

Black America standing on 'shaky' ground

By Marc H. Morial
Special to Sentinel-Voice
Equality.

The word represents the essence of the America Ideal, and of the vision that has inspired African-Americans during their centuries-long struggle to gain their full measure of citizenship in their native land.

But African-Americans' striving for equality continues to be shadowed by an unsteadiness that has always cloaked the progress Blacks have made in an extraordinary complexity.

That is, the progress Blacks forge, whether through the accomplishments of individuals or of large segments of the entire group, has

always been shadowed by two things.

One is their awareness of the substantial challenges yet to be overcome.

The second is their awareness that a significant reversal of fortune could, in group terms, completely erase such gains.

One way to describe this condition is by the words of an old folk saying: Black Americans feel they are "standing on shaky ground."

A more formal way would be to say that Black progress is precarious and complex. A third way is numerically, via an indexing of the status of Black America's pursuit of parity with White America.

To Be Equal

By Marc H. Morial
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In the 2004 volume of its annually published journal, *The State of Black America*, the National Urban League is unveiling its Equality Index to underscore the continuing "precarious and complex" quality of Black progress today.

What our Equality Index has determined is that Black

Americans stand at less than three-quarters — 73 percent, to be exact — of where White America stands.

Thus, one can rightly say that more than two centuries after the Constitutional Convention created an infamous concept of measurement — *three-fifths of a person* — to define the value of the enslaved Africans and African-Americans who were doing more than their share to build the American nation, Black Americans have progressed.

But they still stand on shaky ground.

By no means do we discount the progress. Indeed, we celebrate it, whether it be the notable achievements of individuals in business, or education, or science, or sports; or the broad advance of Blacks as a group — as when the rush of the Black poor to a, for once, welcoming labor market in the late 1990s drove the Black unemployment rate down to its historic low of 7 percent.

But we cannot ignore the measure the Equality Index, drawn from examining the status of Black Americans in the five areas of education, economics, health, social jus-

tice and civic engagement, takes of the "equality gap" — the progress that has to be made before one can declare that Black Americans and White Americans live in a society in which race produces no negative accounting.

In addition, the collection of provocative essays and, another new feature, op-ed articles we've gathered provide a powerful resonance to the data limned in the National Urban League Equality Index and the National Urban League Poll.

That Black Americans should be such a long way from parity bears powerful witness to the continuing affect of America's long past of racial discrimination and the defining characteristic of the African-American Experience — the complexity of Black progress.

So, even as America this year prepares to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown* school-desegregation decision, and all the progress that produced, we cannot forget the fact that our Equality Index shows the economic status of Blacks is but 56 percent that of Whites.

Or that, once the economic recession hit, the unemployment rate of Blacks soared back above 10 percent, twice that of Whites, and has stayed there.

Our index provides plenty of further evidence of this sharp split in the quality of life for African-Americans, and evidence via our National

Urban League poll, which also appears in *The State of Black America 2004*, that African-Americans themselves are intensely aware that they are standing on shaky ground amidst the physical peril of a global war that follows no rules and has no boundaries, and amidst a national economic "recovery" that for millions and millions of Americans seems scarcely different from the preceding recession.

As those latter words indicate, African-Americans are hardly alone in their sense of anxiety about the present and the future.

The difference, however, is that this predicament has always been so for African-Americans, and, at this critical juncture, history may be repeating itself — with consequences that could widen even further the "equality gap" between Black America and White America.

There are many lessons to be drawn from the scholarship and statistical indices in *The State of Black America 2004*, lessons that the Urban League intends to help America as a whole discuss throughout the year.

But certainly the most important lesson is understanding that closing the equality gap is a challenge not just for African-Americans and other people of color, but for White Americans, too. If America is to maintain its position as the economic power and moral leader of the world community.

Curry

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mislead USA Today reporters trying to verify his work, documents retrieved from his company-owned laptop computer show. Two of the people are translators Kelley paid for services months or years before. Another is a Jerusalem businessman, portrayed by Kelley as an undercover Israeli agent."

Even Jayson Blair didn't go that far.

Speaking of Blair, he continues to prove that he is a shameless liar. Not only did his behavior prompt the resignation of Gerald M. Boyd, the New York Times first Black managing editor, he even told a malicious lie about Boyd's mother.

In his book, he wrote that Boyd's mother "died following a long struggle with drugs." However, Boyd disclosed in his syndicated column, "Odessa Thomas Boyd, my mother, was 29 years old when she died, after a lifetime battle with sickle cell anemia."

He continued, "My mother's life was one of making the best of an awful situa-

tion, which she did with courage and without complaint. It is unconscionable that a journalist would write something so hurtful. The truth is that my mother did not drink or smoke, and she certainly never used drugs."

Frankly, I don't know why anyone would want to read or listen to what Jayson Blair has to say about anything unless they were interested in fiction. Even then, they could find better selections. Yet, this admitted liar can get a book contract, be interviewed on network TV newsmagazine shows and be welcomed at book signings across the country.

If USA Today really wants to imitate The New York Times, the top two editors will resign. And Kelley, taking a cue from Blair's lead, will no doubt be offered a book contract to write more lies.

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Waters

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this pernicious law. The Hip-Hop mogul Russell Simons has been waging a campaign in New York City to bring heat and light to the opposition to this issue.

But I have not seen the rest of our leadership out front on this issue that, more than any other, has contributed to locking up an entire generation of Black youth who are targeted and punished at a greater rate than Whites.

These young people have become caught up in a nasty period of ideological fervor where White males had to prove that they in fact controlled society by fashioning a set of laws in the 1994 Omnibus Crime Bill. It has had a disastrous effect on our community, even at a time when crime has been going down.

So, even though 6,000 of them will be coming out this year, most will not be eligible for public housing, student loans and other public goods that will enable them to get a fresh start in society.

President Bush adopted a program created by Jesse Jackson that propose to put churches in a relationship to those coming out of prison to make their transition easier. But nothing

would make it easier than to eliminate those punishment laws that has made it tough for them to get a new start and easier for them to consider giving up and going back to the old ways. In fact, Bush ought to make it harder for them to get in, rather than easier to get out, but impossible to get on with their lives.

The Black leadership has said a lot about getting convicted felons to vote, but not much about getting them a life and we are giving the politicians a pass on this issue. For example, if you go to John Kerry's Web site, there is a list of issues, but nothing about the repeal of mandatory minimums — or any other criminal justice issue.

Democrats have also played the game of being "tough on crime" to stay viable in the race for votes. But it is time to know where Kerry stands (we know where Bush stands) on this issue.

Justice Clarence Thomas said not a mumbly word at the hearing, but Kennedy and his colleague Justice Steven Breyer are fighting hard. We should join them.

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Daly

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gested people visit the Web site of the Caucasian American Firefighters Association, adding that his association was in agreement with Chicago Alderwoman Freddrema Lyles' proposal to create a citizen oversight board to monitor the fire department.

He revealed that their membership is experiencing similar mistreatment in many of the fire departments across the nation. For example, on March 3, according to a report on Channel 9 News in Cincinnati, an incident of broadcasting racial comments over fire department radios occurred.

In fact, according to observers, the problem of racial comments has been an ongoing problem plaguing Black and Latino firefighters. In 1999, a San Francisco Fire Department newsletter published the following statement: "Some minority Captains don't know the difference between Cardiac and Cadillac." In October of 2003, a New Haven firefighter was suspended for six months without pay for using the n-word during a public presentation.

However, warns Portia Rawles, assistant professor of psychology at the Regent University in Virginia Beach, Va., seldom do those who want legal redress for acts of discrimination and harassment mention the health consequences of such acts. She explained that there was a significant amount of research that links poor psychological and physical health with gender and ethnic discrimination and sexual harassment.

Rawles recommends specific actions that may be implemented by fire chiefs and their senior staffs. Her ideas include formulating anti-discrimination and sexual harassment policies; publishing understandable procedures for the reporting and investigating of any occurrences of these types of behavior; and making it known that retaliation against anyone filing a complaint will not be tolerated.

He says, "It must be clear to line firefighters and company officers that the chief and the senior staff are serious in their support and enforcement of such policies."

Saeed Shabazz writes for the Final Call.