

On What the Donald Sterling Flap Brought Up for Me
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

At this writing—late April, 2014—there is an enormous flap over what were deemed the racist remarks of Donald Sterling, the owner of the Los Angeles Clippers professional basketball team, in a telephone conversation with his girlfriend that has gone public. No less than the President of the United States has weighed in on the matter: President Obama called Sterling’s comments “ignorant” and “incredibly offensive” and “an example of how the United States continues to wrestle with the legacy of race and slavery and segregation.” The media are in an uproar, and there have been calls for a boycott of the Clippers’ games and drumming Sterling out of the National Basketball Association.

I’m interested in the place of organized sports in American life, and there hasn’t been a bigger sports story in my memory. I was eager to listen to the actual recording of the phone call, which is online. I was struck by the contrast between what I heard on the tape and what I had gotten from media reports and from people I talked to. The audio left me with the impression that while Sterling, for sure, is no saint, the depiction of him as the devil incarnate based on this audio tape goes way beyond what reality warrants, and that it reflects a unfortunate pattern all too prevalent in our time.

Based on this nine minute recording of a private phone conversation with his girlfriend, who is of mixed race (the word is that there are hours of tape not yet made public—I’m only writing here about the audio that is thus far available), Sterling is thought by virtually everybody to be an anachronistic, despicable racist, period, no qualifications, stone him. There is no exploration of what was said and intended by both parties on the tape—including suggestions that we hear from Sterling about what, from his side, he was up to---that I can find in the public discourse, nor any attempts to put it in the context of anything good Sterling might have done in his life as a human being and businessman, just posturing and self-righteous moralizing and unrestrained condemnation and musings about possible ways to rain blows on him.

Everything Sterling is doing and has ever done in his life, or what he has to say for himself, is now immaterial; this chat on the

phone trumps everything. He heads a very successful sport exhibition business, the Clippers regularly sell out; he hired a black coach this year and all but two of his players are black, and he pays them salaries the rest of us would relish; he's donated large sums of money to minority causes and gotten awards for his civil rights activity--all beside the point of the simple generalization chiseled in stone: he's ignorance and malevolence personified, beyond the pale of enlightened and decent society.

In the tape, the girlfriend asks, "What's wrong with black people?" Sterling answers, "Nothing. Nothing." Later on he says, "I love black people." And, "There's nothing wrong with minorities, they are fabulous." About Magic Johnson (a former NBA superstar and black): "I've known him well, and he should be admired." His concern is business-related, with public relations, and limited to the girlfriend, whom people know is his girlfriend; she sits in the first row at the games. He tells her, "There's a culture. People feel certain things. I'm living in a culture, and I have to live within that culture." If the girlfriend puts minorities on her Instagram or comes to games with them, "People [will] call me," he says. So he's telling her, back off on going public with behavior that offends the culture, that is to say, my paying customers. She says he's racist. He replies--clumsily to be sure, it's a telephone conversation, and he's a business owner not a rhetorician and he's 81 years old--that he hires and financially supports blacks, what do you mean racist?

The particulars of what Sterling actually said in those nine minutes and what he meant to communicate is disregarded in the current outrage, and I can't find exceptions to this pattern; it's about labels and inferences drawn from them. *Slate* online magazine has a headline today (April 28, 2014), "The Basketball Plantation: Why White Owners Like Donald Sterling Think They Own the Players." Sterling never said anything that even implied that. Media are piling on with overblown claims and supposed transgressions that have nothing to do with this racism business, including Sterling's marital affairs and the fact that he dyes his hair (so does Stephen Colbert); vicious, no holds barred. Today's New York Times: "Vortex of Outrage Has Long Trailed Clippers Owner." "Donald Sterling, stood exposed [by the telephone conversation] as a gargoyle, disgorging racial and sexual animosities so atavistic as to take the breath away." A gargoyle, atavistic, takes the breath away.

To the guillotine.

I have taken particular note of the Sterling flap because I see parallels between what is happening to Sterling and the treatment of people I have studied and written about—and frankly, me--white racial analysts and advocates, those who dare to publicly express respect for white people and concern for their status and destiny. (I realize the dangers of linking Sterling, who by all accounts is a pretty seedy character, with white advocates; I'm just writing here about reflections the Sterling episode has prompted.) The slurs and attacks poured on whites who affirm white people and show concern for their wellbeing characteristically have very little to do with what they have actually expressed and done. It is about language, words: these people are dehumanized, they become a negative label, a concept—racist, white supremacist, anti-Semite--which in my experience is almost every instance a very inaccurate and unfair depiction, and whatever they express or do is interpreted, and twisted, to suit that conception. The great irony is that if anyone is the victim of racial bigotry if not outright racism it's them: there is a deep-seated negative stereotype and resentment and animosity toward whites that prevails in our time, especially toward those whites that overtly affirm who they are and a commitment to their racial brethren.

What especially intrigues me is why this disparagement and torment of white racial advocates and activists is so strong, heated, among their fellow white people. I don't see other group vociferously coming down on one of their own who stands up for their kind. I don't see blacks, for instance, going after a fellow black who says, "I think we ought to look at how our race is doing and work together to determine our own destiny," demonizing and trying to marginalize and silence him, get him fired from his job, and so on. In a number of places on this site, I've attempted to explain this phenomenon among whites.¹ I'll say briefly in this context that, in good part, I believe it has to do with the fact that people—of any race, but certainly including whites--many of them, most of them, aren't good at discerning reality, which is invariably nuanced and qualified, and they are not prone to work all that hard, and it takes effort to comprehend things as they truly are and it is a lot easier to just go along with what the people who have their eye and ear tell them, and really, it is not in their perceived interest to try to do anything beyond that. How is it in anybody's interest--

journalists, politicians, anybody--to do anything other than jump on a white advocate, or Sterling for that matter? If they said anything that came off as remotely understanding or supportive of him, exhibited anything but outrage and hostility and assault, they would be in major trouble given the current cultural and social circumstance within which they have to forge their lives.

I think we need to get into personal psychology to get a handle on what's going on. I just finished reading a biography of Elia Kazan, the stage and film director who ran up against the House Un-American Activities Committee back in the 1950s for his leftist political affiliations (and got in trouble for supposedly ratting on his commie comrades).² The book said that one of the purposes that is served by having someone to trash and attack--communists then, and, I'm saying, white racial analysts and advocates now--is that it gives the average--and even above average--Joe who isn't doing anything about anything somebody to blame for what's wrong in the world and a justification for doing nothing, plus it makes him feel superior knowing that he isn't ignorant and evil like these other guys. And it justifies really, really despising people and hurting them, which Joe likes to do but can feel guilty about.

Something I'm seeing, and it's unfortunate, is that a good number of the defenders and supporters of white people are being worn down, not so much from the abuse they receive from non-whites—that they can understand—but rather from the grief they get from their fellow whites for standing up for white people. They just want to get away from it, and I must admit that applies to me. I wrote a thought for this web site a couple weeks ago called "On Fighting Up Close" (April, 2014) in which I used a boxing metaphor to get at the reality some of us have to live with. I ended with: "Whether they [boxers] win or lose the match, they take it like a man. They learn from it and get right back into preparation for the next fight; losing a fight doesn't have to be the end of a career. Or, alternatively, they decide to end their boxing career. They've taken enough punches; they don't want any more of it. They get a cabin by the water in Montana and live out their days with the wife and kids." If white people want to be the only race without anyone speaking up for them, and with no organizations, and no leadership, and no racial solidarity and collective action, and no positive racial consciousness and commitment, if that's what they really want, they are doing a very effective job of bringing it about.

1. A recent example, a 2013 writing for this site entitled, *Are Whites Pathological: Yes and No*.
2. Richard Schickel, *Elia Kazan: A Biography* (Harper, 2005).