Our 'Ostrich Mentality' on Racism
In Blaming Campanis, We Refuse to See Prejudice All Around

By HALFORD H. FAIRCHILD

The recent remarks by Dodger executive Al Campanis about blacks in baseball, the resulting public outcry and his subsequent dismissal, offer poignant lessons for understanding the contemporary nature of race relations in America.

Campanis revealed, in his statements expressing doubt about the ability of blacks to fill managerial roles, that he is as much a victim of racism as those he disparaged. The resulting calls for his firing also demonstrate a failure on the part of civil-rights activists to perceive the true significance of public disclosures of prejudicial beliefs.

Campanis' openness, in revealing his beliefs about the inherent inferiority of blacks, is but a symptom of the racial stereotyping that far transcends baseball or professional sports. Indeed, the belief that blacks are intellectually inferior is, as well, as American as Mom and apple pie.

Racism has a long history in America. The founding of this country was accomplished in a climate of unabashed racism and beliefs in the innate inferiority of African peoples. The result of hundreds of years of slavery and decades of Jim Crow legislation, segregation and discrimination has been a cultural belief system that contains a heavy dose of racist ideology.

Campanis' remarks demonstrate the "unconscious" nature of racism, and how easily a person in his position can be caught off-guard. They reveal both the breadth and the pervasiveness of a disturbing ideology that courses through our society.

Just as disturbing are the demands that Campanis be punished. They seem to tacitly accept prejudice so long as it remains unspoken, as if it is not prejudice that we find abhorrent, but the foolishness in revealing it.

It is incorrect to castigate Campanis for his racial beliefs. To do so is tantamount to "blaming the victim." Like the rest of us, Campanis is a product of his culture. He reminds us that we all lose by bigoted belief systems. He reminds us that bigotry is blind to itself.

Both phenomena—the inadvertent disclosure of racial prejudice, and the public condemnation of it—are reflective of the denial syndrome that surrounds American racism. It is what could be termed an "ostrich mentality" when it comes to the difficult social issues that confront us. If we don't see the problem, we can pretend that it doesn't exist. And when we do see it, we posture in outrage and indignation. Such posturing participates in the denial syndrome by failing to acknowledge the omnipresence of prejudice and racism.

In the last year or so there has been a notable resurgence in the expression of intergroup hostility. The Howard Beach incident, racial confrontation in Forsyth County, Ga., and open hostility to blacks who desegregate certain neighborhoods are grim reminders of our continuing need to combat racism on multiple fronts.

Professional sports are a microcosm of the rest of society. In it we find courage, competitiveness, teamwork, violence, drug abuse—and yes, racial prejudice. Certainly, removing Campanis from baseball won't solve the problem of prejudice in baseball or anywhere else. The problem is institutionalized, embedded in the social fabric of this country.

Professional sports is one of the focal points for the fight against drug abuse. Now, professional sports is a focal point for the struggle against the tenacity of racial prejudice. The Campanis incident should be used as a vivid example of how prejudicial beliefs can affect the complexion of upper management in baseball, other sports and much of the rest of the working world.

Campanis' apology and resignation were necessary as a symbolic gesture of our intolerance of intolerance. More important than an apology or resignation, however, the incident should spur definitive actions to reverse prejudicial beliefs, and their associated actions, that have denied equal opportunities to blacks and other minorities.

It is necessary that we acknowledge the reality and pervasiveness of racism in our lives, and face it head on, if we are ever to successfully move toward its elimination. Civil-rights leaders must be vigilant regarding public disclosures of prejudice, to be sure, but they also must develop more aggressive agendas for eliminating racism in the broader social culture.

The demand for an apology for racism is a continuation of the ostrich mentality that has led to the perpetuation of racism. Instead of apologizing and denying prejudice, Campanis—and all of us—should acknowledge the reality of bigoted belief systems, and recognize the need for deliberate steps to eliminate prejudice and discrimination.

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