

Documentary series: What it's like to be Black in America

CNN

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network's series reads like a sociological report on the state of Black America, showcasing individuals who are living through the successes as well as struggles of one of the most misunderstood communities in America, nay the world.

The documentary series began in April with "Eyewitness to Murder: The King Assassination." O'Brien spoke with witnesses, investigators and other parties that were connected to King, including his convicted assassin, James Earl Ray.

Part two of the documentary airing July 23 at 9 p.m., "The Black Man," puts a searchlight on the lives of Black men and their conditions. As CNN indicated in a release, "perhaps the most misrepresented group in America today," Black men have been the recipients of all sorts of media castigation and stereotypes.

In the segment, *Essence* magazine editor-in-chief Angela Burt-Murray said, "There are so many African-American men doing the right thing. Those are the stories you are missing," with regard to responsible Black men raising their families.

True. Our society has been allowed to buy into the false notion that most Black men are dangerous and armed and that all of them have refused educational opportunities. And these are the myths that many in America with an ever ready mainstream media have sold to audiences without any sense of recourse to the damage this negative portrayal has had on the Black community.

While there is no doubt that there is an abundance of father absenteeism in the Black community, with its sharp-toothed implications on the future of the Black child, there is also a significant father presence in the lives of many of our children that is not reported as it should be. If the media is going to report on these kinds of sociological ills in the Black community, it must do media justice by presenting issues in perspective to allow for greater understanding, as well as opportunity to secure requisite resources to address those kinds of issues.

Black America for too long has been the victim of one-sided reporting and has been deliberately painted as

a monolithic society with straight-jacketed thinking. No wonder the Democrats take the Black votes for granted.

A central issue in the Black male segment is the incarceration of Blacks in the prison industrial complex some Black historians have often referred to as modern-day slavery.

While a recent Pew Center report indicated that for the first time, one in every 100 adults in America is behind bars, the Sentencing Project says, "More than 60 percent of the people in prison are now racial and ethnic minorities. For Black males in their twenties, one in every eight is in prison or jail on any given day. These trends have been intensified by the disproportionate impact of the 'war on drugs'; three fourths of all persons in prison for drug offenses are people of color."

Black men are sentenced for crimes their White counterparts would only get probation for instead of jail time. That is the reality. When they come out, they can't find jobs because felonious histories are anathema to the highly competitive job market.

Marvin Andrews, an African-American inmate at San Quentin State Prison, California, is in the segment showing his GED certificate to O'Brien, which he received in prison.

Encouraging, but how many prisons have educational programs where inmates are truly rehabilitated and effectively prepared with skills to re-enter society?

But newspaper editors, radio and television producers do not have an excuse anymore to ignore what CNN has committed resources to uncover in its documentary.

Setting up a prison project devoted to covering racial and complex issues affecting the estimated 2.1 million people behind bars would be an important step toward meaningful media responsibility. I have always contended that the power of the media — if used justly — can help liberate people. If used unjustly, it binds lives and grinds hope.

Roland Fryer, 30, Harvard economics professor, told O'Brien that education is the root of future successes. He called it "the ball game," which is an undeniable fact. But first, government must

begin to address the state of public schools in urban communities. Broken educational systems with no funding can in no way provide a solid educational foundation for a child who aspires to attend an Ivy League school. Education should not be a back burner issue. It should be a top priority on our government's agenda.

The third segment of the documentary airing July 24 dwells on "The Black Woman & Family," a look at the issues taking a toll on the

lives of Black women such as HIV/AIDS and single parenthood, among others.

In 2005, the *Washington Post* reported that AIDS was among the top three causes of death for Black women. In the segment, Whoopi Goldberg sends a strong warning to women to guard against the deadly virus.

Notwithstanding, the documentary highlights some success stories of Blacks who have crossed the Rubicon against all odds. So many of those stories do not

make the headlines or even covered.

Beyond these issues glares the responsibility of the various levels of government in ensuring the welfare of hard-pressed taxpayers who expect well thought out policies and result-gearred actions that will alleviate the deep-seated problems raised in the CNN documentary. Yes, the Black community must hold itself accountable. At the same time, deficiency or failure of government in meting out just equitable

policies to narrow the disparities in health and education cannot be excused. That is why citizens pay taxes. They expect a return on their civic investment.

Both senators Barack Obama and John McCain, the presidential candidates representing the Democratic Party and the Republican Party respectively, should heed the instructive revelations in this challenging documentary.

Bankole Thompson writes for the *Michigan Chronicle*.

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