

Campaign equating treatment of animals, slaves halted

By Amecia Taylor
Special to Sentinel-Voice
WASHINGTON (NNPA) - The scenes are graphic. The charred body of a Black man is juxtaposed with a burning chicken.

A shackled Black leg is shown next to the leg of a chained elephant. A woman is branded next to a panel of chickens getting branded. The unmistakable message is that animals are suffering the same fate as African-American slaves.

That's the point of a controversial campaign by the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA).

The online exhibit has been placed on hold amid a flurry of protests.

The central question in the emotional debate is whether animals deserve the same respect and rights as Black people.

To William H. Horton, associate professor history and philosophy, Grambling State University in Louisiana, the answer is an emphatic no.

"When you compare slavery to animals, it sends a negative message," he ex-

plains. It's not what you say, it's what you don't say that's communicated. In essence, you're saying that slaves and animals are equivalent."

Dawn Carr, director special projects for PETA, defends the online exhibit.

"Animal Liberation project is about many cruelties: slavery, child labor, oppression of women and Native Americans," she says.

But some see that as a stretch.

"NAACP is opposed to animal cruelty, but valuing chickens over people is not a proper comparison," says John C. White, director of communications for the NAACP.

"PETA shows that it is willing to exploit racism to advance its cause. Is PETA saying that as long as animals are butchered for meat, racists should continue lynching Black people?"

PETA officials reject the charge that it is exploiting racism and says the idea for the campaign came from an unlikely source — Dick Gregory.

The Black comedian serves on the board of PETA

and gave a knowing grin when asked whether this was his idea.

Regardless of who came up with the idea, it's still a bad one, according to Cassandra Newby-Alexander, associate professor of history at Norfolk State University in Virginia.

"Comparing humans and animals is like the apples and oranges analogy," Newby-Alexander states.

"You can't compare the systematic deprivation of people's rights, their culture and heritage to animals that don't have an understanding of things. Doing so belittles the legacy and horrors of slavery."

There is also the issue of historical accuracy — or inaccuracy.

"Horses and dogs were treated better than Blacks," says Horton, the Grambling professor.

"The psychological presupposition was that a slave was less than an animal. Slaves were considered property. They were shipped like sardines in a can... worked for years without pay, and Black women were vio-

lated."

An estimated 12 million Africans were enslaved and imported to the new world; one-third of them died before they were placed on ships.

The panels display nameless victims from the past who didn't get a chance to tell their stories, and now they are lowered to the status of animals.

This isn't the first time PETA has found itself in the middle of a fierce debate.

PETA offended the Jewish community recently with a "Holocaust on Your Plate" campaign that showcased photos from slaughterhouses and Nazi death camps together.

Apparently, they didn't learn their lesson — or didn't care that the latest campaign would similarly offend Blacks.

In fact, Carr, the PETA spokesperson, said, "Any group or community that is aware of bigotry and oppression is more sympathetic of others."

Critics say that holds up in people-to-people relations, not when a group of people is equated with animals.

While the "Animal Liberation" campaign has been postponed indefinitely, PETA officials are hopeful that once they meet with the NAACP they will move forward with the tour.

"We are planning to meet with the local NAACP president... we will discuss details... we hope that we can discuss what's at the root of any objections to our exhibit," Carr said.

In the meantime, they are reviewing emails and other feedback they have received.

"We have had a full range of feedback, from outraged people to thankful people," Carr said.

"This exhibit is bringing up a big issue for people to face... animals have rights and it's a supremacist view to think otherwise. The mindset that led to these cruelties is the same mindset that is alive and well now... the mindset is the same, only the victims have changed."

"PETA is opposed to all cruelty and bigotry... [we're] asking people to open their hearts and minds to the concept that chains, whips and abuse of any living being can

end, just as the shameful abuses of our past have ended," Carr said in an e-mail following an interview with the NNPA News Service.

"There is embedded dehumanization in comparing Blacks to animals," Newby-Alexander said.

Racism is still a touchy issue in the U.S. The last known lynching was less than 40 years ago.

Almost 4,000 Blacks were lynched between 1882 and 1968 according to the archives at Tuskegee University. It's been a little more than 140 years since the Emancipation Proclamation was signed.

Just six years ago 49-year-old James Byrd Jr. was chained to a pickup truck and dragged to his death on a rural road in Jasper, Texas.

"Every time someone makes an unwarranted analogy or statement it needs to be addressed," Newby-Alexander said.

"This campaign showcases how some people don't understand the impact of what happened and the long-term predispositions."

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