorated on public facilities.¹

So was the governor just inconsistent in his decisions on what to sign and what to veto? Plainly, the impetus behind both bills was a change in present-day sensibilities relative to the past when the names were first applied. But there is a difference between the use of a term such as "Redskins" which is offensive and the naming of a building after a person who may have played a prominent role in some aspect of local history deemed positive even though that person may have also had negative qualities.

The line between one and the other can be hazy, however. After the recent shooting in North Carolina, there was a significant drop in the display of confederate flags in public spaces even though supporters of such displays came up with rationales as to why there were positive elements. But symbols and names are nonetheless different from persons. George Washington was a slave owner, but he has both a state and the national capital named after him. It's hard to say that, as a person, he played an insignificant role in U.S. independence and history.

There is now resistance to celebrating Columbus Day due to the eventual impact of his voyages on Native Americans. But when Columbus set out he was not looking to create mass murder. After all, he did not know that the continents of the western hemisphere even existed, let alone that they had inhabitants. That he got to North America at all, given the limits of sailing and navigation technology, is surely a fact worth noting.

The fact is that people who played a major role in history were all flawed – they were human and products of their societies – especially when viewed with modern sensibilities. And you don't have to look back centuries. Martin Luther King had extra-marital affairs – not a Good Thing. And he was hardly alone in that department among major political figures of his time (and later). But we have Martin Luther King Day as a national holiday.

Most biographers of Earl Warren – and Warren himself ultimately – had trouble reconciling his desegregation and other major decisions as Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court with his role as a gubernatorial candidate in California in incarcerating the West Coast Japanese-origin population during World War II. But there are today California public schools named after him as well as a state office building. What can you say other than what he did happen? He did what he did. And in the case of the Japanese internment, it is worth noting, there was virtually no opposition at the time.

¹<http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-me-pc-redskins-mascot-banned-20151011-story.html>

After the Watergate affair, when the White House tapes were discovered, it was also revealed that previous presidents had recording devices in use. On a wholesale basis, the practice really started with Kennedy. But there were some limited recordings going back to Franklin Roosevelt.

In the Roosevelt era, magnetic recording (tape and wire recorders) had not been perfected and office recording devices were basically phonographs that could record for only short durations. Roosevelt had a machine installed that used film and recorded the way movie soundtracks of that period were made. It thus could record for an extended period. He apparently wanted to use the machine for press conferences held in the Oval Office so that misquotes in the newspapers could be corrected. But the device picked up some other conversations.

I came across one such conversation between Roosevelt, black union chief A. Philip Randolph, and Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox concerning the role blacks (“Negroes” on the recording) were going to play in the then-segregated military shortly after the draft was enacted in 1940.² Randolph was president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and his union’s membership reflected the occupational segregation on the railroads.³ He was viewed as a black leader, not just a union leader, by Roosevelt.

In the conversation, Randolph is looking for assurances that blacks would play a significant role in the military. While he hints at integration as a goal, it appears that he will settle for a role in the military for blacks that is more than menial. Roosevelt assures him there would be a combat role for blacks. But there are no promises of integration. When it comes to the Navy, it is pointed out to Randolph, you couldn’t have northern ships (where integration might be accepted) and southern ships (where segregation would be the rule). Roosevelt comes up with the suggestion that since musicians are being recruited by the Navy, you could have “colored” ships’ bands.

OK. By modern standards, there is a lot wrong with this conversation about the draft and blacks in the military. So how should we think about it? At the time of the conversation, the U.S. had not yet entered World War II, but the War had already been going on for some time in Europe. It was evident to Roosevelt that the U.S. would be in the War eventually. (Why push through a draft law, if not?) Troops would thus be drawn from the general population with all of its social attitudes.

The south had been segregated for decades in 1940 and the Democrats – and thus Roosevelt – counted on the electoral votes of the “solid south.” (The solid south referred to the domination of the segregated south by the Democratic Party; Republicans – the party of Lincoln – had little chance there.) Even in the north and west, while there was no southern-style legal segregation, there was plenty of prejudice and *de facto* segregation. The conversation took place shortly before the 1940 presidential election in which Roosevelt was running for an unprecedented, and thus controversial, third term. Can you really judge the conversation without taking account of the world and domestic context of 1940?

Perhaps even more problematic in hindsight is Roosevelt’s role in the internment of the West Coast Japanese-origin population in 1942 after Pearl Harbor. Yes, the internment was very much a product of agitation by Earl Warren and others. But it was Roosevelt who signed the executive order making it

²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5D3A12LKjw>. The recording is only partially audible. I tried to reduce the background noise present in the original.

³http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_org_brother.html.

possible. In 1997, a memorial to Roosevelt was dedicated in Washington (there's that name again!) D.C. And long before that Roosevelt was placed on the dime (because of his "March of Dimes" fundraising against polio). Should we now tear down the memorial and put someone else on the dime, given the negatives?

Unless you think such actions are the obvious and required way to go, you will want to be careful about what is sometimes termed "presentism," i.e., judging historical figures based on modern attitudes. And, even if you think various historical figures might have done better than they did, you might want to contemplate the flaws of some more contemporary figures you admire. There is one thing of which you can be sure; in the future your own beliefs and behaviors are likely to seem odd, outdated, and - with hindsight - even wrong!⁴

⁴This musing started with discussion of a California state law banning a particular Native American-related word for public usage. Such words and symbols were common until quite recently. The first car I owned was a 1954 Pontiac bought in 1963 for \$100. You can see the "Indian chief" hood ornament used on that model at <http://fineartamerica.com/featured/hood-ornament-on-1954-pontiac-robert-jensen.html>. Confession: I didn't think anything of it at the time.