

COMMENTARY

Rwanda: Who actually knew what?

By George Wilson

Special to Sentinel-Voice

In most cases, Congressional hearings are carefully orchestrated events that yield few surprises. However, a recent hearing held by the House International Relations Committee dealt with a subject that should have commanded national attention. The subject was genocide in Rwanda and the resultant international response. Genocide is defined as the deliberate and systematic extermination of a national or racial group.

In April, 1994, between 500,000 and 1,000,000 citizens of Rwanda who were members of the Tutsi tribe were killed by Hutus who happen to comprise the majority in Rwanda. In spite of the fact that this horrible killing went on for at least three months, the so-called developed countries conveniently looked the other way. Not only did the United States, France and Belgium not step up to the plate, they ignored warnings that genocide was going to occur. It should also be noted that United

Nations (UN) Secretary General Kofi Annan was notified and chose not to push for a remedy.

Among the witnesses invited to appear before the committee were representatives from the State Department and the Department of Defense. Neither of these agencies participated because of an unwritten rule which states that if the Secretary of State is appearing anywhere on Capitol Hill, then other agency representatives won't speak. This silly excuse didn't hold much water with panel members because the Secretary of State wasn't even in the country.

Cynthia McKinney (D-GA) is a member of the subcommittee and has been at the forefront of advocating for the African continent. McKinney has sat through many hearings, but she was particularly disturbed by this one. "I was shocked and appalled at the testimony received because it directly implicated the United States in turning away from assisting

people when it knew that they were being targeted because of their ethnicity. It is clear that the United States government knew full well that a genocide was going to take place months in advance of when it occurred. There was time and opportunity to stop the killing from occurring. Unfortunately, the United States along with France and Belgium decided not to act," McKinney declared.

The French and Belgian's behavior shouldn't be too shocking. After all, when these two nations were controlling certain segments of Africa, human rights were not very high on their agenda. In spite of their spotty records on the African continent, both nations are conducting investigations into why they didn't act. The United States hasn't launched an investigation to date.

When asked about the possible inaction of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, McKinney said the Secretary General didn't stand alone. "I don't think that it stops at Kofi Annan. While we do want to know what he knows and when

did he know it, that is not nearly enough for us. We believe that the highest levels of the United Nations and the Security Council also need to have this question posed to them. At the time, the Secretary General of the United Nations was Bhutros Bhutros Gali. What did Bhutros Gali know and what did he do when he found out that a genocide was being planned? We now know what the Belgians knew. We know what they did. We are learning what the French did. Because

the United States hasn't conducted its investigation, we don't know what the United States knew and when it knew it. Those people who represented the highest level of US foreign policy decision making need to respond to this question. Our representative at the United Nations then is now our Secretary of State, Madeline Albright. She is a key in answering this question," McKinney noted.

The thought of nearly a million people being murdered

is quite chilling. The thought that bigger and stronger nations watched it occur is unconscionable at best. If 1,000,000 deaths don't prompt concerned citizens to get answers, such genocide could occur again and maybe on a broader scale. Remember the words of a Nigerian proverb: "Not to know is bad; not to wish to know is worse."

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

DOWN TO BUSINESS

Education reform for \$20 per student

By John William Templeton
Special to Sentinel-Voice

In the musical "Purlie Victorious," the minister proclaims, "De lawd lives up in heaven, de devil lives in hell; me and you, we do the best we can..."

The point is that sometimes the most "high-falutin'" solutions don't get the job done. It is an important point when every major politician is focused on education reform. Mantra words include charter schools, competency testing, vouchers, basic skills, privatization and ending bilingual education.

Most are distinguished by the inability to affect more than a minute percentage of the students involved, while spending enormous sums of money, often now with for-profit entities. If I were the suspicious sort, it would almost seem that public schools are being intentionally run into the ground to create a market for private entities.

Recent reports in The Richmond Times Dispatch analyzed the area's public schools. One article talked about suburban Henrico County's \$30 million commitment to put five computers in each classroom in the school district.

Now, the U.S. Department of Education has declared that five students per instructional computer should be the national standard. Henrico took that seriously. Most school districts haven't. The majority of American schools failed to even take advantage of the e-rate savings on telecommunications provided by the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Technology is merely a tool, but if used correctly, can overcome the major hurdles which seem to be especially concentrated in mostly Black schools, including lack of access to literature, references and an up-to-date curriculum. In our book "The African-American Student's Guide to the Internet and World-Wide Web," we pinpoint hundreds of web sites with the kind of information that gets kids excited.

A subtle message is also sent by the state of school facilities, a point which Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun was attempting to make in her school construction finance bill, recently rejected by the U.S. Senate. Doesn't it make sense that if you build new jails and keep old schools, young people will want to go to jail — even write songs about it? When was the last time you heard a rap song about going to school?

There is no quicker way to spruce up a classroom than equipping it for the information age with brand new computers, not someone's throwaways. The students

will no longer notice the crumbling walls around them and they may even become inspired to paint them themselves.

So what would it take to bring five brand new computers to each of the 90,000 classrooms in the 4,200 schools with 75 percent or more African-American student bodies? A whopping \$552 million. However, those same schools receive \$22 billion for the instruction of the children. This is a 2.5 percent solution, about \$6,100 per classroom or \$20 per student.

In honor of former Congressman Augustus Hawkins, the former Education Committee chair who was an architect of Title I programs along with the late Adam Clayton Powell, we should see to it that the federal education budget provides the entire sum needed to give Black students equal access to the information age. This is particularly important since high tech companies are proposing to import a quarter-million foreign workers yearly to take jobs paying more than \$60,000 per year.

And given the long odds of help from the current Congress, we should not wait for that heavenly result. Exciting developments are happening among Black entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley to dramatically reduce the cost of computing and software delivery, so parents, churches, volunteers and even students who make the commitment to change their own technology futures can make their money go even further.

The second "Save Our Students Saturdays" will be held Sept. 19, 26 and Oct. 3, 1998 to encourage parents, churches, mentors, businesses to go into majority Black schools to inspect, fix, improve and make a commitment to stay engaged all year. As part of that effort, we hope you will encourage your school board to make a commitment like Henrico County for five computers per classroom. If not, you'll have time to register to vote and put its members out of office. Starting now, there's time to organize parent clubs to raise funds for technology in classrooms, solicit donations from businesses and recruit professionals who can become on-line role models. Other ideas include a book drive to collect titles for school libraries.

Whatever your interest, do something. Once we get it rolling, the politicians will wait in line to embrace the Hawkins Educational Technology plan. His name is already associated with many legislative milestones. Nothing would please him more than to attach it to a real change in the outcomes of the children to whom he has devoted his life.

John William Templeton is executive editor of "Griot."

Carl Rowan's Commentary

Blacks need not sell out rights and dreams to be Republican

Special to Sentinel-Voice

I've been saying for a generation that one black person need not sell out the rights and dreams of all blacks or minorities in order to be a Republican, or even a conservative Republican.

Rep. J.C. Watts, former Oklahoma football hero who is



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lead in voting against Riggs' amendment, and it was defeated resoundingly, 249-171.

Watts surely knows that the Republican Party needs him infinitely more than he needs the GOP. But he also seems to realize the damage that Prop. 209 has done in California, and that most of the people who

the lone black Republican in the House of Representatives, is proving that. Watts has just played a major role in getting the House to vote down a measure that would have banned affirmative action programs at most colleges.

Rep. Frank Riggs, R-Calif., was trying to attach to a \$101 billion bill covering federal aid to college students an amendment that would have banned affirmative action to help blacks, other minorities and women at any public college or university that accepted federal funds. This would have been a national version of California's Proposition 209, which has led to a calamitous drop in the number of blacks and Hispanics accepted in the University of California system. And it would have slammed the door to equal educational opportunity in the faces of millions of youngsters of color.

Watts dared to join with Democratic Rep. John Lewis of Georgia in sending their House colleagues a letter saying, "This is not the time to eliminate the one tool we have — imperfect though it may be — to help level the playing field for many minority youth."

Fifty-four Republicans followed Watts'

oppose affirmative action on grounds that they are opposing racism are in fact trying to retain preferences for those who have profited from racism from this country's beginning.

So Watts has taken a stance that millions of Americans wish that black conservatives such as Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and California university regent Ward Connerly would take. The point is that if Watts had voted for the ban on affirmative action, he would have given protection from criticism to enough whites in Congress to allow them to pass the unwise amendment. The parallel is that the Supreme Court would be a lot less hostile to minorities if Thomas did not give "cover" to the most backward elements, and that the California regents would never have dared base admissions on something as flimsy as SAT scores if Connerly had not been so arrogantly aggressive in opposing affirmative action.

By refusing to be blinded or racially corrupted by partisan politics, Watts has scored his most impressive touchdown, and in the process has given a better name to those black Americans who choose to be Republican.