

COMMENTARY

Legendary films shows what's right, wrong about Hollywood

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

I was surprised that "Citizen Kane," "The Godfather," and "Casablanca" placed higher than "Gone with the Wind" (GWTW) on the American Film Institute's recent list of the 100 greatest American movies of all time. I say surprised because from the moment I started going to the movies I have heard film buffs and critics fawn over GWTW as the all-time American film masterpiece. It certainly has everything filmgoers could want: heroism, villainy, romance, tragedy, and action, all set against the backdrop of an event that is generally regarded as the defining moment in American history: the Civil War and its immediate aftermath.

It has been accepted for nearly 60 years that GWTW pretty much got the story right about the South, slavery, and the Civil War. And now, this generation of filmgoers again can revel in the South's heartbreaks and triumphs with the film's re-release by New Line Cinema late last month. And that's the problem.

GWTW is still steeped in myths that film critics and audiences have ignored or glossed over in the past. They include that: African-Americans were for the most part servile, loyal, and contented as slaves; slavery was a relatively benevolent brand of servitude; and the South was the victim of the Civil War. Author Margaret Mitchell set the tone for this historical whitewash in her novel which, sans the romance, was essentially an impassioned homage to the glories of the Old South, desecrated in her view by brutal Yankees, predatory northern carpetbaggers, corrupt southern scalawags, and misguided northern do-gooders.

"Gone with the Wind" is still steeped in myths that film critics and audiences have ignored or glossed over in the past. They include that: African-Americans were for the most part servile, loyal, and contented as slaves; slavery was a relatively benevolent brand of servitude; and the South was the victim of the Civil War.

The film's producer, David O. Selznick, mindful that the film would be criticized by the Black press and Black leaders, smoothed over the book's hard political edges. GWTW avoided the "N word," sanitized the more vicious stereotypes of Blacks, and allowed actress Hattie McDaniel to portray the leading Black character, the maid "Mammy," with some measure of sass and dignity.

McDaniel was rewarded with an Oscar for best supporting actress in 1939, thus becoming the first African-American to win an academy award. But her towering performance didn't rescue the other Blacks in the film from negative stereotypes. They are depicted as clownish, docile, and ever-faithful slaves — roles that were deeply enshrined in Hollywood screen lore by the 1930s.

McDaniel's on-screen triumph also didn't translate into any major changes in Hollywood's image of African-

Americans. In fact, the actress wasn't even invited to the film's premiere at a racially segregated theater in Atlanta. During the next decade she appeared in more than 20 films, but still in the role of cook, housekeeper or maid.

In GWTW, there are no cruel masters, beatings, gun toting slave patrollers, runaway slaves, or abolitionists. Slavery is presented as no more harmful than the class-rigid paternalism of the English aristocracy. As for Reconstruction, there are no nightriding Klansmen, whips, or burning crosses, and little hint of the struggle of Blacks for political rights during that era.

GWTW spun history especially hard on its head in portraying the South as the wartime victim of Northern aggression that valiantly fought to preserve its noble and idyllic way of life. The film faithfully followed in the tradition of movies from filmmaker D.W. Griffith's viciously racist "Birth of a Nation" to the cheerful racial paternalism of Walt Disney's "Song of the South."

To this day the critics who continue to heap praise on GWTW give the false impression that African-Americans did not protest the film's distortions. Many did. There were picket lines at some of the theaters where the film was shown, some Black newspapers attacked the film's racist stereotypes, and while the NAACP praised Selznick for "erasing" the racial epithets, it declined to endorse the film. GWTW will always be remembered as a film that reflects Hollywood filmmaking at its best. But it should also be remembered as a film that reflects Hollywood myth making at its worst.

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President's race initiative started hot, ended as sham

By Lee Hubbard
Special to Sentinel-Voice

President William Jefferson Clinton's panel on race held its final meeting recently very quietly. This ending was a far cry from the much-talked about opening, when the panel was assembled in Washington last year. Led by historian Dr. John Hope Franklin, the panel went around the country holding feel good town hall meetings that basically amounted to a bunch of hot air. In fact, the "conversation on race" was a sham from the beginning.

One of the glaring weaknesses was that everyone basically had the same ideological bent. Although there were a few Republicans and a majority of Democrats on the panel, each member was basically a liberal. Now I ask, how can you have a conversation on such a serious topic when everyone is cut from the same cloth? That isn't a conversation, it is a monologue. A real conversation would have taken place with people from different ideological views including Black nationalists and White conservatives. That is a way to have a conversation. It makes no sense to talk to someone who agrees with you.

Secondly, racism in the United States is a social pathology that has primarily been a White problem. Personally, I would've had the panel deal primarily with this pathology. I would have had it question White politicians, intellectuals, and business and religious leaders.

As for the president's role, Clinton's race commission symbolizes his policies on race. All we need to do is study his actions regarding race during his presidency. First and foremost, when Clinton ran for president he went to a Jesse Jackson banquet and publicly humiliated Sister Souljah and Jackson.

He did this to show White voters that he could put Black folks in their place. And while on the campaign trail he flew back to Arkansas to witness the execution of a brain-damaged Black man. This was his Nixon-like tough on

crime spill. Just a few months ago, he went to Rwanda and apologized for the genocide that took place there, saying he wished the U.S. would have acted sooner. But yet when the genocide was taking place, he didn't even acknowledge it was happening.

We all know that if George Bush or any other Republican president had done some of the same things that Clinton has done, Jesse, the NAACP and every other imaginable civil rights group would have been all over them. But no. As long as Clinton says he will protect affirmative action with his "mend it don't end it" policy, the civil righters will give him a pass.

Meanwhile, I am still grappling with what "mend it don't end it" actually means. I used to see government-sponsored affirmative action as a kind of reparation package for slavery, and the terrors that took place in the segregation era. That was until I found out that almost 80 percent of the beneficiaries of affirmative action are White women. Now, I have never read of White women getting lynched, or hosed down because of their race! Maybe Ward Connerly was right in his twisted logic.

And speaking of Connerly, he has taken his minstrel show on the road. As a regent in the University of California system, he is ordering a review of all Black and Ethnic studies classes. He said he wants to review them to see if they have any academic merit. I don't have a problem with him doing this, as long as he doesn't discriminate and orders a review of a whole series of departments. He should look at Women's Studies, Queer Theory, Western Civilization and U.S. History, just to name a few.

I hope while Connerly performs this review, he can sit in on one of these classes. If he does, I know he will probably learn something, and I hope he can bring Clinton with him, so the president can learn a little about race too.

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Define black political agenda by needs, not party affiliation

By Dr. Conrad W. Worrill
Special to Sentinel-Voice

One of the major questions facing the African Community in America is how to achieve Black Political Power.

Since 1966, when Kwame Ture — formerly known as Stokely Carmichael — called for "Black Power," the dynamics of Black politics in America have shifted drastically.

It has been more than 31 years since Kwame made this call for Black Power. Today there are more than 8,000 Black elected officials in the United States, including more than 40 congressional representatives, a U.S. Senator, more than 400 Black mayors and a host of state senators and state representatives and numerous local elected and appointed officials. Most of the elected and appointed officials are Democrats.

But all the representation hasn't transformed into true political clout.

Ture's call for Black Power led to the organizing of the first Black Power Conference, convened on Saturday, Sept. 3, 1966 at the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington, D.C. The session was called by the late Congressman Adam Clayton.

As a result of the conference, Black Power conferences were held in Newark, N.J., in Philadelphia in 1968 and in Bermuda in 1969.

The Congress of African People conference was called in the summer of 1970 in Atlanta. More than 3,000 people of African

ancestry attended the meeting where a resolution was adopted to create a National Black Political Convention.

More than 8,000 Black people from every state participated in the convention in Gary, Ind. in March of 1972. It created a structure called the National Black Political Assembly, whose aim was "to develop a new black politics and organize the National Black Political Agenda."

We must be reminded that in the mission statement of the Million Man March, we committed ourselves to "the follow-up development of an expanded black political agenda and the holding of a Black Political Convention to forge this agenda for progressive political change."

In that statement we also called for "a massive and ongoing voter registration of Black people as independents; using our vote to insist and insure that candidates address the Black agenda; and creating and sustaining a progressive independent political movement."

Finally, we must stop selling the Black vote to White political interests that don't benefit the masses of our people. If African people in America are to truly acquire political power, we must develop true independent strategies apart from the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, or any other White-dominated political party. This should be clear to all by now.

Dr. Worrill is the National Chairman of the National Black United Front.

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