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Jack & Rachel Robinson

When Jack Roosevelt Robinson came up with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, Black America was engulfed in and practically smothered by a giant white power lie. There was segregation all over America—legal in the South and cultural in the North. Segregation was constitutional. It was also hogging and shunning. White people hogged every good thing from the presidency on down to the toilets at gas stations. And they made it clear that they wanted no part of blacks except that little tiny piece that could be servile, so you were made to feel dirty, unworthy and unequal.

That was what the lie said you were. Incompetent and dumb and lazy and ugly and not good enough to play baseball with white people—or to be dead in cemeteries with them either. They had the numbers and the power and the wealth to enforce the lie and to drive it into the heart of the culture.

When Jack came up as a rookie first baseman, baseball was at the heart of American culture. There were two eight-team major leagues and network radio and few other distractions. The technology and the pace of the country were right for baseball. And so people paid attention. And that was why Jack was so important.

He was right there—in all his splendid, handsome blackness—in the middle of white America's dreams and fantasies, on the ballfield, where there were rules and umpires. White folks could hate him, throw beanballs, spike him, threaten to kill him, spit on him and call him "nigger," "snowflake" and on down. But they couldn't lie about his competence. There were rules and witnesses.

They couldn't cheat him the way they could cheat the rest of us. For instance, if you went to register to vote in the South and they gave you an arcane section of the state constitution to interpret, some illiterate clerk could tell you, even if you were a lawyer: "Wrong! You flunk the literacy test." Or you could go for a job that was advertised in the paper and when they saw your skin, they could lie and say, "That job was filled this morning." Or when you did have a job they could say you weren't qualified for anything but the most menial one they had, and a lot of times even when you were sweeping the floor, they'd yell at you with lies about how stupid you were. That way they could keep on reserving their privileges and feeling superior and we could go on being poor, taking America's leftovers and feeling lousy.

But we felt good about Jack. We were riding his shoulders right out from under the worst part of that white power lie. Every time Jack got a hit, stole a base or made a great play in the field he was telling them for all of us: "It's a lie!" He could have failed, of course, and then that big cloud would have been almost suffocating. But he knew what was at stake and he wouldn't let himself fail and he wouldn't let us down.

He didn't do it alone, though. There was Branch Rickey, who blended idealism and craftiness and who did a great thing and also stole a march on his fellow owners by being the first to tap a rich pool of talent. And there was Pee Wee Reese, the Dodger captain from Louisville, whose steady decency raised the standards of behavior, first for the Dodgers and then for players all around the National League. But most of all, there was Rachel.

She was not simply the dutiful little wife. She was Jack's co-pioneer. She had to live through the death threats, endure the vile screams of the fans and watch her husband get knocked down by pitch after pitch. And because he was under the strictest discipline not to fight, spike, curse or spit back, she was the one who had to absorb everything he brought home. She was beautiful and wise and replenished his strength and courage.

Together, Rachel and Jack, as beautiful and intelligent an American couple as you'll ever see, walked right into that big white thing that had shackled us all for so long and showed how big a lie it was—right out there with everybody watching. They changed the culture.

They made a lot of white people stop and think and a lot of them began to change their minds. They made a lot of black people stand up straighter, try harder and enjoy life more. It is no coincidence that the Supreme Court ordered the schools desegregated seven years after Jack and Rachel went to the Dodgers or that blacks cracked the back of segregation in Montgomery a couple of years after that.

Jack and Rachel, two heroes. This country owes them more than we can ever even figure out how to say. ROGER WILKINS

Roger Wilkins, a Nation editorial board member, is a professor of history at George Mason University.

LAW & ORDER

False Closure

Florida's grisly March 25 electrocution of Pedro Medina—the blue and white flames that shot a foot from his head for ten seconds, the smell of burned flesh that caused witnesses to gag—inspired little sympathy in official quarters. “My compassion is with the victims of the crimes. I really don't have that much compassion for people on death row,” intoned the state Attorney General, Bob Butterworth; declared state house minority leader Buzz Ritchie, “If anything, we ought to take a moment to reflect upon the pain and suffering of the victim.”

But which victims did Butterworth and Ritchie have in mind? I ask because of a significant fact absent from their soundbites and most news accounts: *Pedro Medina's execution was fought by the daughter of the woman prosecutors said he killed.* In fact, Lindi James believes that Medina might have been innocent of the 1982 stabbing death of her mother, Dorothy, a schoolteacher. “This is almost impossible for me to talk about anymore,” she said to me after Medina's execution. “I am exhausted. I spent years trying to get people to listen.”

In 1980 the 22-year-old Medina arrived in Florida from Cuba in the Mariel boatlift with no possessions and a long record of psychiatric hospitalization. In Orlando he was befriended by Dorothy James. Two years later she was found stabbed to death in her home, and Medina was convicted of the crime. Among the awful and confusing details, in their rush to convict Medina the police covered up a former lover's threats against Dorothy James and other important leads. “It is undisputed at this point that the state

possessed evidence...and failed to disclose this evidence to the defendant,” state Supreme Court Judge Harry Lee Anstead wrote in a January dissent from Medina's final execution order. Judge Anstead also argued that even if Medina committed the crime, his lifelong mental illness should have spared him execution.

Advocates of capital punishment like to talk about the “closure” it supposedly provides victims. But for Lindi James it has provided the opposite. “I just never believed that Pedro did it. Now I'll never know, will I?”

Lindi James's situation is far from an isolated one, even in Florida. Shortly after Medina's execution I spoke with SueZann Bosler of Hallandale. Just before Christmas in 1986 Bosler's father, a minister in the Church of the Brethren, was stabbed twenty-four times by a 20-year-old burglar named James Campbell; he also stabbed SueZann in the head, nearly fatally. Yet for more than a decade—through two trials, with a third coming up in June—she has protested the death sentence handed her father's killer.

Partly, Bosler told me, this stems from her father's beliefs, his insistence that he would oppose the death penalty even if her life had been taken. She's also convinced, after talking with many victims' families, that execution represents “false closure. I have never met anyone who healed better because of an execution.” Politicians who argue that capital punishment serves victims infuriate her. “It's quite the opposite. When the state kills somebody it is just making more victims—another mother without a son.”

It has been a lonely road: “Ninety-five percent of the people I talk to just want James Campbell to be fried.” Bosler has been required to recount the story of her father's murder three times in court but prohibited from telling a sentencing jury of her opposition to Campbell's execution. So much for victims' rights. Bosler has found some company in Murder Victims Families for Reconciliation (P.O. Box 208, Atlantic, VA 23303; 804-824-0948), which campaigns against the death penalty.

Most Americans who support capital punishment think only the most deserving die. Pedro Medina's legally questionable and physically sadistic execution should challenge that notion. Meanwhile, the “pain and suffering of the victim” remains the argument of last resort. “I hear the tortured voices of the victims crying out to me for vindication,” Court of Appeals Judge Alex Kozinski wrote recently. Lindi James and SueZann Bosler reply: *Not in my name.*

BRUCE SHAPIRO

Israel's Press Agents

Coming back to the United States from almost anywhere else at a time of tension in the Middle East, one has to be prepared for a peculiar sort of culture shock. Elsewhere, the nuanced and thoughtful coverage in the press and on TV and radio reflects a consensus that the continuing crisis between Israel and the Palestinians has been caused almost entirely by the blatantly provocative actions of the Netanyahu government, which seems intent on undermining all the agreements reached with the Palestinians and refuses any substantial concessions to them, even the token ones made by Labor governments between 1993 and 1996.

However, the returnee to America can be forgiven for having