

C O M M E N T A R Y

Reassessing what it means to be free in '04

By James Clingman
Special to Sentinel-Voice

By the time you read this, July 4, 2004 will have passed. However, maybe between now and the next Independence Day you will ponder the implications of this famous day in history and regard it in its full and proper context.

Additionally, the 40th anniversary of the signing of the Civil Rights Act, which took place on July 2, 2004, will have also passed when you read this. In my new book, *Black-O-Knowledge, Stuff We Need to Know*, I used the following quote by President Lyndon Johnson during his signing of this famous Act: "We believe that all men are created equal — yet many are denied equal treatment. We believe that all men have certain inalienable rights. We believe that all men are entitled to the blessings of liberty — yet millions are being deprived of those blessings, not because of their own failures, but because of the color of their skins."

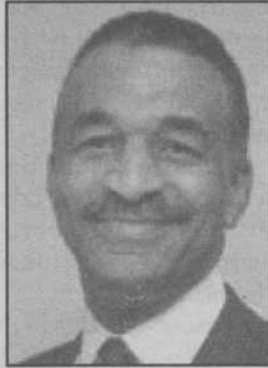
Thus, this year is quite significant for Black folks as well as for this country. Let's review a few things, some you may know and some you may not know. First of all, did you know about the statement that was left out of the Declaration of Independence?

As I listened to the annual reading of this document on NPR, which is something I look forward to hearing every 4th of July, I imagined how much more meaningful it would have been to Black people if that paragraph had been allowed to remain in the document.

It reads as follows: "He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither."

This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain determined to keep open a market where men should be bought and sold. He has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce: and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them: thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.

That paragraph was referred to by some historians as one of the strongest in the Declaration, but it was taken out because of two reasons: Southern states' resistance to it and economic reasons having to do with New England's shipping industry and



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their lucrative income from the slave trade. It's always about the money, isn't it?

While we're at it, let's take a look at a paragraph that was included in the Declaration: "In every stage of these Oppressions we have petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury." A Prince

whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people. Don't misunderstand; they were talking about another (King) George, not the one we have today.

Now let's look at the Civil Rights Act. President Johnson had to use his entire repertoire of political tricks, arm-twisting, and cajoling to get this one passed. Kennedy had attempted to get a Civil Rights bill passed years earlier without success. Johnson pulled it off though and the rest, as they say, is history. But what will history ultimately record about the Civil Rights Act? More importantly, what will history record about Black folks' reaction to it?

I compare Black people in America today to the children of Israel, and strangely enough that comparison grows clearer every day.

They were set free; we were set free. They walked around complaining about what they did not have, murmuring against one another; we have been and are doing the same thing. They had what they needed for self-determination but paid little attention to their abundant collective resources; so, too, are we immersed in discussions about the possessions of others while neglecting to leverage our own resources.

They compared themselves to grasshoppers and their enemies to giants; we do the same thing in many cases. Unfortunately, they had to walk for 40 years until their so-called leaders died off, and only two were allowed to enter the Promised Land. Is that what is in store for us? After all, we have also been walking for 40 years now, since Pharaoh Johnson signed that Civil Rights Bill. Some of us just don't want to let Pharaoh go.

So as you reflect on the 4th of July and the 40th anniversary of our freedom, although some say we received it in 1863, 1865, 1870, and other years in between, please think about that missing paragraph in the Declaration of Independence and what leaving it in could have meant to this country. Also, give some serious thought to those Civil Rights, that were originally Black Rights, and ask yourself, "What am I doing with them?"

Oh yes, and don't forget about that reference in the Declaration of Independence that spoke about the "Prince" who was unfit to rule a free people. What goes around comes around, doesn't it?

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Will John Edwards meet Black America's needs?

By Ron Walters
Special to Sentinel-Voice

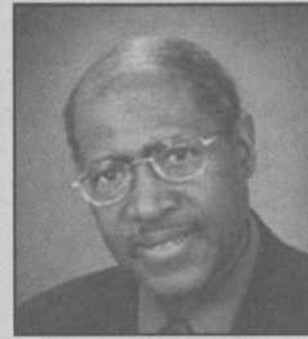
First, let me get something off my chest. It is high time that a Black person was chosen for the second spot on the Democratic party presidential ticket. It seems that Blacks are the "third rail" of American politics in a conservative age. To prevent the major Black leaders from being credible, the gatekeepers in the media and the party join in game of finding something wrong about every one of them who could have been considered for vice president. The result is that Blacks are left with lesser jobs in an administration and even then, they most often have to earn an appointment based on their loyalty to the candidate in a manner which puts their loyalty to Blacks in question.

The net effect, as has been observed many times, is that Blacks contribute a great deal to the fortunes of the Democratic Party, but get less in return than other groups. Thus, the point of Black political strategy is how to get more for the political investment we make in that party. This is the question one entertains now that Senator John Edwards has been chosen.

Overall, I think that John Edwards is a good choice. His instincts for the leadership of those locked in "two nations," one of which is clearly the disadvantaged, speaks well of his potential to represent the interests of most Blacks. And if I were John Kerry, I would deal with the criticism that his campaign has not pulled close enough to the Black community by making a fresh start and giving this brief to John Edwards.

Kerry just doesn't appear to be comfortable enough with Blacks and has leaned toward the "third way" politics of the Clinton era, as reflected in his attempted run with Republican John McCain. But how could he have done this without knowing or caring what the reaction would be? That is the point which has given many the feeling that he could be passive to Black interests and that is why John Edwards is needed.

The large opening to empower Blacks in this campaign comes from the fact that



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Edwards' selection is the clearest sign that the Kerry campaign is going to have a Southern strategy. This means that the "solid Republican South" so evident in 2000 when George Bush won all of the states in that region, except Florida, will be contested in 2004. But for that to happen the role of the Black vote will have to be enhanced

because Blacks constitute so large a proportion of the Democratic base: nearly half in states such as Louisiana, South Carolina, and Mississippi and a healthy portion in states such as Georgia and Maryland. So, the winning arithmetic in those states will be a coalition of Blacks and White liberals.

In order for the coalition to win some of these states, the performance of the Black vote has to be better than in 2000 to overcome the Ralph Nader factor as well. In the latest Gallup Poll, Nader was attracting a surprising 10 percent of the Black vote, a result that could kill the Kerry campaign in most Southern states.

This is a sign that there needs to be some resources devoted immediately, and in substantial amounts to contesting for the Black vote against Nader and for preparing the Black vote to support the Kerry-Edwards ticket by building the infrastructure necessary to deliver votes.

Edwards could help, however, in both the South and the Midwest as indicated by his performance in the primary elections. Taking those states where Edwards won at least one-third of the vote in the crowded field, he did his best as expected in Georgia and South Carolina, but also came in second in Wisconsin and Ohio.

These are two of the most important "battle ground" states where his appeal to the White working class as well as Blacks could be effective.

But the Edwards effect on the South could be most explosive if he is able to sell the argument put forth strongest by Howard Dean, that poor and working class Whites in the South have more in common with poor and working class Blacks, than the elite. If Edwards is able to make this case, he would help crack the near solid support

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competent or soft on the threat of terrorism. Such electioneering is not going to do very much to distinguish between what is in our national defense interest and that which can provide for a secure homeland.

In this regard, I will say our current attitude with initiatives that suggests the rest of the world be damned is not going to make us more secure. Given our current military presence of 250,000 troops, spread out in many nations of the world, there is no way we can provide for the safety of our military personnel, their families, and more

than 50 million Americans who travel aboard annually.

This is why we need the goodwill of other nations.

Telling other nations to "like it or lump it" is not going to solve our problems of providing for our national defense or homeland security independent of whether our national political leaders choose to define the difference in an election year.

Mark my words, the next four months are going to be stress filled times for America nationally and internationally on a variety of fronts.