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TELEVISION PROGRAM TO "CBS NEWS' FACE THE NATION."



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Washington Post

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TRANSCRIPT

BOB SCHIEFFER: Today on FACE THE NATION, the topic is race in America. But is the conversation we expected. Many thought the election of the first African-American President would mark a new era in race relations. But somehow when racial issues emerge, this White House seems to stumble as when it rushed to judgment on government worker Shirley Sherrod last week. And what about the administration's handling of that fringe group called The New Black Panthers.

We'll bring together an extraordinary panel to discuss all of it. From Princeton, Professor Cornel West; Georgetown University sociologist Michael Eric Dyson; two conservative columnists Michael Gerson of The Washington Post and John Fund of the Wall Street Journal; and Abigail Thernstrom, a Bush appointee, to the Civil Rights Commission.

Afterward I'll have some thoughts on the role the media played in all of this.

But first, race in America on FACE THE NATION.

ANNOUNCER: FACE THE NATION with CBS News chief Washington correspondent Bob Schieffer. And now from CBS News in Washington, Bob Schieffer.

BOB SCHIEFFER: And good morning again. A lot to talk about, so we're going to get right to it. We're going to begin with the Shirley Sherrod case. By now I'm sure you know the story how a heavily-edited tape that was taken totally out of context was put on the web. And the result was that the administration without checking to see what the rest of the tape said fired the woman. Then came a lot of apologies and an offer of a new job.

Michael Eric Dyson, you are writing a book about Barack Obama and race. And it seems to me after making all of these eloquent statements about race during the campaign, now when race comes up as an issue, this White House seems to commit some gaffe or-- or stumbles. What-- what do you think has happened here?

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON (Georgetown University): Well, I think the unfortunate reality is that there's a kind of gag order imposed on the-- the Obama White House when it comes to issues of race. There's an understandable lamentation among the Obamanites that, look, we don't want to pigeon our holes-- pigeonhole ourselves into the corner of race so to speak, but at the same time what is sacrificed is clear and decisive action in behalf of I think valuable principles of racial negotiation, which means that we have to tell the truth about race. What we saw with the Sherrod case was quite remarkable. You have the reptilian repugnance of certain elements of the right wing, which edit history for their own vicious and devious purposes. And then, you have the marrying of one-- on one hand of historical amnesia with the exaggerated sense of racial injury, which leads to a kind of racial privileging and a-- a-- and a kind of white innocence that I think takes off here because a lot of white people think that in the age of Obama, we're living in a post-racial era. There are at least two or three myths out there, Bob. One of them is that the rough equality of the 1960s provided the opportunity for all peoples of color and white people to be roughly equal. Secondly, that the stale bread of the arguments of the sixties needs to be discarded, and what we need to eat in its place is the fresh bread of new arguments. But it's-- it's a kind of racial non-tolerance. And there's--

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): All right.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: --a zero racial characterization. And then, finally, I think what happens we're not living in a post-racial era. The Obama administration has been intimidated by the far-right wing which is addicted to a kind of paranoia of race that then leads to paralyzing racial conversation which means there's no word from the White House that's positive about the issue of race.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, let me turn to Michael Gerson. You-- you've written a lot about this. Do you think this was just sloppy work by one guy on a website and then was picked up by-- by some of the media, or is this something that goes deeper than that?

MICHAEL GERSON (Washington Post): No, I think it goes deeper. I-- I think we're in a moment where you have people on the left and on the right that want to take political polarization and turn it into racial polarization for their own purposes, to get internet hits, or to get supporters, or other things. That's a very, very disturbing trend. So you have it with The New pa-- Black Panther case in my view where you take an incident and try to turn it into a narrative when it really doesn't justify that in a lot of ways. I-- it's damaging for the-- for the reasons the other guest talked about. I mean, these wounds are very close to the surface in America. When people take-- take these issues and attempt to use them for political reasons, when they feed rage, they're doing something very, very dangerous. And I think, you know, historically, it-- it's a-- it's a real problem.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Cornel West, Bob Herbert of The New York Times say-- said the Obama administration runs from race issues like a thoroughbred bolts out of the starting gate. Is the President too sensitive on race?

CORNEL WEST (Princeton University): I think Bob Herbert is absolutely right and to have it smiling others have been making this point with great insight. I think what you have is you have a PR operation, where the White House is reluctant to want to intervene in issues of race. Let us be clear what we're talking about. We're talking about race. This is not just some deodorized discourse. This is a history of black people being terrorized, traumatized, and stigmatized. To try to convince black people that we are unworthy to have our poverty addressed, to have our bad schools, our bad education, our unemployment rates, or underemployment rates to keep us scared and intimidated. And this is what is so magnificent about Shirley Sherrod. She is democratic nobility and black royalty. She's an American hero. She's a Christian soldier for justice. Why? Because in the face of terror, in the face of trauma, in the face of being stigmatized what does she do? Like Martin King, like Fannie Lou Hamer, I will love my way through this darkness by promoting justice not revenge. That's a great legacy of black people that we see brown people trying to do the same thing in Arizona in the face of America turning away. Now we have made great progress. Barack Obama is one example of that. But he's caught in the middle. Brother Dyson is right about it. He's caught in the middle. He got a PR operation on the one hand not wanting to engage in the other. And I would say to my dear brother Barack Obama, if you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right. I want to get back to this case but before we go too far here, I want-- want to get into this controversy over the administration's decision to drop most of the charges against this fringe group called the New Black Panther Party for voter-- charges that they intimidated voters in Philadelphia. It all got back in the news a couple of weeks ago when a Bush appointee to the Justice Department, J. Christian Adams, said he had resigned because of the Obama administration's reluctance to press charges against African-Americans on these issues. And then he talked about it with our legal correspondent Jan Crawford.

CHRISTIAN ADAMS (Former DOJ Attorney): Voting section attorneys have refused outright to work on these sorts of cases saying things such as I didn't join the Justice Department to sue black people. I'm not going to work on the case. People who did work on the cases were harassed. There was terrible things that occurred within the department whenever certain people would decide that a race-neutral enforcement of the law was appropriate.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Now, Abigail Thernstrom, President Bush appointed you--

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights): Mm-Hm.

BOB SCHIEFFER: --to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission.

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM: Mm-Hm.

BOB SCHIEFFER: You said that all of this thing about The Black Panthers was small potatoes. Why did you say that?

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM: Well, first place, you had two unappealing black guys, unappealing because, you know, the New Black Panther Party is unappealing and it's a racist party and so forth show up at one largely black precinct in Philadelphia. And they stand around. One was slapping a billy club against his wrist. But one, there is, we have no direct evidence that they actually intimidated anybody, stopped them from voting. And two, we certainly have no direct evidence that anybody in the Justice Department said oh, we're not going to prosecute the-- this case because we have racial double standards. We protect blacks, we don't protect whites. And my view, if anyone bothered to read my rather lengthy dissent on this issue, was there are more important voting rights issues to talk about.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, in fact, sources, I mean officials in both the White House and the Justice Department deny totally the allegations. They also point out that they did get an injunction, a court order against the guy that carried the billy club--

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM: I--

BOB SCHIEFFER: --that he can't go around a polling place anymore and-- and they say that, you know--

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM: For-- for two years, yeah.

BOB SCHIEFFER: --this is just-- just flatly untrue.

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM: I think it is flatly untrue. But then there is another point here. I mean, Thomas Perez, the assistant attorney general for civil rights, did come before the commission. And he said absolutely legitimately, look, Section 11 (b) of the Voting Rights Act, which is the sect-- provision that is at issue here allowing civil suits on the basis of voter intimidation. We have had in the forty-five years since the Voting Rights Act was passed, three successful prosecutions under that provision. This is-- this is a section of the Voting Rights Act that is very hard to win cases under, that has no-- no clear standards, you know, no internal regulations--

BOB SCHIEFFER: So you just didn't see a case there, yeah?

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM: I think the evidence is extremely weak. If the Justice Department chooses, and I would be delighted to-- if it did so, chooses to send to us, for in-- for instance, somebody who is at that alleged brown bag meeting--

BOB SCHIEFFER: Yeah.

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM: --in which Julie Fernandez said, "We don't pro--prosecute cases in which blacks are victims." Fine.

BOB SCHIEFFER: But--

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM: I mean, really I-- I'm an evidence girl--

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right.

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM: I want evidence.

BOB SCHIEFFER: I want to get to John Fund. He's kind of an evidence guy, editorial writer for the Wall Street Journal. You thought this was not small potato, this whole case. You have been writing-- you wrote a lot about it over-- over the last couple of years.

JOHN FUND (Wall Street Journal): I know we don't have all the facts because this Justice Department is stonewalling subpoenas issued by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. They even--

BOB SCHIEFFER: Big surprise.

JOHN FUND: --transferred one of the officials to South Carolina so he's outside the jurisdiction of the Civil Rights Commission subpoenas. Look, two African-American poll watchers testified they were intimidated by these people. And this is part of a pattern--

BOB SCHIEFFER: But-- but-- no voter, John.

JOHN FUND: Well, we-- we-- we saw-- we saw testimony that the voters said that they turned around and said they would come back. We don't know if they ever came back. We do know that this is a pattern with the Justice Department. Kinston, North Carolina is a predominantly African-American city and voted to have non-partisan elections. The Justice Department said no, you can't do that. You have to continue to give black voters the cue of Democrat versus Republican, so they'll know who to vote for. And you go through it. Georgia. Georgia wanted to take social security data and verify the U.S. citizenship of people who were registering to vote. Justice Department said you couldn't do that. There is a consistent politicization of the Justice Department. We just had a report clearing the Bush administration of illegality in the U.S. attorney's case. I think that the Justice Department is clearly stonewalling these subpoenas because they have something to hide. Do I know exactly what they're hiding? I don't. And I just want to say something about Mister West's comments. I agree we've made great progress in race in this country.

CORNEL WEST: And tear and the trauma and so worth--

JOHN FUND: And there still lots of problems remaining. Our rhetoric is stunted on this issue. Every political year, every political season you get these hair-trigger responses from the

internet, from the Obama administration. Why is this? This is about politics as well as race. Mary Francis Berry, who was the former chairwoman of the Civil Rights Commission under President Clinton, said tainting the Tea Party movement with the charge of racism is proving to be an effective strategy for Democrats. No evidence Tea Party adherents are anymore racist than any other Republicans and indeed many other Americans. But having one's opponent rebut charges of racism is far better than discussing joblessness.

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): Let me--

JOHN FUND: We have 9.5 percent unemployment, fifty percent teenage black unemployment, seven-- sixteen percent of adult lack of unemployment. There are a lot of issues to discuss in this table. I don't think these are the most pressing political issues.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, let me-- let me-- I just want to ask Ms. Thernstrom, Doctor Thernstrom, one question. You made an extraordinary statement to Politico, when you said conservatives on the U.S. Civil Rights Commission thought they could use this case to bring down the attorney general and really damage the President. Has this the civil rights commission become that partisan? I mean, do you mean that literally?

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM: Well, I do mean it literally. And-- but this is a he said, she said situation. And then it's not-- it's not recorded anywhere. But, look, race and politics and I think Mister Gerson said this has become-- have become so entangled, you can't even criticize President Obama without it being coming off as, you know, you coming off as racially suspect. You-- Arthur Davis--

CORNEL WEST: I criticize him all the time. I never come racially (INDISTINCT) --Brother Dyson does, Brother--

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM: Hold this.

(Cross talking)

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM: All right. But-- all-- all right. Arthur Davis could not say I oppose-- running for governor in Alabama, could not say I oppose the Obama health care without Jesse Jackson saying he's not a real black man. I want to say one thing to-- in response to John Fund who is an old and dear friend of mine. Look, the poll workers who testified, they were Democrats, they are working for Republicans. They-- and they had affidavits. They said themselves, they were not afraid. And the issue here, of course, is voter intimidation. They were not voters. But even if they were intimidated they said they were not afraid.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right.

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM: We have no evidence that any voters were afraid.

BOB SCHIEFFER: We're-- we're going to have to break here--

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON (overlapping): Can I respond, Bob?

BOB SCHIEFFER: --because we have to pay some bills here. But we'll be back in one minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: And we're back talking about race in America. Michael Eric Dyson of Georgetown, you wanted to get into this discussion when we went to commercial break.

MICHAEL ERIC: Yeah-- Yeah, Bob. A couple of things. First of all, I-- I agree with Doctor Thernstrom that, look, there is an enormous ratcheting up of the incivility of racial discourse in America. But the problem is, is not that we offer criticism of Mister Obama. Mister Obama, I met with him a couple of weeks ago in the Oval Office. He is quite rece-- receptive to criticism, principled criticism and criticism that's rooted in, I think, intellectual difference and even ideological or political difference.

But the reality is that when you see elements of the Tea Party portraying him as some African witch doctor. When you see elements of the far-right wing acidly and acerbically repudiating his humanity. What other president has been subject to the scrutiny over his birth certificate when it's been proved that he is from earth, so to speak. So the reality is-- is that we-- we've got that kind of opposition on the one hand. And then on the other hand, there's an implicit, I think, manipulation of racial solidarity among African-American people that keeps black people silent in the face of obvious offenses that are delivered, that are silently accepted by the Obama White House. So, black people feel that they are hamstrung because if they speak out against Mister Obama, they're siding with far-right conservatives who have no interest in principled dialogue. And, finally, I want to say this. We certainly have had enormous racial progress. But it's not simply about race here. The Shirley Sherrod case was about gender. The Obama White House did not do due diligence, it didn't vet this person because a woman is not seen as a legitimate civil rights leader. So among African-American people we have to contend with the gender issue. And I think the right wing understood that she was, yet, another woman that don--

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): Let-- let me--

MICHAEL ERIC: --comes to our mind that-- that we refused to deal with the issue of gender, as well.

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): Go ahead.

CORNEL WEST: But Bob, the only way you breakthrough this kind of superficial discourse, I think, is all of us acknowledge we have a fallible quest for truth. And the condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak and we don't like to talk about suffering among our poor people, of all colors but especially black poor and red poor.

We don't like to talk about the levels of unemployment, the levels of underemployment, the decrepit schools, disgraceful school systems and-- and-- and de-- de-- decrepit housing and so forth. Why? Because then, we're talking about power, privilege versus poverty, and relative powerlessness that's-- that's the challenge. Race is integral. Race is part of this issue of joblessness.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Let me-- let me just because that leads into the question I want to ask Michael Gerson. You wrote this week that a lot of these controversies are the result of what you said, quote, "Too many Americans searching for excuses to justify their rage." How does that work?

MICHAEL GERSON: Well, that works because we're a big country. We've got three hundred million-- over three hundred million people. If you set out and if you're an internet site or a cable network, if you set out to find an excuse, some incident to-- to emphasize, you can find one in America. And run it over and over again. It could be a picture at a Tea Party rally of a single sign, okay? It could be a-- a-- of--

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM (overlapping): Which it was.

MICHAEL GERSON: Yeah, exactly or a video at you-- you know, that had to do with the New Black Panthers. And it makes it look like it's a crisis of race when in fact these are incidents in America. And-- and--

CORNEL WEST (overlapping): --industrial complex--

MICHAEL GERSON: --it exaggerates--

CORNEL WEST: --the crisis-- the crisis in our education. I mean, you would agree--

MICHAEL GERSON: I will.

CORNEL WEST: --you were outraged at 9/11, right?

MICHAEL GERSON: Right. No, no, I agree.

CORNEL WEST: We all were outraged at 9/11. Well, that's terrorism. When-- when innocent people are being put to death, rights violated, pushed to the mark--

MICHAEL GERSON: It's a-- it's a diff--

CORNEL WEST: --we have a right to be outraged.

BOB SCHIEFFER: John Fund wants to get into this.

JOHN FUND: We-- we have generations of minority school children that are being deprived of a good education at urban schools. Right now, in this city, Michelle Reed is trying to reform those schools. She's being blocked by teachers union and other special interests. That's a race gap we should be talking about. I think Mary Frances Berry is an honest liberal. The former chairwoman of the Civil Rights Commission says there's no evidence the Tea Party adherents are anymore racist than other Republicans and indeed many other Americans having ones opponent rebut charges of racism is far better than discussing joblessness. Why don't we talk about the real issue?

MICHAEL GERSON: Well, can I-- can I jump in it?

JOHN FUND: --the real issues, and this is all politics--

MICHAEL GERSON (overlapping): Right, but you know what?

JOHN FUND: --leading up to the election. Let's have a moratorium. Unless someone really practices real racism which is racial superiority I'm better than you.

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM (overlapping): Exactly.

JOHN FUND: If you're-- unless you're-- the got-you game should stop.

CORNEL WEST: But Bob, can I jump in?

JOHN FUND: --let's have a moratorium until the elections.

BOB SCHIEFFER: That said--

CORNEL WEST: --racism's already working, structural racism already working. The new (INDISTINCT) the President doesn't have--

MICHAEL ERIC: Here's-- here's the point.

BOB SCHIEFFER: The President doesn't have--

(Cross talking)

BOB SCHIEFFER: Gentlemen. Go ahead, Michael.

MICHAEL ERIC: The real-- the reality is that that you-- the reality is that you have the manipulation of symbols of success. That's why Obama's election provided many people coverage for the belief that they we were in a post-racial society. We no longer had to deal with the issue of race. But the deep, abiding persistent structural inequality that prevails is a different matter. Having Obama at the top is one thing. So we have the support and the spark of racial dialogue and discourse in the bottom and the suppression at the top. The symbolic representation of Barack Obama's success does not translate well to most African-American people--

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): Let me-- let me--

MICHAEL ERIC: --who are subjected to vicious forms of inequality and racial injustice that prevail--a prison system where a disproportionate numbers of African-Americans are in prison, a school system that's going all to hell and the inability of most people of color to find decent employment, 16.5 percent of African-American people are unemployed. Those are the racialized issues that need to be addressed both from the White House and in the broader public.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right, Doctor Thernstrom.

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM: Well, two-- two things. When Obama came in to office, I don't think anybody expected a quote unquote post-racial society. But we did have some hopes for leadership on the issue of race and leadership consisting of knowing when to lower the temperature on race-related conflicts. And, I think that that is extremely important in-- and indeed as well telling kids America is black kids, America is wide open to whatever aspirations you have but you've got to go to school. You got to stay in school. You got to work in school. And just one thing on the Tea Party.

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): One quick-- one quick--

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM: Yeah, one think-- thing on-- on the Tea Party movement. A Gallup poll has shown the Tea Party movement is completely representative of America.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right.

(Cross talking)

BOB SCHIEFFER: I'm sorry--

CORNEL WEST: The example of Shirley Sherrod is, just like Martin King, when you put the focus on the suffering and allow blacks and whites and reds and browns to come together to focus on the suffering, that's how the temperature goes down. It doesn't go by avoiding, doesn't go down by deodorizing a dialogue, you guys allow some of the funk to come to the surface.

MICHAEL ERIC: Because right now.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right. We have to end it right there.

MICHAEL ERIC: Right, because right now it's a frigid racial dialogue this--

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): Back with final thoughts in just a minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: All this controversy has caused talk lately about the differences in how the new media and the old media operate, and how the old media better get on the stick. In case you haven't noticed, I am old media with a capital "O." Proud of it, actually. And yes, we do operate differently than some in the new media. And I, again, underline some. Here's one way.

Old media makes its share of mistakes but not if we can help it. We still call people involved in the story to get their side. Editors fact check. And we never publish or broadcast anything unless we think it's true.

Last week, we saw what can happen when it's done the other way. A partisan blogger with an agenda, not a journalist, put a heavily-edited, totally out of context now infamous sound bite of Shirley Sherrod on the internet. Some of the cable folk picked up the story and demanded the woman's ouster--no calls to those involved, no checking of any kind. Just throw it out there and leave it to the woman to defend herself.

Even worse, an administration so anxious to wash its hands off the controversy before the evening news came on didn't check either and fired her. You know the rest of the story including all the apologies.

I know the old media can always learn a thing or two from the new media. And I sure don't want to lecture the young folks, even the older ones masquerading as new media. But hey, if you would just make a call, every once in a while, to check these things out before you put it on the web, you could save all of us a lot of trouble.

Back in a minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: By now you have seen the reports on the death of Daniel Schorr, the ninety-three-year-old legendary correspondent for CBS News and later CNN and NPR, who died last week. Dan was one of the best and I learned a lot from him. We all did and we'll remember him with fondness and the greatest respect.

See you next week.