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TO: Phillip D. Creighton, President

FROM: Charles Coate, Greg Monahan, Robert Moody, Bruce Shepard, George Venn

SUBJECT: The Name of the Walter M. Pierce Library

At your request, we are sharing with you our analyses and our professional judgments on the question of the continuing appropriateness of the name of the Walter M. Pierce Library. We organize our report in the form of a preface, findings, issues, and recommendations.

Preface

During the Spring Term of academic year 1998-99, some faculty and other members of the Eastern community discussed the appropriateness of continuing to use the name of Walter M. Pierce for the Eastern Library. The most visible portions of the discussion occurred *via* Eastalk, the campus listserv. There were suggestions that Pierce had been a member of the Ku Klux Klan and that the use of his name on a campus building was an institutional black spot (and, perhaps, blind spot) that should be remedied. You asked Provost Shepard to look into the issue and, to assist, he gathered a small group of individuals widely respected for their judgment, their command of historical method, and their knowledge of, and feel for the local area.

We have collected information from a variety of sources, primary and secondary. Further, we have had the benefit of receiving analyses and conclusions from other respected historians, including an individual who has recently completed publication of an annotated collection of the minutes of the La Grande Chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. We have also gathered information from individuals having connections to the issue including library directors current and former and individuals with family relationships to Walter Pierce.

Findings

Be it physics or history, nothing is ever known with finality. What follows is our shared professional judgment given the evidence we have at this time.

1. In our investigation, we have heard the La Grande Chapter of the Ku Klux Klan referred to as "sort of like a social club," so popular around 1920 that most everybody was a member. This was not the case. The minutes reveal an organization with strong anti-immigrant and, in particular, anti-Catholic positions that worked, for example, through boycotts to seek the dismissal of Catholics employed in local enterprises. As to the "most every male was a member" assertion, there is no doubt that this period saw a rapid increase (and then, as rapid a decline) in membership in the Klan in La Grande and statewide. However, this was also a period in which it was quite common to find others taking public positions-- *e.g.*, politicians and newspaper editors--against the Klan, its activities, its purposes, and its methods.
2. There is no evidence, conclusive or even strongly suggestive, that Mr. Pierce was ever a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Among minutes that list inductees by name, Mr. Pierce is never named. There is evidence, in minutes, that Mr. Pierce did address the La Grande KKK on one occasion and showed up at another meeting and that at least one member of the La Grande "klavern" of the Ku Klux Klan thought of Mr. Pierce as "an honorary member." This statement occurred in the minutes at a time when Pierce was aligning himself politically with the Klan position on a heated ballot measure of great importance to the Klan and, of course, the very reference as "honorary member" suggests that Mr. Pierce was not a regular member. There are consistent indications in the statements of family

and associates that Walter Pierce never was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. When all the available evidence is considered, we share the conclusion reached by respected historians who have examined the matter: Walter Pierce was not a member of the La Grande Ku Klux Klan.

3. There is considerable evidence that Pierce cultivated the support of the Oregon Ku Klux Klan in his 1922 campaign for Governor, in particular, through his support of an initiative ("the School Bill") that was a high priority for the Klan. (The "School Bill" initiative--approved by the voters in the 1922 election and quickly found un-Constitutional--required compulsory attendance at public schools, thereby targeting Catholics and their parochial schools, among others.)
4. Analyses by academics of the voting patterns in the 1922 election reach contradictory conclusions on whether Klan support made a difference in the gubernatorial contest; there is evidence that, in races for other offices during the 1922 election, Klan support was a liability. Nevertheless, Pierce's silence on the Klan during the gubernatorial campaign (in contrast to his opponent, Governor Olcott) and Pierce's association with the School Bill (again in contrast to Olcott) created an image, documented in regional and national newspapers of the time, that Pierce was "the Klan Candidate" and that he owed his election to Klan support. The Klan clearly thought that Pierce owed his election to them.
5. Owed or not, Pierce did not follow a pattern of consistently supporting Klan preferences once in office. Indeed, some members of local Klan groups became quite disillusioned with their failure to prevail on matters of appointments made by Pierce. There were threats of recall coming from the Klan, and these were taken seriously in Salem although Klan strength was already waning, and the threats of recall never came to anything.
6. There is absolutely no doubt that Pierce shared the anti-immigrant views of the Klan (and, likely, of most Americans if the subsequent highly restrictive amendments to the nation's immigration laws are any indication). His anti-Japanese views extended to advocating, as World War II was ending, that those of Japanese heritage ("aliens" and "dual citizens") be deported. His "nativist" sentiments have a curious consistency. While strongly anti-Japanese in attitude and in action, we have heard in our investigations of his warm and mutually respectful interactions with the Chiefs of the Tribes of the Umatilla, about as "nativist" (but not racist) as it is possible to be.
7. The minutes of the Oregon State Board of Higher Education show that "The Union County Pioneer Association and other groups" suggested, in September, 1950, that the then new library be named for the former Governor. Action was deferred for four years at the request of the University and then, shortly after former Governor Pierce's death, the State Board approved the name for the Library. This was a period when the Board did not name buildings after the living, and, although the decision to name the Library after the then 90 year-old Pierce was clearly made by the University at the time of the dedication of the Library in 1951, the naming was postponed until 1954, after the death of the former Governor. Many reasons were given for the choice of Pierce, prominent among them his long record of support for education and his role in laying the political foundations necessary for the establishment of the normal school that eventually became Eastern Oregon University. In reviewing the University's correspondence on the Library dedication, we found no indication of any concern about or dissatisfaction with the choice of Pierce as the name for the Library.

Issues

Our discussions have also identified several issues relevant to the matter before you. They may be obvious, but they also bear centrally on reaching any decision and so we identify them here and employ them subsequently in reaching our recommendation.

1. Why are buildings named for particular individuals? All of us are a complicated blend of attainments and shortcomings. Certainly, that applies to Walter M. Pierce. By anybody's estimation, he made significant contributions to public well being. Those, we have surmised, were the bases for the original decision to name the Library in his honor. In any such situation, do we accept the bases for honoring an individual or do we open consideration to a more complete accounting of activities?

2. Do we interject today's standards in evaluating the achievements of an historical figure? Or, do we utilize the values and common practices of an earlier period in determining the appropriateness of prior actions?
3. Both the preceding points have, imbedded within them, the "slippery slope" issue. By today's standards, we would find much about Washington and Jefferson to be absolutely abhorrent. But, do we consider changing the name of the Capitol or some of the faces on our currency? Where is the line drawn? If we begin with Pierce, where do we stop?

Each of these issues could be interpreted as offering an unambiguous decision rule: because of a person's achievements, we need not look at their failings; we must only judge historical figures in the context of their times; and, because of the slippery slope, we cannot ever take a step in the direction of correcting a mistaken use of a name. We disagree. The issues should not be cast as black-or-white, binary choices. For us, degree matters.

We can imagine hypothetical naming decisions that, in the light of more recent information or the application of modern sensibilities, would be sufficiently egregious as to persuade us that an earlier decision should be changed. How "bad" is "bad" before the line is crossed? Here, we enter the realm of subjective evaluation. That, we believe, is the reality of the situation we face, and we must accept one result: different individuals agreed on the same "facts" and the same principles may yet reach different conclusions.

Recommendations

Our recommendation then boils down to deciding if our findings lead us to believe that former Governor Pierce's shortcomings are sufficient to conclude that the name of the Eastern Library be changed. Pierce was a complex person, for example, a staunch defender of principles that most civil libertarians would find admirable. We have not developed those positive attributes. We do not have to. This is because we do not believe that candidate Pierce's cultivation of the votes of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1922 election is, alone, sufficient grounds for removing his name from our Library. Had we concluded that Pierce was a member of the Ku Klux Klan--and that was the assumption that those engaging in the Eastalk listserv discussion seemed to take for granted--then our decision might well have been different.

Let us try a comparison. Franklin Roosevelt built a political coalition that had, at its core, the one-party South, and there was what analysts have referred to as "a gentlemen's agreement": the South's presidential electoral votes were traded in exchange for an agreement not to raise "the race problem" in Congress. Here is another example of a politician cultivating political support from clearly racist regimes and, unlike Pierce, trading political favors with those regimes, political favors destructive of human liberty, in return for electoral votes. Yet, judging Roosevelt's overall record and the limited options he had if he were to be elected, his political strategies have usually been characterized as masterful. (We could go further with the comparison, considering the approaches of both Pierce and Roosevelt to Americans of Japanese ethnicity.) Certainly, we would not conclude that names of streets, schools, and the like honoring Franklin Roosevelt should be changed based solely upon calculated strategies for electoral success.

It is our recommendation, therefore, that the name of Walter Pierce not be disassociated from the Library.

We use the preceding awkward wording because we do wish to share another thought. In our investigations, we learned about Cornelia Marvin who eventually became Cornelia Marvin Pierce. Ms. Marvin was, effectively, the first Oregon State Librarian, being appointed, in 1905, as the first secretary of the just established State Library Commission. Marvin was known for promoting the delivery of library services to rural areas--we heard stories of her regularly filling up a buggy with books and traveling rural roads to make library services accessible to far-flung patrons. She did establish a free "books by mail

order" service, the first in the nation. Her marriage to Pierce came later, and she is given much credit for both his political success and the reversal of his personal financial problems.

A person known for innovation in extending library services to rural citizens? That sounds like somebody we would be honored to have associated with Eastern's Library. Suppose the Library name were expanded to become the Cornelia M. and Walter M. Pierce Library with suitable portraits of each hanging side-by-side in the Library? We think this worthy of consideration.

Please carefully note our reasoning. Bringing Ms. Pierce into the discussion is NOT a way of avoiding the fundamental issues we have explored with regard to Walter Pierce. That it might seem like ducking the issue lead us initially to discount the possibility of adding Ms. Pierce's name to the Library. However, we have first come to an independent conclusion regarding former Governor Pierce's name on the Library.

A question remains, though. Is it really appropriate to go back to a decision made 45 years ago and "perfect it" by adding another name? Is that not as suspect as seeking to remove Walter Pierce's name? Here, we are looking at the other side of issues that had to be weighed in reviewing the matter of Walter Pierce. History may ignore achievements as well as failures, particularly if the achiever were a woman in a period when public acclaim went primarily to males. Here, we think, is a case where it is appropriate to interject today's sensibilities and, by naming the Library for both Pierces, seeking not to dilute recognition of Walter but, rather, allowing us to honor an individual who, in an earlier era, was likely assumed to attain recognition only through honors bestowed upon her husband.

The controversy concerning the name of the Pierce Library has provided the campus with a valuable opportunity to learn more about who we are as a campus, a community, a region, and a nation. We should seek ways to assure that such opportunities periodically reoccur. We suggest that, on an annual basis, the University apply lecture funding to support a "Walter M. Pierce Lecture on Human Rights." There might also be supporting, concurrent displays in the Library. The application of Pierce's name to such a series is not tongue-in-cheek. Pierce, the populist, advocated for the rights of the poor in ways that would make modern-day Democrats and liberals seek cover by scurrying even further to the center. As a person and as a politician, Pierce's complexities refract those of a society--yesterday and today--without coherence in its approach to human rights.

Finally, given that it is the end of the academic year, we recommend that no decision be made until the beginning of the next academic year when it will be possible to involve the campus in discussion leading to a decision.

Conclusion

We believe that the review of the issues involving Pierce is a valuable undertaking for the campus. Regularly, we should seek opportunities to know our racist history--not because there is any particular merit in beating ourselves with the past but because we must know the past, and hence, ourselves, to consciously craft the future we desire. Also, the simple review of an issue such as we have undertaken is, we hope, a reminder to our students, to ourselves, to the community, of how the academic enterprise can best approach challenging controversies: with research, reason, and creativity.

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