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Regional

Slavery, racism still cast shadow on colleges

During the recent convention of the Democratic Party, Michelle Obama said something that surprised many. "I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves," she told the audience of delegates. And that is a historical fact. Another historical fact is that some of the most venerable American universities also have strong ties to slavery, not only because some of them were built by slaves, but also because many of their founders and major benefactors were either slave holders or publicly supported slavery or clearly racist policies.

These troublesome facts were revived recently due to an incident that took place last June at Yale University. Corey Menafee, a dishwasher in Calhoun College's dining hall (one of Yale's residential colleges), purposely broke a stained-glass window with a broomstick because of its racial imagery. The window included images of slaves carrying cotton bales, which he described as "racist, very degrading," according to the local press. Menafee, who faced felony and misdemeanor charges, told reporters that although he regretted what he did, his act was a gesture of civil disobedience.

Menafee later apologized and resigned his position from the university. He was charged with felony criminal mischief and misdemeanor reckless endangerment (glass fell near a passerby) but the university asked prosecutors to drop the charges and Menafee was later reinstated in a different setting.

But there is a background that really helps to explain this incident. The building in which the window was broken is named after John C.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

Calhoun, a Yale graduate and white supremacist of the class of 1804 who became vice president of the United States and was an unabated advocate for slavery.

Because of Calhoun's background there have been calls for changing the name of the college. Julia Adams, head of the college, had announced in an email earlier that the dining hall would be named in honor of another former Yale student, Roosevelt Thompson. Thompson was a brilliant student who was African American. He was also a Rhodes scholar, a distinction that only about 32 seniors in the nation receive each year. He even scored a perfect 48 on his law school admission test. Thompson died in a tragic car accident when he was only 22 years old. Although Yale had planned to replace the window and had removed three portraits of Calhoun, the university refused to change the college's name, which drew sharp criticism.

Following public uproar, Peter Salovey, president of Yale, declared that the decision to keep Calhoun's name was not final. "It is now clear to me that the communitywide conversation about these issues could have drawn more effectively on campus expertise. In particular, we would have benefited from a set of well-articulated guiding principles according to which a historical name

might be removed or changed," he said, reversing his original decision that the Calhoun name would remain in the interest of the university's educational mission.

The connection between slavery and higher education in this country has a long history. It became notorious when, in 2003, Brown University's president Ruth Simmons commissioned a report on the Rhode Island institution's historical ties to slavery. Published three years later, it showed that during the colonial period enslaved people had helped build the campus, and that some of the first officers and trustees of the college were slave owners.

Since then some scholarly work has been done on the issue. One book that encapsulates the sad history of higher education and slavery is Craig Wilder's "Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities." A professor and head of the history department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Wilder uncovered many universities' stories that had remained largely unknown even to people associated with those institutions.

Neither Yale nor Brown are unique cases. Recently Princeton University went through a similar situation when the school's leaders decided not to strip Woodrow Wilson's name from the university's public policy school and a residential college. As president of the United States, Wilson took legal action to segregate the workplace and was an admirer of the movie "Birth of a Nation," in which the actions of the Ku Klux Klan were glorified.

Many other northern universities are revisiting their historical connection with slavery. Harvard has

announced a symposium on this topic for 2017.

In the meantime, southern colleges and universities are also confronting the issue, although from a different perspective. The University of Mississippi, for example, is still debating whether or not to remove confederate statues from its campus, or add historical explanations on plaques attached to them.

One of the reasons why many universities seem to be hesitant to respond to calls to erase any trace of slavery or racism on their campuses is the fear of losing support from many of their wealthiest (and oldest) alumni. In a recent article in The New York Times it was reported that when campuses are the involuntary hosts of protests, donations start to dry out in terms of both number of donors and total money donated. Since the influx of money is vital to private schools, and to make up for diminishing state support at state colleges and universities, the institutions' leaders do not want to irritate their donors.

In these times of racial tensions, the Black Lives Matter protest movement, and incendiary political rhetoric, higher education leaders need to take a stand and do what is right for the historical memory of their institutions and what they will represent in the future.

Despite accusations of political correctness, the truth is that we need to remember the words of the Spanish-American philosopher and Harvard graduate, Jorge Santayana. "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

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