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Preserving History – the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Historian Ray Rickman on the violent history that Americans try to forget, and why it's important to remember



November 11, 2013

BRISTOL, R.I. – From the genocide of nearly an entire native population to the lawless Wild West to centuries of enslavement followed by the lynchings and segregation of the Jim Crow era, the foundation of America is underscored by blood and violence. And while bits of that history become glorified in film and novels, most is seldom remembered or simply forgotten.

“Americans are a forward-looking people – we erase history,” said historian Ray Rickman, who spoke about the 1824 Hardscrabble Riot and 1831 Snowtown Riot in Providence during a recent visit to RWU for the Mary Tefft White Cultural Center Series: Talking in the Library lecture.

The early 19th century was a time when race riots terrorized black communities across America, Rickman said. Some weeks reached as many as 40 race riots, where white mobs stormed African-American neighborhoods to burn down houses and beat (and sometimes kill) people who legally couldn't fight back – all usually condoned or observed by the local law enforcement officers.

It's placating to think that circumstances may have improved with time, but Rickman noted that anyone born before 1960 lived in an apartheid condition in America – prior to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the laws actually harmed blacks, Latinos and other minorities. Rickman himself bears childhood memories of men shouting cruel and hateful invectives at him.

But that 50-year-old hate and abuse hasn't disappeared from consciousness with the advent of the Civil Rights era – rather, it transposes to another ethnic group, Rickman said.

Violence has become ingrained in American identity, he said, but it should not be embraced as normal – nor should it be ignored. "It's in the culture; it's *in the culture*," Rickman emphasized, "and has been for 200-plus years. And I think we need to put a stop to it."

He said that seeking knowledge of one's own history is the most important step to take. (As an aside, Rickman praised the Pay Attention to Roger campaign – a revival and celebration of the legacy of University namesake and the founder of the state of Rhode Island, Roger Williams, one of the forgotten Founding Fathers of American ideology. "I always say how important Roger Williams is, and that people should pay attention to him," Rickman said.)

The next step to abating the violence is to take action, he said. A child of the 1960s, Rickman recalls that many more people were driven to make change as a reaction to the vast hate and maliciousness that plagued daily life. Now, so few people create social change, he said, because there are less obvious incidents to prompt people to action.

Major effort isn't needed, Rickman said – if everyone took on small steps, it builds upon itself. For instance, Rickman said that each time he eats breakfast at his favorite local restaurant, he deposits his pocket change in a UNICEF donation jar.

"I'm not just here as a historian – I'm a crusader," Rickman said. "I'm telling you: Put the 17 cents in the container every chance you get!"

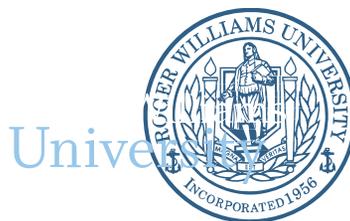
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