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A part of the Imus issue is not yet finished

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From *Where I Stand*

Some things are not over when they're over. It's important not to forget that.

Everything that can be written about the behavior and fate of Don Imus has already been said. As host of a radio-television talk show, he reduced the Rutgers women's basketball finalists to "nappy-headed ho's." It never even crossed his mind, apparently, that there might be something wrong with that. There's nothing to be gained by piling on -- and I don't intend to. In fact, strange as it may seem, I almost feel sorry for the man because there is a great deal more to be concerned about in terms of the Imus issue than Imus alone.

The real truth of the Imus affair is that the whole tawdry incident has more than enough victims to go around: African-Americans, women, the U.S. Constitution and Don Imus himself. You see, however monstrous Imus may now be seen, in retrospect it is clear that such monstrosity is of our own making.

African-Americans were certainly victimized, of course. By a strange amalgam of old put-downs that were once the lingua-franca of a more overt white racist world, we were taken back almost 50 years to a moment when some of us were really human and the rest of us just played at it. "Nappy-headed" went right along with "honkie," "mick" and "dago" to separate some of us from the majority of the rest of us who had made ourselves the "norm." But in the twisted economy of prejudice, "nappy-headed" said more than "culturally different," as the other labels did. It said, rather, "essentially unlike us." Something other than we are -- in color, in humanity, in a quality of being that rested on the nature of a person's hair.

It makes a person gasp at the very lunacy of it.

The ignorance of racism is a breathtaking thing to watch. It emerges out of domination, maintains itself with structures of power and ends with diminishment, not simply of the "other" but, as we have seen with crystal clarity, of the so-called "norm" itself. It is a fungus that grows across the face of society with such deadly invasiveness that it gets to be taken for granted, to be considered normal, to be called truth.

The tomes of "scientific" data, for instance, used to prove the inferiority of African-Americans -- and of women -- would be laughable if it weren't so pathetic. Racism and sexism were protected and legalized in our Constitution. And the reams of theology spun to insist that dominance of blacks -- and of women -- was God's will and so immutable, would fall into the category of religious superstition, if it weren't so theologically embarrassing.

In one breath, "nappy-headed" and "ho" managed to do both at one time. It caught in its web half the black the population and all the female population of the world. All simply sex objects. "Ho's," in fact. Not moral. Not rational. Not worthy of respect. Any of them. All of them. And, furthermore, it did it on a national broadcast. For all to see and hear. At great expense to the sponsors, great pay checks for the speaker and great attention to the program. Which is precisely where the other victims come in.

Talk shows debated whether or not the statement was really as bad as the black community said it was. After all, this is a country founded on "freedom of speech," isn't it?

The idea gives us all pause. When did "freedom of speech" begin to mean that civility of expression had no place in public discourse? When did "freedom of speech" begin to imply that personal insults and inflammatory talk were inconsequential, were to be protected in the public arena, were without meaning in the civic community? When did the Constitution begin to be used as a shield for name-calling, for insidious and uncivilized insult?

The concept of freedom of speech is tested over and over again in the American legal system. And the courts are pretty clear about it. Freedom of speech, they tell us, covers the subject matter of speech, not the quality of the speech. As a result, it is acceptable to talk or write or show sexual content or religious content or social content in the public domain. But the way we discuss sex or preach in public or promote monarchy or have conferences on white nationalism in the U.S. social system is another thing entirely. The cases are always tendentious, always difficult, always problematic. But one thing is clear: None of these subjects are protected by law when they stir up hostility against another group.

Nevertheless, for years we have, as a nation, been flirting with the dangerous edge of such talk. We have stretched the boundaries of such conversation. We have defended the indefensible on the grounds of free speech when what we really meant was that we wanted the right to engage in hate radio, to attack public figures on a personal level with impunity and to speak anonymously on the internet without accountability for it.

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African-Americans began to call a halt to their public demeaning in the Civil Rights Movement. We finally discovered a difference between being an "African American" and a "nigger." Women's groups have made it clear that defining women sexually -- as "ho's" -- would simply not be tolerated anymore. Women and blacks made it clear that they were fully human, fully rational and to be regarded as fully respectable at all times and by everyone.

So Don Imus was fired for acting otherwise. But that's the problem. Was he really fired because as a nation we simply will not put up with that kind of racist, sexist put-downs? Was he fired because we have higher standards for public speech? Or was he fired simply because a few sponsors withdrew their support from the program? Was he really fired more for economic reasons than for moral reasons? Would CBS really have fired Imus if African-Americans and women had not responded so quickly, so firmly, if the national media had not made it a major story, if sponsors had not withdrawn from the show, if the public had simply laughed and let the whole thing go?

From where I stand, that's the part of the Imus issue that is not finished yet. Are we yet principled enough as corporations to refuse to permit hate radio, to refuse to create the Imus's of the world, or do we only make the kind of business decisions that refuse to support what doesn't sell?

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