

OUR VIEW

Worst Times

These, quite possibly, are the worst of times for African-Americans in high-profile, public positions. By now you've seen, watched or heard about the tsunami of problems swirling around University Medical Center. In bad financial straits for years, UMC is drowning in a mountain of debt and could need another taxpayer bailout.

Sad as UMC's financial situation is, what's sadder still is that an African-American or, more correctly, three African-Americans, are to/will be blamed for its worsening economic condition. Chief Executive Officer Lacy Thomas, Chief Financial Officer Richard Powell and Chief Operating Officer Marlo Hodges have run the county hospital since 2003. All came from Chicago and all were friends/colleagues back in the Windy City. On Tuesday, as Thomas was doing a poor job of explaining how the hospital has performed worse under his watch—he was brought in to stanch the bleeding—and as county commissioners did a good job of acting surprised—no hackles, it seems, were raised when UMC began missing deadlines for financial reports—police were raiding the hospital for any evidence of theft, fraud or misconduct.

Turns out, the problems went beyond huge deficits and into what's alleged to be a culture of graft and corruption: contracts awarded to companies that didn't provide services; circumventing procedures to funnel business to friends. This is bad stuff; bad enough for county manager Virginia Valentine to give Thomas the axe.

Said Valentine after Thomas spoke: "I had concerns about his lack of transparency regarding the hospital's financial situation. I've decided it's not in the best interests of Clark County for Lacy Thomas to continue running University Medical Center."

In commenting to the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* after the meeting, Thomas' friend Bill Taylor, who owns a Chicago company whose contracts with UMC are being probed, drew the race card: "If this man was White, this wouldn't be happening. He's an African-American in a redneck state. They hated his guts the day he walked in there. ... There's a lot of racist folks that don't want him there, and they'll do anything to get him out of there, including lying."

Taylor's rhetoric comes off like the ranting of a defensive friend rather than a studied analysis of what led to Thomas' downfall. Facts are this: something is wrong at UMC and, as its leader, Thomas is ultimately responsible; if he funneled contracts to friends who didn't perform the work, that's a crime; Thomas should've been more forthcoming about UMC's money losses. Which yields perhaps the saddest parts of the story: the possibility that care was compromised, which is unforgivable, and the stain this scandal leaves not only on Blacks, but Black men. No doubt, some folks are cooing right now: *See, we told you, they're not capable leaders.*

In another sad development, Yvonne Atkinson-Gates has decided, after 14 years on the County Commission, to retire. With Lynette Boggs defeat in November and Atkinson Gates' departure in March, we have to hope against hope that Gov. Jim Gibbons selects an African-American replacement. If not, the state's most powerful municipal body will be without a Black presence for the first time in a generation. Think what you will about Atkinson Gates; her brushes with ethics, questions about residency, concerns about undue influence. But don't minimize her advocacy for issues concerning African-Americans and other minorities and women.

On the topic of powerful voices, one of the valley's most powerful has found his muted of late. An early architect of the gaming industry's diversity push, a frequent critic of the Clark County School District (its bids processes and insensitivity to minority students) and founder of the politically influential Caucus of African American Nevadans, E. Louis Overstreet has been removed from his executive director post at the similarly influential Urban Chamber of Commerce. Insiders say the falling out is a dispute over personalities. Let's hope cooler heads can prevail because the Black community—with the UMC fiasco and departure of Gates from office—has had enough bad news this week to last the entire year.



I want Chicago-Indy in Miami

By George E. Curry
Special to Sentinel-Voice

I admit that it may be considered narrow-minded, politically incorrect and not altogether logical, but that's not going to stop me from pulling for a 2007 Super Bowl that features the Indianapolis Colts against the Chicago Bears. Although a Black quarterback, Doug Williams, has won the MVP trophy, no Black head coach has taken his team to the ultimate football game. And if the Bears line up opposite of the Colts on Feb. 4, it will place two Black head coaches on the sidelines, guaranteeing that one will emerge victorious.

Even though football is a game, it has never been only a game. I know because I played football in segregated Alabama and remember how I beamed with pride when I saw an African-American on TV playing quarterback, the position that, supposedly, requires the most intellect. At 14 years old, I saw Sandy Stephens on TV quarterbacking the University of Minnesota. After that, in my mind, I became Sandy Stephens. His talent was on display for everyone to see. Oh the field, I didn't want to be like Mike, I wanted to be like Sandy.

When you have "White" and "Colored" signs staring at you every day, you take pride wherever and when-



GEORGE E. CURRY

ever you can find it. In the athletic world, Sandy Stephens gave me that pride. The all-White teams at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, my hometown, certainly didn't instill any Black pride, so I looked north for it. I never met Sandy Stephens, but I didn't have to. His mission was accomplished from afar and, at the time, that worked just fine.

Even though the sports landscape has drastically changed for the better since 1961, even at Deep South universities, kids still need role models and the impact is greater when they can see people who look like them succeed at the highest level of competition. While that's certainly not limited to sports, we're often consumed by athletics during our youth.

Although no one made a big deal of it, I was happy to see that when Ohio State University and the University of Florida squared off to determine the national championship, each had a Black starting quarterback. In the

biggest college game of my lifetime, the first time that a No. 1-ranked football team was playing the No.2-ranked team, each would be led by an African-American quarterback.

Our young people, in particular, need to know that the world many of them take for granted, has not always been this way. When Blacks played on integrated teams up north, they were still shut out of playing quarterback and middle linebacker, the defensive equivalent. We were supposedly too dumb to play those positions. And heaven forbid Blacks becoming stars at those coveted positions; the secret would be out.

These myths persisted even though the 1950s and 1960s teams of Jake Gaither at Florida A&M, John Merritt at Tennessee State and Eddie Robinson at Grambling were capable of

beating some White schools in the South. In fact, in the first interracial football game in the South, played on November 29, 1969, Gaither's Florida A&M Rattlers defeated the University of Tampa 34-28. (I wrote a chapter on that game in my first book, "Jake Gaither: America's Most Famous Black Coach.")

Segregation was designed to crush the dreams of Blacks. And one way of doing that was to make sure Black athletes didn't star in the glamour positions, especially quarterback. It was stupid for anyone to assume that Blacks couldn't play those positions because we were playing them whenever we played one another. Did they think that we played offense without a quarterback, using 10 players instead of 11? Did they think we played with 10 on defense because none of

(See Curry, Page 11)

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