

In 1964, a candidate emerges from the Catholic imagination

Joe Feuerherd | Oct. 12, 2008



Illinois Sen. Barack Obama? No, New York Gov. Timothy Pettigrew.

Obama, if current polling proves accurate, is on the verge of a very real and historic victory. The fictitious Pettigrew, meanwhile, was the creation of Berry Reece, a Yazoo City, Miss., native and Notre Dame graduate, and New York-based cartoonist Joe Sinnott. The six-part “Pettigrew for President” series ran in the January-June 1964 issues of *Treasure Chest*, the Catholic educational system’s response to the violence and vapidness of such comic book heroes as Superman and Batman, but also part of a broader effort commissioned by Pius XI to instill civic virtue in U.S. parochial school students.

[Watch the Pettigrew Comic panels on Youtube](#) [1].

Written in 1964 but set 12 years in the future, during the presidential primaries of 1976, the Pettigrew story is equal parts civics lesson and Hardy Boys/Nancy Drew mystery. Cliffhangers end the first five parts of the six-part series. Pettigrew runs a close second in the New Hampshire primary, survives an assassination attempt (John Kennedy was murdered as Reece penned the series), but goes on to win the nomination with the bumbling if energetic assistance of Joey and Angie Blatt, children of campaign press secretary Bart Blatt and his “Catholic Action worker” wife, Jane.

Pettigrew, a Catholic, is shrouded, viewed from a distance, or hidden behind pillars and poles through the first five parts of the series. It is only at the conclusion, as the candidate takes center stage to accept his party’s nomination, that readers discover that the candidate is a “Negro,” a black man.



To be sure, the

political and cultural conversation of the era focused on race: Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech preceded Kennedy's assassination by three months and the Civil Rights Act was a source of contentious congressional debate during the first six months of 1964. Still, even 44 years later, the notion of an African-American president during an era when Jim Crow still reigned supreme in the American South seems farfetched, if not fanciful. Not, however, to Reece, whose own views on race were shaped in the Deep South, only to be challenged and turned upside down at Notre Dame.

"I was trying to conceive of a person, a hero, a protagonist, who could unite the allegedly United States of America," recalled Reece, now retired to Annapolis, Md., after a career in book publishing. In an era of segregation and state-sanctioned racism, said Reece, he determined that such a candidate would have to be black.

So why hide Pettigrew's hue until the series' conclusion? "I wanted the students to judge him on the strength of his character before they made any judgments about his race," said Reece.

Though the comic book format was likely alien to the pope, the Pettigrew message of equality and opportunity seems just what Pius XI sought to promote in his 1938 apostolic letter to the U.S. Catholic bishops. The Nazi threat clear, the communist heresy seemingly strengthened, and facing direct assaults on Catholicism in Spain and elsewhere, Pius urged the bishops on the occasion of The Catholic University of America's 50th anniversary to "give special attention to the sciences of civics, sociology and economics" and develop "a constructive program of social actions ... which will command the admiration and acceptance of all right-thinking men."



The U.S. hierarchy's response, outlined later that year by Philadelphia Cardinal Dennis

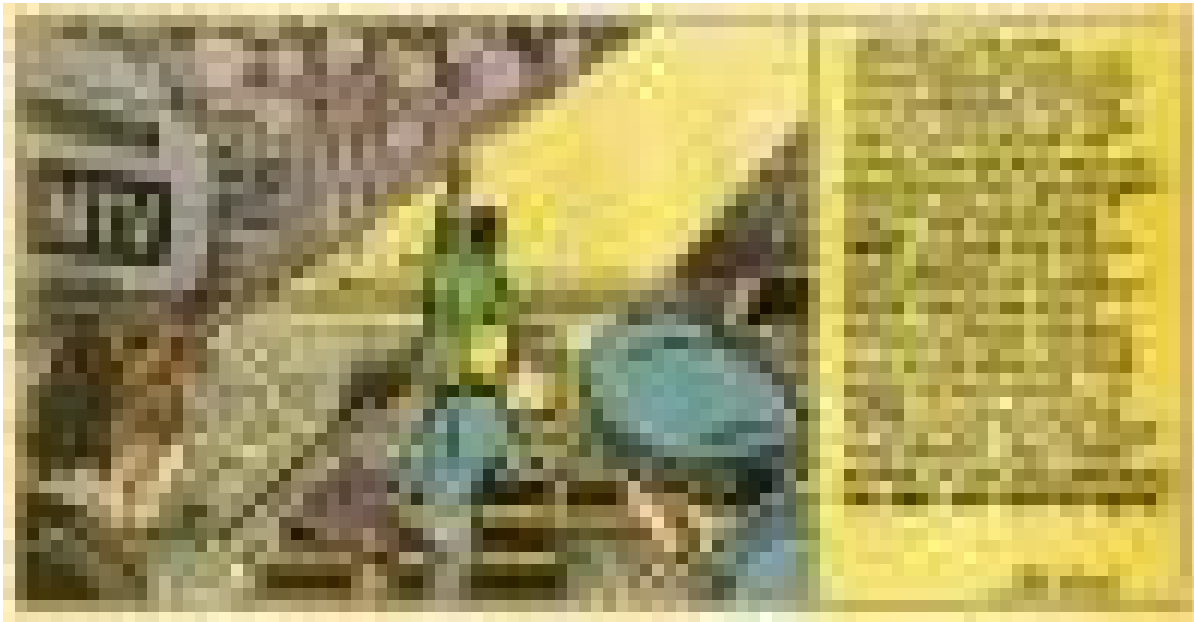
Dougherty, was a charge to The Catholic University of America "to compile at once a more comprehensive

series of graded texts for all education levels” focused on building “an enlightened, conscientious American citizenship.” Over the next three decades, the university-housed “Commission on American Citizenship” developed highly regarded civics textbooks, sponsored more than 5,000 “Catholic Civics Clubs” for parochial school students, and contracted with the Dayton, Ohio-based Pflaum Publishing Group to develop such periodicals as *The Young Catholic Messenger* and *Treasure Chest*.

“Our publications were strongly informed and shaped by the principles of the Commission on American Citizenship,” said Bill Pflaum, son of the publisher’s founder. Today, the commission’s documents are housed at American Catholic History Research Center and Catholic University Archives, where archivist Maria Mazzenga and her colleagues hear frequently during this election year from one-time *Treasure Chest* readers who recall a parallel political universe where a black man previously headed a presidential ticket.

The Pettigrew candidacy was not the first time the commission or its offshoots tackled the question of race. Its 1946 good citizenship handbook, for example, urged students to explore such questions as “What racial groups are there in your community?” and “Why is it important to understand and appreciate the problems of each racial group in a community?”

In 1970, with interest waning in its endeavors, the commission was abolished, its civic clubs disbanded, and the publications it sponsored shuttered.



Did Pettigrew go

on to win the presidency? Reece does not say, but the story concludes with a challenge that some of those parochial school students, now in their mid-to-late 50s, still recall: “It would depend on whether they believed and, indeed, lived those words in the Declaration [of Independence] -- ‘All men are created equal.’ ”

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[1] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CA8MweR89M>