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July 21, 2010

# With Apology, Fired Official Is Offered a New Job

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*This article was reported by **Sheryl Gay Stolberg**, **Shaila Dewan** and **Brian Stelter** and was written by Ms. Stolberg.*

WASHINGTON — [Shirley Sherrod](#), the black Agriculture Department official whose firing and subsequent offer of rehiring by the Obama administration this week has sparked a national conversation about politics and race, said Thursday she believes she deserves a telephone call from [President Obama](#) — and the White House said Mr. Obama has not ruled it out.

Ms. Sherrod, who until Monday was the rural development director for the Agriculture Department in Georgia, said she was inclined not to return to the agency. Secretary [Tom Vilsack](#) on Wednesday said he was asking her to return to use her expertise to help move the department past its checkered history in race relations, but she told the “Today” show on [NBC](#) that she did not want the burden of solving the department’s racial problems to rest entirely on her.

She said she would like to have a conversation with Mr. Obama, but does not believe he owes her an apology.

“I’d like to talk to him a little bit about the experiences of people like me, people at the grass-roots

level, people who live out there in rural America, people who live in the South,” she said on the show. “I know he does not have that kind of experience. Let me help him a little bit with how we think, how we live, and the things that are happening.”

Ms. Sherrod appeared on a round of morning talk shows, one day after the White House and Mr. Vilsack offered their profuse apologies to her for the way she had been humiliated and forced to resign after a conservative blogger put out a misleading video clip that seemed to show her admitting antipathy toward a white farmer.

By the end of the day, Ms. Sherrod had gained instant fame and emerged as the heroine of a compelling story about race and redemption.

Pretty much everyone else had egg on his face — from the conservative bloggers and pundits who first pushed the inaccurate story to Mr. Vilsack, who looked stricken as he told reporters he had offered Ms. Sherrod a new job. “This is a good woman, she’s been put through hell and I could have and should have done a better job,” Mr. Vilsack said, as he conceded that he had ordered Ms. Sherrod’s firing in haste, without knowing that the video clip, from a speech she gave to the [N.A.A.C.P.](#), had been taken out of context. He said that he had acted on his own, and that there was “no pressure from the White House.”

Mr. Vilsack’s late-afternoon appearance on Wednesday capped a humiliating and fast-paced few days not only for the White House, but also for the [N.A.A.C.P.](#) and the national news media, especially the Fox News Channel and its hosts [Bill O’Reilly](#) and [Sean Hannity](#), all of whom played a role in promoting the story about Ms. Sherrod.

The controversy illustrates the influence of right-wing Web sites like the one run by [Andrew Breitbart](#), the blogger who initially posted the misleading and highly edited video, which he later said had been sent to him already edited. (Similarly, Mr. Breitbart used edited videos to go after [Acorn](#), the community organizing group.) Politically charged stories often take root online before being shared with a much wider audience on Fox. The television coverage, in turn, puts pressure on other news

media outlets to follow up.

The [full video](#) of Ms. Sherrod's March speech to an N.A.A.C.P. gathering in Douglas, Ga., shows that it was a consciousness-raising story. Ms. Sherrod's father was murdered in 1965 by white men who were never indicted; she spoke about how in response, she vowed to stay in the South and work for change. She married the [Rev. Charles Sherrod](#), a civil rights leader and cofounder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Later, as director of a nonprofit group in Georgia formed to help black farmers, long before she went to work for the Agriculture Department, Ms. Sherrod received a request to help a white farm couple, Roger and Eloise Spooner, and she confessed in the speech that the request had given her pause. She did help them, however, and as the fracas over her firing became public this week, the Spooners came to her defense, saying Ms. Sherrod had gone out of her way to accompany them to see a lawyer and, in effect, had helped them save their farm.

"If we hadn't have found her, we would have lost everything, I'm afraid," Mrs. Spooner, 82, said in a telephone interview.

Fox News began its pursuit of Ms. Sherrod in prime time on Monday night on three successive opinion shows that reached at least three million people. Leading off, Mr. O'Reilly asked on his top-rated program, "Is there racism in the Department of Agriculture?" He discussed the tape, plugged Mr. Breitbart's Web site and demanded that Ms. Sherrod resign immediately.

By the time Mr. O'Reilly's remarks, which were taped in the afternoon, were broadcast, Ms. Sherrod had indeed resigned, a development that Fox's next host, Mr. Hannity, treated as breaking news at the beginning of his show. He played a short part of what he called the "shocking" video from Mr. Breitbart, and later discussed the development with a panel of guests, mentioning the N.A.A.C.P.'s recent accusations of racism within the conservative Tea Party movement.

"It is interesting they just lectured the Tea Party movement last week," Mr. Hannity said, telegraphing

a talking point that would come up repeatedly on other shows.

Fox's 10 p.m. show also covered the resignation as breaking news. Ms. Sherrod later said Fox had not tried to contact her before running the video clip repeatedly on Monday. (A Fox spokeswoman said the O'Reilly program had contacted the Agriculture Department for comment. On Wednesday, Mr. O'Reilly said he owed Ms. Sherrod an apology "for not doing my homework.")

By Tuesday, Ms. Sherrod's forced resignation was the talk of cable television news, and it was becoming clear that the Breitbart video clip had been taken out of context. After seeing the full video, the N.A.A.C.P., which had initially applauded Ms. Sherrod's resignation, had reversed itself, saying it had been "snookered" into believing she had been acting with racial bias.

Still, Mr. Vilsack stood his ground on Tuesday, insisting that the Agriculture Department had a "zero tolerance" policy for discrimination. The department has for years been embroiled in lawsuits over accusations of discrimination against black farmers, and Mr. Vilsack said he had been working hard to "turn the page on the sordid civil rights record as U.S.D.A."

By Tuesday night, however, the White House had intervened, a senior official said, and sent word to the Agriculture Department that Mr. Vilsack needed to reconsider.

The official said Mr. Obama had not spoken personally to Mr. Vilsack, but questions swirled around the White House on Wednesday over just how involved the president and his aides were.

Mr. Obama has shied from making race relations a major theme of his presidency, yet somehow racially charged controversies keep cropping up — as was the case last year, when the president said the Cambridge, Mass., police had "acted stupidly" in arresting a black [Harvard University](#) professor, [Henry Louis Gates Jr.](#) The upshot of that was the White House "beer summit," in which Mr. Gates and the white arresting officer shared some cold beverages with Mr. Obama and Vice President [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#)

In an interview Wednesday afternoon, shortly after Mr. Vilsack extended his public apology, the Rev.

**Jesse Jackson** said Mr. Obama should hold another summit with Ms. Sherrod and the Spooners.

“In the end, it’s such a redemptive storybook ending,” said Mr. Jackson, who has known Charles Sherrod for decades. “I wish that Shirley Sherrod and the Spooner family could be invited to the White House and give them the credit that they’re due, because it is a great American story. A rural white family in Georgia and a black woman, overcoming years of segregation. It would be great if the president were to seize this moment.”



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