

~ COMM 290 | Section 001 | Spring 2008 ~

EXTRA CREDIT

NAME: Riley Paulsen

DATE: January 22, 2008

TIME: 7:00 P.M.

VENUE: Pruis Hall

SPEAKER: Dr. Terrence Roberts

PRESENTATION: Lessons from Little Rock

It is quite unfortunate that Dr. Terrence Roberts has become a casualty of his own innovation – yet, it is even more disheartening to see his grasp of this realization fluctuate. His once loyal support for idealistically influencing society, while roused on rare occasion during the speech, is largely fading. The young man who stood strong in the face of blatant racism and violence has been forced to become subservient to a culture based on non-interventional tolerance that his very actions helped to foster. It is possible that deep down he is aware of this, but feels that there is nothing he can do about it anymore.

Roberts's lecture can be interpreted in one of two ways: as a failure and [assimilated] relapse of the societal responsibilities of his youth, much as many of those who followed after him have experienced; or as a testament to the success of the movement for integration. And though his optimism would certainly favor the latter, his failure to push the audience beyond jokes and canned responses signifies the reality to which he belongs. It is possible that his candidness about the serious situations he faced long ago may be a sign of a truly integrated society.

But rather than discussing the very real issues of lingering racism and intolerance taking place during the cultural globalization in America, Roberts chose to recount details of his experiences at Little Rock High School. It was there that he played an active role as one of the nine black students who voluntarily desegregated the school district.

It is clear that Roberts is rightfully very proud that he had the moral authority to accept this responsibility as a teenager, but the message sent to the audience failed to address the world of today. Reinforcing the strife the nine faced

at Little Rock only strengthened the argument for the historical significance of the event, not the implication of the changes that it brought about.

In a redeeming moment near the end of the lecture, Roberts commented about the status quo in response to an audience member's question. The passion with which he spoke of the pitfalls of our "democratic society" easily overshadowed all of the anger and emotion about his past, and for a moment, the "old" Terrence Roberts shone through, full of rage and activism. This difference was intoxicating, and came across as a true representation of the power of the voice of dissent that has since long passed.

Unfortunately, this is where he lost and left behind most of the audience. Instead of the previous cheers and applause in response to his feelings about the time he spent at Little Rock, Roberts was met with dumbfounded silence and quizzical stares at the outburst.

It was then and there clear as to what Roberts is facing in the contemporary world. It was not *he* who has been lost as an expense of unquestioning social tolerance, but American culture in general. Rather than engaging in active debate about the injustices found in everyday life, "tolerance" has been perverted into a replacement for critical thinking. Roberts ironically misjudged this problem by speaking to the very people who are afflicted.

Given the response he received, Roberts was, regretfully, forced to abandon his activism, for he was largely alone in the auditorium. In hopes of continuing at a raised discussion level, he covertly switched to education, and cleverly disguised the problems he had just been mentioning behind a plea for knowledge and awareness. But alas, the message was again lost to the crowd, despite the university setting. Roberts then relapsed back to answering questions about what it was like to be at Little Rock.

As the program came to a close, there was a strong feeling in the air that another mass uprising against the woes of our culture, no matter what issue, will never again be possible – America has become much too *tolerant* for that...