

POINT OF VIEW

Our View

Action needed to curb needless searches

In somewhat of a return to the colonial days when white men "practiced" their love-making skills on black women and rarely owned up to the results of such transgressions, U.S. Customs officials are ordering black women to remove their clothes, undergo invasive X-rays and have their bowel movements monitored in an attempt to find hidden drugs.

A report by the General Accounting Office, Congress' investigative tool, stated that although black women were much less likely than others to be found with hidden illegal drugs, they were nonetheless subjected to strip searches and X-rays more than any other group.

One percent of the 71.5 million passengers entering the United States in 1998 were singled out for searches, with 52,455 subjected to simple pat downs. Those numbers aren't cause for alarm. But the statistics smack of a sort of racist, misogynist hypocrisy: X-rays conducted in 1998 found drugs almost twice as often on whites and black men than on black women; black women who were U.S. citizens were nine times as likely as white American women to be X-rayed but less than half as likely to be concealing illegal drugs; strip searches in 1998 revealed drugs on Hispanics and black men at much higher rates than on black women.

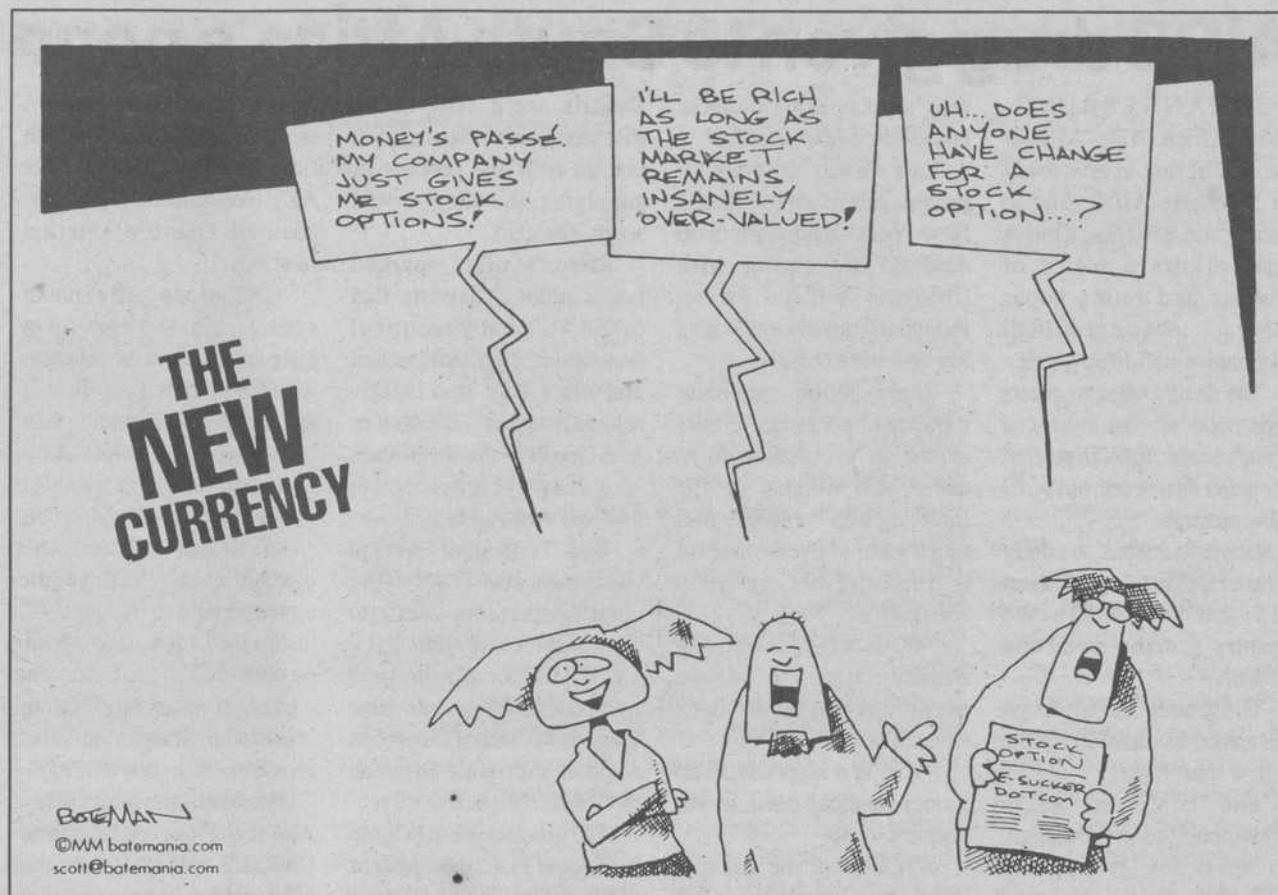
The report's findings aren't surprising given that passengers have alleged such abuse for at least two years. A flurry of lawsuits have been filed in the last 24 months, many by minorities claiming they were singled out for intrusive searches because of their race. A group of 100 Chicago women are seeking a class-action lawsuit against the Customs Department — Chicago fields a notoriously high amount of the complaints.

It is hoped that legislative efforts to tackle the problems succeed. John Conyers, D-Mich., has introduced the Law Enforcement Trust and Integrity Act. In it is a provision enhancing oversight of the customs department and other law enforcement agencies.

NAACP President and CEO Kweisi Mfume has threatened litigation, saying that "we believe these women's rights are violated without foundation."

While law enforcement types are trained to identify certain descriptors, pigeonholing an entire segment of the population as contraband-carrying criminals is wrong. In their overzealous attempt to snag a multimillion or multibillion-dollar bust, they're trampling on the rights of innocent people.

To add insult to injury, black women are subjected to more intrusive, and therefore less human, searches. It seems Customs officials want to go the extra mile. Thanks but no thanks. Being handcuffed and led through an airport is debilitating enough. Being detained without any way to contact someone or any legal recourse to force authorities to let you contact help, is salt to the wound. Cavity searches add to the degradation. To top it off, they can induce a bowel movement to see if you're hiding drugs inside your body. All this, just because you fit a profile. Happy flying.



Al Sharpton: The new Willie Horton

Ron Walters

Special to Sentinel-Voice

You remember Willie Horton? He was a black prisoner in Massachusetts who was let out on work release one weekend and sexually assaulted and killed a white woman.

Al Gore, running for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1988, brought this fact out during the public debate against Michael Dukakis, the eventual nominee.

Then, the republican strategist Lee Atwater developed this theme for George Bush, Sr. to use in the general election through a video commercial that racialized the election even further.

The specter of the "bad black" who would kill if shown any leniency not only fueled the election of George Bush that year, but helped lay the groundwork for a series of criminal justice laws that were later enacted under the leadership of President William Jefferson Clinton.

This year republicans apparently want their own version of Willie Horton — in the person of the Rev. Al Sharpton. Candidates for the presidential nomination on the democratic side and Senate candidate Hillary Clinton, have all gone to visit with Rev. Sharpton. Why? Because he polled over 600,000 votes in the 1996 Senatorial campaign in the state of New York, which gave him instant credibility and more than the aura of a demonstrator, and catapulted

him to the position of a leader with influence who has a constituency and who may be able to leverage it in favor of one candidate or another.

Jim Nicholson, Chairman of the Republican Party, has led the campaign against Sharpton in the strongest terms by calling him a "bigot" and an "anti-semitic." This refers to Sharpton's role in street demonstrations in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, a heavily Jewish neighborhood in New York where orthodox Jews were perceived to be involved in the death of a young black boy.

More recently, Sharpton has taken up the high-profile fight to secure justice for the family of Abner Louima, the African immigrant who was killed by out-of-control, New York City Police officers.

And, since many of the causes that he has championed have involved the police, Sharpton has been perceived as a police-baiter since his allegation that a white policeman abducted a young woman, Tawana Brawley, six years ago.

Although he was sued by that policeman and recently found guilty of defamation by an upstate New York court, there are still those who believe Brawley's story even though it has been widely dismissed as a hoax.

Regardless of the outcome of these cases, there is a sense that Rev. Al Sharpton has established himself as a champion of those who must confront the system in order to secure justice at a time when other leaders have

shrank from this task. In doing so, he has brought the National Action Network and his own voice into national prominence, as he is now featured on nationally televised talk shows and is sought as a speaker and champion of causes far from New York City.

For instance, Sharpton traveled to Michigan to become involved in the demonstration against a Wayne County court seeking to try a 12-year-old black male as an adult, and to California to protest the shooting death of an unarmed black woman by officers of the Los Angeles Police Department. And, in another high profile case, he is — not incidentally — suing republican party chair Jim Nicholson for defamation of character.

So in one sense, Sharpton, taking the stage and having begun to carve out a ministry for himself that resembles that of Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr., has also become fair game for demagogues in the media. Speaking of Rev. Jackson,

however, it should also be remembered that he has suffered this same treatment when he was running for President in 1984. He also was called a bigot and an anti-semitic, and has had to work hard to dispel the rabid untruth, not only with the evidence of his past life, but of his subsequent works of inclusion and coalition.

But why would you suppose there is this syndrome?

I thought a lot about this in the midst of the storm as a close assistant to Jackson in the 1984 campaign. I thought that he was being vilified, as Sharpton is today, because America has always been uncomfortable with the notion that blacks might acquire real power — especially blacks that cannot be trusted to follow the party line.

Trusted blacks have always had the opportunity to exercise, considerable power, as long as they use it to affirm both the system and those who control it.

(See Sharpton, Page 9)

NEVADA'S ONLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER

LAS VEGAS Sentinel Voice

NEVADA COMMUNICATIONS GROUP, INC.

Nevada's only African-American community newspaper.
Published every Thursday by Griot Communications Group, Inc.
900 East Charleston Boulevard • Las Vegas, Nevada 89104
Telephone (702) 380-8100 • Fax (702) 380-8102

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Member: National Newspaper Publishers Association
and West Coast Black Publishers Association