

When Heroes Stumble

Paul A. Lombardo, PhD, JD

The American Sexually Transmitted Diseases Association faces a quandary. The name of Dr Thomas Parran, a 20th century hero in the field of sexually transmitted disease prevention, accompanies a prestigious award given by the organization annually. Members are now confronted with the unsettling realization that Parran, like many honored figures of the past, also had a less heroic side. It was already known that he presided over the Public Health Service in the early years of the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study; more recently, the world learned that the scandalous intentional infection studies in Guatemala after World War II also occurred on Parran's watch. Material from the files of Dr John Cutler, who directed the Guatemala experiments, has provided more troubling details. It suggests that Parran not only knew the details of Cutler's work but also endorsed it with full awareness of its ethical toxicity. Should Parran—a giant of the field—be banished from its Pantheon, or should his eponymous award remain despite the newly found stain on his reputation?

The discovery of long-hidden documents that implicate a revered leader in dishonorable behavior threatens our view of the past and challenges our idealism. We like our heroes simple and virtuous, standing like the statutes we build of them, without flaws. In that guise, we can salute them as avatars—demigods who walked the earth, the embodiment of our most lofty aspirations. But when we find that they were merely human, when their biographies are complicated by moral lapses so disturbing that they threaten to overshadow the virtues we have celebrated, the disappointment is a shock. We are tempted to tear the statutes down and erase their names from our memories.

We have watched the reaction to historical revelations play out before. Political controversy has surrounded the name of French surgeon and inventor Alexis Carrel for decades. Carrel won the Nobel Prize in 1912 for his work in medicine, but evidence emerging after World War II that he collaborated with the Nazis in the 1930s led to calls for removing his name from schools and streets throughout France. Here in

the United States in the late 1990s, a debate raged in Virginia about whether to remove the name of Dr Joseph DeJarnette from a mental health facility he had founded in the 1940s. The doctor's reputation as a pioneer in treating the mentally ill was forever tarnished when historians revealed his praise for Nazi eugenics and his efforts in support of eugenic sterilization in the United States. The Virginia General Assembly eventually removed his name from the building that previously had stood as a memorial to his good works. I would have preferred another solution: to let the name remain, along with a second plaque that described Dr DeJarnette's advocacy for eugenics. That way, we would see the bad and the good together. Myth would be tempered with a touch of reality.

History is not a greeting card from the past, conveying to future generations only the happy memories of those who preceded us. Delving into our history only opens our eyes more completely, always reminding us that even great lives include some failings. But when we find negative evidence, what should we make of it? What kind of moral failure turns a hero into a villain?

I do not know how disturbing a revelation needs to be before we amend our regard for those once considered exemplars; I do not know whether Thomas Parran's triumphs should overshadow the evil he sanctioned in the name of public health research. So that history will not be erased, I would prefer that the American Sexually Transmitted Diseases Association continue to use his name to mark achievement in the field he led, but I think the citation describing the award should be rewritten. The recitation of accomplishments for which Parran has been praised should include an account of his involvement in 2 of the most disgraceful episodes in the annals of research ethics: Tuskegee and Guatemala. Recipients of the Parran Award would then be reminded that in the unforgiving gaze of history, the most exalted are often humbled, and even their most glittering successes are no insurance against ethical malfeasance that history will condemn.

From the College of Law, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA

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Correspondence: Paul A. Lombardo, PhD, JD, Georgia State University College of Law, PO Box 4037, Atlanta, GA 30303-4037. E-mail: plombardo@gsu.edu.

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