All the Critics Love U in New York



If there's any celebrity you can be sure you *did not know* in any significantly real way, it was Prince. Shape shifter, name shifter/eraser, master of every style you can name. Intensely private and essentially flamboyant. Exhibitionist. Hermit. You don't know him except in the ways you think you do, and that has as much to do with what you wanted him to be as it does with which little pieces of mythologizing he wanted you to see at any given time. Like the classic Trickster of legend, he could present multiple faces at the same time, and the face you got to glimpse, briefly, depended on which side of the road you were standing on. If Prince had been around then, Kurosawa could have made this pint-sized product of Minni-freaking-sota the centerpiece of *Rashomon*. That would have been cool.

What do I know of Prince? We're roughly the same age. He's probably the most under-appreciated guitar player in like ever. Over the years that I have been heralding him as easily the best thing since Hendrix and sliced bread I've received more than a few puzzled looks and dismissive chuckles about me just being a contrarian. This week, many people were surprised when Billy Gibbons described his playing as "sensational".

But even that is only a piece of it. From his textbook knowledge and respect for those who came before him – JB, Sly, Jimi, Miles, George Clinton, &c. – to his savage dance chops and ultra-sharp fashion sense, to his early adoption and

mastery of technologies like the Linn Drum; the guy put a package together that was both historically intelligent and, somehow, way out in front of the coming surge of hip-hop and Michael Jackson/Madonna style pop that followed him by a few years. The man had his gifts. Add in an almost incomprehensible work ethic, and you have Prince.

How Prince helped me know myself comes down to this simple question:

How could anyone possibly fail to recognize such evident talent?

Probably the way that I did.

Because instead of listening, I reacted to the packaging cues that came with the Prince product. And because he hit the scene in the late 70s with a funky beat, puffy shirts, lots of synthesizers, and a (deceptively) silly reliance on lyrics about fucking, I saw him clearly for what he was: just another callow Disco Boy, a Travolta, a Bee Gee.

It's hard to remember (or, if you are a little younger, comprehend) the degree to which DiscoSux fever encompassed the world of funky music. Earth, Wind & Fire, James Brown, P-Funk: all these and more took their share of unfriendly fire from people who were essentially painting the entirety of black popular music as beneath-contempt shit.

DiscoSux fever was a symptom of reaction against gay and minority encroachment into the historically masculine world of rock and pop. This music was aimed at gender-fluid communities and urban black folk. For a generation of mostly white, hetero-norm critics and fans for whom rock'n'roll equaled priapic guitar stroking and golden-maned Dionysi sporting socks stuffed into spandex trousers, this was music that threatened the natural order. <fn>The pulse belonged on the 1 and 3, dammit, none of this 2 and 4 backbeat shit. Whaddya, Disco Duck?</fn> It was outsider art storming the

academy. And I was a privileged, by-birth member of the patriarchal academy, though I didn't even know that such a thing existed; such is the blindness of by-birth membership.

Prince said fk all that noise, and it was pretty clear that he was throwing down on, well, people like me.

> *Look out all you hippies, you ain't as sharp as me*
> *It ain't about the trippin', but the sexuality*
> *— All the Critics Love U in New York*

Hey. I resemble(d) that remark.

So I could "listen" to *When Doves Cry* or *1999* and quickly sort this alleged genius off into the "just another over-hyped fraud" bin.

In that same song, this upstart had the nerve to sing:

> *It's time for a new direction*
> *It's time for jazz to die*

As a burgeoning jazz-bo, I tooks what I tooks and it was more than I could takes. I didn't need to hear the music behind this pixie poppinjay. These crude insults told me all I needed to know! Pistols at dawn!

Later, when Miles compared him to Duke Ellington and Chopin, it was easy to dismiss the comments as Miles trying to glom onto the popularity of the younger phenom. Because come on: he's really just another Disco Boy, and everybody knows that DiscoSux, so pass the bong and cue up some Coltrane or some real rock'n'roll. Dude.

One night in 1993 I watched a terrific Neil Young *Unplugged* on MTV<fn>In those days, children, the M stood for "Music". You can look it up!</fn>. The next show was Prince live in some mega-arena, and I watched it and thought, "Meh, pretty

good” and then he walked offstage and into a limo that took him somewhere and he walked into a small club and took the stage and proceeded to melt my face with a yellow guitar and the most scorching Hendrix-style blues I’d heard since before Stevie Ray died. For the next hour I was slain. I’ve been listening to Prince ever since.

So what does the phenomenon of Prince teach me about myself? Every time I hear his music, even as I am digging it down to my toes, I am reminded that I am a fallible human being, prone to unpleasant bigotries and prejudices that cause me to stop paying attention to what is real and true. The impulses that put me on auto-piloting sort mode – this person is this, that music is that, I don’t like “those” kinds of people/music/movies/food/&c. – are the things that make me miss the My Favorite Worldness of life. It’s good to have a ready reminder – one that the iPod throws up randomly and often – that for all my pretense to erudition and discernment and such like, I am just as likely to react like a dope as I am to apply any kind of intentional awareness to, well, anything.

Which means, naturally, that any opinion I hold is inherently suspect and worthy of re-examination. Consider yourself duly warned.

The most delicious part of the irony is that the song I quote above, had I bothered to listen to it in 1983, would have delivered exactly the kind of face-melting guitar heroics that won me over ten years later. Check it.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJxt_Ey6tbo

Who knows? I was full of myself in those days<fn>Unlike now, when I am extremely humble and enlightened.</fn>, so I might have dismissed it anyway.

Thanks, Artist Who Formerly Bestrode The World as Prince.

Somehow, having you be the constant reminder of my proclivity to dopiness ain’t all that bad. You sexy motherfker.

The Atticus of My Life



In the book of love’s own dreams
Where all the print is blood
Where all the pages are my days
And all my lights grow old
– Attics of My Life, by Robert Hunter

THIS POST IS FULL OF SPOILERS:
If you hate spoilers and plan to read *Go Set a Watchman*, skip this post for now.
But please, come back when you’re done.

A piece of free advice:
If you have not read *To Kill a Mockingbird* recently, read it before you read
Go Set a Watchman. You’ll be glad you did.

I’m one of those peculiar people who take literature too seriously. I’ve never doubted the power of a good writer to create worlds that are as real as our own and, at the same

time, to conjure reflections and echoes of a reality we haven't quite earned yet.

Characters in books become as real to me as my friends and family, my banes and enemies. I grant that this is a sign of deficient mental health, but I hope I'm not the only one who, for example, bursts into tears when Gavroche Thénardier dies on the barricade or when Edgar Derby is executed for pocketing that damned teapot he found in the rubble. I guess most times for most people, characters remain on the page where they belong and don't much interfere in our day to day. Lucky them?

But some characters escape the page and grow larger than life, become icons. Some, like Atticus Finch, become moral exemplars and redeemers of collective wrongdoing. And if there's anything we can't stand, it's for someone to reveal the flawed man behind the myth.<fn>See also, Huxtable, Cliff.</fn>

So let's cut to the chase. Atticus Finch is a standard issue Southern gentleman – a man I recognize well in several of my Deep South forbears – a genteel fellow of manners and decency who also happens to hold racist views that are extreme enough to make the daughter who once idolized her Perfect Father literally throw up when she discovers his true nature.

It's easy to see why so many long-time Harper Lee fans are outraged.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee created *the* Great White Father, the man of infinite patience, rectitude, and sense of fairness who could redeem our (White folks, that is) sense of guilt and discomfort over racial injustice. In *Go Set a Watchman,* she pulls the curtain back to reveal that Atticus, the Great and Powerful, is just another worn out, cranky uncle forwarding conspiracy emails and ranting about Those People. Once again, hero worship turns out to be a sucker play.

At the end of *Mockingbird*, we were given permission to tut-tut the horror of Tom Robinson's predicament and to feel joy at

the progress we've made, pass the chicken please. The white trash Ewells excelled in the Judas role in this passion play, lowly creatures who took welfare and kept their kids out of school and couldn't be bothered to shift for themselves. Our own hands were never dirtied like the coarse and common Ewells. They were the evil in our midst, and if only we *better* whites could follow the shining example of Atticus Finch, the world would be our Nirvana, and hallelujah, pass the gravy, if it's not too much trouble.

Watchman's Chapter 17 is one of the most painful reading experiences I've ever suffered. Even knowing ahead of time that Lee was going to reveal a "dark side" of Atticus, I was unprepared for the casual, genteel, typically Southern bigotry coming out of his mouth. And Lee wrote this exchange with no wiggle room: Atticus is basically a disgusting racist. He laughs at Jean Louise's arguments, he taunts her for her naivete.

There's no turning away: the Great White Father is a son of a bitch. The revelation of Atticus's repellent attitudes hits as hard as if a sequel to the gospels revealed that Jesus and Judas were the same character. Everything you know is wrong.

A few days before GSAW hit the stores, I re-read *Mockingbird* for the first time in years. I was surprised at the extent to which the movie depiction replaced the book itself in my memory.<fn>Like I said: re-read TKAM before you read GSAW.</fn> *Mockingbird* the movie revolves around the trial of Tom Robinson; everything else that happens travels in orbit around that event. In the book, the trial is critical, but the book as a whole explores the curve of small-town childhood in the South with fondness and wit. (White children, naturally.) As with so many movies/books/tv shows about race, actual black folks are pretty much in the margins.<fn>With the notable and long overdue exception of the movie *Selma,* though it too has its own issues of Great Father drama and hagiography.</fn> And

this gets to one of the key problems with *Mockingbird* – on the one hand, it asks us to empathize with the 'poor, poor Negro', even while bestowing upon us a glimmering savior to make us all feel okay again. That nice (hell, impossibly perfect) Atticus washes our sins away.

While theories abound as to *Watchman's* origin, I readily accept that this was an early shot at Lee's Maycomb chronicle; after reading *Watchman*, Lee's editor told her go back and tell the tale from Young Scout's perspective. It took her two years to re-write, and the result was the structurally and stylistically superior *Mockingbird*. The *Watchman* version is clearly unfinished; it lacks the cohesion that extended editing and re-writing would have instilled.<fn>It is also unmistakably the work of Harper Lee. This is no hoax, and it sure as hell is not Capote.</fn> But I can also see how this might have become, later on, an effective sequel. In fact, it takes great effort to read this as anything other than a sequel or amplification of the original: the same characters, 15 years later on the fictional timeline, in a book published 50+ years later. It's of a piece, and it provides an essential corrective element that turns the saga into something other than a happy fairy tale, albeit one where that poor Tom Robinson &c., pass the black eyed peas.

Mockingbird gave us a feel-good fantasy. *Watchman* fills in the blanks and gives us a truth that does not encourage happy mealtime discussion.

Mockingbird is still a great novel. Lee's depictions of the rhythms and rhymes and smells of Southern life are as good as anybody else, Faulkner, O'Connor, Percy, you name your favorite. But Harper Lee is not a great novelist.<fn> For the same reason the John Kennedy Toole and Joseph Heller are not; the body of work is just not there to justify such a judgement.</fn> She spread a dusting of fiction over the people she knew growing up, the place she knew. She had a

story worth telling, and perhaps even recognized that the time had come for white southerners to address race in a different way. But she had one good story, told it, and went silent. Wondering whether she could have become a great novelist is no better than a parlor game along the lines of could Wilt Chamberlain outplay Michael Jordan and such.

While *Watchman* is not a great novel by any stretch, it's probably not fair to judge it too harshly given that it never even made it to galleys until its rediscovery. But it is an important piece of work for two key reasons. First off, it sheds light on the author's struggle, the process of taking a work from idea to paper to woodshed to completion. This alone would make GSAW a worthy curiosity for literary scholars and a fun what-if exercise for *Mockingbird* devotees. But more important than this: *Watchman* uses the Freudian/Oedipal device of *kill the father* to allow Jean Louise to become an adult in her own right. And in so doing, Lee strips the mask from a false idol that has captivated her fans for several generations. And that shit comes with some heavy dues.

So first: The similarities between TKAM and GSAW are evident and plenty, with several paragraphs that describe Maycomb life appearing in both without so much as a comma's difference. But the divergences are where we get a glimpse at the evolution of a book that has been read by millions of people over the past half century.

Famously, Tom Robinson is convicted and then killed trying to escape prison; everybody knows that. But in *Watchman*, the "trial" is dealt with in a paragraph or two, with the throwaway reference that Tom was acquitted.<fn>And a more disturbing suggestion that Atticus fought hard for Tom only to sustain the fiction of equality under the law. More later.</fn> In the retelling, the "trial" transformed from a mere trifle to the centerpiece of one of the nation's great moral fables.

Then there's the fiance in GSAW, Henry, who Jean Louise describes as her oldest and dearest friend, a boy who lived across the street at the same time the trial and the adventures with Jem and Dill and Boo played out. This character does not exist in *Mockingbird*. Perhaps even more revealing, Boo Radley does not exist in the *Watchman* universe, and there is no mention of Bob Ewell's attack on Jem and Scout, the event that provides the bookend beginning/ending of the entire *Mockingbird* narrative.

And of course, there is Jean Louise's discovery and outrage that the Father and her fiance are, if not card carriers, at the very least fellow travellers of the White Citizens Councils who made damned well and sure that Jim Crow remained the law of the land and kept Those People from getting above their station. Not to be outdone, Jean Louise reveals herself to be a states rights fanatic of the first degree, and declared herself angry and outraged that the Supreme Court would force people to do the right thing when they would certainly get around to it in their own good time and why are they rushing things so. Between the two of them, you have the complete package of racial oppression. And they're both so damned reasonable about it.

The heart of *Watchman*'s ultimate importance lies in that last disparity between what might be viewed as the canon of TKAM and the heresy of GSA, lies in Harper Lee's forcing us to squarely face the myth of the Great Father, to see the truth of the complexity and the ugliness and duplicity, and to, well basically, grow the fuck up. Look, she says – you worshipped this False Idol, you used him to absolve your sins, and you've been a dupe the whole time. And by the way, your stand-in Scout ain't all that either, what with her love of states rights and eventual acceptance of *the way things are*.<fn>To be sure, the ending of the book feels hurried and undeveloped, something I feel would have been addressed in re-write/editing. But Lee said publish it warts and all, so this

is the text we have to unpack, to use a term that I hate but why not at this point, my god, the world is in tatters and the Great Father is dead. Cut me some slack.</fn>

Lee created *the* Perfect Father, the man who could resolve any argument, cure any scratch or scrape. And Gregory Peck made that character flesh. Go ahead, try to imagine any other actor of the past 100 years in that role. None of them will stick. One stupid internet poll after another has put Atticus near the top of the "perfect father" sweepstakes. People name their children after Atticus. He's a goddamned monument.

And this is exactly where *Watchman* delivers the blow that makes it an important contribution to this corner of the literary world: Lee shows us that our Savior is a fraud, tells us to wake up and be adults in our own right. Lee shows us the essential error of putting our faith in mythical heroes and asks us to stand on our own. Sure, it's tough when we discover that the pleasing fairy tales of our childhoods are fictions that cover up a more complex and disappointing set of truths. Step up and deal.

Watchman comes along at a particularly fraught moment in our 400 year struggle with the wages of America's original sin. Any pretense to having arrived at a post-racial moment withers with the first serious investigation. No matter how "good" we whites think ourselves, no matter how much we congratulate ourselves on how far we've come<fn> Guilty as charged. Mea culpa.</fn> – the fact remains that we live in a segregated society, and it is primarily White America's obligation to ensure that the structural changes necessary to allow this issue to reach resolution are squarely in our own laps. (Like it or not, Blacks have no obligation to *make things better*; we shit this bed and it's ours to clean.) Unlike TKAM, *Watchman* does not offer any bromides to make that pill any less bitter. In fact, by making Atticus' noble defense of Tom Robinson an act of expedience rather than principle, Lee drives home a disturbing and cynical point:

good deeds may not quite be what they appear. Even your own, so stay awake and question, question, question.

Another heartbreaker in *Watchman:* Jean Louise pays a visit to Calpurnia, the Negro woman who essentially raised her and Jem. In TKAM, Calpurnia was for all intents the only Mother Jem and Scout knew. Now long since retired and removed from the White world, Calpurnia barely acknowledges Jean Louise, and certainly display no affection. Jean Louise is deeply hurt, but also outraged: how dare she not remember me, how dare she turn her back on how good we were to her, how we treated her *as though* she were just like family, etc. Jean Louise has not found the maturity to accept her own complicity in racial oppression. It's too much for her to take. In this, she is the perfect representation of too many "enlightened" whites on the question of race, with our plaintive whines of "can't they see how much we/I have done for them already?", largely blind to the overwhelming privilege we claim as our birthright without even recognizing it even exists.

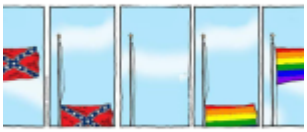
In the end, I find myself at this: despite the fact that *Mockingbird* is likely to remain the preferred version of Lee's Maycomb tales, it is dishonest to ignore the details of *Watchman* in our overall view of what Maycomb means in its literary context. Memories are imperfect, and stories told over time shift and morph to reflect new experiences, changed attitudes, or something as simple as wish fulfillment. When Lee wrote *Watchman*, she told a story of a young woman's disillusionment about her once revered father; when she rewrote the story from the young Scout perspective, she transformed Atticus into the perfect father, the perfect man.

This is not necessarily a contradiction. But the fuller portrait that emerges from the combined tellings – even though it is a real heartbreaker – brings us closer to an understanding that is probably more useful and true in the long run: we are none of us perfect – even/especially the people you've placed on a pedestal – and you can bet there's a

dark side to your own character that needs serious work, some whining cling to privilege that we mostly don't even see. And there is no Great Father who can fix everything for us; it all depends on our own imperfect efforts. It is surely impossible to bear, to go on without our Great Father; but the alternative – giving up and throwing in the towel – is even worse.

I'm not sure Harper Lee intended anything of the sort. It may be that she truly felt the story delivered in *Mockingbird* is the "way it is", and I've no doubt many will hold to that reading. But I'll hold to this one: Harper Lee knew what was in the earlier manuscript, and she allowed its publication as a favor to us all. *Watchman* delivers a harsh but necessary message: Give up the fantasy and face the world as it is. Shit's too damned serious for anything else.

The Longest Arc



It's been a good week to be a liberal in America. The affirmation by the Supreme Court that the Affordable Care Act will be allowed to remain the law of the land, along with their upholding of Obama-era policies regarding housing discrimination, are big victories.

Even bigger: today the Supremes affirmed the right for

everyone to get married. This is a huge stride forward. Obama is correct in saying that “We have made our union a little more perfect” with this decision. The *Obergefell* decision is one of *the* key social justice decisions SCOTUS has delivered, and today we saw momentous history in the making, as surely as Brown v Board of Education was sixty years ago.

This is all huge stuff, great stuff that helps me put aside my usual ‘glass is half empty, and would it kill you to add a little ice’ mindset.

Also big this week: the Stars and Bars has become de facto radioactive to almost every public official and corporation. The rapidity of this has been stunning, albeit long overdue. Sure, it’s pretty evident that many of the pols speaking out against the Confederate battle flag are just playing a triangulation game, trimming their positions just in time.<fn>I’m looking at you, Nikki Haley.</fn> But in this case, having these folks play along with their “me too” duplicity is welcome. That battle rag has loomed over the South – and the Nation – for far too long. There will be predictable pockets of holdouts, a bunch of ‘fergit, hell!’ yahoos who refuse to give up their precious. But at last, there is rapidly growing agreement that the flag is a symbol of a shameful legacy of racial hatred. I’m more than okay with that.

But this change comes with a hefty price tag that belies the *happening overnight* feeling. It took nine *more* people dying at the hands of yet another wacko with a gun to get to this moment. It’s not too much to suggest that every step in the movement to repair our national shame surrounding racial inequality has carried similar costs, that carnage has been the necessary currency in the struggle to get white people to do something as basic as to recognize our shared humanity. But unlike, say, the Newtown massacre, this horror is actually leading to a significant, if insufficient, piece of social change.<fn>Gun control remains somehow too much to even

consider, and it would not surprise if the NRA crowd was somehow fueling the anti-flag fever to divert attention away from the well-armed elephant in the room.</fn> But if this overdue disgrace of the battle rag is really *just* a step in the right direction, it is a gol-durned big un, especially in the states that still whistle Dixie a little too often.

I come from the South, from a family background that is typically conservative in the way the White South has pretty much always been, and that was not always let's say *flexible* in our view of difference. It appears that ancestors fought on both sides of the Civil War, but mostly for the Confederacy. One ancestor was a prosperous slave holder in South Georgia.<fn>None of that wealth survived the war, and that side of the family scraped along after that.</fn> On the other side of the family, my great-grandfather was, among other things, a bootlegger in Mississippi who employed black men to help work the still, and who earned frequent uninvited visits from the local Klan who disapproved of this economic arrangement. Like most Southern families, the past is a muddle of strange happenings and inherent contradiction.

But either way, the elders of my experience were polite, white Southerners who would never dream of being overtly rude to a 'Colored'<fn>Never a colored *person*, although occasionally perhaps a *Nigra,* which was the genteel substitute for that horrible word that I was taught from an early age was only used by White Trash.</fn>, but who were quite certain in their belief that black people were something other, and absolutely *less than* in some indefinable way.<fn>But who might also, through dint of hard work and diligence, elevate themselves above the aforementioned White Trash. The granular slicing of social strata was elaborate. The point was to always have some group that was *lower* than your own.</fn>

And so it came to pass somehow that at a tender young age, when we lived in the Tennessee tri-city area, I was given a small Stars and Bars of my own.<fn>I cannot remember who gave

it to me, other than that it was a relative, not my parents.</fn> It was not very large, and cheaply made, with staples holding it to a dowel that served as an ersatz flagpole. Nobody explained anything about it, other than that it was “the Southern flag”. I hung it my room and really didn’t think much about it.

And then we moved to southern Connecticut, where I unpacked my stuff and hung it in my room. I still had no concept of what it meant. And it came to pass that I made friends in the neighborhood who were more overtly racist than anybody I’d known in the South. Not necessarily more racist, but they lacked the gentility to say *Nigra*, preferring that other word that gets readers of *Huck Finn* so riled up these days. And so, like anybody wanting to fit in, I started using it, too.

In the north, I attended an elementary school that was pretty much all-white, with the exception of the son of the caretaker of our church. Willie and I became pretty good friends. You’d think this cognitive dissonance of having a chosen friend, who was Black, and a bunch of racist neighborhood friends, would provide a sharp spur of conscience in a young boy. No such luck.

One day, Willie visited my house. I’m not sure if he saw the flag or not. It really didn’t occur to me that it might make a difference. But we somehow got into an argument, and I ended up getting mad and dropping the N-bomb on him. He punched me in the gut so hard I dropped to the ground. And he left to walk home, not even asking for a ride or the phone to call his mom.

And we never spoke again.

Make no mistake. I knew I was crossing a line when I said it, and I knew that it was fucked up to do so. But I felt I had it in my power to knock this really nice friend down to size, just because he made me mad about something. But he was having

none of that.

I was around 10 years old at the time. The shame of what I did that day still burns. It's the most overtly racist act of my life, and that word has not passed my lips since. But I can't claim innocence of more subtle racist behaviors, like getting nervous when a group of black males gets on an empty subway car with me, or even just not considering that a great scientific advance might have been realized by a Black man or woman, or of being surprised when I met a Black man who *loves* 80s hair metal bands. Because that's not what *they* do, right?

I was not raised by bad or malevolent people. I was not taught to be racist, at least not in any obvious sense. But I did live in a world where hanging the battle rag was fine, where assuming the racial superiority was the order of things, where laughing and joining the guys in crude racial jokes was no problem. I thought I was not a bad or malevolent person. But by every reasonable measure of the word, I was a racist. And I somehow managed to *get* that those two statements could not live together.

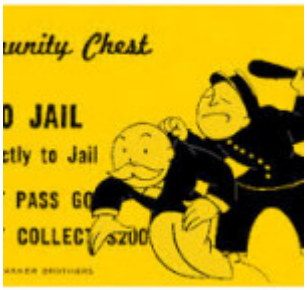
I'm not sure when I decided to change, not clear on exactly when I quietly took that toy battle flag and threw it in the trash. I'm not sure when I actually realized that I could work to be rid of the burden of lies that led me to assume my superiority based on my pale skin. I've struggled with that for over 40 years, I guess, but even though I like to congratulate myself on how far I've come, that stain is still there. Just like that stain is indelible on our Nation. If I treat every person I meet, from now until I die, with full dignity and respect – doubtful, but it's a goal – the stain will remain.

Getting rid of the battle rag is not going to change much in the overall calculus of how racial "difference" plays out day to day. But like the day I threw mine in the trash, it can represent a decision to make conscious choices about the

messages we endorse and about how we wish to be, even while we are never going to be able to fully attain that goal. For most whites in my generation, the stain is pronounced. For later generations, for people who do not grow up with the message that a symbol that represents slavery and segregation and racial animus is approved by their governments and institutions, maybe that stain begins to fade.

And even though the shame of how I behaved remains, I am not ashamed of being from the South. Many of the better examples of American culture come from the South. The music I love, the food, the literature, the seemingly genetic predisposition to gothic humor…this is the bounty of Southern heritage. The Civil Rights movement started in the South and rippled out across the country to force people in other regions to grapple with the institutional racism as it manifested in those places. There's plenty to be proud of. This is the heritage – shared across race and class lines – that we can celebrate. And we can do it just fine without that miserable battle rag.

Breaking: Water is Still Wet



Late last year, the NY Police were very, very cross with their new Mayor, who had the gall to mention that he had instructed his son to be very careful and respectful if he had any encounters with the police. Here's a picture of the mayor and

his son.



What possible reason could da mayor have had for saying such a thing?





(Excuse my insolence. I forgot we live in the post-racial America now.)

In response, the police union announced a virtual work stoppage during which they would not issue citations or make arrests "unless absolutely necessary". Arrests fell by 66%, parking citations by 94%, and traffic tickets by 94%, according to the NY Post. My favorite stat:

> *"Summonses for low-level offenses like public drinking and urination also plunged 94 percent—from 4,831 to 300.*

Of course, everyone remembers all the headlines about how NYC became a flame-engulfed hellscape in which drunken parking scofflaws urinated all over unsuspecting touristas. Snake Pliskin himself would have fled in horror, amirite?

Alas, no.

There was no surge in crime. The city went on as before. It turns out all that hyper-vigilant enforcement activity was not the only thing standing between Gotham and Somali-esque chaos. It turns out that most of the police work was not, to borrow from the union's statement, "absolutely necessary". Who knew?

The 'broken windows' policing philosophy that became (in)famous under NYPD in the 80s-90s became a tool for harrassment of minorities and other "suspicious" characters. In tandem with the lunatic war on drugs frenzy, this was really nothing more than a cudgel to keep Those People™ in line. Stop-and-frisk statistics clearly demonstrate the disproportionate burden imposed on minorities through its practice. Even after research demonstrated that the tactic had little real effect on wider crime rates, most police forces insisted that this was the only way to keep the streets safe for our law-abiding citizens.<fn>Who, it turns out, are bad for budget solvency!</fn> But America loves it some authoritarianism, and so long as the burden is borne by Those People™, Johnny Law had no reason to change.<fn>FWIW, I have little patience with the smart-ass '*No cops? No crime!*' tautology of the gLibertarian crowd. Many – maybe even most – police officers are decent people trying to do a difficult, often dangerous. Though statistically speaking, the chance of death or injury on the job is greater for about two dozen other careers, e.g. fishing, logging, or collecting trash.</fn>

Last week, our local fishwrap reported that the Leon County budget is facing a million dollar hole "because of a decline in the number of traffic tickets being written by the Tallahassee Police Department over the past 18 months." Shortly after TPD settled an excessive force lawsuit <fn>Half a million bucks, taxpayers!</fn>, the chief of police "… went to the patrol division and instructed officers to continue

writing traffic citations for serious offenses, but gave them the option and encouraged discretion in issuing warnings for stops for minor offenses."

The article goes on to talk about TPD shifting it's emphasis to a law-enforcement model that encourages engagement over confrontation. A TPD spokesman offered this:

> *"Our policing in Tallahassee has changed. In the past we may have been doing a traffic stop, and immediately the idea would be to write as many tickets as would warrant. Now the process is more of an education over enforcement at times."*

The result? TPD wrote fewer than half the number of tickets compared to the prior year. That number had been pretty steady for years. Perhaps some of that hard-core Barney Fifeing was not "absolutely necessary"? Maybe that instinct to "write as many tickets as would warrant" led to some, oh, let's call it overly creative police work.

The news that the city government in Ferguson, MO, viewed its citizenry as little more than a dusky-hued ATM has spread far and wide.<fn>As long as far and wide does not include that place where certain friends and relations think everything would be fine of Those People™ would just simmer down a little and know their place.</fn> Ta-Nehisi Coates provides a rundown on the situation in The Atlantic, and there is really little I can add to his excellent work.<fn>Why this guy does not have a twice-weekly slot on the NYT editorial page is an ongoing mystery.</fn> Notably, the federal DOJ reported that the department held contests to see who could write the most tickets for a single offense<fn>Merely a motivational tool to ensure greater public safety, no doubt.</fn> and that the city manager actively encouraged the police to step up citations when revenue began to lag. Suffice to say that there has been an ongoing and conscious effort to balance the city budget on the backs of the (mostly) Black citizens who can least afford

it.<fn>That the collection agency is the predominately white police force is certainly just an unfortunate coincidence that makes this situation appear *racial* despite the fact that we have arrived at an utterly color-blind and post-racial period of harmony and unicorns. Pardon my insolence.</fn>

(By the way, I am not accusing Tallahassee police of this same racially-structured revenue enhancement, but I am curious to see the statistics one way or the other. However that turns out, I have not noticed our little burg devolving into any sort of Mad Max-ish dystopia in the absence of hyper-vigilant policing.)

I'm no public policy expert, but it seems pretty clear that if eliminating "unnecessary" citations and fines creates a hole in the budget, that money is going to have to come from some other source. <fn>But that leads us to the word that must never be spoken: taxes. Yet another legacy of St Ronald the Dim: we can have everything we want without paying taxes. It's magic!</fn> "Enhancing" revenues through law enforcement is just another creative means of making up the shortfall that was, at one time, borne by the community as a whole. It essentially makes criminal activity a necessary component of a healthy city budget.

What would happen if, miraculously, our entire population became perfectly docile, law abiding citizens, as in Singapore, where the idea of a stray gum wrapper or jaywalking is unthinkable? If we are relying upon revenue from citations to balance the budget, we would have two choices: raise revenues some other way or *create* criminal activity where we can impose fines. (Are we headed to a day when people who do not commit infractions are labeled "takers" because they refuse to pay their fair share; at that point, the police will be viewed as "makers".<fn>I kid! Such Randroid stupidity could never happen here.</fn>) Couple this impulse with the distortion already created by militarizing the police and inculcating an occupation force mindset<fn>cf.



</fn> – alongside the budget-balancing incentive to confiscate property under drug laws run amok – and the inevitability of our descent into police state-ism is apparent.<fn>Has that ship sailed? Is it too late?</fn>

Back to our local budgetary shortfall and the role of (not-enough) traffic fines in funding the local government. I happen to really like my current hometown. The services the city and county provide are generally efficient and enlightened.<fn>After enduring the incompetence of ATL's city governance for years, our local gummit is a marvel.</fn> I know this kind of service doesn't come cheap. But if we are relying upon illegal activity (or at least the citation of same) to fund our community, we are doomed.

I grant our local PD, and our new Police Chief, this: they recognize the problem and are taking some steps to move away from this kind of zero-tolerance policing.

> *"Our officers are spending less and less time doing what we would call proactive policing. They are doing more of the answering calls for service."*

There's some radical thinking. Maybe a slogan to reflect this new emphasis. Hey, I got it. How about "To Protect and Serve"?

Nah, that will never catch on. Too hard to monetize.