

COMMENTARY

Bulworth embodies traits of a typical politician

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Jay Bulworth, the character portrayed by Warren Beatty in his recent movie *Bulworth*, is the prototypical U.S. politician so viscerally distrusted by American voters (76% now think government is run by powerful interests working for themselves, not the people). A Kennedy liberal turned pawn of California's voracious corporate interests, Senator Bulworth has come face to face with his own moral corruption. He pledges to stop an anti-insurance company bill in exchange for a \$10 million life insurance policy — a gift from an industry lobbyist. Then he contracts a hit on himself.

In this brilliantly designed set up, the first five minutes of the movie shows us not simply a political system gone mad with corruption, but a politician gone mad as well. Shortly after he seals his "suicide" deal and hits the campaign trail for the final days of his reelection bid Senator Bulworth, freed of the anguish of his moral and political collapse, begins to utter the awful truth in a series of public appearances that shatter the basic canons of liberal political correctness. This includes the hallowed ground of how Black people are supposed to be depicted in film.

Suffice it to say that as an African-American independent who has spent the better part of the last 15 years communicating to Black voters the extent to which the Democratic Party takes us for granted (and trying to create an alternative place for us to go) it was downright exhilarating to see the scene where a Black church member in South Central Los Angeles accuses Bulworth of saying that the Democratic Party doesn't care about Blacks. Bulworth confirms her charge.

I've spent over a decade trying to persuade such Black militants as Minister Louis Farrakhan, Rev. Jesse Jackson (who reportedly disliked the film) and Rev. Al Sharpton to be that honest. However, it was *Bulworth*, created by Warren Beatty



along with his talented and insightful co-screenwriter Jeremy Pikser who finally reached a mass American audience with that message. Beatty, Pikser and Bulworth turn out to have more guts than America's best-known Black leaders do. Having also been critical of the extent to which the Jewish establishment has opportunistically played the "Farrakhan card" to incite and raise money from Jews, I couldn't help but enjoy Bulworth's bumbling search for the pro-forma anti-Farrakhan remark in his speech to, what the movie termed, "Hollywood's Big Jews."

Mr. Pikser was the guest on my weekly television show and, together with my co-host Fred Newman, we had the opportunity to discuss the film's impact on the movie-going public, on progressive culture, and the statement the film was looking to make about Black/white relations, a source of some controversy in Black circles. On the show, Pikser said the film was not attempting to make a statement about race relations, but about Bulworth's experience in coming into contact with a constituency he is supposed to serve, but is thoroughly alienated from. Still, because Bulworth falls in love with Nina, a young Black woman (Halle Berry) from the heart of South Central's drug and crime

ridden ghetto and begins to rhyme (as in rap) rather than speak, some Black critics felt that the film and Beatty overstepped the bounds of political correctness. They're right. And therein lies the genius of the film.

Beatty as Bulworth (and no doubt Beatty as Beatty) is the world's most god-awful rapper. Not being white myself, it's a bit hard to gauge how humiliating it must be for white audiences to watch. For our part, Blacks feel ridiculous when it's the psychotic white Bulworth who tells us the depths to which we have sunk in our slavish relationship to the Democratic Party and our ruthless brutalization of one another in drug and gang life, economic imperatives notwithstanding. We'd rather hear it from Jesse Jackson. Unfortunately, Jesse won't say it. But *Bulworth* does, in no small part because the film takes seriously the notion that racism is a white problem, for which whites must take responsibility and action. Jesse wouldn't say that either, because if he did, he and other Black arbiters of race relations in America would be out of a job.

For me, *Bulworth* was mainly about giving up the conservative and deadening politics of political correctness (yes, militant and moderate Black nationalism is as conservative as Newt Gingrich's family values), and being willing to look ridiculous. If Black and white America could ever get to the point of being willing to be ridiculous together, we'd probably rid the country of racism in the process. Congratulations, Jeremy, Warren and Halle! Go see the movie!

Lenora B. Fulani twice ran for President of the U.S. as an Independent, making history in 1988 when she became the first woman and African-American to get on the ballot in all fifty states. Dr. Fulani is currently a leading activist in the Reform Party and chairs the Committee for a Unified Independent Party. She can be reached at 800-288-3201 or at <http://www.Fulani.org>.

Carl Rowan's Commentary

Talk of race once proved substantive, not any more

Special to Sentinel-Voice

When President Clinton announced his "initiative on race" a year ago, I cheered because I thought he had named a panel of citizens who would hammer out a federal action program to combat America's greatest social problem.

But it turned out that the president, his political advisers and his panel were all gutless.

So they resorted to a handful of "town halls" and "dialogues," in which assorted people talked and talked, spewing forth mostly personal anecdotes and grievances about racism in America.

Race was also a hot topic during this nation's period of slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote a celebrated book about it. John Brown, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass and thousands more spoke and preached eloquently about it, but nothing much changed until after the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation or enactment of the 13th and 14th amendments.

From post-bellum America to nearly a century of de facto and de jure Jim Crow, race was Topic A in this country, especially in my native South. But the talk changed almost nothing.

The moral and military demands of World War II forced some progress.

President Truman's order desegregating the military set a moral standard for American civilian life.

One postwar federal program, the GI Bill of Rights, was a vehicle of remarkable change. The Federal Aid to Higher Education Act of



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1965 broadened the GI Bill's impact, further diluting the effect of race and class, and creating a broader middle class, including a black middle class.

During the 1960s Americans talked more about race, with the voices of John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey, George Wallace, Lyndon B. Johnson, Orval Faubus and Martin Luther King Jr. rolling across the

landscape. But we also did more about it.

Passage of the Public Accommodations Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, as well as the White House issuance of affirmative action decrees regarding federal hiring and spending, changed this nation profoundly.

Corporate America endorsed affirmative action as a sound business policy.

But none of that was enough to eradicate all racism in the basic institutions of America. Nor was it enough to wipe out historic American stereotypes about racial minorities, or the ideas of racial superiority and inferiority.

Thus these developments could not prevent a wretched backlash in which those who built a huge hole and put minorities in it are now saying.

"No, America can't give you a special boost to get you out of that hole, because such a boost would be racial favoritism."

The talk will go on about race, because the subject and its myriad ramifications and motivations are parts of our psyches and souls. But President Clinton and all of us will see that while the talk is not cheap, it alone isn't worth a damn.

Stun belts newest weapons of choice against poor, minorities

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

When defendant Ronnie Hawkins fell to the floor of a Los Angeles courtroom writhing in pain this month after a sheriff's deputy jolted him with 50,000 volts from the stun belt strapped around his waist, it brought back horrid memories of the cattle prods used to shock civil rights protesters in the South 30 years ago.

A coalition of black community leaders and organizations called the treatment of Hawkins, who is Black, "racist and barbaric." They are demanding a full investigation by the state's Commission on Judicial Performance of Judge Joan Comparet-Cassani who ordered the deputy to shock Hawkins. The judge's action at best was overkill, and at worse torture.

Hawkins, convicted in April of petty theft, was in court to determine if he would be sentenced under California's three strikes law.

Witnesses agree that he did not threaten the judge, disrupt the court, or try to escape, action supposedly giving authorities reason to zap a prisoner. His only offense was that he argued too loudly with the judge.

The judge could have used less drastic means to silence him: a warning, ordering him to be removed, having him confined to a holding area, or finding him in contempt. She chose to order the deputy to stun Hawkins.

No other defendant in a Los Angeles courtroom has received such extreme punishment for a relatively minor offense.

Hawkins' treatment opens up volatile issues like race, poverty, crime, and judicial abuse, but also underscores the growing use of stun belts by prison officials, judges and law enforcement agencies. Increasingly, they are becoming a

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new weapon of torture against the poor and minorities. The 27 prisoners or defendants who have been shocked with a stun belt have been either poor, black or Latino.

Sales of the stun belt, which releases an eight-second, 50,000-volt charge from a distance of up to 300 feet, have boomed since 1994.

The Bureau of Prisons uses the belt in medium and high security prisons. The U.S. Marshals service and more than 100 county agencies and 20 state correctional agencies use it with more law enforcement agencies likely to join the bandwagon.

Prison and court officials say the belt is a non-lethal method of controlling violent inmates and defendants, while minimizing physical harm to them and guards. This is questionable.

Amnesty International, which has fought to ban stun belts for the past two years, warns of its potential health risks to people with heart ailments, and the danger of using it for torture.

Unlike cuts, bruises from fists, or gunshot wounds, the electric shock leaves no physical marks, making it nearly impossible for a victim to prove brutality.

A compelling case can also be made that the use of stun belts by penal, and judicial authorities in the United States violates the U.N. Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners prohibiting the use of restraints that could be used for torture.

The agonized contortions on Hawkins' face and the violent shaking of his limbs as he lay on the courtroom floor certainly testify that the stun belt can be an instrument of torture.

Dr. Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the author of "The Crisis in Black and Black."