

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY:

REENACTING AND THE AUTHENTICALLY CORRECT

By Kim Allen Scott

Americans of the 1990s live in an increasingly sensitive society. Scarcely a day goes by that we do not hear from yet another group in our fragmented populace that feels it is being victimized by a crass and uncaring majority. Like our reaction to the old fairytale about the princess and the pea, we shake our heads in disbelief at the seemingly innocuous bumps underneath life's mattress that some people demand be smoothed. Nowhere is this sensitivity more obvious than at American colleges and universities where the practice of protecting thin-skinned protestors as been assigned its own special term: political correctness. Columnist George Will recently felt moved to report an academic exercise in P.C. that pushed the envelope to the realm of absurdity. It seems that when the University of California at Chico attempted to ad-

vertise a job opening for a professor with a dynamic classroom style, feminist members of the faculty protested the use of the sexist and racist term "dynamic" and forced the use of the substitute word "effective." What made the incident so ludicrous, argued Will, is that one of the critics used the term "lady-like" in her rant against sexism, without so much as batting a politically correct eyelash.

It may come as somewhat of a shock for reenactors to realize that ultra-sensitivity has also found its way into the practice of our own rather easygoing hobby. Much like the activists who insist that manhole covers be called "personhole hatchway shields" lest we offend their sense of gender equality, a loud minority of Civil War reenactors demand we all become "authentically correct" lest we ruin their weekends.

While there is nothing wrong with requiring a modicum of authenticity in dress and demeanor, some hard-cores have taken their complaints far beyond the obvious sins of cars and coolers in camp. Having reached such a high level of connoisseurship themselves, the authentically correct are easily offended by things that most of us do not even notice. A recent exchange which occurred on the internet's CW-REENACTORS listserv resulted in one spokesman admitting that it was difficult for him not to shudder when he spotted Jarnagin coats in the ranks, a distinction that most participants would be hard-pressed to make at a distance over six feet and one that is totally lost on the vast majority of spectators.

The real problem of heightened sensitivity in our society is that once you have achieved awareness, the smallest thing can offend your delicate perceptions of fair play. For example, a feminist scholar may find sexism in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address since Abe mentioned "forefathers" rather than "forebearers." In reenacting, similarly sharpened sensibilities can also be easily offended. While most sham warriors would be delighted to see a row of crudely made shebangs at an event, an authentically correct crusader would be disturbed to notice the presence of metal grommets on the shelter halves. One reenactor might be overjoyed to arrive on the field and see a camp filled with smelly, wool-wearing

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compatriots, but another may view the same scene with disgust because of the uniform colors do not match the results of his painstaking research.

Two Pennsylvania women recently made headlines when they insisted on shouting the Rosary at a Pittsburgh church. They felt so strongly about their interpretation of church ritual that it took the beleaguered parishioners a court order to convince the over-zealous ladies to take their worship elsewhere. One naturally wonders why, if these women felt so strongly about their religious practices, they continued to attend a congregation that so obviously fell short of their expectations. In a similar vein we have to wonder about the authentically correct in reenacting. Hard-cores whose heightened sensitivity makes them feel "almost unclean" at garden variety events often speak in terms of "advancing the hobby" when complaining about the presence of what they consider authentically challenged hobbyists. But just like the people who live in the town that has removed the Dead End signs for fear it might remind some sensitive motorists of death, reenactors naturally question the exacting nature of the ultra hard-core commitment to authenticity.

After all, to be accused of being a farb because one does not consider handsewn buttonholes to be necessary is not too far removed from accusing one of sexism who uses the term "dynamic" in a want ad. In order to placate extremists in both cases we, as a society, are being forced into a rather puritanical stance that some may consider an advancement, but that most consider a joyless severity.

Behind the byline: Kim is a special collections librarian and archivist at Montana State University, Bozeman, having held the position since August 1994. He previously worked as head of processing services for the Special Collections Division of the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, where Kim also served as their Civil War reference specialist. Kim published a guide on manuscript resources on the Civil War at U.A. which will be coming out in a second edition this year, and has also published numerous articles on the Civil War in professional journals, mostly on the Trans-Mississippi.

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