

COMMENTARY

Black leaders investigate Cuba

Part one of a two part series
Special to Sentinel-Voice

This June, I led a delegation of 15 prominent African-Americans who visited the island of Cuba.

Members of our delegation included: Leith Mullings, professor of Anthropology, City University of New York; writer/editor Jean Carey Bond; political theorist Clarence Lusane; Columbia University Chaplain Jewelnel Davis; and Michael Eric Dyson, visiting professor of African-American Studies, Columbia University.

The delegation was hosted by the Center for the Study of the Americas in Havana to engage in a series of conversations about the future of Cuba and its relationship with black America. The delegation identified five critical areas for examination: race relations and the status of Afro-Cuban people since the Cuban Revolution; the status of women and gender relations; the impact of economic liberalization and the introduction of private enterprise in Cuba since the end of the Cold War; and issues of human rights, civil liberties and political freedom under the Castro government.

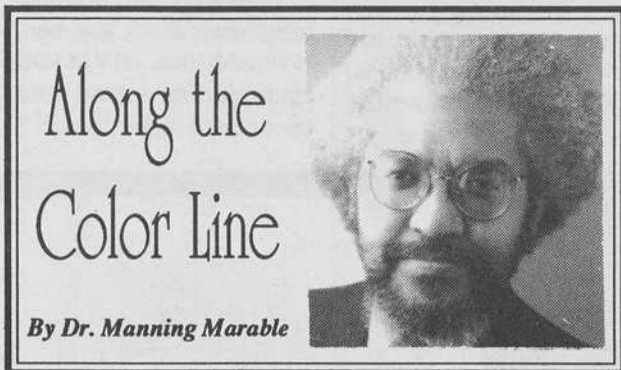
The ground rules for our visit permitted us to travel anywhere and interview leaders in government, culture and society.

We met with Alphonso Casanova, the Deputy Minister of Economic Planning, and the chief architect of Cuba's economic transformation.

Casanova explained that Cuba's gross domestic product was cut in half after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of economic trade with socialist countries. Out of necessity, U.S. dollars were decriminalized and corporate investment from Europe, Canada and Mexico was eagerly solicited.

By 1997, there were over 300,000 Cubans who had registered as private entrepreneurs with the government. New resort hotels were constructed and a thriving tourist business developed. This year over one million tourists will visit Cuba.

This economic growth was achieved at a certain price.



Prostitution is flourishing in major cities and especially at hotels and night clubs. Economic disparities between the well-to-do and the poor have grown dramatically.

Casanova said: "The main objectives of the Revolution have not changed. But when the world surrounding you changes so fundamentally, one has no other alternative but to transform your own domestic (economic) system."

Cuban economists believe that it is possible to adopt elements of capitalism and corporate investment into a socialist system. At risk in Cuba's experiment with capitalism are the substantial accomplishments the small nation has achieved.

For example, Cuba's life expectancy is 75 years; illiteracy has been virtually eradicated; one out of every 15 adults is a university graduate; Cuba's infant mortality rates are one half that of African-Americans.

Safeguarding the interest of Cuban workers is Salvador Valdez Gonzalez, the Minister of Labor and Social Security.

The minister estimated that Cuba's current unemployment rate is 6.5 percent. However, workers who were terminated from their jobs still receive a minimum of 60 percent of their former salaries.

Despite their current economic difficulties all healthcare in Cuba is still free. Programs for the physically disabled were protected. No hospitals or universities were shut down.

In fact, Cuba's ratio of doctors to the general population, one out of 73, is by far the best of any Third World country, and better than many western societies.

The members of the delegation sometimes felt somewhat at odds with our Cuban hosts over the issue of race. The Cubans tended to insist that the issue of racial discrimination had been "resolved" by the Revolution.

Dr. Manning Marable is Professor of History and the Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies, Columbia University, New York City.

Economics: A pathway to power

Special to Sentinel-Voice

This summer President Clinton said America must steadfastly examine its racial problems if it is to avoid being crippled by them.

His central question — are we ready to become a robust, multi-ethnic democracy — was not rhetorical. It is the fundamental challenge of America's future.

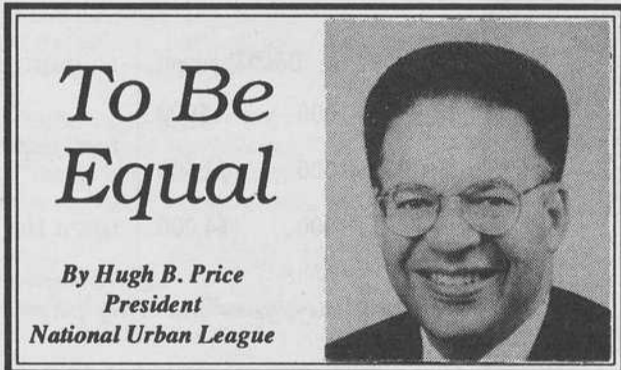
African-Americans must understand the importance of economic prosperity in a world that promises to be harshly unforgiving of economic weakness. So must America.

America won't be strong unless it is strong economically. And it won't achieve that strength until opportunities for economic success are shared further.

Black America must tap into those opportunities and direct its "human capital" to take advantage of the American and global marketplace.

If black America isn't strong economically, America can't be. That's the new American reality.

For white America, that reality means making the commitment to unlock the gates of opportunity. It means employers must be committed to inclusion, even in the face of assaults on affirmative action.



It means labor unions must include everyone in their ranks.

American industry has made great strides toward inclusion, but it still has a long way to go. The backlog of 80,000 cases at the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission proves that encouraging inclusion is more effective than hoping that overburdened enforcers can catch up to bigots after the fact.

Not only must blacks shape the debate over the rules of the game, but we must play the game hard, whether we like the rules or not.

We have part of the human "resource base" we need to take our people to an entirely new plateau of economic power.

We have scores of management consultants, plant managers, product managers, salespeople and even a

smattering of senior executives who've worked inside corporations in the core businesses.

We have a deep pool of talented MBAs, attorneys and undergraduate business and marketing majors who have been able to show — thanks to affirmative action — they have the requisite skills and ambition to get ahead in minority and mainstream markets.

And we have a growing corps of micro-entrepreneurs, working in an economic sector where business savvy and a reputation for reliability and quality work are critical to success.

There's no doubt that African-Americans have a long challenging road ahead. But this is a march that must be made, given the dividends of economic power.

Firstly, black-owned firms

are much more likely to hire inner city residents for the jobs they're qualified to train for and do.

Secondly, economic power provides the resources for exercising political clout at the local, state and national level.

Thirdly, economic power generates the wealth that will make black philanthropy an even more potent force.

The Los Angeles Urban League works with companies by contracting to provide well-prepared entry-level workers in sectors like banking and automotive supply.

The Cleveland Urban League recently sponsored a National Economic Development Summit on franchising. Our affiliate in Oklahoma City is helping small business owners secure start-up financing. The Trenton Urban League is operating a KidCo program, where youngsters run mini-businesses. The Phoenix Urban League is starting a charter school devoted to entrepreneurship.

There are many ways to stoke a greater ambition for economic power within black America. But the impulse remains the same: to find a pathway that will lead to a full inclusion in the American mainstream.

Carl Rowan's Commentary

Clinton's gay policy unconstitutional

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Using the same principle that caused the Supreme Court to rule unanimously that racial segregation in public schools is unconstitutional, a Brooklyn federal judge has said that the Pentagon's policy on gays is illegal.



CARL ROWAN

U.S. District Judge Eugene H. Nickerson has just ruled that when the Pentagon sets up special "don't ask, don't tell" and other rules that treat homosexuals differently from other military people, it stigmatizes homosexuals in a damaging way.

"It is not within our constitutional tradition for our government to designate members of one societal group as pariahs," Nickerson wrote.

Thus the judge found unconstitutional a Clinton administration scheme, put into effect in 1994, that says lesbians and gays can remain in the military only if they do not engage in sexual activity and do not admit that they are



BILL CLINTON

gay. Nickerson found stark discrimination in a policy under which homosexuals are discharged for engaging in sexual activity while heterosexuals face no punishment for engaging in sexual activity.

The judge noted that the military has laws applying to everyone which "deter a whole gamut of sexual conduct, from sodomy and rape to sexual harassment and lewd, lascivious and reprehensible conduct." He said that the military does not need another law

punishing only homosexuals, and cannot enforce such a stigmatizing law under the Constitution.

The logic and the fairness of Judge Nickerson's ruling are so compelling that I cannot see how the Clinton administration, or a higher court, can fail to accept it. But those defending the separate rules for homosexuals, including the Clinton Justice Department, are likely to fall back on the argument used to defend every bad policy the military has ever had: The "morale and cohesion" of military units. Judge Nickerson dismisses "cohesion" as "a euphemism" that is an excuse to give in to prejudice.

"The Constitution does not grant the military special license to act on prejudices or cater to them," the judge said.

When the Army was segregated racially, "morale" and "cohesion" were cited by generals as reasons to keep it that way. But President Truman overruled them, and time proved that Jim Crow had in fact been a terrible destroyer of morale and cohesion.

The military has used "cohesion" as the reason for rules under which it has tried to police adultery, "fraternization" and almost everything about the sex lives of its members, from raw recruit to top general. It now retreats during an embarrassing barrage of charges and courts-martial.

Sex, it seems, is the Achilles heel of our great fighting force.

Judge Nickerson's courageous ruling points the way toward a fairer military that in the long run will be a stronger force for freedom and justice. Let us hope that homophobia does not have such a grip on this society that it rejects blindly what he has to say.

