

EDITORIAL / OPINION

Celebrating Holidays: An Afro-Centric Perspective

African-Americans should always celebrate holidays, any holiday from an Afro-Centric perspective. That is to say that Black people as a developing national community should view holidays in terms of our needs as a people and "celebrate" accordingly. Frivolous celebration and merry making without regard to the condition of our people may be like fiddling while the house is burning down.

All kinds of information continues to indicate that though some Black people are living very well these days, vast numbers of our brothers and sisters are subsisting in desparately miserable conditions. Nearly 35% of Black people in American still live in poverty in 1988. A dramatic report released by the National Center for Health Statistics recently revealed that life expectancy for African-Americans actually dropped from 1984 to 1986. While life expectancy for

white America continued to increase, the decline in Black life expectancy was the first for any group in America in the last 25 years. Black family income (\$18,000) was stalled at about 56% of that of white family income (\$32,000) in 1987. In this regard again Black people, as a group, are actually going backward, not forward. As we "celebrate" during the present holiday season, nearly 2/3 of all the prisoners jamming America's jails are Black. African-Americans are being disproportionately locked up not because there is something wrong with Black people, but because the American system continues to fail us.

The point is that Black people in America are still afflicted by racism and economic deprivation and we need to recognize this fact. African-Americans as a national community need to continue, indeed to escalate

the struggle for survival and development. Hence our celebration of holidays should reflect our need to survive and develop as a people. The way we celebrate therefore will either be a part of the solution or a part of the problem.

For example to the extent that our celebration of Christmas highlights the birth of Christ as a fulfillment of God's promise of human liberation, then African-Americans quest for survival and development is enhanced. To the extent that Christmas and other holidays focus on and emphasize family and our familyhood as a people then Christmas and other holidays strengthen our capacity to build a brighter future for Black people.

Unfortunately, I am forced to observe that far too much of what we as Black people celebrate is either irrelevant or actually negative in terms of our development as a people. For instance the true meaning of Christmas is virtually buried beneath an avalanche of commercialism and frenzied deficit spending; a further illustration of Black peoples tendency to pay for what we want, and BEG for what we need. Civil Rights organizations go begging, Black colleges are fighting for survival (thank God for Bill Cosby's example) and in every Black community in America there is some agency, institution, organization or just a Black Family or neighbor which could use some human or financial assistance. And yet we are African-Americans blow billions on extravagant, excessive, unnecessary spending on much that is meaningless and superfluous for Christ's birthday. It becomes a party without a purpose, a holiday which ignores our holocaust.

I don't mean to throw cold water on our "good times," but I do mean to challenge African-Americans to do better, much better in terms of our care and concern for ourselves as a people as we face the necessity to survive, build, develop, and contribute towards the future of the race and the world. A sense of PURPOSE is fundamental to who we are as a people. My view is that Black people have the power within us, a spiritual power, if you will, not only to save ourselves, but to help lead the world to unprecedented new levels of humanity, community, and human achievement. So as we celebrate, who we are, what our needs are as a people, and what our purpose/mission is should always be a part of the celebration. The future will belong to those who make it!

RON DANIELS

An Agenda For Black Empowerment

by Dr. Manning Marable

A half century ago, the Black community's leaders bought into a political strategy of reliance and dependency upon the Democratic Party in national elections. The goal was to increase our collective power within the electoral system, and to eradicate Jim Crow segregation. Unquestionably, for a time, this single-party approach yielded substantial benefits. Civil Rights legislation, economic and social welfare programs, minority set-asides, and affirmative action were largely byproducts of this coalition approach which gave millions of Black votes to white Democrats.

But as last year's presidential elections only reconfirm, the old liberal coalition has become permanently unglued. The leadership of the Democratic Party is rapidly moving rightward on questions of race and economic justice. More importantly, apparently Democratic presidential candidates lack the capacity to win national elections against the Republicans, despite the party's continued domination in the Congress. Since 1969, Democrats have controlled the Executive Branch of the federal government for only four years. Since the vast majority of Black administrators and would-be public officials are Democrats, this has meant that they are generally shut out of decision-making posts within government. Because the civil rights organizations are heavily linked, politically and financially, to traditionally Democratic constituencies, their political clout in the Reagan administration was virtually nonexistent.

Facing the apparent permanency of the white electorate's conservatism, a number of Black political leaders and political commentators are now suggesting that the solution to the dilemma of Black powerlessness within the electoral arena can be gained by the move to Republicanism. Roy Innis, head of CORE, suggested recently the need to cultivate a bipartisan approach to electoral politics. For different reasons and employing a different approach, Tony Brown basically takes the same position. A larger number of entrepreneurially-inclined, younger African-Americans have already joined the GOP, attempting to reap the potential benefits of opportunism and tokenism. Most of the new Black Republicans do not support Reagan and Bush for ideological reasons. Unlike the black neoconservatives Thomas Sowell and Glen Loury, they have no ideological commitment to laissez faire economics or an avowed hatred of affirmative action. The new Black Republicans simply recognize that the GOP is basi-

cally a white party, which for purposes of political appearance must nurture and promote a tiny number of middle class Blacks. It's no longer acceptable in American political culture to appear to be vulgarly racist, so a certain number of Blacks provide a proper cover to justify repressive policies against the black community as a whole. Racism may underscore Bush's entire social and economic agenda, but the new administration must nevertheless go through the motions of appointing a token number of African-Americans mostly in symbolic positions. These few nonwhites who participate at the doors of the corridors of power are well-rewarded.

But the solution to the question of Black powerlessness is not to be found by leaping from the political frying pan into the fire. The Republican Party is dominated by the most conservative and reactionary constituencies in white corporate America; the entire leadership of the Republican Party throughout the South is largely the old Dixiecrat, segregationist reactionaries who opposed Dr. King and the civil rights movement. We can only begin to address our own political dilemma by establishing two things; an independent, aggressive political organization which can articulate the legitimate grievances of Black working people and advance our own public policy agenda; and by setting strategic goals for the achievement of that agenda, no matter who occupies the White House.

An agenda for Black Empowerment must tackle the long-term issues which every Black community across this nation must address: hunger, poverty, inadequate housing, poor public health care, the lack of economic self-sufficiency and development, affirmative action. We need to develop a better strategic relationship with that section of the Hispanic community, the Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans, who share a number of common economic and social problems with us. But most importantly, we must develop a political vehicle and a coherent agenda which advocates our interests without reservations or qualifications. Neither the Democrats nor the Republicans can liberate us. We must do so ourselves.

A central crisis which characterizes the white western world today, especially its educational institutions, is a cultural crisis.

For centuries, white America and western European educational institutions have established their curricula and educational assumptions upon a series of ethnocentric distortions. Creative, talented Black intellectuals, writers, poets and scientists are traditionally ignored, while the architects of slavery, racism and economic oppression are championed. For example, Aristotle, the father of modern western philosophy, was also the earliest defender of slavery and the "natural" inferiority of slaves and women. Do the writings of Protestant reformer Martin Luther provide the sole treatment of religion worthy of study—or should we also turn to the thoughts of Martin Luther King, Jr.? Does Thomas More's Utopia or the Leviathan of Thomas Hobbes tell us more about politics than the writings of Frantz Fanon or C.L.R. James? Can a young Black woman or man learn better about life by reading a white novelist, or by reading Toni

Morrison, Alice Walker or Richard Wright? Which is more relevant to an understanding of humanity, Plato or W.E.B. Dubois?

When education reflects the mythology that the white west has created for itself, the answers to these questions become obvious. The curriculum in traditionally white, mainstream environments reinforces ethnocentrism and an ignorance of the cultural and intellectual creativity of nonwhites.

Black and progressive educators have long recognized that the cultural battleground is absolutely decisive in the broader political and economic empowerment of oppressed people. The values which are taught to our children largely determine their behavior. If a people are not seen as active creators of culture, playing significant roles within history, they will be ignored within our children's textbooks and classes.

In America, our economic system rewards people who possess certain values and styles of behavior, such as aggressiveness, competitiveness, initiative, and individualism. But in their most extreme form, reinforced by the constant quest for dollars, such values in people deteriorate into greed and materialism. Culture becomes anything which can be marketed for a profit. The media reflects the lowest level of public awareness and political discussion—"trash tv," symbolized by Geraldo Rivera, is the logical result. Sexuality all too often becomes simply a commodity, an item which can be bought and sold. Religion becomes marketed by gradulent, hypocritical televangelists, seeking dollars and wealth more than the salvation of souls.

The cultural conflict is waged most intensely in the field of education, and especially on college campuses. White, conservative traditionalists are fighting against any changes in the Western civilization courses, to ensure that the next generation of white young people is properly indoctrinated in reactionary, racist values. At Stanford University, after two years of bitter debate, the faculty senate voted to overthrow the university's Western civilization course requirement. The new required course includes readings by people of color. Stanford's modest acknowledgement of nonwhite cultures within its curriculum has been denounced by former Education Secretary William J. Bennett, who condemned the university for "trashing the classics" and capitulating to students' demands.

As America becomes increasingly Black, Hispanic and Asian in its population, academic institutions will be pressured to change their curricula to reflect the cultural values and literatures of nonwhites. The phasing out of the western culture program foreshadows a more intense future struggle over faculty and administrative posts, and the entire curriculum as well. As students begin to read DuBois, Baldwin, Hurston, Robeson and others, they inevitably acquire a critical perspective on racial issues, which assumes a linkage between scholarship and social reform. Art, music, and literature for Afro-Americans is also a critique of injustice and racism.

Dr. Manning Marable is Chairperson of the Department of Black Studies, Ohio State University. "Along the Color Line" appears in 140 newspapers.

CIVIL RIGHTS JOURNAL

by Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.

Dangers To African-American Life Expectancy

The National Center for Health Statistics in Washington, D.C. has just released a shocking report. For the first time in the twentieth century the life expectancy of African-Americans in the United States has decreased in two successive years while the life expectancy for Anglo-Americans has continued to increase.

I have received many letters during the last eight years questioning our criticism of Reagan administration social policies. Now a report by a Federal agency confirms that there is, in fact, a serious decline in the overall state of health of the African-American community. This phenomenon is directly related to the Reagan administration's budget cuts in social and health care programs.

Of course, African-Americans have not been the only racial and ethnic group affected by these policies during the last eight years. Latino-Americans, Native Americans and others also have been severely impacted. Yet, the report from the National Center for Health Statistics verifies that the life expectancy of African-Americans dropped from 69.7 years in 1984 to 69.5 in 1985 to 69.4 in 1986. During this same period, the life expectancy of whites increased from 75.3 to 75.4 years.

Now all of this may appear to most people to be only a slight difference in statistics. Yet, life expectancy is not just a random number; it tells you how long the average person can expect to live from birth. Never before, at least in the last 100 years in the United States, has the life expectancy of one race declined for two

successive years while the life expectancy of whites increased.

According to the Washington Post, "Some officials attributed part of the problem to economic policies of the Reagan administration, which they said have increased homelessness, cut aid and health care to the poor and otherwise hurt blacks disproportionately." The infant mortality rate among African-Americans is more than double that among white Americans. During the last eight years there has been a disproportionate increase in the cancer rate of African-Americans. Tuberculosis, drug-related deaths, AIDS, pneumonia and other infectious diseases have all increased disproportionately among African-Americans.

Dr. Arthur H. Hoyte, former D.C. Commissioner of public health, stated, "It is really something that might be reflective of the policies [Reagan] instituted." Ed Pitt, director of health for the National Urban League, said, "There's a crisis in health care for black America. There are a number of conditions that have gone unchecked in the black community that are causing an increase in the death rate."

Like racism, the genocide of a people can also be institutionalized. All Americans should be alarmed at this serious health crisis in the African-American community. President-elect George Bush must not continue his predecessor's devastating policies. All human beings deserve the right to live long and healthy lives. We must not allow racism and exploitation to deny this fundamental right to anyone.

Black Elected Official Responds



CITY OF
PORTLAND, OREGON
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY

December 29, 1988

Honorable Neil Goldschmidt
Governor of Oregon
State Capitol
Salem, Oregon 97301

Dear Neil:

I am writing to add my voice to those protesting the Emergency Board's appalling decision to close the Albina Human Resources Center administrative unit and lay off all seven employees.

This is a critical time for Northeast Portland residents and the neighborhoods they are trying desperately to hold together. It is a time when government should be enhancing programs in this area, not cutting them.

The cuts proposed by Kevin Concannon, your Department of Human Resources director, and approved by the legislative Emergency Board, will serve only to deepen the feelings of isolation and abandonment in the community.

I know these are not easy times for governments, but they are even less easy for the people who depend on government for their very survival.

Please—reconsider this ill-timed and totally inappropriate action.

Sincerely,

Dick Bogle, Commissioner
Department of Public Safety

DB:dh
cc: Portland Observer
Kevin Concannon, Department of Human Resources
Tom Darby



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