

COMMENTARY

Waco: Bipartisan cover-up taints investigation

Lenora B. Fulani

Special to Sentinel-Voice

In the summer of 1995, FBI agents who commanded the government's armored assault on the Branch Davidians' home outside of Waco, Texas, swore under oath to a Congressional oversight committee that although their tanks battered down the flimsy walls of the Davidian's Mt. Carmel Center, and spewed CS gas at women and children for six hours, they never did anything that could have started the fire that eventually took more than 76 civilian lives.

Now, four years later, a previously undisclosed FBI audio tape clearly reveals that agents fired combustible tear gas rounds.

Congressional leaders — some of whom presided over the 1995 hearings that let the FBI off the hook — are now calling for a new set of hearings. But there is little reason to believe a forum

presided over by Democrats and Republicans will ever elicit a satisfactory explanation as to how our law enforcement officials provoked this tragedy.

If the history of the 1995 hearings is any guide, any new investigations of the FBI's actions will be milked by both parties for every possible partisan advantage and then discarded.

Although there were some "true believers" among Congressional staff and some first-term members, no one in the leadership of either party ever seriously wanted hearings that would uncover law enforcement abuses and lay the basis for much-needed reform of the agencies in question.

In the wake of the greatest law enforcement disaster in FBI history, no one with oversight responsibilities wanted to do anything at all. Grassroots activists and independent investigators across the political spectrum



—religious scholars who had studied the Branch Davidian sect, Second Amendment activists, civil rights campaigners unafraid to stand up for the rights of those most Americans regard as "fringe" — started lobbying Congress in the month after the fire, urging the FBI be held accountable. Members on both sides of the aisle turned a deaf ear.

But by the summer of 1995, the political environment had changed. The Republicans now had a majority, and the National Rifle Association was boasting, with good reason, that its campaign

contributions helped the Republicans in the 1994 electoral sweep.

They instructed their Congressional beneficiaries it was time to roll back the assault weapons ban and other restrictions on gun ownership passed by Clinton and his Democratic allies.

The egregious abuses by law enforcement agencies like the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms — at Waco, Ruby Ridge and elsewhere — became ammunition in the Republican/NRA campaign against the Clinton Administration.

Meanwhile, the

Democrats mobilized for the defense of their Commander-in-Chief and the nation's law enforcement agencies. Many observers of the 1995 hearings remarked the Democrats and Republicans seemed to have switched places, with the Republicans defending the rights of an outcast minority, while the Democrats defended the abusive government agents.

From the opening gavel, the five Congressional Black Caucus members on the panel made it clear they were Democrats first, civil rights leaders second. Only months earlier they had led a spirited defense of the Fourth Amendment right to freedom from unwarranted search and seizure, in response to an (ultimately successful) attempt by Republicans to overturn the "exclusionary rule" that said evidence obtained illegally at trial could not be introduced in court.

But, in spite of pleas from

myself and other advocates for the rights of the Branch Davidians, they refused to speak up on the gross violations of Fourth Amendment rights committed by the ATF when they falsely obtained a defective warrant and used it as justification for the original raid on Mt. Carmel.

Trying to score points against the Republicans was everything; joining ranks with them in a defense of civil liberties was apparently impossible for these Democrats to do.

Though the Republicans did question law enforcement abuses, their partisan agenda became clear when they focused their line of questioning on trying to expose the White House's role in signing off on the final gas/tank assault on Mt. Carmel.

This took the form of trying to show Attorney General Janet Reno was not

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Carl Rowan's Commentary

Miss America Organization's rules revamp sullies pageant's image

Special to Sentinel-Voice

I've always known the Miss America Pageant was about as phony as most 40-inch bosoms.

Not that the beauty contest did not for 30 years guard against fallacies, wigs, buttock pads and other store-bought illusions of feminine pulchritude.

I mean phony in the pageant's growing pretenses that the annual display of gorgeous and sexy females was a scholarship contest or some Super Bowl of "opinions, talent and intelligence." I always watched the Miss America telecast knowing it was a fantasy parade designed to stimulate my libido and strike jealousy in the hearts and minds of womankind the world over.

But now comes the Miss America Organization as a stupid killer of our dreams, telling us that, next year, girls who have been divorced or had abortions will be eligible for competition as our "ideal."

The pageant has opted for more "realism" than I want. And I'm uncomfortable that it has exposed me as the old fogie that I really am.

I was raised with the notion that divorce is a failure of both a man and a woman, so a babe who has failed in marriage, however physically beautiful, can never at first glance be "my ideal."

And I always thought the Miss America Organization was way off base by asking



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contestants to certify they had never had an abortion. Hell, why not go all the meddling way and ask them to swear they have worn a chastity belt since puberty!

But the old Bert Parks song says: "There she is, fairer than fair she is;" and I thought it referred not to her skin pigmentation, or lack of, but

to the lack of blemishes on her character.

It didn't irritate me so much to have a 19-year-old beauty in a swimsuit tell me what I should think about gun control, or for whom I should vote, if I could imagine she was morally a No. 1 draft choice. But I don't want any round-heeled broad who can't keep a husband for even a year telling me what my political and moral posture ought to be.

So why would the Miss America Organization publicly OK divorce and abortion after 30 years of presenting at least a façade of the highest moral standards and the strictest traditions? The Associated Press says pageant officials feared running afoul of new anti-discrimination laws in New Jersey.

The Miss America Organization has caved in and ruined a great thing because I know I am not the only man — or woman — who will refuse to watch a beauty pageant if I must constantly wonder who is a genuine dream role model and who is just a well-built shrew — or slut.

Know your history: Slave past should be studied, not feared

Rainer Spencer

Special to Sentinel-Voice

I sometimes show bad movies to my students. These films are known by the titles "Mandingo," "Drum," "Song of the South," "The Littlest Rebel" and "Band of Angels."

These are films about American slavery, and each one of them does its job of misrepresenting this most important aspect of American history.

Because there are really no good feature films that take American slavery as their main topic, I show my students these bad films and explain how they are wrong.

Yes, there is the television mini-series "Roots," but what else? "Beloved" is an outstanding film, but on a literary more than a historical level; and "Amistad" wasn't even about slavery in the United States.

I don't want to complain too loudly, though, for fear Spike Lee will decide to do a film on slavery and mangle that important history as much as he mangled the history of Malcolm X. But what explains this absence of cinematic interest in American slavery?

For some reason, practically no one — whether African American or white — wants to touch it. I think many blacks, while they will acknowledge a slave ancestry, are not really interested in learning anything about it because they consider it to be embarrassing or demeaning somehow.

Just a few years ago in Virginia, black residents managed to temporarily stop a mock slave auction designed to educate the public as to how human beings were once legally sold as property.

Their reason for stopping this truly educational exercise?

They called it "degrading," and a

"trivialization" of the African American experience. Yet, who is truly degraded at a slave auction — the slaves being sold or the buyers and sellers of those slaves?

To label the auction degrading for blacks is to join the oppressor in blaming the victims instead of the criminals.

Far from trivializing the African American experience, the slave auction is an essential component of that experience.

The heights to which blacks in this country have risen begin from that auction block, which represents the kidnapping of Africans from their homeland, the tearing apart of both African and African American families, and the inescapable fact this country simply refuses to deal honestly with the immorality of its own beginnings.

So, I don't shy away from slave history. Rather, I try to learn as much about it as I can, for as a descendant of those who were bought and sold on the auction block I have nothing to be ashamed of.

Instead, it is America's shame that keeps the subject of slavery out of history books and off of movie screens. An honest examination of American slavery requires fortitude. There is much cruelty and inhumanity, and not all of it can be laid at the feet of Europeans.

Whites generally did not venture up African rivers very far into the interior. Instead, they bought slaves on the coast from African traders who procured their captives farther inland, either through war, raids, or simple kidnapping.

Sometimes marching for hundreds of miles over a period of several weeks or months, approximately half of these captives died before they even reached the West African

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