

EDITORIALS

CIVIL RIGHTS JOURNAL

New York's Big Apple:
Racist To The CoreBy Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.
Executive Director

Their faces were contorted with rage, their bodies wracked with hate. As we marched in protest, over 2,000 strong, through the streets of predominantly White Howard Beach in Queens, New York, we saw racism in its rawest form. No longer hidden behind fluffy lace curtains and neat row houses, the obscene racism that had driven Michael Griffith to his death on a Queens highway had finally been laid bare.

Now, all major charges against the young men who killed Michael Griffith have been dropped. One of them admitted beating Griffith — even stating during the attack, "Let's go back and kill them". Yet they are now all free, reminders of the racism which pervades not only a community, but the criminal justice system as well.

Let us remember the circumstances of the Griffith death which the court so conveniently dismissed. Michael Griffith and two companions were chased by a mob of approximately 12 Whites as the three left a pizza parlor in Howard Beach. The mob then repeatedly beat the three Black men with baseball bats and tree limbs. Chasing them like dogs, they forced Michael Griffith onto the highway where he was struck by a car and killed. The car was driven by a man whom one of the victims identified as a member of the mob.

These are the facts of the case, but they do not tell the whole story. For the whole story can only be seen on the faces of those who live in Howard Beach. We saw those faces as we marched: the families sitting on stoops, young and old alike showing the same looks of rage and disgust. For in this community hate is passed on from generation to generation, from the adults to the young people who screamed, "Go back home, niggers, you don't belong here."

If Howard Beach tells us anything it tells us this: in New York City, the nation's so-called melting pot, racism is a way of life. A Black man who works in the Howard Beach area told a reporter he always wears his uniform home as identification because if he didn't he would be

attacked. White security guards routinely patrol the area to ensure that Blacks, as one guard noted, "get through properly".

However, it would be a mistake to see Howard Beach as an exception in New York City. Back in 1982, three Black transit employees were brutally beaten in Brooklyn by a mob of Whites as they left a donut shop. One of them, Willie Turks, was beaten to death and left to die on a sewer grate. In 1983 three Black employees at a Veterans Administration hospital were attacked by White youths hurling bricks and bottles as they left work. That same year young Michael Stewart was beaten to death in a subway station by 11 White Transit policemen. Then, in 1984 White members of a SWAT team shot to death a 66-year old Black grandmother during an eviction in the Bronx.

These are just a few of the racially motivated incidents which have plagued the whole city of New York in recent years. The tolerance of the Black community has been pushed far beyond any rational limit. If we are to deal with this anger constructively we must begin to build strong local, grass-roots organizations, city-wide, to keep the pressure on. Local organizations are needed which can confront racism proactively, rather than scrambling to react to each incident after it occurs.

The series of mass meetings being planned by and for the Black youth of New York City is a good start. The first such meeting will be held in a Black church and this is as it should be. For the Black churches, particularly, must assume a more active role in this struggle.

As always there are those who will now try to minimize the horror of the Howard Beach murder by defaming the character of the victims, or by ferreting out the so-called "good people" of Howard Beach. And as he has always done, Major Koch continues to portray these incidents as isolated incidents and not symptomatic of the deep-seated racism of the entire city. These tricks will not stop us from remembering what caused this horror, for the Big Apple has been shown to be racist to the core.

Reagan's Racist Legacy

By Chuck Stone

A mushrooming of racial setbacks in the last few weeks may be fulfilling the ominous prophecy of a 1968 government report.

"This is our basic conclusion," warned the Lyndon Johnson-appointed Kerner Commission: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal."

On the threshold of 1987, that movement leapfrogged across the country in Howard Beach, N.Y.; Tampa, Fla.; Jefferson Parish, La.; Charleston, S.C.; the University of Massachusetts; Philadelphia and Arizona.

No longer a regional aberration, racism has been upgraded to legitimacy.

Until Ronald Reagan became president, the Kerner Commission's words have never been ratified with the imprimatur of the presidential seal. It's taken Reagan six years to accomplish this distinction.

But Reagan's benign spirit of "separate but equal" is not new, even though it may deny it finds inspiration in the 19th-century eloquence of that distinguished Southern racist, Henry W. Grady.

"Not the cowardly mask or shotgun," declared Grady, for whom the University of Georgia School of Journalism and Mass Communication is named, "but the peaceful majesty of intelligence, massed and unified for the protection of its (the South's) homes and the preservation of its liberties."

A few days ago, those same sentiments were uttered by a Howard Beach construction worker after a Black man had been beaten and killed by a car as he fled from his white

assailants.

"It's very easy to spot a black person in this neighborhood," said the worker, "and whenever I see one, I know he's up to no good. They come in the neighborhood and rob everybody."

I can appreciate that emotion, implied Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen, who wrote a justification of D.C. downtown merchants who refuse to admit young Black males to their stores.

In Jefferson Parish, La., Sheriff Harry Lee ordered his men to stop all black men "driving a car late at night in a predominantly white neighborhood."

At the famed Citadel in Charleston, S.C., Ku Klux Klan-clad cadets harassed a black cadet, who later resigned. The tepidity of their punishment suggested to many blacks that the Citadel was not offended by the racist prank.

At the University of Massachusetts, a large group of white students violently attacked a small group of blacks who had made the mistake of cheering for the New York Mets' defeat of the Boston Red Sox in the World Series.

According to several black students who attend colleges in the area, racial harassment has become an integral part of their college curriculum.

In Arizona, Reagan ally Governor-elect Evan Mecham rescinded the state's designation of the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a holiday.

This is the new racial polarization that Ronald Reagan has left America as his legacy.

And all of us are morally poorer because of it.

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Human Rights In Africa

By Norman Hill

In a general, discussions in this country on human rights have focused mainly on Central America, Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and other areas deemed to be of particular strategic or political importance to the United States. For a number of reasons, rights abuses (or advances) in Africa, with the possible exception of Ethiopia and South Africa, have been largely ignored.

Some have argued that this indifference is tied to the perception that most of Africa is of little economic or strategic value to the United States. A more cynical (and innately racist) view is that democracy and civil liberties are alien to the continent, and that the proliferation of totalitarian regimes is an indication that Africans are "not ready" for democracy.

For Black leaders in America, the issue of human rights in Africa presents something of a conundrum. Their relative inattention to serious rights abuses in a number of nations is partly rooted in a reluctance to acknowledge the political, social and economic repressiveness of some Black African countries, even if many of these conditions are the direct by-product of colonial oppression and the arbitrary drawing of boundaries without regard to tribal and linguistic realities.

When discussing human rights

in Africa, several major historical factors must be taken into account. First, the slave trade and colonialism disrupted Africa's independent evolution. Economic progress, education and individual rights were made subservient to the needs of the colonial power. Second, many of Africa's leaders spent the colonial period in exile or jail, where they embraced anti-democratic notions and Marxist ideologies irrelevant to African conditions. And third, many newly independent nations were defined by arbitrary borders, drawn in Europe without regard to tribal and language considerations.

These factors, coupled with desperate economic conditions, often led to the development of systems of government that put a premium on strident state control of all facets of social and economic development at the expense of civil liberties and individual rights.

Of late, a number of African nations have been experimenting with economic decentralization and other reforms that may contribute to greater freedoms in politics and social life. Zaire, Zambia, Somalia, Mali, Guinea, Senegal, Kenya and others have adopted changes that take market forces into greater account, and the resulting economic growth is encouraging.

Increased sensitivity to the

issue of human rights and political freedoms has been demonstrated lately in Nigeria, the Sudan, Uganda, and Liberia, although there is certainly more room for improvement. Botswana is a country with a record of democracy and human rights that is unrivaled in Africa. Gambia and Senegal have vigorous parliamentary systems and Kenya is committed to democratic principles and economic reform.

Yet, continued progress in human rights and economic growth depends on continued Western involvement and assistance that help alleviate the causes of abuse. Western funds have been used to assist in law codification, to promote fair elections, to upgrade legal facilities, to educate people about civil and political rights. Economic aid has also been used to combat hunger and disease, and to help refugees.

But financial assistance must be offered in conjunction with diplomatic efforts to promote human rights. Unfortunately, the Reagan Administration has sharply curtailed our economic involvement in Africa and our ability to help African countries make the difficult economic and political transitions they are attempting. Congressional cuts in foreign aid and other factors will dramatically reduce our economic assistance for Africa to \$705 million this fiscal year.

That is 35 percent less than in 1985 and 18 percent less than in 1986. As a senior State Department official recently observed, these cuts will seriously damage our interests in Africa and could lead to a reversal of recent African efforts to undertake the critical economic reforms that are so vital as underpinning to human rights reform.

For those of us concerned with democracy and the fundamental issues of human dignity, individual rights and civil liberties, this country's growing indifference to developments in Africa is a disturbing development. Freedom of the press, religious tolerance and free elections are not exclusively Western rights; they are vital human rights. But the impoverished nations of Africa will be unable to foster these rights without resources to meet the basic needs of existence. America cannot ignore Africa, and then point accusing fingers at human rights abuses or the rise of Marxist regimes.

If our human rights policies are to have moral consistency, then we must be ready to aid the aspirations of Africans the way we helped those in Haiti, the Philippines and Latin America. And Black leaders in America must help send this message with the same urgency and force as calls for punitive measures to press for the abolition of apartheid in South Africa.

TO BE EQUAL

Breaking The Back Economic Depression

By John E. Jacob, President
National Urban League

One of the most striking things about the current economic situation is the widespread belief that the United States is operating at full employment levels even though unemployment has stabilized at about seven percent of the workforce.

Black unemployment is stuck at Depression-levels of 15 percent overall, and around 50 percent for young people.

And since the official definition of the labor force excludes discouraged jobseekers who no longer look for work that isn't there and part-time workers who want and need full-time jobs, the official jobless rates are grossly understated.

But we are up against a political climate that is comfortable with what used to be recession-level unemployment rates for the total economy and is comfortable with a prolonged

economic Depression in the Black community.

This comfort level continues even though the safety net for the unemployed has been torn away. Less than a third of the jobless today receive unemployment benefits compared to about two-thirds a decade ago.

With a sluggish economy, it is unlikely that unemployment will fall without federal policies that stimulate job growth — and this Administration is not going to do that.

Nor will it try to do much about the racial job disparity. Blacks are disproportionately found in low-level manufacturing, sales and clerical jobs, often in industries hit hardest by automation and by imports.

The combination of high unemployment, low wage job concentrations, and vulnerability to layoffs have helped to lower the real income of Black families. Blacks are 11 percent of the

population but earn only 7.4 percent of all money income in the U.S.

A Census Bureau study released this year shows that the median household net wealth of Black families is only \$3,400 — and that includes the car and the house! The median net wealth for White families was almost 12 times more — \$39,100.

A third of all Black households had no assets at all, and the bulk of Black assets were in useable goods like autos, while White families typically had income producing financial assets.

The federal government must implement social and economic policies to close the racial gap in economic performance and create opportunities for Black economic growth. While those steps would be non-racial, they would have a disproportionate impact on Black people, thus advancing Black economic pro-

gress.

A brief rundown of such policies would include:

- An industrial policy that preserves our manufacturing base.

- Rational trade policies that create jobs at home and don't export them to East Asia and other parts of the world.

- An education policy that assures quality training and higher level skills that enable disadvantaged youngsters to enter the economic mainstream.

- And a national full employment policy that guarantees productive work to all of the jobless and training to all who need it to become productive.

The economic future of Black Americans largely depends on those or similar federal policies that will redress the imbalance of an inefficient market and the ravages of history.