

Is Truth Irrelevant?

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By Thomas Sowell

STANFORD, Calif.—It is amazing how many people seem to have discovered last Wednesday that riots are wrong—when many of those same people apparently had not noticed that when riots went on, for weeks or even months, in various cities across the country last year.

For too many people, especially in the media, what is right and wrong, true or false, depends on who it helps or hurts politically. Too many media people who are supposed to be reporters act as if they are combatants in political wars.

Truth is the first casualty

Someone once said that, in a war, truth is the first casualty. That has certainly been so in the media—and in much of academia as well.

One of the most grotesque distortions growing out of this carelessness with the facts has been a removal of Abraham Lincoln’s name and statues from various places, on grounds that he saw black people only as property.

Such criticisms betray an incredible ignorance of history—or else a complete disregard of truth.

Defining slaves as property

As a lawyer, Abraham Lincoln knew that there was nothing in the Constitution that authorized him or any other president to free slaves. But he also knew that a military commander in wartime can legally seize the property of an enemy nation. Defining slaves as property gave President Lincoln the only legal authority he had to seize them during the Civil War. And, once they were seized as property, he could then free them as human beings.

But, if the Emancipation Proclamation had based its action on defining the slaves as human beings, with a right to be free, the Supreme Court of that era would undoubtedly have declared it unconstitutional.

Millions of human beings would have remained slaves. Would ringing rhetoric be worth that price?

As for the claim that Lincoln did not regard black people as human, he invited Frederick Douglass to the White House!

Distortions of history

Gross distortions of history, in order to get Abraham Lincoln's name removed from schools, tells us a lot about what is wrong with American education today.

Many schools are closed because of the coronavirus and the teachers' unions. And many schools in minority neighborhoods failed to teach children enough math and English, back when they were still open. So it is incredible that school authorities have time to spend on ideological crusades like removing names and statues from schools.

Indoctrination centers

Unfortunately, too many American educational institutions—from elementary schools to universities—have become indoctrination centers. The riots that swept across the country last year are fruits of that indoctrination and the utter disregard for other people's rights that accompanied those riots.

At the heart of that indoctrination is a sense of grievance and victimhood when others have better outcomes—which are automatically called "privileges" and never called "achievements," regardless of what the actual facts are.

Facts don't matter in such issues, any more than facts mattered when smearing Lincoln.

Faulty discriminatory bias

Any "under-representation" of any group in any endeavor can be taken as evidence or proof of discriminatory bias. But those who argue this way cannot show us any society—anywhere in the world, or at any time during thousands of years of recorded history—that had all groups represented proportionally in all endeavors.

In America's National Hockey League, for example, there are more players from Canada than there are players from the United States. There are also more players from Sweden than from California, even though California's population is nearly four times the population of Sweden.

Californians are more "under-represented" in the NHL than women are in Silicon Valley. But no one can claim that this is due to discriminatory bias by the NHL. It is far more obviously due to people growing up in cold climates being more likely to have ice-skating experience.

This is one of many factors that produce skewed statistics in many endeavors. Discriminatory bias is among those factors. But it has no monopoly.

Yet who cares about facts any more, in this age of indoctrination?