The Masters of Hypocrisy: Hootie, Tiger, CBS, and the Corporate Sponsors

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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Could there be an issue more emblematic of the Bush Era in domestic affairs than the smoldering muck pile being stoked at the legendary Augusta National Golf Club, home of the Master’s and seat of hypocrisy in the “New” South? Maybe there is, but until it comes across my laptop this will do.

It may seem improbable that a man named “Hootie” could be taken seriously by anyone, let alone be the spokesman for the gentleman of the old order who walk among the dogwoods and magnolias free from the scent of a woman. Yet, here he is, William “Hootie” Johnson, chairman of Augusta National in a hail of pomposity telling us that his private organization has no legal, social or moral obligation to accept women as members and that "single-gender organizations are good, a part of the fabric of America."

All Hail Hootie! He speaketh the truth! And dag gummit, he is right. There are boy places and girl places, and sometimes boys just got to be boys. And girls, well, whatever.

For the past several months I have watched from afar (London) this bit of madness unfold, as a parade of spokespersons and pundits unfurl their pro- or anti- Hootie pronouncements, or more commonly, duck the issue entirely. From this distance it is one of those amusing moments that so puzzle many in the rest of the world.

Tiger Woods has been especially interesting to watch as he does his elusive pirouettes filling the air with non-committal comments hoping to avoid offending the commercial powers that fuel his multi-national empire. The Tiger handlers at IMG must have been scrambling like crazy to find just the right phrase or sentence worthy of this symbol of racial justice and equality in the class-ridden world of golf.

Then there are the men of corporate leadership at CBS who long ago sold their soul to Augusta National, vigorously pretending they still have one which they will not sell again. The network of Eric Severeid, Edward R. Murrow, and Fred Friendly haven’t emulated greatness in years, and they are not like to do so now in the face of this dilemma of less than biblical proportions.
It seems astoundingly simple from here. Either you believe that discrimination against women by a quasi-public entity is right, or you do not. If you believe it is right then this whole business is a non-issue. If you believe it is wrong, then act. If you are a member at Augusta, resign. Former CBS executive Thomas H. Wyman’s resignation reported yesterday is a good start. If you are a current executive at CBS insist that CBS withdraw from the tournament coverage. If you are a golfer on tour, pull out of the tournament. If you are a fan of the Master’s, boycott the tournament. If television ratings hit bottom someone will get the message.

No one questions the right of “Hootie” to do what he likes, but those who disagree with him must express that disagreement in some tangible and visible way and they have both a right and a duty to do just that.

What we are witnessing in Augusta is the last gasp of a still very strong male hegemony being expressed in the land of Sir Walter Scott where men still think they are modern knights. They have not understood, or perhaps have not wanted to understand, that chivalry is a euphemism for male dominance, and that the furniture theory of women is dead.

What gives this issue any social significance is the fact that the men who patronize Augusta are among the richest and most powerful men in America. This is the corporate ruling class playing and dealing at the highest levels. If women are excluded from that circle they are marginalized in the ruling class. If African Americans and Asians and Native Americans are excluded from the circle then they are marginalized.

Indeed we are all marginalized to a very great degree because in point of fact we are nearly all excluded from Augusta and the American corporate ruling class by virtue of money and status. Admitting one woman or one African American to this golf club will change very little, but that is a whole other issue.

At some point it is likely that a few of the more influential members of Augusta will pull “Hootie” aside and tell him that the damage being done in a PR sense is much greater than the damage that might be done by allowing a woman or two to become members. Given the level of exposure
on this issue already, it could be a difficult move to make, but it is likely to be done before much more negative fallout results.

Then again, this is still the world of the Bushes, the world of corporate insiders and the deal. It is still the world of good ole boys in Armani suits trading phony oil futures on the 19th hole, where men are men, and women are out of place. This world is the one that is being protected from exposure in the press and in the political arena, it is the world that Americans are comfortable enough with to have endorsed its symbolic leader in the elections of 2002 despite Enron, the stock market, and all those corporate welfare recipients. It is in fact a world that many American men still dream of joining.

These are the people of Augusta National and these are the people who by their inaction indicate to the nation that the more things have changed in the last half century the more they have remained the same. And whether women are allowed as members at Augusta National, the locus of power in America is not going to change to any great extent. And the beauty is that given an adequate supply of “bread and circuses” most Americans will not be disturbed in the slightest.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don’t have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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