

COMMENTARY

Clinton should ask where Feds are on police violence

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

In his radio address two weeks ago President Clinton said that he was "deeply disturbed" about police violence.

But, he should be more disturbed about those who do almost nothing to punish it.

For a culprit, Clinton need look no further than his own Justice department, which has done almost nothing to nail rogue cops who have beaten and killed mostly young African-Americans and Latinos.

According to a recent report on police misconduct by Human Rights Watch, an international public watchdog group, in 1998 federal prosecutors brought excessive force charges against police officers in less than one percent of the cases investigated by the FBI involving allegations of abuse.

The group also found that there was almost no difference in the skimpy number of police misconduct cases prosecuted by the Justice department under moderate Democrat Clinton than there were under conservative Republican President George Bush.

The virtual "see no evil" policy of the Feds toward police violence comes at a time when the number of police abuse complaints has

soared nationally.

The nearly 12,000 complaints in 1996 almost matched the total number for the entire period from 1984 and 1990.

To better aid law enforcement agencies and federal prosecutors to track patterns of abuse, the Violent Crime and Control Act of 1994 authorized the Justice Department to collect data on the frequency and types of police abuse complaints. At the end of 1998, it still had not issued any report on the level of police misconduct in America.

Worse, the Justice department has long had on the books a strong arsenal of civil rights statutes to prosecute abusive police officers. Yet, more often than not, it has taken press attention, large scale protests and even a major riot, such as the L.A. riots in 1992 following the Rodney King verdict, before it used its legal weapons.

Clinton only spoke out after intense media focus, mass demonstrations surrounding police killings of young blacks in Riverside, New York and Pittsburgh and the threat that civil rights leaders would lead a major protest against police violence in Washington D.C.

Meanwhile, federal prosecutors say they can't nail more rogue cops because they are

hamstrung by a lack of funds and staff, criminals who are perceived as victims and an insufficiency of credible witnesses. They also claim they are pinned in by the almost impossible requirement that they prove an officer had the specific intent to kill or injure a victim in order to get a conviction. These are tough obstacles to overcome.

And since the Justice Department is in the business of winning cases, many prosecutors are more than happy to take a hands-off attitude toward police misconduct cases.

Still, this is no excuse for federal prosecutors not to at least make the effort to prosecute more officers when there is substantial evidence that they used excessive force. This is the legally and morally right thing to do and it sends a powerful message to law enforcement agencies that the federal government will go after lawbreakers, no matter whether they wear a mask, or a badge.

Former Attorney General Ramsey Clark

understood the importance of prosecuting abusive officers even when there is virtually no chance of getting a conviction against them.

He felt this acted as a "stabilizing force" to spur police and city officials to take stronger action to halt the use of excessive force in their departments, Clark is right.

Yet in his radio address Clinton said nothing about the need for more aggressive federal prosecutions to crack down on violence by rogue cops.

This glaring omission by Clinton almost certainly will continue the dangerous cycle of more shootings and more racial turmoil and deepen the distrust and cynicism of minorities toward the criminal justice system.

This is a steep price to pay to get simple justice. And this is what Clinton should be most deeply disturbed about.

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

Feeling dissed by the Oscars?

By John W. Templeton
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Watching the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (Oscar) award ceremony is annually one of the most infuriating times of the year for African-Americans.

An industry that still considers "Birth of a Nation" (originally titled the "Klansman") as one of its finest achievements while discounting the technical innovations of Oscar Micheaux and Noble Johnson picks this season each year to let Blacks know how little it appreciates the 25 percent of movie grosses we earn for them.

It was a watershed year for filmmakers like Spike Lee, whose "He Got Game" is right in tune with the headlines about NCAA eligibility and became his first No.1 box office hit; Oprah Winfrey, who successfully converted Toni Morrison's prize winning "Beloved" to the screen and Maya Angelou, whose directorial debut infused her poetic magic into the filmmaking process. But they were completely ignored by the Academy.

All those films had the common thread of interpreting the question of self-identity for a people who were forcibly disconnected from their roots: Denzel Washington's Jake Shuttleworth was an imprisoned father; Winfrey's character chose to kill her children rather than return them to slavery and Alfre Woodard was rescued from addiction through rediscovery of her family's roots.

Additionally, all three were produced by African-Americans. So their exclusion from award consideration is really a message from the Academy for Black dramatists to stay in their place. We will not recognize you for telling your own story the way you see fit, it says.

The industry still wants to use movies to

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anecdotes isn't a trend; it's an illusion."

That's the kind of comment many Southern law officials made in the 1960s when civil rights demonstrations started up in their communities — to their later regret.

The stories of abusive encounters with police which have poured forth from ordinary citizens in recent weeks are not "illusions," as

spread ignorance, stereotypes and hopelessness. It still wants to glorify medieval England without mentioning the slave-trading that paid for the lavish estates and flowing costumes.

So it is up to us to recognize the upward development of such actors as Danny Glover who produced "Buffalo Soldiers" for cable and Morgan Freeman who has NBC's upcoming "Mutiny," which tells the long-lost story of the Port Chicago massacre.

We must reward the initiative of Wesley Snipes, whose Amen Ra Films helped produce "Down in the Delta" and a documentary on scholar John Hope Franklin, and Denzel Washington, who continues his magnificent collaboration with Spike Lee.

Due to the lack of consistent recognition, it is easy to forget the impressive body of work that Black actors, directors and producers have compiled since 1908.

More than 1,400 Blacks appeared in American films prior to 1970, the beginning of the "blaxploitation" era that financially rescued Hollywood.

Since then, we've evolved from mere entertainment to exploration of the issues that shape our reality. The web site <http://www.blackmoney.com> has a tribute to Black film that provides complete listings of all of the films of classic performers like Oscar Micheaux, Noble Johnson, Lena Horne, Dorothy Dandridge, directors like Julie Dash, Haile Gerima and Bill Duke; and actors and actresses such as Halle Berry, Angela Bassett and Sidney Poitier.

Ultimately, it really doesn't matter that Hollywood does not respect black movie fans. We just need to respect ourselves.

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many whites themselves are seeing and saying.

Richard Cohen, a *Washington Post* columnist, wrote recently that "When blacks or Hispanics are disproportionately stopped, it defies logic to claim that it's for any reason other than race or ethnicity. Cops who deny it are profiling in more ways than one. They think we're all dumb."

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Carl Rowan's Commentary

America's prison building binge costing taxpayers

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Every now and then the best societies go a little crazy and embrace monstrous social policies that become almost impossible to reverse. The United States has done that regarding crime, especially drug abuse.

I doubt that one American out of 10 is aware that you and I are spending \$20,000 a year to keep in prison every single kid caught with a couple of ounces of marijuana — a per inmate expense equal to what millions of people are paid for a whole year's work, or a cost well beyond anything we taxpayers shell out to keep a child in public school or a kid in college.

Are we aware that our states are now spending almost \$30 billion every year to keep locked up triple the number of inmates they had just 20 years ago? Or that we are incarcerating our people at a rate never known in any civilized society?

Can you believe that while bond issues to build schools are often failing, this country is willingly building a 1,000-bed jailhouse or prison every week? Building prisons has become the great new American cottage industry or the perceived economic salvation of many rural and other economically depressed areas.

The growth and clout of this industry is such that California now pays a prison guard of moderate experience \$51,000 a year but paid its public school teachers an average of \$43,000 a year in 1996-97.

In politically inspired moves to prove they were not "soft on crime" — and in



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futile and self-defeating efforts to declare "victory" in the "War on Drugs" — our lawmakers have disempowered judges and decreed laws and minimum sentences that have made almost one of every 150 Americans a jailbird. And for blacks and Hispanics, one out of every five faces the curse of

the lockup because of political madness over "law and order."

Finally, millions of Americans, conservative and liberal, Republicans as well as Democrats, are awakening to the reality that incarcerating 400,000 people — most of them small fry — on drug charges has not reduced the curse of drug abuse in America.

And they are seeing that even as crime has fallen drastically, the drive for more jails and prisons at mushrooming costs does not slow down.

The uprising against the current outrageous situation seems great enough that any number of politicians might take the lead without fear of falling to the old cries, "soft on crime."

Enough Americans seem now to understand that the policy of locking up almost forever every little gnat and fruit fly caught in the web of the drug peddlers has been a failure. Still, both will and courage to admit error and change policy seems to be in short supply in this town these days.

We need millions of more Americans shouting, "Stop the prison madness" to ensure that our political leaders will become bold enough to return to sanity.