

# Debate ensues over Webster's 'N' word

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Perhaps no word in the English language stirs more passion and outrage among blacks than the word "nigger," or its politely sanitized version, the "N" word.

It's happened again. This time the offender is not a loose-lipped politician, celebrity, or athlete. It is none other than one of the bibles of the English language, Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.

The dictionary is now the target of a national campaign by some black academics, local NAACP chapters and *Emergence* magazine. They claim that Webster's "redefinition" of the word "nigger" racially stigmatizes blacks and other non-whites.

They have a point. In the 1996, edition of Webster's, "nigger" is defined as "a black person — usually taken to be offensive." It went even further and applied the word to "a socially disadvantaged person."

Possible danger lies in Webster's redefinition. One could easily infer that the word "nigger" refers exclusively to blacks, the poor and other non-whites, and that all blacks

are "socially disadvantaged."

So far Webster's has stuck to its guns and refused to bow to blacks' complaints.

Frederick C. Mish, Webster's editor-in-chief, insists that the new definition of "nigger" accurately reflects the common usage and intent of the word. Mish justified the definition by claiming that blacks use it among and about themselves. "Its use by and among blacks is not always intended or taken as offensive."

In past issues of such popular black magazines as *Essence* and *Emergence*, black writers have gone through lengthy gyrations to justify using the word. Their rationale boiled down to this: The more a black person uses the word the less offensive it becomes. They claim that they are cleansing the word of its negative connotations so that racists can no longer use it to hurt blacks.

Comedian, turned activist, Dick Gregory had the same idea some years ago when he titled his autobiography, "Nigger." Black writer, Robert DeCoy also tried to apply the same racial shock therapy to whites when he titled his novel, "The Nigger Bible."

Many blacks say they use the word

endearingly or affectionately. They say to each other, "You're my nigger if you don't get no bigger." Or, "that Nigger sure is something." Others use it in anger or disdain, "Nigger you sure got an attitude." Or, "A Nigger ain't S—." Still, other blacks are defiant. They say they don't care what a white person calls them because words can't harm them.

But many feel that the word's black defenders miss the point. Words are not value neutral. They express concepts and ideas. Often words reflect society's standards, they said. A word, as emotionally charged as "nigger," can reinforce and perpetuate stereotypes. It is the most hurtful and enduring symbol of black oppression, they said.

In "Huckleberry Finn," Mark Twain captured the total worthlessness of black lives during slavery. Aunt Sally asked Huck why he was late arriving. Huck lied and told her that his boat had been delayed:

Huck: We blowed out a cylinder head.

Aunt Sally: Good gracious! anybody hurt?

Huck: No'm killed a nigger.

Aunt Sally: Well it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt.

Novelist Richard Wright in his memorable essay, "The Ethics of Jim Crow," remembers the time he accepted a ride from a "friendly" white man. When the man offered him a drink of whiskey, Wright politely said, "oh no." The man punched him hard in the face and said, "Nigger ain't you learned to say, 'sir', to a white man." The pain from the blow would pass, but the pain from the "N" word would stay with him forever.

During the era of legal segregation, some of America's major magazines and newspapers continued to treat blacks as social outcasts.

Historian Rayford Logan surveyed early issues of *Atlantic Monthly*, *Century Monthly*, *North American Review*, *Harpers*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, the *Boston Evening Transcript*, the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, and the *Indianapolis Journal*. He noted that they routinely referred to blacks as "nigger," "niggah," "coon," and "darky."

In news articles, blacks were depicted as buffoons or dangerous criminals. The NAACP and black newspaper editors waged vocal campaigns against racist stereotyping and the

(See 'N' Word, Page 16)

## Critics say U.S.-funded experiment unethical

By Chinta Strausberg  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

U.S. Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun (D-Ill.) is raking the federal government over the coals for continued U.S.-funded medical experiments in the treatment of AIDS among poor Third World women. She said the experiment violates medical ethics.

The United States "hasn't learned its lesson from the Tuskegee Experiment in which penicillin was denied to black men infected with syphilis," she said.

Referring to an article in a recent edition of *The New England Journal of Medicine* (NEJM) titled, "The Ethics of Clinical Research in the Third World," the senator agreed that withholding the proven AZT treatment from pregnant women with AIDS, violated World Health Organization guidelines intended to keep researchers from conducting unethical experiments. The Helsinki Agreement and the Nuremberg Code were international guidelines adopted after World War II to prevent the reoccurrence of experiments similar to those carried out in Nazi concentration camps.

The NEJM editorial states that these international agreements mandate that, "Only when there is no known effective treatment is it ethical to compare a potential new treatment with a placebo."

"When effective treatment exists, a placebo may not be used. Instead, subjects in the control group of the study must receive the best known treatment."

Moseley-Braun credited the health periodical for helping "shine a spotlight on these extremely questionable experiments. Unfortunately, the ethical lessons we should

have learned from the Tuskegee experiment may not have been absorbed."

She said that "AZT has proven results in preventing Mother-to-child transmission of HIV."

"Despite that fact, groups of women in the ongoing studies are randomly selected to receive placebos. As a result, at least 1,000 children will suffer and may die unnecessarily from HIV," she said.

"We must never allow unknowing patients to be abused as they were in the Tuskegee scandal, and we must not put people in harm's way in the name of science when there's clearly no rational excuse to take such risks."

Nonetheless, reports confirm that the Clinton Administration is confident that the U.S.-funded experiments are ethical and will save five to 10 million children who might otherwise contract AIDS through parental transmission. Supporters also say that the studies were reviewed by ethics committees in the United States, Europe and in the countries where the studies are being conducted.

Preliminary research has found that when taken during pregnancy, AZT reduces the risk of transmitting the AIDS virus to the fetus by two-thirds. But the treatment costs more than \$1000 per mother. The controversial study is trying to find out if the treatment can be

as effective with lower and therefore less costly doses.

Critics, like the Washington, D.C.-based group Public Citizen, say it is unacceptable in the name of saving money, to doom unsuspecting mothers and children to death when it can be prevented.

In a letter to Donna Shalala, secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, Public Citizen contends that, "Researchers involved in these experiments have exploited the inadequacies of the health care systems in these developing countries to conduct research they would never even consider

in the U.S."

The studies included 12,211 women in Thailand, The Dominican Republic, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania and Malawi. Funding was provided by the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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Clark County ("Urban County") Consortium  
Community Development Block Grant Program  
(CDBG) and Home Investment Partnerships Program  
(HOME)/Low Income Housing Trust Fund (LIHTF) Grants

Application forms will be available, beginning Friday, October 10, 1997, at the Clark County Community Resources Management Division, 5th Floor, Clark County Government Center, 500 South Grand Central Parkway, Las Vegas, Nevada 89106.

The CDBG Program is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The Urban County Consortium CDBG funds must be used for projects which benefit low to moderate income households in Clark County, such as expanding community housing and eliminating slums and blight.

The HOME Program is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. LIHTF funds are made available to the Clark County (Urban County) HOME Consortium by the State of Nevada. The LIHTF and HOME funds received by the Consortium may be used for projects that serve low income residents who live anywhere in Clark County.

GRANT APPLICATIONS CAN BE MADE ONLY BY NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ENTITIES, NOT BY INDIVIDUALS OR BY FOR-PROFIT FIRMS.

For more information regarding the CDBG Program, please call Mr. Brian Paulson at (702) 455-5025. For more information regarding the HOME/LIHTF Programs, please call Mr. Mike Pawlak at (702) 455-5025.

The deadline for submitting completed CDBG and HOME/LIHTF applications is FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 1997, at 5:00 p.m., Pacific Standard Time. No exceptions will be made. No extensions will be granted.