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Smelling A Rat: Andrew Breitbart

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Distinctly Catholic

At this time yesterday, the world did not know of the existence of Ms. Shirley Sherrod, an employee of the Department of Agriculture. Then Andrew Breitbart "caught" Ms. Sherrod on tape discussing an incident from twenty years previously in which she said she thought about not helping a farmer who had come to her in need because he was white. Except, that is not what she was discussing at all.

Breitbart edited out the part where she said that the issue was poverty not race. He edited out the part where she said that while she experienced this inclination to not help the white farmer who had spoken to her in a way that she thought was offensive, in the end she did help the farmer. Breitbart, and his FOXNews friends failed to point out that any fair reading of this woman's comments would show that so far from advocating racial bias, she was pointing out the way it lives in our subconscious and that we must overcome it.

When Breitbart released his edited version, the rest of the world piled on. The NAACP denounced Sherrod's remarks. (They later said they were "snookered.") Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack fired Ms. Sherrod. (He now says he is reconsidering.) I admit that I saw the edited version of the remarks and thought, "Oh my God, who could say such a thing?" (I am mad at myself for not smelling a rat.)

Well, now we have come up for air and two things are obvious. Ms. Sherrod should get her job back. And Mr. Breitbart has exposed himself as the national rat we should have smelled.

There is a broader aspect to this story, about the clumsy, disjointed way our nation discusses race. Ben Smith has that over at Politico. But, this is also a media story. When I realized that I, like the NAACP, had been snookered by Breitbart's deceptive editing, my mind went back instantly to FoxNews' decision to call Florida for George W. Bush in 2000. Those of us in the news business, including people like me

who are opinion writers, we can't just ignore facts, deceptively edit tapes, and make things up out of whole cloth.

Some people ask why I do a daily 'Yahoo Watch' and wonder if I am not just calling attention to people and ideas best ignored. Sadly, in this era of viral videos, a lie from Breitbart runs through the blogosphere as fast as the truth. If faux-news organizations like the Catholic News Agency publish something, it will get picked up by twenty websites. You need to point out errors and bias so that someone who is looking for the truth will find a contrary voice. Truth will win out, but it will not happen in a day, and truth has found in people like Breitbart and Roger Ailes a crafty enemy, men who see the media only as a means to an end. They are not journalists. In this great, free country of ours, they can do and say what they want but we must push back with the strongest weapon in the arsenal of democracy, the truth.

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