

The Shirley Sherrod firing: Once again, the Obama administration cowers before ultra-right

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The firing of US Department of Agriculture (USDA) employee Shirley Sherrod by the Obama administration, on the basis of false allegations of racism, was one more shameful and cowardly concession to the extreme right. All the administration's backtracking and apologies, and even a job offer, doesn't alter the fact.

On Monday an ultra-right web site posted a misleading excerpt from a March 27, 2010 speech by Sherrod to an NAACP dinner in Douglas, Georgia, in which she indicated that years before, when she worked for a charitable lending organization, she had been hesitant to exert herself on behalf of a white farmer.

The clip was posted by Andrew Breitbart as part of his feud with the NAACP, the civil rights organization, on behalf of the Tea Party movement. Following recent charges of racism by the civil rights organization against Tea Party activists, Breitbart was eager to prove that individuals associated with the NAACP were guilty of anti-white racism.

The March 27 remarks in their entirety showed no such thing. On the contrary, Ms. Sherrod went on to explain that she came to see that the great issue in America was class, and not race. Breitbart's action was dishonest and despicable, but that's to be expected.

In any event, terrified of an attack from the right, the administration rushed to force Sherrod out. She explained to CNN's Tony Harris Tuesday how she was "harassed" into quitting her post as USDA director of Rural Development in Georgia:

"Why am I out? They asked me to resign. And, in fact, they harassed me as I was driving back to the state office from West Point, Georgia, yesterday. I had at least three calls telling me the White House wanted me to resign. ... And the last one asked me to pull over to the side of the road and do it."

The calls came from Deputy Under Secretary for Rural Development Cheryl Cook. Sherrod explained that when Cook called her a third time, "I said, 'I'm at least 45 minutes to an hour from Athens [Georgia].' She said, 'Well, Shirley, they want you to pull over to the side of the road and do it because you're going to be on Glenn Beck tonight.'" How fitting! Glenn Beck, an unstable right-wing ignoramus, threatens and the Obama administration jumps through hoops.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack later claimed that the forced resignation was his idea alone, but there is no reason to credit this. Sherrod stated clearly she was told "the White House" wanted her head. In any event, this has the odor of an Obama White House decision: cowardly, cold-blooded, and fully calculated to satisfy the right-wing.

CNN anchor Tony Harris asked Sherrod whether she felt she had been given a chance to tell her side of the story. She replied, "The administration, they were not interested in hearing the truth. No one wanted to hear the truth."

Mary Frances Berry, former chairwoman for the US Commission on Civil Rights under President Jimmy Carter, told Politico.com, "We now know for sure that the Obama administration fears Fox and right-wing media more than making sure they have the facts."

The NAACP also fell into line Monday night, attacking Sherrod, without even examining the contents of her speech. NAACP President Benjamin Jealous released a statement in which he said, "Racism is about the abuse of power. Sherrod had it in her position at USDA. According to her remarks, she mistreated a white farmer in need of assistance because of his race. We are appalled by her actions, just as we are with abuses of power against farmers of color and female farmers."

In regard to the NAACP, Sherrod told CNN, “The NAACP has not tried to contact me one time ... I would have appreciated—when you look at my history of civil rights, I would have appreciated having the NAACP at least contact me ... contact me to try to get the truth about what happened.

“That hurts, because if you look at my history, that’s what I’m saying. I’ve done more to advance the causes of civil rights in this area than some of them who are sitting in those positions now with the NAACP. They need to learn something about me. They need to know about my work. They need to know what I’ve contributed through the years.”

Jealous later excused himself on the grounds that it was late Monday when the news came in of Sherrod’s comments and the NAACP had to react quickly. And the rapid, instinctive reaction, from this quarter too, was to cave in to the extreme right.

What did Ms. Sherrod actually say on March 27?

In the first portion of her address she explained that her father, a farmer “and a leader in the community,” had been murdered by a white man in Baker County, Georgia in 1965 and that despite the testimony of three witnesses, a grand jury had refused to indict the killer. Later a cross was burned on her family’s lawn by a group of racists.

Sherrod explained that her father’s murder led her to a decision: “I couldn’t just let his death go without doing something in answer to what happened. I made the commitment on the night of my father’s death, at the age of 17, that I would not leave the South, that I would stay in the South and devote my life to working for change. And I’ve been true to that commitment all of these 45 years.”

As for the incident in 1986 at the center of the excerpt aired Monday that cost Sherrod her job, the proper context makes clear the experience was life-changing. At the time she worked for the non-profit Federation of Southern Cooperative Land Assistance Fund. Sherrod acknowledges the uneasy character of her first encounter with the white farmer, Roger Spooner, in need of help. She felt Spooner “was trying to show me he was superior to me,” and “I was trying to decide just how much help I was going to give him.”

Sherrod explained, “I didn’t give him the full force of what I could do,” merely taking him “to a white lawyer,” expecting “that his own kind would take care of him.” But the lawyer’s inaction and indifference to Spooner’s fate “opened my eyes.” She continued, “Well, working with him [Spooner] made me see that it’s really about

those who have versus those who don’t, you know. And they could be black; they could be white; they could be Hispanic. And it made me realize then that I needed to work to help poor people—those who don’t have access the way others have.”

Sherrod attributed racism to the desire of “the people with money, the elite” to divide whites and blacks. “There is no difference between us. The only difference is that the folks with money want to stay in power,” she said.

The posting of the full speech led one ultra-right commentator to denounce Sherrod as a “Marxist.” She is no such thing, and in the same March 27 address she registered her strong support for Obama. But she is obviously an honest and principled person, and the administration simply threw her to the wolves at the first sign of trouble.

Eloise Spooner, wife of the farmer Sherrod helped in 1986, told the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* that the victimized USDA official “kept us out of bankruptcy.” She considers Sherrod “a friend for life.” Spooner told the newspaper, “Her [Sherrod’s] husband told her, ‘You’re spending more time with the Spooners than you are with me.’” The Iron City, Georgia woman told the Atlanta newspaper that she had spoken with Sherrod since the furor erupted. “She’s very sad about it,” Spooner said. “She told me she was so glad we talked. I just can’t believe this is happening to her.”

Roger Spooner, now elderly, told CNN that Sherrod had “stuck with us” back in 1986 and “we still got the farm.” Asked whether he thought Sherrod was a racist, Spooner responded emphatically, “No way in the world. ... I don’t even want to talk about it. It don’t make sense.”

His wife added, “She always treated us really good. And she was nice-mannered, thoughtful, friendly. A good person.” After hearing the news story about Sherrod being fired, Eloise Spooner explained, “We said, she helped us, so we’re helping her.”



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