

COMMENTARY

Partisan politics, policies muddle real issues

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Many people who run for office are interested in winning. If that's what you're interested in and you're Black, you run as a Democrat. That's why Rev. Al Sharpton became a Democrat, for example. The Democratic Party is focused on getting its people elected and once elected in holding on to their elected position and their power.

The Democratic Party is not a place to be if you're concerned with solutions to the problems we face — as a city, as a state or as a country. That concern doesn't ultimately fit with the Democratic — or the Republican — agenda, because you're too caught up in getting elected and staying elected.

I'm a developmental psychologist. I became a developmental psychologist because I wanted to find solutions to poverty, to substandard education, violence, despair and drug abuse among young people. I became a political activist because there are pressing policy issues — from campaign finance reform to charter schools to finding a trade approach that benefits all Americans — issues that are simply going unresolved by the Democrats and Republicans.

Democrats and Republicans say to us, "elect me" and we'll solve the problems. But the problems we face are not reducible to who is or might be in office.

We have lousy schools. We have far too few opportunities for our young people. We have to generate a national reconsideration of our entire educational approach. That's not going to be an easy

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



process, and it will be a futile process if it is constantly overshadowed by the obsession on the part of policy makers with getting and staying elected. The agenda becomes determined by polls, focus groups and efforts to protect yourself from attack.

I don't want to end up in that position. So, when I run for office, when I involve myself in electoral campaigns or in party-building for the Independence Party in New York or the Reform Party nationally, I do it to bring forth a dialogue and a serious scrutiny of policy concerns from the vantage point of what's needed to solve problems, not to get elected.

At some point, the movement of ordinary people to prioritize solutions over the political survival of incumbents may win out. If it does, then a flood of independents will get elected to office, to effect those solutions.

That's the road we're on.

You see greater and greater rifts these days between the ordinary people and the policy makers. For example, the majority of Black and Hispanic lawmakers — nearly all Democrats — oppose vouchers. But 70 percent to 80 percent of Black and Hispanic parents want them. They want access to educational alternatives.

It's the same thing with charter schools.

The unions, most Democratic elected officials, and the school administrations oppose them. Parents want them. They are told that to want them is politically incorrect, because vouchers are "racist" and undercut the public school system. But the "racism" charge is a red herring. It's mainly used to protect the public school system at all costs, when many public schools in the inner city communities are failing. Yes, all of our children have the right to a decent and developmental education. We need alternatives to achieve that goal. And vouchers and charter schools help us to create them.

Now Black and Hispanic Democrats are beginning to shift ground on this, because they can't stop the tide at the grassroots. That's a good reason. But we have to make sure that our communities have a permanent voice in a policy process that's not controlled by any self-serving agenda of Democrats or Republicans.

That's the role and the vision of independent politics.

Lenora B. Fulani is a leading activist in the Reform Party.

Blacks must shed myth that AIDS is a gay problem

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

According to a recent report by the Center for Disease Control, African-Americans accounted for nearly one out of two AIDS-related deaths in 1996, and by the year 2000 will make up half of all AIDS cases in the U.S.

This should finally put to rest the myth that AIDS is a disease that affects mostly gays.

But it probably won't.

Since many African-Americans still equate AIDS with homosexuality, they hesitate to get involved. Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan and some Black writers and rappers publicly call it a deviant and degenerate lifestyle that threatens Black communities. They ridicule Black males who don't act like "real" men as "sissies" and "faggots."

The only comprehensive study that measured Black attitudes toward gays, published in the Journal of Sex Research in 1995, found that Blacks, like many Whites, had not slackened up one bit in their hostility toward gays.

While there was less anti-gay sentiment among the more educated, less religious and more affluent Blacks, many still continued to heap special scorn on African-American gay men.

AIDS activists discovered how hard it is to shake the rampant homophobia among many African-Americans when they begged Black churches to designate the first week of March as a week of prayer and education about AIDS. Some churches heeded their call, but many others didn't, even though they have members, family and friends who suffer from AIDS.

But chalking up the fear and loathing that many Blacks have toward gays to ignorance, apathy, or indifference is too easy.

From cradle to grave, many Blacks have believed and accepted the gender propaganda that the only real men in American society are White men. In a vain attempt to recapture their denied masculinity, many Black men mirrored America's traditional fear and hatred of homosexuality. They swallowed whole the phony and perverse John Wayne definition of manhood — that real men talked and acted tough, shed no tears, and never showed their emotions.

Many Blacks have listened to countless numbers of ministers shout and condemn to fire

and brimstone any man who dared think about, yearn for, or actually engage in the "godless" and "unnatural act" of having a sexual relationship with another man. If they had any doubts about it, they could always flip to the oft-cited line in Leviticus in the Bible that sternly labels men lying down with men, "the abomination."

The gospel singing Winans sisters drew heavy fire from some gay groups in 1997 for their anti-gay single, "Not Natural," but there were no major protests from Black communities, and their record sales have jumped.

The out-of-sight, out-of-mind exclusion of gays from Black life hinges on the shaky assumption that there are thousands of gay men lying in wait to subvert traditional family values. Beyond the fact that no one really knows how many Black or non-Black men consider themselves exclusively gay, much of what passes for traditional family values has long ago decomposed into shambles.

America of the 1990s bears no resemblance to the country of the 1950s. Today, the majority of women must work outside the home. They are better educated and are pursuing careers in business. They have drastically changed the shape of gender and family relations in America.

There are all sorts of family combinations in the 1990s that were barely imaginable a generation ago. There are single working women, single working men, grandparents, single sex male and female couples, step-parents, foster parents, designated guardians, foster homes and even children raising children.

If the American family still fully resembled the storybook "Ozzie and Harriet" family, the list of the mightiest destabilizers of the Black family would still remain the same: poverty, unemployment, lack of education, chronic disease, violence, drugs, alcoholism, imprisonment and early death. Homosexuality is not on that list.

It's inevitable that as public attitudes change toward gays, more Blacks will come out of the closet and more of us will meet them and get to know them better as people. In some cases we may discover that we have known them all along as family members, friends or acquaintances.

Dr. Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the author of "The Assassination of the Black Male Image."

Carl Rowan's Commentary

Enough good is happening on road to racial healing

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Some 30 years ago, in the wake of some terrible urban violence, President Lyndon Johnson's Kerner Commission warned that we were fast becoming "two nations, one black, one white, separate and unequal."

Recently, there was a flurry of concern over a report that we already have fulfilled that gloomy prophecy.

Well, I am more than dissatisfied with the current state of race relations in America, but I cannot subscribe to the argument that things have gone downhill over three decades to the point that we have established an American separatism that approaches apartheid.

Let's look at the last 30 years by category:

- Residential patterns: There has been scant progress, if any, in this area primarily because federal and state government housing programs have honored the principles of segregation by both race and class.

- Banks and other lending institutions and the real estate industry have subtly, and sometimes brazenly, worked to ensure that Americans of different races and backgrounds do not share the same small communities.

- An angry black drift toward separatism has added to the fact that people of different races don't really know each other, thus the racial stereotypes, tensions and fears linger.

- Education: At the elementary and high school levels, we have given reality to the worst fears of the Kerner Commission.

Despite the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, this country has in both the North and South lapsed into shameful de facto racial separatism in public



CARL ROWAN

education. This partly reflects the separatism in housing patterns, but also the fact that white Americans everywhere have effectively rejected all the mechanisms for putting their children into classrooms with black children.

But at the college level there has been substantial progress,

with a notable, though less-than-satisfactory, increase in opportunities for black students, professors and administrators, including gaining the presidency of major institutions.

- Employment: Blacks and whites are working with and next to each other in jobs that generate mutual respect today far more than was the case 30 years ago.

- There are far more black mid-level supervisors and more in such top jobs as publishers, editors, police chiefs, corporate vice presidents and board members.

- Political power: There is far more racial integration in politics, with blacks wielding far greater political power than was the case when the Kerner Commission reported.

The Republican convention may still look like an Old South country club, and Congress and state legislatures may be lopsidedly Caucasians, but on the whole blacks and whites are now dealing and talking with each other a lot more.

- Worship: It used to be beyond contradiction that 11 a.m. Sunday was the most segregated hour in American life. Our churches still reflect our racial residential patterns, but I believe the races are praying together a bit more than they did 30 years ago.

Enough good is happening for us to keep trying.

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