

Palaima: Is evicting fraternity for racist behavior the best course?

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Posted Sep 24, 2016 at 12:01 AM

Updated Sep 25, 2018 at 10:46 AM

Austin American-Statesman

<https://www.statesman.com/news/20160924/palaima-is-evicting-fraternity-for-racist-behavior-the-best-course>

Like many Americans, I watched the two video clips of white student members of the University of Oklahoma chapter of Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity dressed in black tie and singing a racist chant on the kind of bus well-heeled groups charter to go to and from fancy occasions. I then read what the president of OU said and did in response. I felt déjà vu all over again.

Remember back to November 2008. Right after the historic election of Barack Obama as our first black president, a University of Texas football player posted on his Facebook page the racist message, “All the hunters gather up, we have a (expletive) in the White House.”

In both cases, those in charge of the universities disappeared the offending parties. The UT student athlete was quickly off the team and transferred to another school. The Sigma Alpha Epsilon chapter at OU was closed down fast. Two fraternity members have been expelled.

Do you think that the students involved suddenly decided of their own rational choosing to behave like racists? No one truly educated in the history of racial prejudice in our country and its enduring effects long after the civil rights movement of the 1960s would post the Obama joke or sing the fraternity chant. In Austin in 2008 and Norman in 2015, the perpetrators appear to have acted without even conceiving there was something to think about. They have suffered serious consequences. But are these the right consequences?

Is a larger issue being ignored? Shouldn't we ponder what kind of upbringing and education kindergarten through 12th grade disposes fortunate young white men

at respected public universities to not recognize when they are being racist? If we “disappear” them, are we not in some ways giving them and us an easy out? Are we failing to take hold of an opportunity to unite in learning?

In the case of the UT football player, the argument was made that his teammates would have been uneasy and tense around him, that his transferring was best for all concerned. But wasn't that an odd kind of enforcement of the status quo? Young men with racist instincts, especially if acquired unthinkingly, should have to confront how what they have done affects those who are objects of their racism. And those who are the objects would benefit by having to confront their own feelings of anger or despair about how ingrained racism still is in our society and try to make their way along the courageous nonviolent path of Martin Luther King.

In both cases, we see a lack of strongly felt historical imagination. The UT student athlete had no capacity to feel the deep meaning of Obama's election. And just a few days after the end of Black History Month, many white OU fraternity members had no sense of what it would be like to be on the receiving end of their chant. If any of them had watched the movies “12 Years A Slave” or “Selma,” they had not internalized what those movies were depicting.

Instead of disappearing the problem, why not keep these students on as students and have them live through what their actions mean in a healthy, open communal way? Surely with pressure from college presidents across the country, Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity members nationwide could sign on to conduct educational events throughout Black History month annually for the foreseeable future. That would do much more social good than forcing a single fraternity chapter to disband and the members to go their anonymous, unthinking ways. Further separation will not promote the human togetherness we all need to feel.

I say all this having come to realize in my adulthood just how segregated my own upbringing was. The Cleveland, Ohio, of the 1950s into the 1970s had no Jim Crow laws. But most black Clevelanders lived on the near East side in neighborhoods left behind by the children and grandchildren of white European immigrants chasing America's suburban dream.

We had no apartheid. But my Catholic grade school and Jesuit high school had no black students 1957-1969. There were few black students at Boston College from 1969-1973. None ever took a class with me.

Growing up in such racial separation makes it easy not to see racism in the first place. And when we do read about racist conduct in America's past or about a racist act by somebody somewhere else, it is easy not to feel the continuing presence of racism where we are right now.