

RICHARD COHEN

Tidying Up Our History With Aid of the Eraser

IN MARYLAND, there's a move afoot to either dump or change the lyrics of the state song, "Maryland, My Maryland." It is an awful song, full of blood and gore—pro-slavery and anti-union. It is not fitting, some say, to be sung by the current citizens of the state who are, with some exceptions, pro-union and anti-slavery. They want to rub it out. The Great Eraser is on the move again.

This is my term for our reluctance to fess up to history and our desire to change it to suit our purposes. In Maryland this takes the form of shock that the state was more Confederate than Union and that Abe Lincoln was considered no better than a tyrant in many of Baltimore's better neighborhoods. People would rather it hadn't happened that way.

This urge to alter history is something of an American pastime and Washington is rather like a geographic center of it all. Nearby, for instance, is the Mount Vernon home of George Washington where the Great Eraser has obliterated the slave

quarters. In their place we have servants quarters. The servants nevertheless came to the place in chains.

Farther south at Monticello slavery had been similarly rubbed out. Jefferson had slaves, and felt awkward about it. He freed them upon his death, but the Great Eraser had made them disappear all together.

Lest you think this is an Eastern phenomenon, I submit the example of Hearst Castle, built at San Simeon, Calif., by the late William Randolph Hearst. When I toured the place, a member of my group asked the location of the bedroom of Marion Davies, who was Hearst's mistress for 32 years.

Talking in the sort of voice that was later used for movie robots, the guide said that he was under orders not to mention her. When the tourist persisted, pointing out that Hearst himself had been up front about the relationship, the guide switched back to robot voice and repeated what he had said before. The Great Eraser had struck again.

Sometimes it strikes in more subtle ways. The nation, for instance, has had a near mania recently for rehabilitating, restoring, pardoning, exonerating and granting citizenship to just about anyone you can name. Dr. Samuel Mudd, ancestor of Roger and fixer of John Wilkes Booth's shattered leg, has been exonerated of suspicion that

See COHEN, C3, Col. 1

COHEN, From C1

he was involved in the assassination plot. This comes a little late to do him much good.

Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis have had their citizenship restored and now there is an effort to clear the good name of Joe Hill, the union organizer executed in Utah who left behind a legend and a fine folk song. I am waiting for John Dillinger to be granted posthumous work-release.

Some of these efforts are commendable. Both Lee and Davis should have had their citizenship restored. In Lee's case, this is something he himself very much wanted and he was seconded in this cause by none other than Ulysses S. Grant, his battlefield adversary. In any case, he was entitled to it.

But there is something about all of this that has nothing to do with entitlement or justice. It has to do instead with this national mania for tidying up, for making all men—Lee and Grant, for in-

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stance—more or less the same, to make light of the differences that separated them back then and to say more or less, "North or South, what difference did it make?" It made one hell of a difference to them and to ignore that demeans them.

But more than that, this urge to clean up trifles with history. We have done this sort of thing with the American Indian which is why so few people understand their current plight, their agony and their circumstances. I was an adult and a long-time history buff before I learned that it was Custer who had been chasing the Indians, not the other way around and it was years before I realized that when Indians talked of genocide, they weren't just throwing words around.

We have changed history to suit our purposes time and time again—cleaned it up so it would be presentable for our children. We did it with slavery, transforming it from a brutal institution to some sort of idyll under the magnolias, in the process falsifying the heritage of a whole people. You cannot understand black people today unless you know their history and if you went to school when I did you know precious little. Myths don't only hide the past; they also obscure the present.

So it's fine with me if they want to scuttle "Maryland, My Maryland" as the state song, only don't change the lyrics. History has been messed with too much and it's time we had respect for the people who went before us—their times, their lives.

Maryland was what it was and nothing, not even the Great Eraser can change that. It's called the truth.