

Grasping Reality with Both Hands

The weblog of Brad DeLong. Comments (mostly) welcome, or email me at delong@hey.com with "delong-weblog" as the subject.
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James Buchanan in the Context of Jim Tobin and Herman Wouk...



James Buchanan: <https://www.bradford-delong.com/2019/05/27/>: 'I experienced overt discrimination for being a non-Easterner, a nonestablishmentarian. In the whole group of 600 boys, there were only about twenty who were graduates of Yale, Harvard, Princeton—all Ivy League. By the end of this first boot camp period, they had to select midshipman officers. Out of the 20 boys from the establishment universities, 12 or 13 were picked, against a background of a total of 600. It was overtly discriminatory towards those of us who were not members of the establishment.... From that day forward I have shared in the emotional damage imposed by discrimination, in any form, and "fairness" assumed for me a central normative position decades before I came to discuss principles of justice professionally and philosophically..'

Charles Steindel: 'One interesting thing in this material was Buchanan's groaning about how he was discriminated against in Navy Officer training relative to Yankee Ivy Leaguers. Herman Wouk's recent passing stirred me to reflect on this process. As was mildly fictionalized in the *Caine Mutiny*, Work was outstripped in his training class by none other than Jim Tobin. Yes, both Wouk and Tobin were northern 'Ivy Leaguers' (Wouk Columbia and Tobin Harvard). But the Jew from New York and the Irish kid from Illinois would surely not have seen themselves as more on the 'inside' than Buchanan who, after all, had the same name as (an admittedly wildly unsuccessful) US President..'

IMHO, what Buchanan is complaining about is this: Harvard and Columbia could and did turn people like Wouk and Tobin into effective WASPs by teaching them to turn down the accent and soft-pedal the Blarney and the Yiddishkeit. Middle Tennessee State Teachers College and the University of Tennessee were not in that business at all. Yet he got another chance in the navy—serving on Admiral Spruance's staff during World War II. But that was a chance he did not want to take.

Now, after spending World War II out in Hawaii on Admiral Spruance's staff and marrying Anne Bakke, a Norwegian-American nurse, and then getting your Ph.D. in 1948 at the University of Chicago—after that you have many options. You don't have to identify as a southerner, a governor's grandson, from a family whose land had been "ruined" by the Civil War. (Actually, land is hard to ruin: livestock, buildings, orchards, and most of all slaves can no longer be yours afterwards, but the land, its nutrients, the sun, and the rain are still there. Tobacco can ruin land. But not Sherman.) You could identify as whitish-bread American meritocrat—like Wouk and Tobin—who happened to have been born in the shallow south.

I don't know whether Buchanan thought that would have been a theft of his identity, or whether he would have taken that road if Buchanan's first jobs had been in Vermont and Wisconsin rather than Florida and Virginia.

Or maybe his complaints about discrimination against him were never reflective of any inner experienced reality: maybe they were just a con, an intellectual judo move—I'm not an oppressive Jim Crow-enforcing white establishment southerner—I'm being oppressed!—because being in the dominant race was a central part of his identity.

When one reads "From that day forward I have shared in the emotional damage imposed by discrimination..." and "'fairness' assumed for me a central normative position...", one does tend to expect it to be followed by "and so I marched with Martin Luther King, Jr."

One does not expect it to be accompanied by "and so I worked hard to devise plans whereby Virginia's public-school tax collars could be diverted to segregation academies..."

It's hard for me to see and contemplate such a total lack of awareness of self and context.

.#class #ethnicity #equitablegrowth #racism #status #2020-07-16

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