

COMMENTARY

M. T. Mehdi, a brilliant cross-cultural icon, dies

Special to Sentinel-Voice

On Monday, February 23 Dr. Mohammed T. Mehdi, a dear friend and lifelong advocate for international brotherhood and peace died of a heart attack. He was 70 years old.

Dr. Mehdi was born in Baghdad, lived his adult life in the United States, and founded numerous organizations to promote public awareness of the Islamic world view, acting as a spokesperson for the Arab Diaspora.

He was bitter in his condemnation of Israeli policy toward the Palestinian people and relentlessly critical of anti-Arab policy and propaganda in the United States.

He was also one of the kindest and most spirited people I've ever known. All of the anger he felt about the hypocrisy that surrounds U.S. foreign policy toward the Arab and Islamic world never dissuaded him from a humor and humanity in his dealings with all.

He was a great appreciator of the multitude of the world's cultures and was a one-man cross-cultural phenomenon.

Having grown up in the very religious and socially conservative society of what was then Persia (today, Iraq), he was an exceptional student and was offered an opportunity to attend any university

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



in the world at government expense. He once told me that he sat down, looked at a map and, hungry for new experiences, searched for the university that took him as far away from Baghdad as he could possible go. That led him to the University of California at Berkeley.

Off he went and suddenly found himself on the campus of free speech and free love, never having seen a woman without a veil covering her face. It was a culture clash of monumental proportions and it was a defining moment for the young scholar, who lived

his life trying to acquaint distant and dissonant cultures with one another.

He often found himself embroiled in political controversy and never shied away from it. Instead, he embraced it.

For his criticism of Israel and Zionism he earned the enmity of the Anti-Defamation League, whose director, Abraham Foxman, could not restrain himself from using the sad occasion of Dr. Mehdi's death for once more conscienceless political attack on him in a New York Times obituary.

Perhaps, it is ironic that our dear brother passed away within hours of the signing of the agreement between United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan and Iraq's Saddam Hussein.

As I recall, Dr. Mehdi had no great love for Saddam. But he had a great love of peace. And he died at a moment when international pressure had succeeded in getting the United States to abandon its current plan for a bombing assault on Baghdad. Hopefully, that moment will last. I know our loving memory of M. T. Mehdi will.

Lenora B. Fulani is a Reform Party activist and chairs the Committee for a Unified Independent Party. She can be reached at www.Fulani.org.

A VOICE FROM HILL

Annan accorded marginal praise; deserves fanfare

By George Wilson

Special to Sentinel-Voice

For the time being, we can all breathe a sigh of relief that the United States will not be dropping bombs on Iraqi citizens. This respite is due to the outstanding diplomacy of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

When the "war hawks" were busy preparing to bomb Iraq, Annan was actually talking with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein about peace. The efforts of Annan enabled him to secure a deal that should avert war for a limited period of time.

One would think that Annan's efforts would be cheered by the masses of the world population.

Instead what we are witnessing is a muted adulation. Annan is politely cheered on one hand, while the other side raises questions about the type of deal he cut with the Iraqis.

Some have said that they doubted if Annan had the "right stuff" to deal with Saddam Hussein. It was also implied that there would have to be close scrutiny of the deal to make sure that all of America's concerns were met.

Let's be honest. Annan would not be in the position he occupies without at least the tacit endorsement of the U.S. government. Therefore, it would be rather ludicrous to think that American officials weren't informed about what was happening at the negotiation table.

I can't help but recall the look on Secretary of State Madeline Albright's face when it became known that the Iraqi government had agreed to allow UN weapons inspectors anywhere in Iraq without conditions. Albright's expression indicated anything but joy. In fact, it resembled the look of one who had just stepped in animal droppings.

Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott spoke on the floor of the Senate about statements made by Annan indicating his trust for Saddam Hussein. Lott thought this statement was ridiculous because of Iraq's past of broken agreements.

Apparently, Lott has conveniently forgotten all of the treaties and promises that American governments have broken.

Remember the 40 acres and a mule for African-Americans? How about some of the treaties with Native Americans? They quickly found out that American leaders spoke with

"Kofi Annan has saved the United States from making a terrible mistake."

—Cynthia McKinney, D-Ga.

"forked tongues?"

Cynthia McKinney, D-Ga., is a member of the House International Relations Committee and one of the few African-American leaders who have dared to publicly commend Annan for his exemplary work.

"Kofi Annan has saved the United States from making a terrible mistake. He has saved the world from an unnecessary conflagration or large destructive fire. We ought to be praising the diplomacy of Mr. Annan. I think that in private around the world his work is being praised," she said.

The lack of praise for Annan's work and the second guessing of his techniques only leads to a conclusion that some will find uncomfortable. If he was of a different hue, he would be clearing out a spot in his home for the Nobel Peace Prize, as well as being the object of adulation from a grateful nation. Just imagine the response if the Secretary of State had negotiated a deal that could save thousands of lives.

Throughout this sordid mess, we constantly hear about the concern over Saddam Hussein being in possession of weapons of mass destruction. What we never seem to want to talk about is the fact that at least a dozen other countries in the Middle East also possess the same types of weapons.

McKinney notices a certain amount of "double speak" on the part of politicians on this issue.

"I find it quite hypocritical for politicians like Newt Gingrich to stand up and talk about how we have to keep the Iraqis from having access to biological weapons when he and others have full knowledge of the fact that were it not for the U.S. transfer of material to the Iraqi government when they were considered allies, we wouldn't be at this point today," she said.

What is needed in the Iraqi situation is a coherent policy rooted in a true concern for peace and not based on "saber rattling" and arrogance. Kofi Annan was successful because he applied the basic principle of respect for the person he was speaking with. Perhaps the President, Secretary of State and others can take a page from his book.

George Wilson is a veteran Capitol Hill correspondent for the American Urban Radio Network.

McKinney, guilty? Maybe; Victim of race card? Maybe

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson

Special to Sentinel-Voice

At first glance, Sgt. Major Gene McKinney seems like the worst choice for the military's poster boy for sexual misconduct. When it was announced in July 1995 that he would be the first African-American Sergeant Major of the Army, civil rights leaders hailed it as proof of the army's commitment to equal opportunity for Blacks.

The appointment was also a personal tribute to McKinney's nearly 30 years of unflagging devotion to the army.

But when a retired White female officer complained that McKinney harassed her, he quickly became the target of an investigation. When six other White women claimed he sexually abused them, he was court-martialed. If convicted he faces 55 years in prison, loss of rank and retirement benefits.

While the Congressional Black Caucus and the NAACP have dropped cautious hints that the Sgt. Major is being nailed because of race, and not for violating army regulations, they realize that a too vigorous defense of McKinney would lay them wide open to the charge that they are soft on the issue of sexual harassment whenever a black man is on the hot seat.

So, the job of playing the race card has gone to McKinney. He loudly protests that he is not a sexual victimizer but is being railroaded by jealous White men and women who hate to see a Black man climb so high in the military.

He offers three pieces of proof:

Army investigators asked every witness whether he was interested only in White women.

Army prosecutors tried to bump all Blacks from the jury. Only one was seated.

The army has brought no charges against 23 generals and senior enlisted men accused of similar sexual misdeeds.

Is McKinney a sexual victimizer who abused his authority? Or is he a victim of a racist military hierarchy eager to toss a black man to the wolves to cool public rage over its "see no evil" attitude toward sexual abuse? He is probably both.

It would be foolishly naive to completely accept the army brass' word that race does not play a part in the charges leveled against McKinney. The case can't be neatly separated from the murky web of racial stereotypes,

negative typecasting and public misassumptions about black men, white women and sex.

The notion that black men are rapacious, sexual studs in a perennial carnal hunt for white women is still one of the America's most durable and deadly myths.

The issue exploded in 1996 when a dozen black drill sergeants at Maryland's Aberdeen proving ground were charged with raping, harassing and abusing female trainees. The men and their defenders screamed that they were plucked for prosecution because they were black.

They were partly right. The case against them was based solely on the word of their white accusers. As usual the allegations against them were blown up and publicly sensationalized to make black men appear to be brutish sexual abusers. It defies belief that army officials could find no white commissioned officers to charge with sexual offenses.

But the prosecution of McKinney and the other black servicemen isn't a simple case of vengeful, racist white military officials egging on naive white women to nail Black men. There was evidence that the men did commit some acts of abuse and assaults on the women. And there is even more evidence that many women are being badly mistreated in the military.

In surveys one out of five women claim that they are pressed to have sex, and nearly half claim that they are sexually harassed. After the Army sex scandals hit, more than 7,300 calls from women poured into an Army hotline complaining of sexual abuse.

McKinney can and should indict military officials for serving him and other black men up as public sacrifices for their past sins of abuse and mistreatment of women within the ranks.

But no matter how justified his charge, it still doesn't mean that he and the others didn't commit those same sins.

While the Army may have done more than any other institution in America to promote racial equality and opportunity, it must do more before it can boast that women and black men in its ranks can be all that they can be.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the author of "The Assassination of the Black Male Image." E-mail: ehutchi344@aol.com