

OUR VIEW

Police State?

For years, many people have complained that Las Vegas is a police state, that the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department and the North Las Vegas Police Department, are all-too-effective agents of said police state.

During the time of Martin Luther King Jr., it was common for cops to harass Blacks, particularly Black youth in West Las Vegas. They'd detain them for the smallest infraction, make them put their hands on hot car hoods, unnecessarily handcuff them and act in a generally disdainful manner.

Fast forward to the turn of the century.

Things have changed—marginally. Data collected in 2002 by law enforcement agencies statewide confirmed what many Blacks already knew: that we were stopped, handcuffed and cited at a rate disproportionate to our representation in the population. Two years later, the problem hasn't subsided. The Associated Press in November reported on a Reno study showing police there were twice as likely to stop, search, handcuff or ask Blacks and Hispanics to get out of their vehicles than White motorists. According to the article, 71 percent of the drivers in the study were White, 17 percent were Hispanic, four percent were Asian and three percent were Black. "While no study is ever definitive, this one provides very powerful evidence that there is a significant problem. People of color are treated differently than Whites once they are stopped," Gary Peck, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Nevada, was quoted as saying.

Makes you wonder: Are Blacks living in a police state?

That's probably what some of the men of Muhammad Mosque #75 felt recently after being unduly harassed by police. You've seen these men around town: well dressed, well mannered, greeting motorists with kind words and smiles while they peddle *Final Call* newspapers, incense and bean pies. Their genial demeanor has disarmed many motorists who disliked the Nation of Islam because of its controversial leader Louis Farrakhan (who, several years ago, distanced himself from the vitriolic, rhetoric of his past), and therefore disliked its denizens. Unfortunately, neither their kindness or civic outreach meant a thing on Martin Luther King holiday weekend.

As some cops saw it, Muhammad Mosque's civic legacy amounted to less than a hill of beans. According to witnesses, members of the mosque were doing what they always do—walking up and down the eastern median at the intersection of Lake Mead and Martin Luther King Boulevards. As they always do when the light turns red, these men weave in and out of stopped cars, chatting up motorists. If the talk gets a tad long-winded and the light turns green, they hot-foot it back to the median. Harmless, right? Some cops didn't see it that way. They'd committed a crime. The offense: jaywalking.

Jaywalking is generally used to describe when a pedestrian crosses the street without regard to traffic regulations. It most commonly refers to someone crossing a busy street outside of a designated crosswalk. Using this definition, most people have probably jaywalked, cops included. If you've ever seen the men of Muhammad Mosque—as a matter of fact, if you've ever seen firefighters or other groups who stand on medians and walk amid stopped traffic collecting money—you know that they aren't intentionally breaking the law. At issue here isn't the technicality of the jaywalking statute, but the spirit of the statute. If you cite the Nation of Islam, you have to cite everyone else. Fair is fair, unless, of course, you're in a police state.

In a police state, you can ask questions, but don't expect answers.

To wit: Why did it take four cop cars to cite nonthreatening citizens? Would this happen in Summerlin?

Why do West Las Vegas and North Las Vegas bear the brunt of the police-state state-of-mind?

Lastly, why was a concerned observer ticketed for asking questions? Is it another case of walking while Black?

Some say we're not in a police state. But if it walks like a duck...



Woman makes political history

By Dora LaGrande
Sentinel-Voice

On Monday, Africa's first elected woman president took office. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a Harvard graduate, is Liberia's new president. The international civil servant was inaugurated as Liberia's new "Commander in Chief," to borrow the title of a hit ABC television show about a woman president carving her name into history. As Africa's first elected female president, she is taking the helm of a damaged nation struggling for peace after a quarter century of coups and wars.

The elections, in which Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf was a candidate, were held in November 2005 and were the first held since the end of the 14-year civil war that ended in 2003. The people of Liberia were euphoric about the elections, which drew 1.3 million voters, and can you blame them?

In 1820, freed slaves from America and the Caribbean established Liberia, Africa's oldest independent republic in 1820. For more than 150 years, their descendants dominated the country's majority African population—a situation which created a simmering resentment, ethnic tension and eventually civil war. Liberia has suffered decades of mismanagement, instability and conflict despite being a resource-rich country with a relatively small population of just 3 million. Some 200,000



ON THE RECORD

By Dora LaGrande

people are believed to have died in Liberia's civil wars. With the hope of the return of peace under President Johnson-Sirleaf's leadership, it is hoped that the country can finally achieve stability, reduce corruption and tackle poverty.

The president's challenges are many, but they do not include a lack of resources. Liberia has the potential to become a middle-income country. Its land is crisscrossed by rivers watering fertile soil that supports rubber, palm oil and tropical fruit plantations. It has some of the richest timber resources anywhere in Africa, mountains bearing some of the world's highest quality iron ore, and significant deposits of diamonds and gold. The problem is that Liberia's resources have never been rationally exploited. In 1848, when freed slaves from the United States settled there, the Black settlers and foreign investors marked out huge plantations. Paying little attention to the needs of the native population, these farms and plantations made a few people very rich but dispossessed many more.

Despite having rich resources, her challenges are many. The Gross Domestic

Product (GDP), the output of goods and services produced by labor, and property, per capita, is well below the average sub-Saharan Africa nation, as is life expectancy and levels of childhood mortality. Liberia's capital, Monrovia, has had no running water or electricity for more than a decade. Corruption, which has permeated political and business circles, is widespread and will have to be tackled. She'll need to build political bridges with her opponent in the runoff race and is leaning toward offering him a job in her administration. And, probably, the biggest problem of all is unemployment. Currently, hundreds of thousands of young men are condemned to scratching a living by petty

trading or day laboring, which, historically, has made them easy prey to be manipulated by warlords or dishonest politicians. An honest government after all these years threatens to challenge the vested interest of many powerful Liberians, which—if that's what Johnson-Sirleaf intends to introduce—will mean that she has a bumpy ride ahead of her.

Now, if you will, allow me to shift from Africa's progress to America's lack of progress in the political arena. Namely, let's compare the reality of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's presidency to the possibility of a female president in the United States.

The USA is supposed to be the modern champion of democracy. But as one observes life in America, it is convincingly clear that the American public still has a lot to learn about this phenomenon called democracy. We just need to watch televi-

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