

New Orleans: Neapolitan, vanilla or chocolate?

By George Curry

Special to Sentinel-Voice

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin opened himself up for a torrent of criticism when he declared in a Martin Luther King Day speech that God wants New Orleans to again be a "chocolate city."

In his speech, he said, "It's time for us to come together. It's time for us to rebuild New Orleans — the one that should be a chocolate New Orleans." Nagin added, "This city will be a majority African-American city. It's the way God wants it to be. You can't have New Orleans no other way. It wouldn't be New Orleans."

Under fire, Nagin backed away from his comments. It's easy to criticize Nagin for his choice of words or for professing to speak for God — and many have done just that. But that's the easy way out. What's missing in the discussion about rebuilding New Orleans is a candid exchange about race. Now that the mayor has apologized for calling for the reconstruction of a chocolate city, let's discuss what's being avoided — the issue of race. Of course, race is not the primary issue when pondering New Orleans' future. The paramount issue is one of safety and providing protection against future hurricanes in the below-sea-level city. But in deciding how to rebuild New Orleans, race becomes a salient

factor, intended or not.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans had the fifth-highest concentration of African-Americans among major cities, according to the Census Bureau. With 84 percent, Gary, Ind., led the nation in that category, followed by Detroit with 81.6 percent, Birmingham, Ala., at 73.5 percent, Jackson, Miss., with 70.6 percent and New Orleans, with Blacks representing 67.3 percent of the population (the other leading chocolate cities were Baltimore, 64.3 percent, Atlanta, 61.4, Memphis, 61.4, Washington, D.C., 60 percent and Richmond, Va., 57.2).

Mayor Nagin isn't the only person suggesting that New Orleans should maintain its chocolate majority. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Alphonso Jackson, an African-American, predicted that New Orleans will become more vanilla-like. And even those who profess to want a Neapolitan city — similar to the equal stripes of chocolate, vanilla and strawberry in the brick-shaped block of ice cream — know that under current plans, vanilla will become the dominant flavor of the city.

Whatever the final product, race should



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be openly debated. New Orleans will, in effect, become a planned community and race should be part of that planning. New Orleans, like most major U.S. cities, has a largely segregated public school system that grew out of largely segregated residential patterns. If the city can be revived in a way that leaves no racial group isolated from important

resources and services, Hurricane Katrina could be a blessing in disguise.

However, if the unstated plan is to rid the city of its Black majority, then everyone should return to the drawing board.

New Orleans' population approached 500,000 prior to Katrina. The special Bring New Orleans Back Commission places the current population at 144,000. The population is projected to rise to 181,000 by next September and 247,000 by September 2008. The commission says it is hoping to make New Orleans "the best city in the world."

But the commission has not helped its image by recommending a four-month moratorium on rebuilding the most damaged neighborhoods, most of them Black. The commission says a determination must be made to allow reconstruction or tear down

these areas and allow others to redevelop them.

On January 22, The *New York Times* carried a candid news story headline: "In New Orleans, Smaller May Mean Whiter." That kind of candor and directness needs to be injected into the discussions about the new New Orleans.

"The city, nearly 70 percent African-American before Hurricane Katrina, has lost some of its largest Black neighborhoods to the deluge, and many fear it will never be a predominantly Black city again, as it has been since the 1970s," the news story observed.

It continued, "Indeed, race has become a subtext for just about every contentious decision the city faces: where to put FEMA trailers, which neighborhoods to rebuild, how the troubled school system should be reorganized and when elections should be held. Many Blacks see threats to their political domination in reconstruction plans that do not give them what they once had. But many Whites see an opportunity to restore a broken city they fled decades ago."

It's an opportunity for Blacks and Whites to come together and determine what will be best for the city. But they can't do that by ignoring the elephant in the room — race.

George E. Curry is editor-in-chief of the NNPA News Service.

Time to reward consciousness, commitment

By James Clingman

Special to Sentinel-Voice

"It's not the critic who counts, not the one who points out how the strong man stumbled or how the doer of deeds might have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred with the sweat and dust and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes up short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions and spends himself in a worthy cause and who at best knows the triumph of high achievement and who at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat." — Theodore Roosevelt

I chose to dedicate this article to those whose level of consciousness and commitment keeps them fighting for true freedom.

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Administrators and teachers see a marked reduction in paperwork. Principals have indicated that they save five hours a week because they no longer have to attend regional meetings. Onerous paperwork on student transfers have all but disappeared.

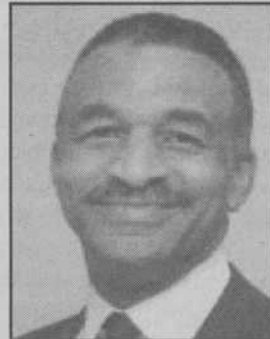
The Autonomy Zone schools must meet higher standards than average schools, though. Average daily attendance must be 90 percent, and 80 percent of students must graduate for the school to be considered successful.

The principals in the program support each other in networks of five to six schools that have similar issues or philosophies and more clearly define lines of responsibility and accountability.

Accountability for overall student performance has been a real challenge for the Clark County School District, a district that in 2001

Because I have a personal understanding of what it takes of you and what it takes out of you, having been involved in collective Black economic empowerment for many years, I feel the need to acknowledge and thank you.

During the past decade, I have met and worked with many whom I consider not only consciously committed to economically uplifting our people, but also just plain-old smart and highly qualified to lead us — not by talking but by doing. I have seen them go through everything from being ostracized, ridiculed and left financially bereft, to suffering heart attacks, the ravages of cancer and even assassination. Yes, some are gone, but there are others still here, still fighting, not on a stage, not for notoriety or ac-



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claim, but because they are consciously committed to economic empowerment for our people.

In my travels across this country, I have become friends with so many who are unafraid to stand up and be Black, so many who, by their example, show us not only what to do but how to do it. I have met entrepreneurs who have taken their economic destiny into their own hands and left the new plantations, broken the shackles of psychological enslavement and continue to do whatever they can to help others.

I am so proud to know so many and to be loved by so many of the same mind and the same heart as I have for collective economic empowerment. So, this is for you — all of

you — for you have kept me going; you have kept my fires burning; and you have provided those booster shots I have needed along the way. I want so much to name all of you, but there is not enough space in this column.

While others may continue to get the adulation, the visibility, the material rewards, and all the other trappings of only talking about our problems but never offering anything to solve them, while some of them may even get their rewards by going against their own people: know that it's you who will bring us through the tough spots and take us where we need to go. You will always make the sacrifices; you will always do what is necessary rather than what is expedient. You will always stand up, speak up, and put up, and never give up, because freedom is in your DNA. You are the remnant of David Walker and Harriet Tubman, strong and unyielding

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became a "minority majority" district, one with White students accounting for less than half of the total school population. While Black and Hispanic students make up the majority of the student population, they have the highest dropout rate and account for the highest rate of students who graduate but don't get a diploma because they can't pass the proficiency test.

The local school board members have a tough decision to make, still. They have to decide whether they are interested in creating the image of a successful school district or if they are interested in creating a reality of 317 successful schools — schools that will incorporate the full involvement of the people closest to the kids and the classroom: the principals and the teachers, working in consultation with parents (who must be involved in their children's education at every level), and the children themselves at the higher grade levels. These are the people who are best

positioned to determine what kids need to learn, how they best can learn it and how to assess that learning.

A new leader whose main goal is to make a difference in children's lives and who has the guts and determination to bring and implement a new concept is exactly what the district needs. The district has had new superintendents, but it has been operating under the same old structure which has continued to fail miserably as depicted by the declining achievement scores. Mr. Nadelstern and his Autonomy Zone initiative might have been just what the doctor ordered. The format, thus far, has been successful in New York City and can be made scalable to the entire school system here. A lot of attention got focused on him and that model, an effective one. Maybe that will be the only legacy of Nadelstern's candidacy here, and maybe some people in the district here will consider the possibilities of a new way. Maybe?

The district's legitimate role is to channel available resources directly to the schools as much as possible. The initiative in New York City has saved a quarter of a billion dollars a year that now goes directly to schools. Recruit the best people to be school leaders, hold them accountable for the results, support them, and provide incentives for them. Ultimately, they protect the children and turn out highly educated students.

And last but not least, parents still need to be a very integral part of their child's education and the school system. Parents should regularly attend the school board meetings and support their trustees. Go to the child's school and visit their classroom to see what's going on (remember to sign in at the office first) and go to the school board meetings when leadership is being discussed, and participate in choosing the individual who will be key in charting the course of each child's future.