

Prejudice, on the Record

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The outrage was as proper as it was predictable over remarks captured in a 30-year-old tape recording. President Richard M. Nixon complains to the Rev. Billy Graham that Jews dominate the media. And the minister agrees, saying, "The stranglehold has got to be broken, or this country is going to go down the drain."

Thirty years ago. Comments neither man would utter in public. Mr. Nixon is dead. The Rev. Mr. Graham, a man held in high esteem by millions, is in precarious health and has apologized. What's the value in opening the tapes and old wounds?

The value is the same as the value of history. We have to know where we've been, to move forward. We gloss over anti-Semitism at our peril. America cannot assume all is well because such overt discrimination as restrictive covenants, whites-only drinking fountains and "No Irish need apply" is now illegal. We need to face the fact that government and religious leaders harbored beliefs based on stereotypes and canards.

We have Black History Month to ensure that Americans learn of the vast contributions of African-Americans as well as the degradation visited on them. We have Women's History Month to hail the women who fought for suffrage and to make sure younger generations know that the right to vote and equal employment opportunity were not given freely.

And we release the tapes documenting the prejudices of our leader to remind ourselves that laws are not enough. As the Rev. D. Martin Luther King said, ". . . all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands."

Understanding history can lead to better laws and maybe even better leaders.