

Fairness for Shirley

This time last week, few Americans had ever heard of Department of Agriculture official Shirley Sherrod. Now, she is a household name in households that actually follow the news. A few days ago, Ms. Sherrod was fired by the Obama administration for admitting that, more than 20 years ago as an administrator in Georgia, she did not treat a white farmer as fairly as she would have treated a black farmer. Her admission came as part of a speech she made before the NAACP in March. Ms. Sherrod is black.

The problem was that Ms. Sherrod was relating the story as part of an epiphany she said she had. After mulling things over, she came to the conclusion that what she had done was wrong. Unfortunately, that message was overlooked in the initial reporting, and I was one of the culprits.

Regretfully, I did not examine the full transcript of Ms. Sherrod's remarks closely enough and, after hearing that the white farmer got hosed, I said she should resign. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack made the same mistake; so did the NAACP. Like all Americans, Ms. Sherrod deserves to be treated fairly, and she should be reinstated at the Department of Agriculture. However, the situation deserves a top-to-bottom examination by the feds.

Shirley Sherrod is a long-time liberal activist who peppered her NAACP speech with racial references such as this: "I figured I'd take [the farmer] to one of them [white lawyer]—that his own kind would take care of him."

His own kind?

Now, we all make mistakes, and that just might be a harmless comment. But if a white federal official referred to an African-American by using the term "his own kind," you know what would happen.

Then Ms. Sherrod went on to tell the NAACP audience this: "I haven't seen such a mean-spirited people as I've seen lately over this issue of health care. Some of the racism that we thought was buried, didn't it surface? Now we endured eight years of the Bushes, and we didn't do the stuff these Republicans are doing because you have a black president."

The Hatch Act prohibits federal employees from endorsing political parties while on the job. Ms. Sherrod was invited to speak at the NAACP meeting because she was in the administration. So you make the call.

There are two main points here: First, Shirley Sherrod was not initially treated fairly by me, some other journalists, the NAACP and the Obama administration. She deserved better.

And, secondly, Ms. Sherrod may not be a great fit for the USDA. She is obviously a very political person with a strong point of view. Public servants are supposed to look out for all the folks; it is tough for polarizing people to do that.

So this is a fascinating story on many levels. We have not heard the last of it.