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NATIONAL news

WORD WAR

A gay aide to Washington, D.C.'s mayor gets the ax for using an offensive-sounding word the right way by Bob Roehr

The highest-ranking openly gay person in the administration of Washington, D.C., Mayor Anthony Williams has resigned and the city is buzzing.

David Howard, 44, was the city's public advocate, or ombudsman—a post he held for only a matter of days.

Howard, who is Caucasian, sparked a controversy by using the word "niggardly"—which means stingy or miserly—during a Jan. 15 staff meeting at which he was discussing budgetary matters. He could see from the looks on the faces of his staff that some did not know the meaning of the word. At least one staffer mistook it for another "n" word—the unrelated racist slur.

Howard quickly apologized and tried to explain the definition of nig-

rumors, ignorance, and slander, then any talk about racial healing becomes a sham and a mockery. We are gravely disappointed by your failure to exercise better leadership and judgment in this matter."

The incident has wheeled through the press with multiple articles on successive days.

Julian Bond, chairman of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, told The Associated Press: "This whole episode speaks loudly to where we are on issues of race...imagined slights are catapulted to the front burner. You hate to think that you have to censor your language to meet other people's lack of understanding."

According to Reuters, media inquiries have poured in to the mayor's office from as far away as Aus-

**Niger** (ni'jər) 1 river in W Africa, flowing from Guinea through Mali, Niger, & Nigeria into the Gulf of Guinea: c. 2,600 mi. (4,185 km) 2 country in WC Africa, north of Nigeria: formerly a French territory, it became independent (1960): 489,191 sq. mi. (1,267,000 sq. km); pop. 6,715,000; cap. Niamey

**Niger-Congo** (-kän'gō) n. a large family of languages of sub-Saharan Africa, including the Bantu, Kwa, and Voltaic language groups, among others

**Nigeria** (ni'jir'ə) a country in WC Africa, on the Gulf of Guinea: formerly a British colony & protectorate, it became independent & a member of the Commonwealth (1960); a republic since 1963: 356,668 sq. mi. (923,768 sq. km); pop. 105,448,000; cap. Lagos —**Nigerian** adj. n.

**nig-gard** (nig'ərd) n. [ME *negarde*, prob. < Scand. as in ON *hnægg*, Norw dial. *negg*, afraid, stingy < IE base \**hneu-* (var. of \**ken-*, to scrape) > OE *hneaw*, sparse, stingy] a stingy person; miser —**adj.** stingy; miserly

**nig-gardly** (-lə) adj. 1 like or characteristic of a niggard; stingy; miserly 2 small, few, or scanty, as if given by a niggard (a niggardly sum) —**adv.** in the manner of a niggard; stingily —**SYN.** STINGY

**nig-gard-li-ness** n.

**nig-ger** (nig'əz) n. [Dial. or Slang] Negro, the term nigger is now generally regarded as virtually taboo because of the legacy of racial hatred that underlies the history of its use among whites, and its continuing use among a minority as a viciously hostile epithet

**nig-gle** (nig'əl) vi. -gled, -gling [North Brit dial., prob. akin to Norw dial. *nigla* in same sense] to work fussily; pay too much attention to petty details; be finicky —**nig-gler** n. —**nig-gling** adj. n.

gardlessly, but the employee would have none of it and rushed from the room. Word soon spread that Howard had used a racist epithet.

Howard offered his resignation on Jan. 25, saying the rumors had halted his ability to be effective. The mayor immediately accepted the resignation, calling it appropriate.

Williams took office in early January. He was the technocrat reform candidate who, after living in the city for only three years, swept past four sitting members of the City Council in the Democratic primary last September. He garnered more than half the total votes cast. In November, he rolled over popular Republican council member Carol Schwartz by a 2-1 margin. Both candidates had strong support from lesbians and gay men.

Howard played a crucial role, coordinating efforts of the 1,600 volunteers in Williams' campaign.

The lesbian and gay community was stunned by the resignation and Williams' rapid acceptance. The situation was described as "appalling and deeply discouraging" in a Jan. 27 letter to the mayor drafted by Rick Rosendall, former president of the Gay and Lesbian Activists Alliance. The 22 community leaders signing the letter crossed all racial and political lines.

"The facts have to count," they wrote. "If we fail to distinguish between decent people and bigoted people, if we acquiesce in treating the former like the latter, then we send a poisonous message to the people of this city, not to mention an illiterate message to our schoolchildren."

They continued: "If the facts don't count, if a person can be driven out based solely on false

tralia, and calls from D.C. residents have been decidedly pro-Howard.

"We mostly get calls from people who disagree with the decision," mayoral spokeswoman Peggy Armstrong told the news service. "It does seem like there's a lot of discussion around the issue."

E. Ethelbert Miller is gay, a poet, and director of Howard University's African American Resources Center. He told *The Washington Post*: "I think that as a society we have to be a little more mature about our use of language. If a person uses a word and apologizes for it, I don't think that person should be chased out of office."

"The city has other problems besides how you spell a word or how you pronounce it," he said.

Keith Boykin, former executive director of the Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Forum, echoes that view, saying, "The black community and the gay community both need to become less sensitive to minor slights and focus on what is really important."

Williams has initiated an investigation of the incident. He has also said that he has not ruled out appointing Howard to another position in his administration.

*The Washington Post* suggested in an editorial that "if, in fact Mr. Howard did nothing wrong, the right thing to do is put him back in the job, with a little staff housecleaning to follow."

Howard, meanwhile, has issued a statement declining comment, other than to say, "The mayor has indicated that he is conducting an investigation. I have every reason to believe that the mayor will be fair in this matter."