

Race flares anew as polarizing issue in U.S. life

NEWYORK - Is Martin Luther King's vision of the sons of former slaveowners sitting down "at the table of brotherhood" with the sons of former slaves becoming an endangered American dream?

A generation after King's clarion call for integration and the official Kerner Commission report warning that America was becoming two nations separated by a gulf of colour, the country appears again on the brink of the racial divide.

That divide was symbolised

by this week's huge, blacks-only rally in Washington and by the race-driven reaction only days earlier to the verdict in the O.J. Simpson trial.

Marshall Frady, the author of an upcoming biography of Jesse Jackson, calls both events "magnesium flares that illuminate the chasm of black daily life that usually goes unnoticed by white society."

He and other experts on race relations are warning that the danger signs of the growing divide are multiplying, egged on

by Congressional efforts to rewrite laws on welfare, medical aid and discrimination and by increasing white indifference to minority groups.

"We are on the brink of something really disastrous, maybe on the brink of a total racial meltdown that leads not to violence but to the inability of people to function together and move forward," said Jack White of Time magazine, whose reporting on race relations has won wide praise.

Said Frady, "Worsening race

relations can be the illness that finally undoes the republic. Slavery was the primal crime of American society ... Whites no longer have a connection to it, there is an almost wilful amnesia."

And out of that "wilful amnesia" comes a discussion about race relations that has changed dramatically since the civil rights days of the 1960s.

Books that claim blacks are intellectually inferior or cause their own problems because "black culture" is supposedly

dysfunctional — ideas that only a few years ago would have been dismissed as racist junk — are becoming bestsellers and the basis for endless debate.

Radio call-in talk shows, often a barometer of public opinion, are filled with angry comments by whites about blacks and vice-versa.

Polls, like one conducted last month by the Washington Post, show lopsided disagreement between the races on even such issues as whether racism is a problem, with 65 percent of

blacks saying it is and only 35 percent of whites agreeing.

The poll could not even find agreement on whether past discrimination was a problem for people who came to the United States as slaves. Eighty-four percent of blacks said it was, while only 30 percent of whites agreed.

Such divisions inspired the 1968 Kerner commission report to conclude after a series of race riots convulsed the country: "Our (See Race Polarizing, Page 21)

Black Man Acquitted In Racially Charged Case

MONTGOMERY, Ala. - A black militant's son was found not guilty Friday on charges he burned down an Alabama school last year after the white principal tried to bar interracial dating at the spring prom.

Christopher Lynn Johnson, 25, of Ashland, Alabama, was acquitted by a jury of eight whites and four blacks who reached their verdict after less than four hours of deliberation.

Johnson had been facing up to 20 years in prison and \$250,000 in fines for arson, along with a maximum of 10 years in jail and another \$250,000 in fines for the illegal possession of an explosive device. The poultry plant worker, whose father led protests against white school

authorities in Wedowee, Alabama, in 1994, was accused of the arson fire that razed the Randolph County High School building on August 6 of that year.

The blaze followed months of racial turmoil after high school principal Hulond Humphries said he would cancel the prom if biracial couples planned to attend. Humphries also allegedly called mixed-race teen-ager Revonda Bowen a "mistake," an allegation he vehemently denies. But the alleged remark none the less forced the school board into a \$25,000 civil rights settlement with the teen.

Blacks held months of marches and mass meetings and even organized an alternative school.

Johnson's father, the Rev. Emmett Johnson, who calls himself the Alabama commander of the Black Panther Militia, has maintained from the beginning that his son was framed in an attempt to get to him because of his role as a protester.

His claims recently were joined by the suspicions of other leading black citizens, including Charlotte Clark-Frieson, the sole black member of the Randolph County School Board, who said she believed Johnson to be innocent.

During the trial, Johnson's court-appointed attorney Ron Wise tried to convince the jury that Humphries and not his client was the more likely suspect.

U.S. murder rate down, teen suicides up

WASHINGTON - The murder rate dropped in the United States last year, and homicide lost its dubious distinction of being one of the top 10 causes of death, according to federal health statistics released on Monday.

But homicide is still the second leading killer of young Americans, aged 15 to 24, and the third leading cause of death for children age 5 to 14. Teenage suicides were also on the rise, according to the analysis of preliminary 1994 data from the U.S. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

The homicide rate dropped eight percent, from 10.5 deaths per 100,000 in 1993 to 9.7 in 1994, which made it the 11th leading cause of death, out of the top 10.

There were 23,730 homicides last year, compared to 25,470 the year before. The rate began dropping in 1992, after rising by five percent a year from 1987-91, according to the data.

Among young people, where 90 percent of the homicides involve guns, the rate has not decreased but has leveled off, according to the federal statistics.

Suicides rose from about 31,200 in 1993 to 32,400 last year, continuing a trend that has seen the suicide rate among young men triple since the 1950s, reported the data.

Whites have a higher suicide rate than blacks, but the rate for black males age 15 to 19 increased 165 percent from 1980-92.

IRS Cancels Random Audits

WASHINGTON - Pinched by a budget squeeze, the Internal Revenue Service said Tuesday it will "postpone indefinitely" its plan to audit 153,000 random tax returns, dubbed "the audits from hell."

Citing plans in the House and Senate to scale back the IRS budget from its present level of \$8.2 billion, the agency said in a statement that it is dropping the audits planned to begin in December. The House has approved a \$7.5 billion budget and the Senate a \$7.3 billion budget. "It is clear that the 1996 budget will require the IRS to limit its compliance program," the IRS said.

House Speaker Newt Gingrich had compared the

program to the Inquisition.

House Ways and Means committee chairman Bill Archer welcomed the decision, saying the "IRS will have to come up with something less obtrusive."

Under the audit plan, the IRS would require taxpayers to prove every line they entered on the complex tax form and they could face fines and penalties if the IRS uncovered any discrepancies.

The IRS, which called the program the Taxpayer Compliance Measurement Program, said it "continues to be the best vehicle for determining patterns of taxpayer compliance with the tax law."

It said it was exploring alternatives.

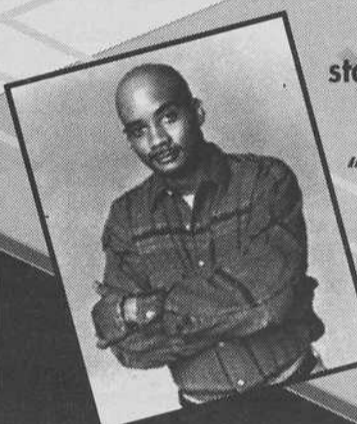
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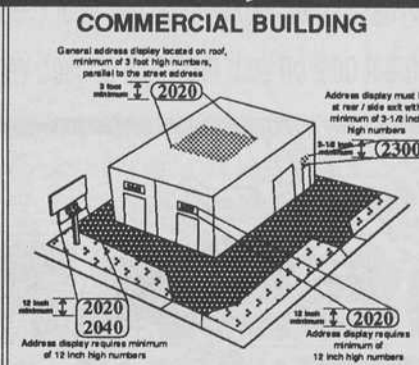
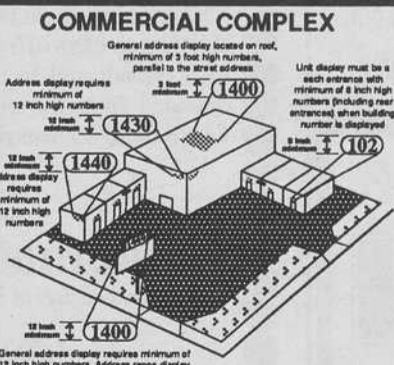
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