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# There's a Battle Outside and It Is Still Ragin'

By FRANK RICH

THE glittering young blonde in a low-cut gown is sipping champagne in a swank Manhattan restaurant back in the day when things were still swank. She is on a first date with an advertising man as dashing as his name, Don Draper. So you don't really expect her to break the ice by talking about bad news.

"The world is so dark right now," she says. "One of the boys killed in Mississippi, Andrew Goodman — he's from here. A girlfriend of mine knew him from summer camp." Her date is too busy studying her décolletage, so she fills in the dead air. "Is that what it takes to change things?" she asks. He ventures no answer.

This is just one arresting moment — no others will be mentioned here — in the first episode of [the new "Mad Men" season premiering tonight](#). Like much in this landmark television series, the scene haunts you in part because of what people don't say and can't say. "Mad Men" is about placid postwar America before it went smash. We know from the young woman's reference to Goodman — one of the three civil rights activists [murdered in Philadelphia, Miss., in June 1964](#) — that the crackup is on its way. But the characters can't imagine the full brunt of what's to come, and so a viewer in 2010 is left to contemplate how none of us, then or now, can see around the corner and know what history will bring.

This country was rightly elated when it elected its first African-American president more than 20 months ago. That high was destined to abate, but we reached a new low last week. What does it say

about America now, and where it is heading, that a racial provocateur, wielding a deceptively edited video, could not only smear an innocent woman but make every national institution that touched the story look bad? The White House, the N.A.A.C.P. and the news media were all soiled by this episode. Meanwhile, the majority of Americans, who believe in fundamental fairness for all, grapple with the poisonous residue left behind by the many powerful people of all stripes who served as accessories to a high-tech lynching.

Even though the **egregiously misleading excerpt** from Shirley Sherrod's 43-minute speech came from Andrew Breitbart, the dirty trickster **notorious for hustling skewed partisan videos** on Fox News, few questioned its validity. That the speech had been given at an N.A.A.C.P. event, with N.A.A.C.P. officials as witnesses, did not prevent **even the N.A.A.C.P. from immediately condemning Sherrod** for "shameful" actions. As the world knows now, her talk (**flogged by Fox as "what racism looks like"**) was an uplifting parable about how she had risen above her own trials in the Jim Crow South to aid poor people of every race during her long career in rural development.

The smear might well have stuck if the white octogenarian farmer saved by Sherrod 24 years ago was no longer alive and if he didn't look like a Norman Rockwell archetype. Only his and his wife's **testimony to her good deeds on CNN** could halt the lynching party. Tom Vilsack, the secretary of agriculture **who fired Sherrod** without questioning the video's patently spurious provenance, was far slower to reverse himself than the N.A.A.C.P. Good for him that he seemed **genuinely chagrined once he did apologize**. But an executive so easily bullied by Fox News has no more business running a government department than Ken Salazar, the secretary of interior who let oil companies run wild on deepwater drilling until disaster struck. That the White House sat back while Vilsack capitulated to a mob is a disgraceful commentary on both its guts and competence. This wasn't a failure of due diligence — there was *no* diligence.

Even now, I wonder if many of those who have since backtracked from the Sherrod smear — including some in the news business who reported on the video without vetting it — have **watched her entire speech**. What's important is not the exculpatory evidence that clears her of a trumped-up crime. What

matters is [Sherrod's own story](#).

She was making the speech in Georgia, her home state, on March 27, the 45th anniversary of her father's funeral. He had been murdered when she was 17, leaving behind five children and a wife who was pregnant with a sixth. Sherrod had grown up in Baker County, a jurisdiction ruled by a notorious racist sheriff, [L. Warren Johnson, who was nicknamed "Gator" for a reason](#). Black men were routinely murdered there but the guilty were never brought to justice. As Sherrod recounted, not even three witnesses to her father's murder could persuade the grand jury to indict the white suspect.

Sherrod had long thought she'd flee the South, but had an epiphany on the night of her father's death. "I couldn't just let his death go without doing something in answer to what happened," she said. So she made the commitment to stay and devote her life to "working for change." She later married Charles Sherrod, a minister and co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, whose heroic efforts to advance desegregation, including his imprisonment, [can be found](#) in any standard history of the civil rights movement.

None of this legacy, much of it accessible to anyone who wanted to look (or ask), prevented the tarring of Shirley Sherrod last week. And it all unfolded while the country was ostentatiously marking the 50th anniversary of "To Kill a Mockingbird."

If we are to learn anything from this travesty, it might help to retrace the racial soap opera that immediately preceded and provoked it. That story began on July 13, when [the N.A.A.C.P. passed a resolution](#) calling on the Tea Party to expel "racist elements" in its ranks. No sooner had Tea Party adherents and defenders angrily denied that such elements amounted to anything more than a few fringe nuts than Mark Williams, the spokesman and past chairman of the Tea Party Express, [piped up](#). He slapped a "parody" on the Web — a letter from "colored people" to Abraham Lincoln berating him as "the greatest racist ever" and complaining about "that whole emancipation thing" because "freedom means having to work for real."

Williams had [hurled similar slurs for months](#), but now that the N.A.A.C.P. had cast a spotlight on the Tea Party's racist elements, he was belatedly excommunicated by the leader of another Tea Party organization. In truth, it's not clear that any group in this scattered movement has authority over any other. But one thing was certain: the N.A.A.C.P. was wrong to demand that the Tea Party disown its racist fringe. It should have made that demand of the G.O.P. instead.

The Tea Party Express fronted by Williams is [an indisputable Republican subsidiary](#). It was created by prominent G.O.P. political consultants in California and [raises money for G.O.P. candidates](#), including Sharron Angle, Harry Reid's Senate opponent in Nevada. But Republican leaders, presiding over a Congressional delegation with no blacks and a party that nearly mirrors it, remain in hiding whenever racial controversies break out under their tent. "I am not interested in getting into that debate," [said Mitch McConnell last week](#).

Once Williams was disowned by other Tea Partiers, [Breitbart posted](#) the bogus Sherrod video as revenge under the headline "Video Proof: The NAACP Awards Racism." To portray whites as the victims of racist blacks has been a weapon of the right from the moment desegregation started to empower previously subjugated minorities in the 1960s. But its deployment has accelerated with the ascent of a black president. The pace is set by right-wing stars like Glenn Beck, who on Fox [branded](#) Barack Obama a racist with "a deep-seated hatred for white people," and the ever-opportunistic Newt Gingrich, who [on Twitter maligned](#) Sonia Sotomayor as a "Latina woman racist."

Even the civil rights hero John Lewis has been slimed by these vigilantes. Lewis was [nearly beaten to death](#) by state troopers bearing nightsticks and whips in Selma, Ala., just three weeks before Sherrod's father was murdered 200 miles away in 1965. This year, as a member of Congress, he was [pelted with racial epithets](#) while walking past protesters on the Capitol grounds during the final weekend of the health care debate. Breitbart charged Lewis with lying — never mind that the melee had hundreds of eyewitnesses — and [tried to prove it with a video](#) so manifestly bogus that even Fox didn't push it. But he wasn't deterred then, and he and others like him won't be deterred by the Sherrod saga's "happy ending" as long as the McConnells of the conservative establishment look the other way and Fox

pumps racial rage into the media bloodstream 24/7.

“You think we have come a long way in terms of race relations in this country, but we keep going backwards,” [Sherrod told Joe Strupp of Media Matters last week](#). She speaks with hard-won authority.

While America’s progress on race has been epic since the days when Sherrod’s father could be murdered with impunity, we have been going backward since Election Day 2008.

We don’t know what history will bring next. But we might at least address the chilling question prompted in “Mad Men” by the horrific events of 46 summers ago — “Is that what it takes to change things?” — before our own summer comes to a boil again.



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