

Staying on the Plantation: Racial Insensitivity and the Power of Social Media

A Case in Big-Time College Athletics

by Matthew Stewart



Charges of racial insensitivity are now treated as seriously as cases of out-and-out discrimination. Overt racial discrimination has receded dramatically, and open expressions of bigotry have rightly become the stuff of reproach. Charges of racial insensitivity are now the stuff of news reports and social media firestorms.

The recent ado over Creighton University head basketball coach Greg McDermott makes for an interesting case study in our ever-expanding chronicles of racial insensitivity charges. We seem to be moving quickly to one strike and you're out. Gray-area cases, verbal misdemeanors and inadvertent slips are treated as if they were deliberate slurs, and the punishments

are severe.

In several instances teachers and reporters have been sacked for using a taboo word (usually the n-word) even in cases where any reasonable person would acknowledge that they used the word pedagogically or demonstratively rather than hatefully or carelessly. McDermott's case is of a middling sort, and he seems to have gotten off lightly by today's unforgiving standards.

McDermott was at fault. It is easy to become impatient with the inflated language that accompanies so many charges of insensitivity and the ensuing apologies. It is also easy to tune them out, as a certain sameness makes one incident seem very much like the next. McDermott's case bears looking at as both typical and unusual. While his case includes some over-reaction, it nonetheless provides some worthwhile lessons.

Creighton has re-instated McDermott after enacting a short-lived suspension for his use of the word "plantation" to refer to the university's basketball program. He stated that he "immediately recognized my egregious mistake" and issued apologies to his team. Here is McDermott's own rendering of what he said in the locker room after a tough loss: "Guys, we got to stick together. We need both feet in. I need everybody to stay on the plantation. I can't have anybody leave the plantation."

After apologizing to the team, McDermott acknowledged in a Twitterized [public apology](#) that it was a painful word for the team's African-American players to hear and a wrong-headed analogy for him to choose. He reiterated this regret upon being reinstated. No one has disputed McDermott's account of the incident.

Here is a case where racial insensitivity was real and not a product of oversensitivity. It is understandable that African-American players would be disturbed by a reference to their

team as a plantation. The metaphor is an ugly one and is especially tactless in the world of big-time college basketball. McDermott did right to apologize to his team in private.

Those not familiar with big-time American university sports may need a quick primer. While university-level sports are generally money-losing programs, some high-powered basketball programs rake in enormous sums of money. (Covid crowd restrictions have temporarily cut into this revenue, but not entirely, for television rights account for much of it.)

Coaches earn enormous salaries, and McDermott is no exception with a package worth well over a million dollars a year. Most players receive full scholarships, so-called “free rides,” but the discrepancy between this remuneration and the income they produce can seem exploitative. The market values of big-time university basketball “franchises” are pegged between \$100-300 million. Racial disparities exist. African-American players are significantly “overrepresented” on rosters. Conversely, although there are now many black coaches and their number continues to grow, the majority remains white. Plantation was indeed a poor word to use.

But there is more to think about. To begin with, why does such an incident merit national news coverage? The short answer is that it does not. The public import even at the local level (Creighton and Omaha, the university’s city) would seem negligible. If the incident had been found to be typical of McDermott, then an argument could be made that potential recruits to the team ought to know, but no one has said that the incident is typical. The entire Creighton team returned to play upon the coach’s reinstatement, [having made](#) a mild public display of unity and spoken of the incident as a chance to teach and learn.

The very existence of social media skews the picture. What once would have been handled in-house is now played out before

the public. McDermott had no need to apologize publicly (he didn't hurt the public's feelings, he hurt his players' feelings) but must have known that he would have to get out in front of the story before it got out in front of him. Every man his own media handler in 2021, or, as is possible in the context of big-time college sports, every athletic department with its own public relations staff ready to give advice on damage control in the event of unfortunate stories.

In the present climate there is a rush to punish verbal transgressions and to punish severely. Both immediate and deeper context are disregarded on social media. Here the immediate context is the emotionally charged locker room. This does not excuse McDermott, but might explain his lack of filter.

The deeper context of such incidents is usually unknowable to those on the outside, but should surely be crucial in forming a judgment. In this case, McDermott has a long-term, day-by-day relationship with his players. Even in the case of first-year players, he would have spent several months interacting with them. Older players will have known him for several years. Will they not have a good idea of whether or not he is malicious, unfair, bigoted, heedless? They will know how he has acted and spoken. They will have a good sense of whether some inner racist has been inside him all along, the lid kept on until he finally let slip, or whether he was careless in an emotionally charged moment.

Twitter mobs are not privy to any such knowledge, but nonetheless rush to post public judgment. In a fury to virtue signal, Twitter mobs end by undermining the agency of those who ought to have the first and probably the only say in the matter. In this case the Creighton University basketball team and its athletic department. In a fury to head the mobs, their potential targets often give too much away.

While insensitivity should not be treated with the same import

as outright discrimination on the one hand, or overt bigotry on the other, it is apparent that for the time being it will be treated as such. In a society full of people who otherwise prize their nonjudgmentalism, the world of social media activism and grandstanding has robbed people of mature judgment and mature responses. Cooler heads can prevail, but it will take deliberate effort and courage to see that day return.