

# Photos of dead bring home true cost of war

By Nicole C. Lee  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Recently, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates lifted a ban that prohibited photography of the caskets of fallen U.S. soldiers.

Supporters of the ban believe it preserved much needed privacy for mourning families, even though reporters will still be required to obtain permission from the families of returning casualties prior to printing any of the photographs.

Supporters of the ban also argue photos of the fallen will be used to politicize special-interest agendas, while opponents counter that the ban is another example of the restrictions on information about the fallen. However, if we truly value that these men and women have made the "ultimate sacrifice," recognition of the return of our war dead, seems not only appropriate but necessary.

The power that images of death and suffering can have on the collective psyche of a group of people, or a country, is indelible. Images of death and destruction have been used in the past both to terrorize and traumatize. And while many of the deaths have come

from dire and unjust situations, one thing can not be forgotten: their humanity.

While we have seen far too few images of our fallen soldiers, we have seen even fewer images of the civilian casualties of our foreign policy. From Afghanistan and Iraq to Somalia, Haiti and Colombia, men, women and children have suffered and died without the flashing of a camera bulb. Children have lost parents, wives have lost husbands, and society has lost security and hope due to the recklessness of war.

Real illustrations of lost life give people a more visceral, emotional and personal attachment to its passing. It was in this vein that over 50 years ago Mamie Till Mobley insisted on leaving her son Emmett's casket open during his funeral.

She did not want the grotesque and brutal murder of her innocent 14 year-old son to go unnoticed, and consequently a photograph of Emmett's body was widely circulated and published. It was under these horrific and



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racially charged circumstances that the image showed the relentless and savage nature of racism in the U.S.

Gates' decision rings particularly true when we look at the disproportionate ways Black and Latino youth have been impacted by U.S. involvement in wars abroad in the name of "justice, security and freedom." The high military enlistment rates of Black and Latino youth can be attributed in part to social and economic factors, a lack of alternative opportunities and the unbalanced recruitment efforts of the U.S. Armed Forces. Economic realities in the U.S. show that while the unemployment numbers have risen for all groups, African-Americans, and other people of color, continue to bear the disproportionate burden of the current crisis.

On high school and college campuses, students of color are heavily recruited and the military is pitched as the "best option" to disadvantaged youth and young adults. Sadly,

they also make up a large number of those soldiers whose bodies are returned to their families in caskets.

Ironically, many of our wars are fought by economically disadvantaged people of color against economically disadvantaged people of color. The U.S. military reaches every corner of the planet. African-Americans are deployed in Africa to protect corporate oil interests. If the present course for AFRICOM, the new U.S. unified command for Africa, is maintained, African-American U.S. soldiers may be called upon to fight for U.S. interests in Africa. Many African-Americans who have worked in Africa fear the ramifications of such an entanglement.

The new administration should be applauded for this new move towards transparency. War has a real cost. More innocents die than we like to think about. We must go further and emphasize the true nature and cost of war. This cost is not just paid in American lives but it has been paid in the blood of so many whose names and images were forgotten before they were even acknowledged.

Nicole C. Lee is the executive director of TransAfrica Forum.

# Post not out of woods over chimp controversy

By George E. Curry  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

The crude *New York Post* cartoon starring President Barack Obama as a dead stimulus bill-writing chimpanzee has been roundly and justifiably criticized as racist. And the half-hearted apologies by the editor and, later, the owner of the newspaper have been exposed for what they are — half-hearted. While much has been written about longtime efforts to equate African-Americans with apes, not enough has been said about the broader motivation behind portraying Blacks as less than human.

Depicting African-Americans as animalistic was part of a larger campaign, both in Europe and the early American colonies, orchestrated to rationalize slavery. No one claiming to be human can justify enslaving another group of people and violently stripping them of their humanity. So White supremacists launched a systematic effort to portray Blacks as animals unworthy of being viewed as humans.

Geocities.com has listed some interesting 19th Century examples of what it calls "scientific rationalism."

The site opens with the observation: "Scholars began to take a more 'scientific' approach in understanding the difference

between Blacks and Whites. They placed great emphasis on environmental factors. French 'free' thinkers believed that every man was born equal, but their [environment] resulted in some kind of hierarchy with Whites on top, Blacks on bottom. According to their train of logic, a Black person could become just as superior as a European if they were removed from Africa and placed into Europe. During this time, philosophers used their claim to justify slavery."

The notion that Africans needed to be taken to Europe in order to be elevated was flawed. Civilization originated in Egypt, not Rome, Greece, France or Britain. That fact is undisputed, yet the idea persists to this day that Africa represented jungles while Europe was the birthplace of a supposed higher order.

George Cuvier was considered the Aristotle of his age and is credited with being the founder of geology, paleontology and comparative anatomy. In 1812, he described Africans as "the most degraded of human races, whose form approaches that of the beast and whose intelligence is nowhere great



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enough to arrive at regular government."

By contrast, he asserted, "The White race, with oval face, straight hair and nose, to which the civilized peoples of Europe belong and which appear to us the most beautiful of all, is also superior to others by its genius, courage and activity."

Dr. Julien-Joseph Virey, writing an essay in the Dictionary of Medical Science, said in 1819: "Among us [Whites] the forehead is pushed forward, the mouth is pulled back as if we were destined to think rather than eat; the Negro has a shortened forehead and mouth that is pushed forward as if he were made to eat instead of to think."

As the American colonies fought for independence from Britain, their leaders advanced the idea that they were special people, chosen by God, to rule over expanded territories. That idea was best expressed by "manifest destiny," a term coined by journalist John L. O'Sullivan in 1845 to justify imperialism. The doctrine was invoked to defend the U.S. annexation of Texas, Oregon, New Mexico, California and later Alaska,

Hawaii and the Philippines.

It was in 1859 that Charles Darwin posited that humans evolved from apes, with Blacks being an inferior order.

I have written in this space and in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that Abraham Lincoln, the so-called Great Liberator, believed that Blacks were inferior to Whites, saying in 1858, "I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the White and Black races..."

The notion of White superiority was ingrained in this nation's racially-segregated customs and laws. In what became a landmark Supreme Court ruling, Dred Scott, who was enslaved, moved with his master from the slave state of Missouri to the free state of Illinois and then to the Wisconsin Territory, where slavery was also prohibited. After Scott's owner, an Army surgeon, was reassigned to Missouri, Scott sued for his freedom.

The case reached the Supreme Court, where it was decided that no slave descendant, free or enslaved, could ever be a U.S. citizen or had ever been a citizen and therefore had no right to sue in federal courts. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, writing for seven of the nine justices, argued that the Founding Fathers viewed Blacks as "beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the White race, either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the White man was bound to respect."

That ruling, *Scott v. Stanford*, was the law of the land until the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling outlawing separate but equal schools. As late as the mid-1960s, Jim Crow laws were still in effect. Portraying African-Americans as less than human has a long, painful history. And the *Post* cartoon played into that ugly past.

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would "follow the money" and provide annotations of the stimulus bill to Black Leadership Forum membership organizations.

A refreshing voice was that of Erica Williams, director of policy and advocacy at Campus Progress, a project of the Center of American Progress.

Erica eloquently enumerated her belief that young people can do more in current times than "public service" (not that public service is beneath young people, but they should not be "pigeon holed" to such). She continued, "Young adults are prepared to meaningfully participate in the public and private sector."

The discussion shifted from domestic to international policy.

Randall Robinson, founder of TransAfrica Forum, and current professor of law at the Penn State School of Law. Petitioned the audience to expand their world view and become well-versed in global issues. In particular, he stated that African-Americans should study more.

For example, Asian-American students study on average about 15 hours per week; European-American students, 12, and African-American students study the least time. Professor Robinson went on to say that Black parents and students must embrace "rigorous scholarship" as cultural tradition which be-

gan in Ancient African.

Vann Jones, founder and president of Green for All, challenged participants to understand that environmental awareness is not new to Black people. He cited the African evolution of ecology, dating back to the cultural connection between godliness and the ground, water, and air.

Ultimately, a common chord of collective responsibility permeated the panels of the 2009 State of the Black Union. The American patient may be sick, but Black people are well prepared to improve its condition. Well prepared.

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