

COMMENTARY

# King's Legacy and the consequences of racism

*Special to Sentinel-Voice*

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s ended structural racism in America. That movement was an independent movement, a grassroots movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and enlivened by thousands of activists, attorneys, and students.

Dr. King was not a Democrat — with a capital “D” — and the civil rights movement was not a Democratic party movement, though the Democratic Party did succeed in co-opting it and taking credit for its achievements.

Throughout the struggles which led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 — propelled through Congress by Lyndon Baines Johnson — not by the liberal establishment — the Democratic Party was ambivalent.

The Democrats, after all,

had constructed an electoral coalition that relied heavily on Southern white voters. But once the civil rights movement galvanized the country, the Democratic Party figured out how to consolidate it and capitalize off of it.

The success of Dr. King and the civil rights movement meant that structural racism had been eliminated. Race discrimination was outlawed and participation in the political process was secured for Black America.

With racism ended, the issue for the country became what to do about the consequences of racism.

We had lived for 300 years with racism as an institutionalized element of everyday life. Slavery had been abolished only 100 years earlier. The social fabric of our society was deeply corroded by this social/political/cultural experience. America needed to go

*This Way For Black Empowerment*

*By Dr. Lenora Fulani*



through a healing process to deal with the residual anger and outrage of Black America and to create a unified country that could move forward in the national interest.

But the 30 years that followed the elimination of structural racism were years not of healing, but of wheeling and dealing.

The Democratic Party was eager to translate all of the social movements of the 1960s into its political subsidiaries. Thus, it nurtured identity politics — the elevation of and competition among fractured segments of

oppressed groups, the Republicans organized the backlash against it, playing on the incomplete social/cultural process left in the wake of the structural elimination of racism and elevating their own identity groupings, e.g., Christian fundamentalists, veterans, pro-lifers, etc.

The country needed to spend the last 30 years creating a new post-racist political culture that could bring the country together. Instead, the two parties spent the last 30 years tearing the country apart, while taking extreme measures to preserve and institutionalize their own political power and that of the corporate and special interests which run America.

This 30 year bipartisan

gambit, however, is losing its grip on the American public. There is still much unresolved outrage on the part of Black America which, though still loyal to the Democratic Party, is showing signs of breaking out of its monolithic allegiance.

There is also a new generation of young Black adults without the civil rights era experience to tie them to the Democratic Party.

Black America is communicating a new message, a question that has remained unanswered for 30 years. What do we do now? Where do we go next?

*Lenora B. Fulani is currently a leading activist in the Reform Party and chairs the Committee for a Unified Independent Party.*

## Carl Rowan's Commentary

### Government demands culpability, but it should not go overboard

*Special to Sentinel-Voice*

Mike Espy clearly was wrong when, as secretary of agriculture, he accepted \$34,000 worth of sports tickets, luggage, air travel and other gifts from people representing companies that he regulated. Espy himself says that he had “lapses of judgment” in taking gratuities



CARL ROWAN

that have brought convictions and/or huge fines for the gift-givers and some of his associates.

Well, why did a jury here find Espy not guilty on all 30 corruption charges brought against him by independent counsel Donald C. Smaltz?

The simplistic answer is that the jury was dominated by black people who believe that black officials in positions of real power are always targeted by those who resent blacks in power. But those who followed this case closely say the so-called “race card” had nothing to do with the verdict.

Some say that the jury was simply reflecting the nationwide revulsion to the Independent Counsel Act, a post-Watergate assault on official corruption that has produced some frighteningly arrogant, overreaching prosecutors, most notably Smaltz and Kenneth W. Starr, the latter of Whitewater and Monica Lewinsky notoriety. Smaltz was slapped down by the courts at least twice for going beyond his mandate, and, like Starr, was severely criticized for appearing to be power-hungry,

out of control and vesting his entire ego and reputation on bringing down a top federal official.

The “unlawful gratuity” statute under which Smaltz sought to jail Espy makes it a crime to give, offer or promise “anything of value” to a public official “because of any official act performed or to be performed.” Smaltz so clearly failed to meet that requirement of the law that Espy’s lawyers simply let him put on 70 witnesses, then rested their case without calling a single defense witness.

The Espy case has reinforced the lesson Starr has taught us so painfully — that in the Independent Counsel Act we created a monster that is more dangerous than the government officials we wanted to be sure were punished for serious wrongdoing.

Congress will have a chance next year to ensure that we never again have prosecutors who lack oversight and are without limits on the amount of time, money and bad judgment they can bring to a case.

But beyond that, we need to revisit the idea that we must ask those we ask to do the public’s business to make their private lives naked to the world, and must deny them such simple freedoms as enjoying a good meal, the theater or other pleasures of life with friends and associates.

Good government requires ethical leaders, yes, but also policies that are reasonable enough to make government service palatable to high achievers.

## Who really speaks for blacks? Question exposes dilemmas

*By Earl Ofari Hutchinson  
Special to Sentinel-Voice*

Nearly a half century ago White Southern-born writer Robert Penn Warren asked, “Who Speaks for the Negro?”

The question was, and will always be, silly and presumptuous. No one asks who speaks for Whites, Latinos or Asians? No one individual or organization can speak for an entire group.

The notion of a common leadership for Blacks feeds more than an ageless myth. It exposes major dilemmas confronting Black leaders.

This presents the first major dilemma for Black leaders: Class division.

The latent class divisions have burst into gaping fissures between two Black Americas. One is poor, desperate and angry, while the other is prosperous, comfortable and complacent. Facing this crisis, many mainstream Black leaders have backpedaled. The NAACP, Urban League and SCLC have replaced the nickels and dimes it received in support from Blacks for decades with corporate and foundation dollars. And, they have tailored their programs to accelerate opportunities for businesspersons and upwardly mobile professionals.

The chase continues for SBA loans, scholarships and grants to pricey universities, corporate managerial positions and suburban homes. Unfortunately, the Black poor are nowhere to be found in that chase.

This presents the second major dilemma for Black leaders: How to win political concessions from the Democratic party (or if possible the Republican party) and for what, and for whom, should they win them?

The sad truth is that Blacks have narrowed their political options down to essentially one: the Democratic party. The result is many Black leaders have cradled even more cozily into the Democratic party and pared their demands down to more party appointments and political offices.

Some have become even more mainstream and less responsive to the neediest and most dispossessed in Black communities. These individuals get less rather than more political representation.

This leads to the third major dilemma for many Black leaders: The challenge from Black conservatives. About one-third of Blacks publicly call themselves conservative and many more privately agree with some, most, or all of what conservatives have to say.

They also know that the old line civil rights leadership has been relentlessly battered and bruised during the 80’s and 90’s by conservative politicians and for failing to mobilize the Black poor around the crisis problems of quality education, healthcare, declining public services, police abuse, crime and drug destruction.

These leaders have felt the criticism and wrath of many Blacks who are mortally disillusioned with two-party politics and convinced that they have not and cannot deliver the goods.

This presents the fourth major dilemma for Black leaders: The anointing of the chosen leader.

Many leaders have knowingly played along, for personal ego strokes and material gain, with the media game of perpetuating the fraud of the “monolithic Black community.”

The media shoves a “chosen Black spokesperson” into the spotlight and pretends that issues not sanctioned by the “chosen one” are not issues. It is then free to ignore any and all local leaders, actions, agendas and causes it does not like. When Blacks reduce leadership to star and celebrity gazing, they pay a dear price.

Now, the fifth major dilemma for Black leaders: Young Blacks.

Many young Blacks are contemptuous of the hypocrisy and corruption of many Black politicians and organizations. They see some of them wrapped in scandals, and

*(See Dilemmas, Page 16)*