

## COMMENTARY

## King's legacy and the consequences of racism

Part I

## Special to Sentinel-Voice

The civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's ended structural racism in America. That movement was an independent movement, a grassroots movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and enlivened by thousands of activists, attorneys, and students.

Dr. King was not a Democrat — with a capital "D" — and the civil rights movement was not a Democratic party movement, though the Democratic Party did succeed in co-opting it and taking credit for its achievements.

Throughout the struggles which led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 — propelled through Congress by Lyndon Baines Johnson — not by the liberal establishment

— the Democratic Party was ambivalent.

The Democrats, after all, had constructed an electoral coalition that relied heavily on Southern white voters. But once the civil rights movement galvanized the country, the Democratic Party figured out how to consolidate it and capitalize off of it.

The success of Dr. King and the civil rights movement meant that structural racism had been eliminated. Race discrimination was outlawed and participation in the political process was secured for Black America.

With racism ended, the issue for the country became what to do about the consequences of racism.

We had lived for 300 years with racism as an institutionalized element of everyday life. Slavery had been abolished only 100 years

*This Way  
For Black  
Empowerment*  
By Dr. Lenora Fulani



earlier. The social fabric of our society was deeply corroded by this social/political/cultural experience. America needed to go through a healing process to deal with the residual anger and outrage of Black America and to create a unified country that could move forward in the national interest.

But the 30 years that followed the elimination of structural racism were years not of healing, but of wheeling and dealing.

The Democratic Party was

eager to translate all of the social movements of the 1960s into its political subsidiaries. Thus, it nurtured identity politics — the elevation of and competition among fractured segments of the population based on racial, cultural, gender, ideological and sexual identity.

This modus operandi served the interests of the Democrats — and the Republicans as well, who quickly learned how to play this game on the "right" — but not the interests of the

country.

As the Democrats served as champions for various oppressed groups, the Republicans organized the backlash against it, playing on the incomplete social/cultural process left in the wake of the structural elimination of racism and elevating their own identity groupings, e.g., Christian fundamentalists, veterans, profilers, etc.

The country needed to have spent the last 30 years creating a new post-racist political culture that could bring the country together. Instead, the two parties spent the last 30 years tearing the country apart, while taking extreme measures to preserve and institutionalize their own political power and that of the corporate and special interests which run America.

This 30 year bipartisan gambit, however, is losing its grip on the American public.

There is still much unresolved outrage on the part of Black America which, though still loyal to the Democratic Party, is showing signs of breaking out of its monolithic allegiance.

In 1997, Black voters stayed home from the polls in record numbers and sought out Republican and independent options in indiscernible numbers.

There is also a new generation of young Black adults without the civil rights era experience to tie them to the Democratic Party.

Black America is communicating a new message, a question that has remained unanswered for 30 years. What do we do now? Where do we go next?

(See Part II next week.)

Lenora B. Fulani is currently a leading activist in the Reform Party and chairs the Committee for a Unified Independent Party.

## Eve's Bayou: Exploding myths, winning fans

By Dr. Earl Ofari Hutchinson  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

The news that "Eve's Bayou" was the most commercially successful independently produced film in 1997 should be cause for much rejoicing.

It showed that an independent film with an all-Black cast, sans the ancient racial stereotypes of crime/dope/guns/freaky sex/cartoon caricatures/human wrecks that for too many Hollywood films traditionally reserves almost exclusively for Blacks, can do well at the box office.

But equally important "Eve's Bayou" shattered two other myths: writer-director Kasi Lemmons echoed the first myth when she remarked that "you can't really point to any film and say this proves that this film will attract a White audience. What examples can you use?"

Lemmons seems doubtful that Whites will go see an all Black film. But why?

For decades Whites have packed concerts featuring Black artists, hailed Black sports figures, enshrined Black divas and praised the works of Black writers, poets and playwrights. If a film is well-crafted and compelling, there is no reason why Whites wouldn't or shouldn't crowd the theaters to see it.

Spielberg's "Amistad" is a good example.

Despite its painful and still controversial theme of Black slavery, from initial box office reports a sizable percentage of those who went to see it were White.

The second myth is that independent, all-Black films are doomed to fail commercially.

In the 1930s, pioneer Black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux made independent films with a small budget

and no major studio backing, or distribution deals. The films didn't present the stereotypical "Amos and Andy," "Stepinfetcher" comedy, or minstrel-type song and dance depictions of Blacks prevalent in that era. The films were dramas, westerns and detective movies. They employed hundreds of Black actors, actresses and technicians and were financially successful.

In the 1960s, the critically acclaimed independent film, "Nothing But A Man," about the struggles of a working Black couple enjoyed good support.

Gerima did not wait for or beg Hollywood to bankroll his anti-slavery epic, "Sankofa." He proved that a commercially successful independent Black film can be made and can create jobs and opportunities for dozens of Blacks.

Actor Tim Reid failed to interest major studios in his film, "Once Upon A Time When We Were Colored," about the fight of Blacks in a small Southern town against poverty and segregation. Yet, it still had a considerable run in theaters and was warmly received by Black and non-Black audiences.

There are several reasons why independent Black filmmakers can have success with their films.

Blacks carry tremendous clout at the box office. It is estimated that Black moviegoers buy an estimated one out of four movie tickets. And more Blacks have the wealth and willingness to invest their money in films that portray positive images of Blacks. Spike Lee tapped a bevy of prominent Black celebrities and personalities to partially bankroll his films "Malcolm X" and "Get on the Bus."

Most Blacks do not fit into the media's sensationalized crime and violence image of Black communities. 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. More than 80 percent of Blacks graduate from high school.

For three decades Blacks have played cops, robbers, dope pushers, pimps, whores, presidents, mummies, corporate heads, maids, aliens, astronauts, devils, washerwomen, zombies, oodles of singers and dancers, and every role in between. Black moviegoers have become far more discriminate in their movie tastes and are increasingly demanding films that portray them with more dignity than degradation. The smash success of "Soul Food" proved that.

However, no matter how good (or bad) a film is it will quickly disappear without a skilled promotion effort. And that means spending money. Many times that has not happened with quality Black films. The dismal box office performance of "Rosewood" is a good example of that.

To its credit, Trimark, which produced "Eve's Bayou," was willing to shell out the ad dollars to jump start the film. This did not guarantee that it would succeed, but it sure improved its chances. Hollywood are you listening?

Dr. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, author of "The Assassination of the Black Male Image," can be reached at ehutchi344@aol.com

## Carl Rowan's Commentary

## Ego flare-ups marring global warming talks

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Eskimos will be passing out from heat strokes before most Americans agree to fight global warming by reducing their standards of living.

Many members of the Senate are making that clear in their hostile reactions to the accord reached in Kyoto, Japan, under which 38 industrial nations would have to reduce their emissions of carbon dioxide and five other greenhouse gases to something below 1990 levels. The United States would have to reduce emissions by seven percent.

Already we are hearing screams that Americans are being asked to sign away our good life because to meet our environmental target we would have to: virtually wipe out the coal industry; drive down farm incomes by some 50 percent; devastate our automobile industry, whose vehicles are the main contributors to the climatic disruptions that some say are grave threats to our children and grandchildren; drive up the cost of gasoline dramatically; and impose restrictions that would wipe out millions of U.S. jobs.

Opponents say there is no climatic problem now or on the horizon that justifies such an assault on U.S. prosperity.

President Clinton, Vice President Al Gore, and others in White House say all this is scare talk from greed-driven interests. They say that the scientific peril is clearly documented, and some compare those fighting in the Kyoto accords with the tobacco interests who maintained for decades that smoking cigarettes was not a health threat.

But some surprising people, such as British Petroleum's chief executive John Browne, are conceding that there is a genuine problem of the deterioration of our atmosphere and urgent steps must be taken to curb global warming.

But the worldwide effort is likely to be hamstrung by those who say that even if the problem is real, Americans can only be asked to sacrifice a trifle to solve it.

In trying to appease Senate foes of the Kyoto agreement, President Clinton is saying that the Third World must sacrifice. Third World leaders are saying, "Not till we see what sacrifices are made in industrialized nations."

So we'll be caught in a war of words, for at least a couple of years, even as we intensify our research regarding solar energy and other ways to light the lamps of industry and commerce. We can be sure that our personal temperatures are going to rise.



CARL ROWAN