

An American Dilemma

Black **H**istory **M**onth

encounters between police and minority males escalate into violent confrontations, terminating in assaults that may result in serious injury or death, such as the deaths of Johnny Gamage in Pittsburgh, PA in 1995 and Tyron Lewis in St. Petersburg, FL in 1996, both as a result of deadly force employed by police who were trying to apprehend them for alleged speeding violations. This problem of "driving while black or brown" has led to individual or class action lawsuits in at least eight states (Maryland, California, Indiana, Florida, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Illinois and Oklahoma) and the introduction of legislation to monitor police stops for racial bias in more than a dozen states.

Legacy of Police Misconduct and Discrimination in the Criminal Justice System

Most African Americans view the police as agents of social control with a primary mission to punish and oppress the community, not to protect and serve its members. Thus, the major institution established to preserve law and order is perceived by many African Americans as an oppressive arm of local and state government, primarily designed to "keep black people in their place."

If this society is going to eliminate inequities in the criminal justice system, we must not only root out police misconduct and abuse and make police accountable to the community; we must monitor the media and insist on accuracy,

objectivity, and the elimination of negative stereotypes and threatening images in their portrayal of minority groups; and we must resist the rhetoric of politicians who thrive on demagoguery and division, and, when all else fails, will invoke the "race card" to create fear and anxiety in their constituents to win elections, and then interpret their victories as a "public mandate" for further police repression against people of color, the poor, and the powerless in our society.

As we welcome the millennium and anticipate a nation that will have no clear majority by the year 2050, it is time, as President Clinton has proposed, to confront our fears and fantasies about race, and to develop a balance between the legitimate

needs for law and order in a heterogeneous society and the basic guarantees of due process and equal justice for all citizens, irrespective of color, culture, creed or social class.

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the rope and helping their brothers and sisters up and over to join them. But would they really sabotage generations of African Americans to ensure their positions and those of their children?

The answer, sadly appears to be Yes they would and are. Because it pays well, all around, and everybody's getting "phat" except the ones on the losing end, who are growing old in prisons, leaving behind sons and daughters as well as their wives, girlfriends and mothers.

Muddying up the water of trying to change the system of incarceration are some myths that have been proliferated. It is a myth that there are more Black men in prison than in college in America. This is the same sort of solipsistic thinking and statistical legerdemain by overzealous advocates who in the early 1990s tried to say there are 7 million homeless people roaming the streets of America. It ain't so. Some of the more legitimate advocates have amended their statistics and definition thusly: there are more Black men under court supervision, such as probation and parole, than there are in college. That's more like it. Still, its not a good thing even with all the added qualifications.

This also has a dark political dimension. The voting patterns in some urban areas are said to be out of whack because of the large numbers of Black men who have temporarily lost the right to vote while being incarcerated or under court supervision.

This has long-term political

ramifications for urban Black/Brown political power, it is feared,

especially with the US Census coming this spring.



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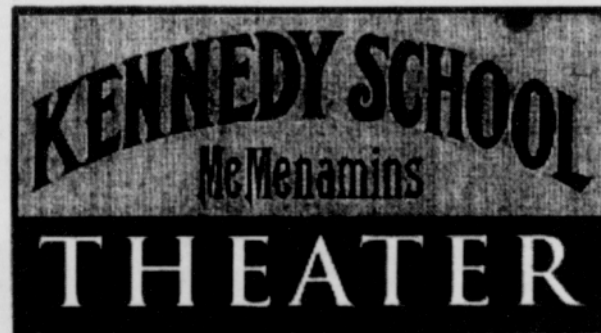
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