

EDITORIAL

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THANK YOU FOR READING THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

To Be Equal Practicing (Practical) Diplomacy

By HUGH B. PRICE
PRESIDENT
NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE

Less than two weeks ago the American government was about to go to war against Iraq again. Newspaper headlines blared that the American round-the-clock bombing of Iraqi military targets--intended to force dictator Saddam Hussein to allow United Nations weapons inspectors unimpeded access to the country's weapons sites--was imminent. The American military high command projected that the planned four-day bombing assault would kill more than 1,500 Iraqis.

Those projections helped provoke vigorous objections to renewing military action from several of America's allies in Europe and among the Arab states--and, surprisingly, it provoked a sudden, strong grass roots reaction within the United States, too.

Now, there has been no bombing, no deaths, and no possibility--always present in such actions--of a wider conflict, because Kofi Annan, the United Nations Secretary General, persuaded Hussein to permit the weapons inspections on the terms the Clinton Administration wanted.

Yet, to hear and read some commentators, you'd think that Annan was, on the one hand, just easy pickings for the shrewd, duplicitous Iraqi strongman, or, on the other, just an errand boy for President Clinton and Secretary of State

Madeleine Albright.

In the immediate wake of the accord, some newspapers reported that Albright was in effect Annan's ghostwriter in crafting its terms, and in a crack bordering on racist, radio talk show host Don Imus even called Annan "a waiter" who carried America's orders to Bagdad.

Don't be fooled by the detractors. Annan's eleventh-hour and successful negotiations were a dramatic example of high-stakes diplomacy carried out by a skilled diplomat.

Of course, no one takes Saddam Hussein at his word. No one thinks the utmost vigilance--and more tough talk on the President's part--was required to compel Hussein to live up to the agreement. It may even be that America will have to take military action in the future.

But Annan's success in averting the bombing campaign was notable for one specific reason: As Newsweek magazine put it in its story this week, it bought the Clinton Administration time.

"Now, the White House is puzzling over a slew of options," the magazine stated, "[such as] training insurgents, boosting opponents in exile--that might help get rid of Saddam or at least contain him. If nothing else, the deal gives Clinton's team breathing room to figure out the next move."

Kofi Annan's mediation of this latest world crisis underscores anew that the diplomatic heights he's scaled are populated by people of African descent, too.

Identity, Motivation And Innovation II

Clearly, a lot of youths and parents were able to "identify" with last week's article. Especially rewarding were those responses which indicated more than a superficial, "well-thats-nice" sort of thing; those who wanted to obtain motivational materials relating to the African American inventors whose key innovations were featured.

You got it! Not a confusing clutter of unfamiliar materials, but specific text and illustrations that will greatly assist in clarifying the basic process and associated ideas. The several teachers who called about "lesson plans" were advised to first get the recommended basic material and, then, we could go from there. The first such list will be appended to this article "if there is room".

I have been made aware that some of us do not have copies of the two half-page articles and photos that appeared in the Portland Observer in February, "Black History Month: Inventor A, February 25, p C4, "Engineering The Spruce Goose", Thomas M. (Don) Rutherford. - Inventor B., February 11, p C2, "The Black Engineer who made Skyscrapers a

Livable Domain," David Crosthwaite. If the Observer is out of these editions and you cannot locate them, I am having some run off at a copy shop soon. Give a call.

It is indeed rewarding and impressive to find neighborhood science clubs operated by black youth. The founders of Tektronix belonged to one as did Steve Jobs (Microsoft Corp.) and almost all of today's leaders in technology 'Don' Rutherford, who graduated from Benson High School, converted gasoline-powered automobiles to 'diesels' while a student at Benson. Boy hood pals, like Harold Gaskin, talk today about the neighborhood shop that spawned many such inventions.

It is interesting in many cases, how either blacks or whites will pause in wonder and astonishment when one first introduces the idea of an African American inventor as an extremely useful and relevant role model for a technological or scientific text. Often, they will blurt out,

"say we have Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell! - heck, genius knows no color."

But, then, some will take a moment to think. "Wait, a moment. How many black kids know or can conceive that an African American can - and did - produce inventions at that very same level?" How will he identify with America's heroes of

technology, all men from another race, another culture - a pantheon of geniuses (all white) from which text, media and history have completely excluded blacks. "Maybe we do need 'Black' History", they begrudgingly admit.

"History 'is' history, by God", one startled neighbor told me. "I guess a white boy could relate to that Crosthwaite fellow inventing thermodynamics that made it possible to live in buildings of incredible heights, just like we automatically expect a black kid to adopt Thomas Edison as a role model and be motivated accordingly."

The man has called me three times in the past week, still unsure, still some what reluctant to accept his own hard-reasoned logic.

"Don't feel badly", I tell him. "School districts, textbook publishers, curriculum specialists, authors, universities, schoolboards, politicians and many others have the same problem. In the meantime, we the people do what we can when I wrote the book, "Black Inventors of America" in 1969, I just knew that these revelations of African American genius would change the mind set of America. Especially, when I got a publisher right off."

At the moment I am looking at a letter from Senator Bob Packwood, dated January 23, 1970. "I've already written the White House to ask if it would be possible for you to make a personal presentation to the president" (To Nixon in the Rose Garden). The request was honored for the third week of the month, everyone understanding that the ensuing publicity would 'make the book'. Strangely, the appearance was canceled, "important foreign developments."

Continued next week with that list of materials.



By Prof. McKinley Burt

African American Youth and Suicide

By BERNICE POWELL JACKSON

The old folks used to say that black people didn't commit suicide because you couldn't jump out of the basement window. It seems that now that many African Americans are out of the basement that that old saying is no longer true. I'm glad the old folks aren't around now as we find out that the suicide rate for black teens has more than doubled in the last 15 years.

According to a recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study, suicide is now the third leading cause of death for African American teenagers, after homicide and accidents. While all the data is not in, the researchers believe that this dramatic increase may reflect the strain some black families are feeling in making the transition to the American middle class. They conjecture that the pressures of middle class life, coupled with the breaking up of traditional black community and family networks and the weakening of the bonds to the church may be re-

sponsible for this new and troubling development.

The starkest increase in suicides among African American teenagers is found among black males between 15 and 19, where the suicide rate jumped 146 percent. When added to the high homicide rate for young black men (111 per 100,000), the severity of the problem becomes even clearer. Young black men in the United States are an endangered species.

Most of the African American male teens who killed themselves did so by using guns, the most common weapon for white male teenagers as well. But another study, done at Rush medical College in Chicago, found that black teens are more likely to kill themselves in the presence of someone else, often a girlfriend or another teenage friend. So, it seems an even greater proportion of African American teens may be affected by these suicide rates.

The statistics are troubling, to say

the very least. But one cannot, I cannot, read them without asking why. What overwhelming feeling of hopelessness has so engulfed black male teens that they turn the guns on each other or on themselves? What signals have we as a nation given these young men so that they see no other way to gain self-respect or peace than homicide or suicide? How can we who are African American reach out to our own children and grandchildren, our nephew and neighbors to plant even a seed of hope which may save their lives? How can we who are African American reach out to those who are not in our own neighborhoods, but who are our collective children, to nurture even the possibility of a future for these young men? Are we who call ourselves middle class African Americans really providing a better life for our children as we integrate into the larger society unless we also provide those age-old support systems which enabled us to survive slavery and seg-

regation and lynchings and injustice?

I cannot read these statistics about black male teens or hear the three stories in six months of white male teens who shoot and kill their classmates without asking the question of why guns are so available to our young people. How many have to die by their own hand or the hands of another teenager before we as a nation say enough? Now that all of our children are endangered by guns will we act even now?

What is this devastating sense of hopelessness that has crept into the spirits of our young men that allows them to see death as the answer? How have we as adults failed our children? How has the church failed our children? How have schools failed our children? How has our society failed our children?

May god give us the courage to ask the questions and the strength to do something about the answers. Our future depends on it.

One Step Forward, One Step Back

By BERNICE POWELL JACKSON

I guess I am resolved to the fact that when it comes to race relations in this country, there just can't be a single line of progress. Indeed, that old saying about taking one step forward and two steps back at least seems to true to the extent that for every step forward, it appears we take one step backward. Maybe we should call it the race relations two-step.

My latest example of this occurred within the past few weeks. First there was a Sunday *New York Times* article entitled "A TV Generation is Seeing Beyond Color." Television history has shown us that African Americans and European Americans tend to watch different shows. For instance, "E.R." is the number one show among white viewers, but ranks number 18 among blacks. On the other hand, "Between Brothers" is the most popular show among African American viewers and ranks only 107th among European Americans.

This has been especially true for sitcoms, with the sole exception of the *Cosby* shows.

But, this article tells us that among the younger generation of television viewers this broad gap between races

is narrowing and, in some cases, disappearing altogether. White teen and pre-teens are watching shows which feature black performers and vice versa. Some watchers of the entertainment field are looking at this trend with hope that popular culture is moving to a new level of dealing with race and encouraging young people to move beyond their own usually narrow peer groups to include people of various races and cultures. Others worry, however, that many of the black sitcoms promote racial stereotypes which are damaging and misleading. The article did show a glimmer of hope that the next generation is learning to see beyond color through its viewing habits. That was my one step forward.

Within days, however, I was jolted back into reality as I heard the story of the suburban Miami high school newspaper which ran racist articles, which could even be construed to threaten their African American principal. Indeed, the cover story was a picture of the principal with a dart through his head. One cartoon uses racial epithets about blacks and another depicts a rape. One drawing refers to a man with an

"African disease" and in one article a student wrote, "I often have wondered what would happen if I shot (the principal) in the head and other teachers who have p*** me off..." The newspaper attacks immigrants and is riddled with racism and sexism.

The school responded by arresting the nine young people responsible for the newspaper under a little-used Florida hate crime law and by suspending them from school. This action resulted in an outcry by the American Civil Liberties Union and by others who believe that the school over-reacted.

The students, after all, included a straight A honor student and one Asian and three Hispanic students. All the young people are A and B students. Families argue that the students were misunderstood and say that the students meant the newspaper to be funny and not to be taken seriously.

I, too, would like to be able to give the students the benefit of the doubt. But history tells me that whether or not arresting the students was the appropriate action, their newspaper must be taken seriously--dead seriously. History teaches us that in pre-

war Germany, for instance, racist writings and drawings by small groups of Nazis paved the way to a broader acceptance of these beliefs and ultimately to the holocaust. Closer to home we know that many of the perpetrators of recent black church burnings are white teenagers. And, sadly, we know that too often people of color get drawn into racist talk and beliefs in order to win peer acceptance.

But perhaps the most disturbing part of this whole incident is that as I have read articles about it no where have I seen parents in this suburban middle-class community disavow the racist writing and drawing. No where have I seen a church leader or elected official or community leader say this is wrong and this is not what our community stands for or believes. Maybe it has happened, but it has not been reported.

One step forward, one step backward. When it comes to television viewing at least, young people are reaching across the color line. but when it comes to holding racist beliefs, young people are not immune. Sadly, it seems that racism will be a part of the 21st century as well.



Letter To The Editor

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