

Thomas addresses critics at black lawyers' conference

Special to Sentinel-Voice
MEMPHIS, Tenn. — Declaring his independence from other prominent blacks, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas told critics last week he intends to continue opposing affirmative action and hold fast to other conservative views.

"I make no apologies ... nor do I intend to do so in the future," Thomas told nearly 1,000 black lawyers and judges at the National Bar Association's convention.

For years denounced by minority-rights groups, Thomas had decided to attend the convention even after some members sought to rescind his invitation and keep him away.

"I come here today not in anger or to anger ... not to defend my views but to assert my right to think for myself," Thomas said. He told his critics to stop telling him "I have no right to think the way I do because I'm black."

About affirmative action, he said, "Any effort, policy or program that (in some way accepts the notion) that blacks are inferior is a non-starter with me."

The only black on the nation's highest court, Thomas complained about being "singled out for particularly

bilious and venomous assaults" by fellow blacks.

Although he often speaks on college campuses and elsewhere outside Washington, Thomas most often confines his comments to inspirational, up-from-the-bootstraps messages. Never before had he tried to take on his critics so fully.

He said he is deeply hurt when portrayed as an enemy of his race. "Isn't it time to move on ... to realize that being angry with me is no solution? Isn't it time that we respect ourselves and each other as we have demanded respect from others?" the justice asked.

His comments drew little applause and some scattered boos. A threatened walkout did not materialize, however. Speaking ahead of Thomas, Illinois trial judge Shelvin Hall of Chicago was given a standing ovation when she attacked "those who will denigrate the gains of the civil rights movement."

Without mentioning Thomas' name, Hall said, "We do not applaud - and yes, we are offended by - those who would willfully destroy the sacrifices" of such black heroes as Martin Luther King and Thurgood Marshall, the justice Thomas replaced in 1991.

But National Bar Association President Randy Jones, a federal prosecutor in San Diego, said afterwards of Thomas, "He spoke from the heart. He's a man who's not afraid to come into the lion's den and face his detractors and critics. I think we all have to respect him for that."

Much of Thomas' 35-minute speech touched on such frequently visited themes as his grandfather's wisdom, the racism he experienced as a seminary student and his fling as a black revolutionary in the late 1960s. He took no questions.

While never raising his voice, Thomas ridiculed as "psycho-silliness" criticism that his conservative views spring from racial self-hatred or a denunciation of his roots.

"I have few racial identification problems," he said. "Nor do I need anyone telling me who I am ... I am a man. A black man. An American."

He urged his audience against falling prey to some "monolithic view of blacks," of accepting opinions "assigned to blacks."

Thomas contended that some of his most controversial opinions have been mischaracterized.

"I can't help but wonder if some of my critics can read," he said in referring to a dissenting opinion in which he said the Constitution's ban against cruel and unusual punishment is not violated when prison guards beat an inmate but inflict no lasting injuries.

Reading from his opinion, Thomas noted that he had called such conduct possibly immoral and illegal, and

perhaps even remediable under some other constitutional provision.

To characterize his vote as one condoning such conduct, he said, would take a critic who is "either illiterate or fraught with malice."

Many of Thomas' comments appeared aimed at his most prominent critic, retired federal judge A. Leon Higginbotham, who was instrumental in the move to

keep Thomas from appearing. After Thomas was invited by Louisiana Supreme Court Judge Bernette Johnson to speak, Higginbotham criticized her for having given the justice "an imprimatur that he has never had from any responsible organization within the African-American community or any non-conservative groups of whites."

(See Thomas, Page 3)

King's youngest son wants FBI to apologize

Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON — The son of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. said recently that he hopes the FBI eventually will apologize to his family for harassing and spying on his father during the 1960s.

"The healing process can never begin until we say publicly that maybe we made some mistakes," said Martin Luther King III, who two weeks ago assumed the presidency of the organization his father founded, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

The King family has been lobbying the Clinton administration to create a national commission to open a new investigation into the assassination of King, who was gunned down on a motel balcony in Memphis, Tenn., on April 4, 1968. Attorney General Janet Reno is reviewing the family's request.

FBI spokesman Frank Scafidi said it would be inappropriate for the agency to comment on King's request for an apology while Reno is considering whether to reopen the assassination investigation.

James Earl Ray, who was imprisoned for the murder until his death of liver disease this year, disavowed his initial confession and spent years futilely seeking a new trial. The King family joined the effort in recent years, arguing that Ray was innocent.

King, speaking to reporters after the conclusion of the SCLC's annual conference, said a new trial "would have raised a lot of issues that needed to be raised" concerning the involvement of the FBI and other government agencies in the harassment of his father.

Those same issues, he said, can be aired if Reno decides to reopen the investigation into King's assassination, focusing on new evidence that has surfaced over the years.

In March, for example, former FBI agent Donald Wilson broke 30 years of silence and said that papers he took from Ray's car after the assassination support claims of a conspiracy.

Wilson, who worked in the FBI's Atlanta office in 1968, claimed to have found an envelope in Ray's car containing two pieces of paper with the name "Raul" written on them. Ray contended he was set up by a shadowy gun runner named Raoul, a man whose existence has never been verified.

The FBI discounted Wilson's story.

King said an FBI apology would be appropriate because the agency, under former director J. Edgar Hoover, "spent years and years trying to discredit my father and my family and spent millions of dollars of taxpayers' money."

Survey

(Continued from Page 1)

Black and white parents alike gave top priority to having schools free of weapons, drugs and gangs.

Ninety-three percent of black parents and 97 percent of white parents considered those safety issues to be "absolutely essential."

Reading, writing and arithmetic ranked second, with 91 percent of blacks and 95 percent of whites considering mastery of those basics to be absolutely essential.

Although a debate over teaching students in ebonics, or black English, drew national attention recently, 86 percent of black parents considered it absolutely essential that all children speak and write standard English, with proper pronunciation and grammar. Also, only 28 percent considered standard tests to be culturally biased against blacks. Nearly eight black parents in 10 wanted results of such tests made public as a way to spur school reforms.

Black parents felt that schools needed to do a better job teaching the contributions of blacks and other minorities to American history: Nearly seven in 10 believed racial stereotypes caused teachers and principals to expect less of black students.

Adding more data to the

argument over vouchers, the survey found that 27 percent of black parents thought it an "excellent" idea for families to get financial aid so they can take their children out of failing public schools and send them to private schools, compared with 15 percent of white parents.

When combined with those who thought it a "good" idea, the favorable response was 54 percent among blacks and 36 percent among whites.

The question did not specify whether the aid would come from the government or private sources. When considered as a solution to failing schools, the idea ranked in the bottom half of possibilities.

Sixty-one percent of white parents said an influx of a large number of black students would probably cause more social problems, cause more discipline or safety problems or cause test scores and reading levels to drop.

But they saw the issue in terms of class. "Most say it is not the students' race but the socioeconomic status of their families that concerns them," the researchers found.

The report noted that in the focus group discussions that followed the telephone surveys, "white parents are very reluctant to talk about education in racial terms, even

in groups with no African-Americans present."

The survey of 800 blacks and 800 whites, picked randomly, was done from late March to mid-April. The margin of error was plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Law Firm of Smith & Williams

ATTORNEY AT LAW



TIMOTHY C. WILLIAMS

Timothy Williams is a member of the Nevada & Illinois State Bar, practicing primarily in personal injury cases.

COMBINED 27 YEARS OF LEGAL EXPERIENCE

EMPHASIS ON PERSONAL INJURY CASES

- Automobile Accidents
- Motorcycle Accidents
- Slips & Falls
- Wrongful Death
- Dog Bites
- Pedestrian & Other Bodily Injuries
- Medical Malpractice

892-0000

1785 E. Sahara Ave. Ste. 337 Las Vegas, Nevada

Neither the State Bar of Nevada nor any agency of the State Bar has certified any lawyer identified here as a specialist or expert. Anyone considering a lawyer should independently investigate the lawyer's credentials and ability.