

In the Spotlight

Tant: Hunter-Gault's voice still needed in America

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Charlayne Hunter-Gault, one of two black students who desegregated the University of Georgia in 1961, returned to her alma mater Monday to speak in commemoration of the racial integration of the university 50 years ago. In an inclusive and optimistic speech, she spoke of “the hate directed at us” during the struggle to integrate a campus that had been a whites-only bastion since its founding in the 18th century, but she also praised “white students who became my friends despite condemnation from their peers.”

Hunter-Gault is an international journalist who has plied her trade on CNN and in the pages of The New York Times and The New Yorker magazine. She is the author of the memoir “In My Place,” which tells her story of growing up black in the Jim Crow South and breaking the color bar at the University of Georgia, along with Hamilton Holmes.

“The Southern landscape was littered with the bodies of people like us,” she reminded an enthusiastic audience who had trekked through snow Monday to hear her speak.

“I have witnessed the liberation of oppressed people from South Georgia to South Africa,” she said, to cheers from the crowd.

Calling for “defending values through action,” Hunter-Gault echoed Martin Luther King’s hope for people of all races to be judged not by the color of their skin but by “the content of their character.” She deplored what she called “a rise in racist hate groups” and “vile, retrograde and even racist rhetoric

filling the airwaves.” Such a “toxic atmosphere” in American politics may have contributed to such tragedies as the recent shootings at a political meeting in Arizona, she said.

“Our greatest challenge in the years ahead is overcoming ignorance and intolerance,” she added.

Ignorance and intolerance abounded in Georgia, in Athens, and on the Athens-based campus of the University of Georgia 50 years ago. Ralph McGill, the influential Atlanta Constitution editor and columnist who had won a Pulitzer Prize for his writings on behalf of the civil rights movement in *Darkest Dixie*, called for calm in the face of white segregationist anger over the integration of the university.

In his front-page column of Jan. 11, 1961, McGill wrote, “The students at Georgia have a God-sent opportunity to rescue their own institution, their South, and themselves by a simple act of compassion and decency. They can thus say, ‘This is the face of the real South.’”

That very night, the face of the hateful and hidebound Old South showed itself here in Athens as hundreds of students, townspeople and race-baiting rabble-rousers from outside the town rioted on the university campus in opposition to black students enrolling in the school. After the university’s basketball team lost to hated rival Georgia Tech, a howling mob gathered at Hunter-Gault’s dormitory, where they broke windows, set fires and battled with Athens police for more than two hours until finally being dispersed by tear gas fired by the beleaguered cops.

In his Atlanta Constitution column two days later, McGill scorned the post-game riot of racists on the Athens campus as “a more meaningful game in which everyone lost and the decent, civilized instincts of Western civilization were shamed.”

Half a century later, Charlayne Hunter-Gault still is working for respect and reconciliation between the races of humankind. She quotes philosopher George Santayana’s famous admonition that “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

In a time when voices of repression and regression bleat from the airwaves, the press and the computer screen, hers is a needed voice saying, “If people are informed, they will do the right thing. It’s when they are not informed that they become hostages to prejudice.”

• *Ed Tant’s work has appeared in The New York Times, The Progressive and other publications. For more, visit his website, www.edtant.com.*