

## COMMENTARY

## Ending politics and racism as we know it

## Special to Sentinel-Voice

The President's advisory panel on race relations has begun meeting and deliberating on its mission. Mr. Clinton dropped by one recent meeting in an effort to prod his panel to action.

What kind of action? The President suggested that his advisors collect reports on successful local efforts to foster racial harmony and publish a book that will help communities "replicate what works." He also announced a National Town Hall meeting on race on December 2nd.

This entire enterprise, it seems to me, is quintessential Clintonism.

The President takes what is the most pervasive and unresolved social

conflict in America—the relationship between black and white America—and turns it into a search for the "quick fix," or "recipes for racial harmony."

This reminds me of what one social commentator, Louis Menand, called the politics of gesture, where genuine and comprehensive solutions (or even attempts at solutions) are abandoned in favor of gestures, symbolic acts that create the appearance of social action, but which actually maintain the status quo.

What's more, it turns out that not

## This Way For Black Empowerment

By Lenora Fulani



only is the advisory panel's action plan unable to break America out of its straitjacket of racial antagonism, it's unable to break itself out.

Some members have voiced concerns about the extent to which

frank dialogue is prohibited by the fact that federal law requires their meetings be open to the press.

They are fearful that reporters will pounce on any signs of controversy or a deviation from political correctness. Commentators have also pointed out that since several of the seven panel

members are very public figures from leading academic, labor and corporate institutions, they are vulnerable to negative reaction and outcry in response to comments they might make in these meetings.

Consequently, the dialogues are controlled, limited and conservatized.

Examining the state of racial discord in America—as the experience of the President's panel indicates—is just about impossible in the current political environment. In my view there is a profound connection between this political environment—where risk-taking is impossible and gesture is all—and the intensification of racism in America.

That is why I have come to believe so strongly that the activity of changing the political environment, the activity of changing the totality of our political culture, is how we engage the trouble between the races.

## Will Soul Food change Hollywood's appetite?

## By Earl Ofari Hutchinson

## Special to Sentinel-Voice

Many are hoping that the box-office success of the black family oriented film *Soul Food* will finally make film executives realize that there are more dollars in making films that promote positive racial images than racial caricatures. But I'm not convinced.

*Soul Food* writer-director George Tillman, Jr. noted that several studio executives originally rejected the project because it didn't have action and violence.

Actor/filmmaker Tim Reid got the same cold shoulder from Hollywood when he shopped his film project, *Once Upon A Time When We Were Colored* in 1995. This film also gives a positive image about black families and eventually did well at the box office.

However, it will take more than the jangling box office dollars of *Soul Food* or *Once Upon A Time* to free Hollywood of its maddening love affair with the ancient racial stereotypes that it reserves almost exclusively for blacks.

It knows that 1990's blaxploitation films that pump out the stereotypes, are cheaply made, and gross from \$15 to \$60 million. Hollywood also knows that blacks crowd the theaters to see these films.

When Hollywood is attacked for promoting negative racial stereotyping on the screen it cites these decrepit myths to justify its actions.

• Black films reflect the reality of the black life.

They do not. Nine out of 10 adult black males are not in prison, on probation or parole. Nearly six out of 10 young blacks reside in two parent households.

Teen pregnancy rates have tumbled among black girls and leaped among non-black girls. Three out of

four black women have never received welfare payments. Eight out of 10 adult blacks are employed.

The women and men in *Soul Food* much more closely reflect the family values of most blacks than the dysfunctional parade of characters that are routinely paraded across the screen.

• All black films employ black actors and actresses.

So did *Emperor Jones*, *Gone With The Wind*, *Green Pastures*, *Cabin in the Sky*, *Song of the South*, *Tarzan*, *Jungle Jim*, *King Solomon's Mines* and the pack of 1970's blaxploitation films. Hollywood never had a problem creating plentiful roles for toms, coons, mulattos, mammies and clowns. And despite the heavy profits in black "gangsta"-decadence films, Hollywood is not barreling ahead to bring out more black films. And recent films, such as *Boozy Call*, *How to be a Player*, and *Hoodlum* hardly represent any departure from the set formula of gangster, comedy and sexual hijinks reserved for black films.

But long before *Soul Food*, pioneer filmmaker Oscar Michaux and later Haile Gerima proved that there is a better way to create cinema opportunities for blacks.

In the 1930's, Michaux made independent films on a meager budget that employed hundreds of black actors, actresses and technicians. In recent times, Gerima did not wait for or beg Hollywood to bankroll the anti-slavery epic, *Sankofa* in 1993. He proved that a commercially successful independent black film can create jobs and opportunities for dozens of blacks in the 1990s.

• Black films put dollars in black pockets.

Not. They put dollars in the pockets of wealthy investors, executives, corporations, distributors, theater chain owners and elite screenwriters.

Author Terry McMillan reportedly

sold the rights to her book, *Waiting to Exhale*, for the film released in 1996, for less than \$1 million. The film grossed \$60 million.

Alice Walker thought she beat Hollywood's "creative accounting" methods when she signed for three percent of the gross revenues for Steven Spielberg's screen adaptation of *Color Purple* in 1985. The movie was a huge hit. Spielberg and Warner Bros. made a mint, and Walker by her own account, got only "a fraction" of what she thought the movie earned.

Meanwhile, far too many black leaders and organizations have maintained a statue like silence on these cinematic assassinations of the black image. This is irritating especially since they pay endless lip service to the notion of promoting black achievement and demolishing racial stereotypes.

They know that many young blacks are in ecstasy watching these characters swagger, posture, act tough, be defiant and sexually outlandish because they imagine that they actually are rebelling against something.

They know that blacks pay a huge price for peddling stereotypes by themselves about themselves, i.e. escalating attacks on social programs, the increased racial hostility and the massive numbers of blacks being shuttled off to prison and graveyards.

Some black leaders do speak out and they should be applauded. The success of *Soul Food* will hopefully embolden even more to speak out against some of these other film and TV obscenities.

But more importantly, by packing the theaters to see *Soul Food*, African-Americans have strongly signaled that they hunger to see themselves depicted on the screen as more than just crooks, clowns and charity cases. I sincerely hope that Hollywood will change its menu to satisfy that hunger.

## A Voice From The Hill

### School vouchers: They won't die

By George Wilson

Special to Sentinel-Voice

One of the pet ideas of the Republican party is that of school vouchers. The thinking or lack thereof behind this notion is that by giving economically deprived young people a voucher, they will be able to attend the school of their choice.

Proponents of vouchers say that poor children are aided by having a choice of schools. This type of logic can be best described as "tricky logic," as Malcolm X said. What is being suggested here is that by putting poor children close to more fortunate children, the result will be enhanced achievement.

Milwaukee, Wis. and Cleveland, Ohio are two cities that have actually implemented the school voucher experiment.

Professor John Witt of the University of Wisconsin conducted a four-year study on Milwaukee students who received vouchers and found that they didn't do any better than their colleagues in public schools. Undaunted by the lack of any concrete evidence to support their claim that vouchers are worth the paper they would be printed on, proponents have targeted the young people of Washington, D.C., as the guinea pigs for another round of social experimentation.

To promote a certain amount of confusion, the Senate is calling its proposal the District of Columbia Student Opportunity Scholarship Act. The House companion to the bill is called the Scholarship Assistance for District of Columbia Students Act. Both bills call for the authorization of \$45 million over a five-year span to fund private and religious school vouchers. These are the same lawmakers who rejected the opportunity to add \$31 million to an emergency bill that would have provided much needed resources for school repair and police in the nation's capital.

To put it bluntly, school vouchers can be compared to a round trip, all expenses paid, on an ocean liner with a hole in the bow.

Imagine the scene of hopeful parents arriving at the admission's office of one of Washington's outstanding private schools with their vouchers and little, if any, cash. These parents will quickly find out that their vouchers don't cover half of the tuition cost at one of these schools. If you don't have the rest of the money, a voucher is worth as much as some confederate currency would be at area banks.

Another point ignored by the supporters of vouchers is that individuals who are able to send their children to many of these private institutions do so in order to keep them away from poor children. One would be naive to think that private institutions will be waiting with open arms for students who are generally academically unprepared after years of substandard public education.

Instead of spending time and substantial amounts of taxpayer's money on this idea, the Senate and the House need to be about the business of creating suitable learning environments in city schools, giving teachers the necessary equipment to work with and providing real incentives to stimulate the learning process among students who have learned to accept mediocrity as the norm.

I'm sure that supporters of school vouchers will continue their ill-advised quest for some form of vouchers. We can only hope that one day it will become clear that nothing will take the place of providing all children with an opportunity for a quality education without the input of "mad scientists" masquerading as educational reformers.

# SPEAK OUT!

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