THE VIEW FROM OVER THE HILL

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Over the years I have seen many movies that purport to be “historical fiction.” Generally they are wonderfully fictional, and very bad history. There have also been many alleged “documentary films” that have confused historians and others with their gross inaccuracies. Some of these horribly inaccurate films receive numerous awards.

One older film that stands out in this respect is Oliver Stone’s historical fiction “JFK,” a film that implied that President Lyndon Johnson was involved in the assassination of John Kennedy.

Currently, we have “Selma,” a film that misrepresents John as unconcerned and opposed to civil rights legislation during his tenure as president and attending major events since Johnson was probably the 20th century president who was most supportive of Civil Rights legislation — this despite his congressional track record as a bigot and his own deep personal racism.

Johnson was a man noted for his casual use of ethnic slurs against a broad spectrum of ethnic groups he disliked; this was not unusual in the Congress of the time. He was also known for going the extra mile as a racist bigot by performing cruel practical jokes on black service station attendants. Yet as president he forced the passage of Civil Rights legislation, the opposition of John.

In the mid-20th century, there were several efforts to fulfill the promises of the Freedmen’s Amendments, including President Franklin Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802 and President Harry Truman’s Executive Order 9981. These early measures were implemented largely as a result of pressure from unsung Civil Rights leaders such as A. Philip Randolph, Walter White and Grant Reynolds, who threatened mass marches on Washington, D.C.

President Dwight Eisenhower used federal resources to enforce school desegregation, and supported several Civil Rights measures during his second term: the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960, which passed with massive Republican support and major Democratic opposition. The attempts to pass the Civil Rights act of 1958 was derailed by parliamentary maneuvers led by prominent Democrats.

In retrospect, one might wonder why the Democratic Party opposed Civil Rights throughout most of the 20th Century. The opposition was for a cynical and political reason; the party enjoyed what was known as the Solid South, a region that could be counted on to vote for Democrats in any major election. There were few presidential, congressional or local elections in the south lost by Democrats — even Eisenhower was rejected in some southern states despite being a five-star general during WWII.

The world was a very different place in that era. In addition to the casual use of ethnic slurs by politicians, well into the 1960s, America abounded with “Sundown Towns,” where depending on local prejudices, one or more ethnic groups was required to be out of town by sundown. Guidebooks such as “The Negro Motor Green Book” listed places to stay and eat and the best routes for traveling blacks. In the 1930s, the town of Hawthorne, California, had a sign that actually read “N____, Don’t Let the Sun Set On You In Hawthorne.” In the north, Boston was embattled in a school desegregation fight where members of the school board compared black children to spreading stain on a pair of blue jeans.

Bigotry was an equal opportunity affair for generations; some areas did not harass blacks, but instead targeted Asians, Jews, American Indians, Mexicans or Catholics. Some towns welcomed blacks but forbade the Irish. The very northern town of Davis, Calif., forbade Jews from living within city limits; while Minnville, Ore., happily permitted blacks to live in in segregated public schools while rigorously excluding Americans and American Indians.

California segregated Latinos, American Indians, Asians and blacks from both whites and one another until the late 1940s. The state law only provided for segregated Asians, blacks and American Indians but 80 percent of local districts segregated Latinos under the claim that they did not know English and needed to be taught in their own languages while learning it.

My own mother, who had visible American Indian ancestry, used to slouch down in the seat when we drove through known sundown towns. When I was a girl I can recall our family — including aunts, uncles and cousins — being refused service at a Mexican restaurant in Toppenish, Wash., because the Latinos considered my mother a “dirty indigene.” Some stores did not permit her to try on clothing.

Racism was a casual, pervasive, everyday affair; until the 1950s, one of the most popular regional fried chicken restaurants, with stores in Salt Lake City, Portland and Seattle, was known as the “Coon Fried Inn” and had an insulting caricature of a black man’s face at its store entrances. The place was so notorious that when a black man in Seattle vandalized one of the chain’s very offensive trucks, the judge fined him a grand total of $3 for the offense.

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy signed an executive order requiring government contractors to treat employees fairly, and followed up with another executive order in 1962 that prohibited discrimination in federally funded housing.

Kennedy did not think that Civil Rights measures would pass. He believed that they would damage his

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