

Moving civil rights forward our duty

By Ron Walters
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A recent trip to Atlanta provided me with mixed experiences. I had a great time in Atlanta at the recent Voting Rights March. However, a panel discussion at the annual meeting of the National Association of Black Journalists left me with serious concerns.

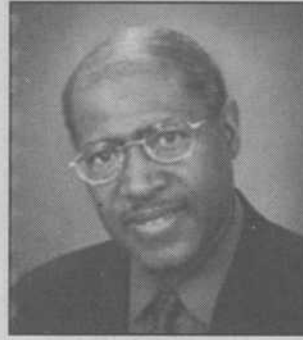
First, I was concerned that what should have been a plenary on the Voting Rights Act was stuffed into a corner room of the Hyatt Hotel in the sub-basement. But what really concerned me was something that arose in the panel discussion, something I had heard several times before.

There seems to be a feeling that the civil rights movement is dead and that the civil rights leaders should die with it. The argument is that the movement's methods were okay in the '60s, but outdated today.

For the record, the Civil Rights Movement is not a '60s phenomenon; it is as old as the Black community. And it resurfaces in each generation to provide the most powerful challenge to the barriers to Black advancement. As a result of the recent agitation of civil rights leaders, articles are now being written

that assess the Voting Rights Act, evaluating the necessity of its reauthorization. Now, that might have happened if someone had given a great speech, written a letter to the editor, or an op-ed piece in the newspapers. I doubt it. It happened because nearly 30,000 people were mobilized to come to Atlanta on August 6 and make their witness in person.

As I write this, a White woman, Cindy Sheehan, is camped outside of the summer home of President George Bush in Crawford, Texas. She is staging a protest against the Iraq war for which she believes her son died needlessly. She has been joined by others in what has turned out to be a media event, with articles being written daily about her agenda. Such methods of getting an agenda before the public are not relegated to a certain era of history, but are used widely by organized labor and others seeking to bring pressure to bear on decision-makers. Should Blacks be the only people in America not to use such



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pressure tactics? I would argue that we need them worse than any. Civil rights tactics were born — and are still relevant — because they match the urgency of the demand for relief from negative life conditions.

Second, this tiresomeness about the role of civil rights in our lives, I have come to think, exists because some are confused about how pressure leads the public to adopt an agenda. During the '60s, the staff members of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were very sensitive to the ways in which they could use his presence to make an impact on the media. Indeed, I could argue that we would not have the civil rights laws today, no matter how eloquent Dr. King was, if his exploits and those of others did not create the pressure which forced the White press to write the stories and focus the cameras on such events. This is what influenced the president and members of Congress and how they eventually took up the issues that were making it hard for them to deal with anything else. In that equation, journalists were central.

Today, journalists are still central, and many Black journalists have taken the place of those Whites who wrote about the civil rights exploits of the '60s. But the problem today is that many of our journalists are playing the game of their newspapers or television stations in order to maintain their jobs, rather than carrying the Civil Rights Movement right into the newsroom. It is much easier to criticize and caricature Black lead-

ers and then hunker down in the newsroom with colleagues who are also afraid of the pressure they might bring, just to get along. In that sense, it's all about a job, about personal freedom, not the freedom of people who need it.

From that vantage point, some of our journalists are just afraid and sow more confusion into the modern Civil Rights Movement by attempting to be "objective" because objectivity depends on where you stand. If a Black journalist stands with the Establishment in their perspective on Black life, many studies show that they are likely to perpetuate racist conceptions. But there is also an objectivity in the Black mainstream of life that journalists should reflect, as Vernon Jarrett so ably-taught.

It's logical to wonder what the politics of confrontation is like in the newsrooms of America where editors and producers assign stories about Blacks from the vantage point of an either distorted or otherwise unreal "objectivism." Except every now and then, what I read leads me to the view that there is precious little of the Civil Rights Movement inside media institutions that have the most important role in educating Americans about issues and influencing the political system to do something about them.

Maybe the Black-owned press can do this easier, but that's no excuse. We need more people to take the movement inside all American institutions, not leave it at the door. That was the plan. If it was not, what is the alternative?

Ron Walters is the director of the African-American Leadership Institute.

King backs off chastity campaign

MBABANE, Swaziland (AP) - Swaziland's king plans to abandon a campaign for teenage chastity that was ridiculed as old-fashioned, unfairly directed at young girls — and that he himself is accused of ignoring.

The announcement, published in the kingdom's papers on Friday and in a radio broadcast by a Swazi women's leader, coincided with the release of government figures showing that nearly one third of Swazi women are HIV positive.

In 2001, alarmed at the high rate of HIV infection in the kingdom, Mswati III reinstated the "unchwasha"

rite, banning unmarried girls younger than 18 from having sex.

With roughly 480,000 people in this nation of 1 million are estimated to be infected by HIV, AIDS has hit Swaziland harder than almost any country in the world. Under the five-year ban, Swazi girls were instructed to wear a tasseled scarf as a symbolic badge of virginity. If an unchwasha girl was approached for sex by a man, she was expected to throw her tassels at his homestead, obliging his family to pay a cow.

But when the 36-year-old king chose a 17-year-old as

his ninth wife in 2001, about 300 young women marched to a royal residence, laying down their tassels in protest.

His aides argued the ban was designed to discourage casual relationships, not marriage. But Mswati surrendered the cow, which was roasted and eaten by the young women.

With criticism mounting, Mswati decided to end the ban a year early.

Mswati has 12 wives, one bride-to-be and 27 children. His late father, King Sobhuza II, who led the country to independence in 1968, had more than 70 wives when he died.

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dominant media bias — our children cannot read about the Tulsa Riots and other historically significant events that happened to their relatives. It is why they do not read about the tremendous strides of Black business owners during the early existence of this country. An African saying is appropriate here: "Until the lion writes history, the hunter will always be glorified."

I am not suggesting that Jennings was not a good man, a good reporter and journalist, and a good news anchor. What I am saying is that the John Johnson story was an opportunity for dominant media to display what it always says it is — unbiased, fair and balanced — and all that other nonsense. Where is George Curry's *Emerge* magazine when we need it?

What do I expect? Nothing. I do not expect dominant media to treat the images of Black folks any differently from the way it treated us in 1910. If they do, it will be a blessing, but I do not expect it.

That is why we must support our own media — meaning, I emphasize, our own conscious Black media.

Additionally, we must maintain what we

have and capture even more outlets; we must grow those businesses by merging and forming strategic partnerships with one another; and we must resist the temptation to capitulate to offers from people who do not care about us when they come calling to take over what few media outlets we have.

Quite frankly, were it not for a few radio stations, most Black Press newspapers and a few magazines, positive Black images and fairness, when it comes to Black news, would be virtually nonexistent.

Our children know very little, if anything, about A.G. Gaston, Annie Turbo-Malone, S.B. Fuller, Joe Dudley, Dr. Walter Lomax, Ken Bridges, and other Black men and women, living and deceased, who have made monumental strides in the business world. This is, in large part, due to the dominant media and their lack of attention to these kinds of role models. It seems that our images have been reduced to dunking basketballs and making music videos.

Media bias can be overcome by one simple thing: Media by us.

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