

COMMENTARY

Revisiting Port Chicago

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Freddie Meeks was not pleased when he heard President Clinton casually tell an interviewer in June that he would consider apologizing for slavery.

Despite the pleas of numerous congressional leaders, Clinton has offered no apologies to Meeks and 49 other black navy men tried and convicted of mutiny during World War II.

Many regard the case, which is still the largest mass mutiny trial in U.S. Naval records, as the greatest travesty of justice in U.S. military history.

On July 17, 1944, the naval depot of Port Chicago, 45 miles southwest of Sacramento, was leveled by a blast which killed 320 navy seamen, 202 of whom were black. The blast accounted for more than 15 percent of the black casualties in World War II.

The then 20-year-old Meeks, a Navy reserve seaman for three years, was one of hundreds of Blacks assigned the dangerous job of loading ammunition on ships bound for the Pacific.

Meeks, and the other black loaders who worked under white officers, were subject to inhuman speed ups, with no training in safety procedures and weapons handling. He escaped death only because he had been granted a three-

day leave. The reprieve was short-lived. The explosion was the start of a nightmare series of events that would haunt him for the rest of his adult life, and stir indignation over racism and the mistreatment of Blacks in the armed forces.

Immediately after the blast, Meeks and 257 black loaders were ordered back to the docks and assigned clean-up duty.

"It was a mess," Meeks recalls. "They made the Blacks stand watch for hours in a warehouse over open barrels in which they shoved badly mutilated bodies."

The men willingly complied. But that wasn't the end. While the whites were given 30-day leaves, Meeks and the other black loaders were ordered to resume loading ammunition. They were

given no counseling, or leave time.

They balked. Some 208 Blacks went back to work after being threatened with execution. Fifty didn't. They were jailed and charged with mutiny.

"It was ridiculous," Meeks remembers. "We weren't disloyal. We didn't assault any officers. We didn't try to take over the base. We were scared that we would die if we went back to work."

President Franklin Roosevelt agreed.

In a private memo to the Navy secretary, he admitted that the men were "activated by mass fear...and this was understandable."

An all-white military tribunal didn't agree. They were sentenced to 15 years, stripped of their benefits and given a less than honorable discharge. The harsh sentence was hardly surprising. Meeks and the other 49 Black defendants had the ill-fortune of being in the most abominable of all the service branches.

The Port Chicago defendants never gave up hope that they would one day be vindicated. Their prayers seemed to be answered in January 1991, when California senators, Barbara Boxer, Diane Feinstein and 24 members of Congress attached a resolution to a military authorization bill that requested the Navy to reopen the case. President Bush signed the bill.

The seamen's demand that their records be cleared appeared to be a relatively low-cost political demand. It wasn't. The Navy in 1994 acknowledged that discrimination and poor treatment were the norm for black seamen during World War II, but ruled "that neither racial prejudice nor other improper factors tainted the original investigations and trials."

The case was tossed to Clinton, who has so far not responded to several queries about the action, if any, he plans to take.

Clinton's failure to act is puzzling to Meeks in light of federal apologies or paid reparations to the Tuskegee syphilis victims, Japanese-Americans interned in detention camps during World War II and Phillipino and Vietnamese servicemen who assisted the U.S. military in World War II and during the Vietnam war.

"It was ridiculous, we weren't disloyal. We didn't assault any officers. We didn't try to take over the base. We were scared that we would die if we went back to work."

— Freddie Meeks, Former Navy Reserve seaman

Politicians, prosecutors perpetuate police abuse

By Linn Washington, Jr.
Special to Sentinel-Voice

New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani's fingerprints are not on the toilet plunger handle that police rammed up the rectum of a suspect during a recent vicious assault inside a Brooklyn station house, but his heated anti-crime rhetoric has contributed to a climate in which police feel they have "permission" to use a certain degree of excessive force.

Civil rights groups in New York City have long criticized Giuliani for sidestepping the issue of brutality, particularly by police officers pursuing a priority of the mayor's first term - cracking down on petty crime.

During the assault on Abner Louima, one policeman allegedly yelled, "This is Giuliani time..."

A frequently overlooked factor in the equation of police brutality is the tacit support this misconduct receives from elected leaders, police officials, prosecutors and judges.

The support leads officials to turn a blind-eye to excesses, including abuse of law-abiding citizens. This is a particularly troubling problem in Black communities.

The degree of brutality in

the torture/assault on Louima is clearly unique.

However, Mayor Giuliani's assertion that this is an isolated incident, not indicative of abuse afflicting the entire police department, flies in the face of repeated reports documenting both pervasive abuse among New York's police and persistent failures by city officials to penalize officers involved in incidents of brutality.

Police brutality in New York City is a "widespread problem, with a pattern of similar abuses occurring over many years" said a 72-page report issued in June 1996 by Amnesty International, the respected human rights organization.

The brutalities cited by Amnesty International included assaults with fists, flashlights and fatal shootings.

The 1994 Mollen Commission probe into widespread corruption in New York's police department found extensive brutality in police districts with large minority populations.

Both reports found that errant officers most often receive only minor sanctions or no discipline at all. One of the first two officers arrested

for assaulting Louima had been suspended in 1992 for striking someone and was the target of three other complaints including excessive force.

Another alarming aspect about brutality in the Big Apple and elsewhere, is the Amnesty finding that abuse is routinely "covered up" by police officials and prosecutors.

This finding of inaction by authorities is consistent with the conclusions of the official report into the March 1991 beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police.

The Christopher Commission said Los Angeles police routinely used excessive force against non-violent citizens, LAPD officials consistently failed to discipline errant officers and the city's district attorney's office failed to prosecute civilian claims of police violence.

Another important factor in perpetuating police brutality is the role of judges.

Last fall, New York City judge Gerald Sheindlin acquitted a policeman charged with fatally choking a Hispanic man whose football inadvertently hit the officer's patrol car.

Sheindlin freed this officer despite saying he did not

believe the "defendant is innocent" and finding a "nest of perjury" in the testimony of the defendant's fellow officers. Sheindlin refused to consider the 11 major complaints filed against this policeman or the fact that he was awaiting trial for fatally choking a teenager he caught driving a go-cart on the sidewalk.

Fatal shootings of blacks by police in 1996 triggered serious disturbances in Leland, Miss., Patterson, N.J., and St. Petersburg, Fla.

Last year both National NAACP President Kweisi Mfume and National Urban League President Hugh Price called on the Clinton administration to take strong action against police brutality. These requests for action were politely accepted by the White House but not implemented.

The laissez-faire attitude to police abuse by elected officials like Mayor Giuliani, judges, prosecutors and police officials is a key reason for the persistence of police brutality as a major problem nationwide.

Linn Washington, Jr., a graduate of the Yale Law Journalism Fellowship Program, is writing a book on police brutality.

A VOICE FROM THE HILL

For the Love of Money

By George Wilson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Money is the oil that lubricates the wheels of politics.

A well-placed contribution or two can get one a favorable response to a question or persuade a lawmaker to slant a rule towards a particular point of view.

The Senate Governmental Affairs Committee has been conducting hearings on campaign fundraising and how money can influence certain political decisions.

On the surface, it would appear that taxpayer's money shouldn't be spent to find out the obvious. However, Senate investigators have stumbled into an area which should cause at least some to raise an eyebrow.

Investigators are trying to determine if a reasonably hefty contribution from the chairman of Chiquita Brands could help crush the economies of several Caribbean nations who depend on bananas for their economic survival.

A visit to your local supermarket will show that the fruit section generally has bananas that carry the name of Chiquita or Dole. These companies control over 90 percent of the world market for the nutritious fruit. The remaining 10 percent is the province of several Caribbean nations.

Apparently, Carl Linder, chairman of Chiquita, feels that 10 percent of the market is too much for Caribbean nations to have. After his donations to Democrats and Republicans, it seems he convinced them that a policy should be pursued through the World Trade Organization that would effectively block Caribbean nations from selling their products to the European market.

What does this mean in practical terms?

Hazel Ross-Robinson, who represents the Caribbean Banana Exporters Association, says that some of the countries are so dependent on the revenue from the sale of their bananas that a loss of market would threaten their very existence.

"In a place like Dominica, 70 percent of all foreign exchange earnings come from bananas. If Chiquita and the United States manage to shut a place like Dominica out of the European banana market, the result will be widespread suffering," he said.

If this misguided policy is implemented what does Chiquita have to gain?

The answer is millions of dollars. You don't need a master's degree in business administration to know that to spend less than a million dollars with policy makers in exchange for millions in increased profits, is as good as betting on the Harlem globetrotters to beat your local high school team.

When Caribbean nations that have pursued the recommended course of democracy find themselves unable to participate in the world economy, they will have to find some other way of filling the gap. While Chiquita is looking at its profit and loss statement, the Clinton Administration and the World Trade Organization are saying to Caribbeans, "Don't Worry, Be Happy."

The Congressional Black Caucus and the Caribbean Banana Exporters Association are fighting to keep the Caribbean nations from facing economic ruin. They need all of the help they can muster.

The decision is currently under appeal and the results will soon be known. If loyal allies of the United States can be sacrificed at the altar of campaign contributions, words like morality and trust have no meaning. Even if the decision goes against Caribbean nations, the United States still has the option of not implementing the policy. Let's hope that righteousness will prevail.

George Wilson is a 16-year Capitol Hill correspondent for the American Urban Radio Network.

SPEAK OUT!

We accept letters to the editor

Send your letters to:
LAS VEGAS SENTINEL-VOICE
900 E. Charleston • Las Vegas, NV 89104
or fax to 380-8102

All letters must be signed and contain a daytime phone to be verified for your protection.

