

Forum

A "Sapphire" Named Whoopi?

Nothing new about it. I've been saying it a long time. When my baser instincts prevailed, I called it the "Californication of the American Negro." Tinseltown not only gave us Tarzan, but also the lesser humans of the darker hue. Hollywood gave us Amos 'n Andy, Stepin' Fetcher, Sapphire, Rochester, Superfly, Shaft, Sweetback, and the Spook Who Sat By The Door? Oatmeal boxes, Auntie. Firecracker packages, you thick-lipped watermelon-eating ootroon. We're selling stuff right here and we shall not let the fragile sensibilities of any race of people get in our way! Right Sambo?

Derogatory words, jokes and stereotypes based on gender and race are permanent features of mass popular culture, especially the entertainment industry. Laughing at belittling jokes about another group (or one's own) reaffirms negative images and rationalizes and justifies the continued negative treatment of that group.

years ago amongst the wretched of the earth in the San Diego slums, ("low as a snake's belly in a wagon track...without a pit to hiss in,") Caryn E. Johnson changed her name to Whoopi Goldberg. Surely, this novel "Jewification" of her name (likely suggested by some white agent) added to her rising celebrity appeal. Many Jews gentrified their names to avoid anti-Semitic responses to their public reasons. But, one has to believe that Jack Benny, Danny Thomas (a Lebanese American), and Lucille Ball Knew when they were wearing the mask.

Whoopi-like "characters" the mask worn by far too many highly visible African Americans today, are troubling because they tend to transmit undesirable values and images. Each week Jet glorifies the hedonistic lifestyles, crass materialism and debauched lifestyles of these folk who are quick to say that they are individuals, not role model, or race women and men. Their

When done tastefully, it serves the purpose of making laughable the uniqueness of the Americans ethnic landscape, the faults, foibles and frailties of all Americans. Those at the bottom of the white hierarchy--my beloved fellow mountain people--are caricatured on Mayberry USA and the Beverly Hillbillies. One must never take oneself too seriously. A society so uptight that its people couldn't make fun of themselves would soon explode. Why, then, did the Ted Danson/Whoopi Goldberg event last week resonate so loudly?



GUEST COLUMNIST

By WILLIAM H. TURNER

Some minority group members--especially in the case of African Americans--react in strange and unpredictable ways to the varied and sordid social stimuli of their environments. Quire often, the reaction is self-destructive. Out of the obsessive need for "acceptance" by the majority group (who defines them), some choose to change the color and texture of their hair. Others blame "others" within their group for its two status. Some try to "pass" as members of the dominant group. Me and you, Kemosabe! (Remember Tonto?) Still others, in hot and unprincipled pursuit of acceptance render persuasive arguments to support the dominant's group's prejudices. Remember Clarence Thomas, some consciously seek to intermarry--for all wrong reasons. Some change their names.

When she was living on welfare twenty "roll" models are wads of treen stuff and they have allegiances only to paying customers. On cue usually photo opportunities, they say and do the right (black) thing. They want it both ways. Reminds me of the fellow married to Kate, but in love with Edith: remember, you can't have your cake and eat it too! When politically correct to do so, they tell us that race is irrelevant; when otherwise appropriate, they tell us that race is the great divide. In the good old days when a spade was called a spade, no blacks had the individual freedom to be a disgrace to the race! Those who "git bigger than their britches" were quickly labelled "wishy-washy, two-faced sellouts!"

In-group members can do what out-group members can't afford and usually don't.. Ted Danson, friend though he be of our dread-locked Rasta, Whoopi is clever too, but he ain't no Richard Prior. Flip Wilson could do Geraldine, but Jonathan Winters couldn't. Alas, Uncle Milton Berle wouldn't last a minute as Uncle Jeb Clampett. We wear the mask, eh DuBois?

In his letter to employees, Allen said: "This is a deplorable mistake on the part of a company with a long, distinguished record of supporting the African-American community." To further distinguish the company's record of interaction with African Americans, Allen held a meeting with the heads of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. As a result of the meeting, it was announced that the NAACP and AT&T would "pursue further dialogue on such issues as recruiting minorities, providing scholarships for African-American students, procurement and promotion goals, utilization of black financial institutions, senior executive positions and management diversity training programs."

While the company's press release, after the gorilla page appeared, said that the company is among the largest supporters of the United Negro College Fund and has financially supported black artists, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, the Children's Defense

Doonesbury



Pulling the Plug on AT&T

AT&T used to be the biggest Mother of them all. Before the breakup of its operating telephone companies, American Telephone and Telegraph was the nation's largest employer, and for years the Bell System was considered one of America's best equal-opportunity companies. Today, questions about AT&T's commitment to the black community, and many of the country's black leaders are ready to pull the plugs of their long-distance service from AT&T.

AT&T is the nation's largest long-distance telephone company, and to hold on to this lofty position the company's top executives rushed to apologize for the "racist" cartoon that appeared in its 300,000-circulation employee magazine called Focus. The company's switchboard lit up with protest calls when employees received the September issue of the magazine which showed people on several of the world's continents conversing over the telephone. All of the characters representing the continents were human except for the caller representing Africa; it was a gorilla.

The AT&T employees and several civil rights leaders were outraged by the insensitivity of the cartoon and were looking for justice of some kind for this gaffe.

While this was just the grist for black America to get "mad as hell," AT&T's leaders moved quickly to rid themselves of the problem. Justice AT&T-style has produced the following actions:

- (1) The firing of the outside contractor that prepared the editorial content for Focus.
- (2) Firing of Mike Moran, the freelance artist who designed and drew the gorilla cartoon.
- (3) A letter of apology from CEO Bob Allen to all AT&T employees.
- (4) Distribution of a listing of AT&T's good works in the community.
- (5) The elimination of the Focus magazine and its staff.

BUSINESS EXCHANGE

By WILLIAM REED

Fund and a long list of others, the question currently on the floor for AT&T is "Does AT&T really interact with black America in a fair and equitable manner?"

Allen relates with blacks based on what those around him tell him. He doesn't know blacks, and most of the people around him probably don't either. It is entirely possible that one of the AT&T people who had final approval over the Focus cartoon was black.

To make AT&T's record really "distinguished" and to be sure that AT&T's black consumers don't move in mass to pull his plug, Allen should give a call to Denny's CEO, Jerry Richardson. After talking to Richardson about his billion-dollar and equitable deal with blacks, Allen will be able to see what a real man who realizes his company's mistakes has to do.

Join Your Local NAACP

If the number of calls received by my office are any indication, the general public believes that the NAACP has an effective answer to every question. I regularly receive calls from all races, ages and political dispositions, wanting to talk about or report alleged discrimination. A large number of the callers start at the wrong end of the pipe line looking for assistance. They need to look first in their local communities.

I have taken to asking callers, "Have you talked to your local NAACP Branch?" or "Does your community have a 'human relations committee?'" The two most often heard answers are "no" and "I don't know." Since I have been NAACP activist for all my adult life, I like to know exactly why someone would go to the time and expense of calling me in Charlotte, when they live in Elizabeth City or Wilmington. It seems that to some people the NAACP is much like the church. You know that it exists, but you only call on it when you need it. I wonder if some of my callers ever stop to think what hard working NAACP members feel about them.

Many years ago the NAACP produced a cartoon of a skinny little fellow with a very fat man astride his back. The skinny fellow represented NAACP members, who were through their volunteer efforts trying to increase opportunity for African Americans in general. The caption of the cartoon said, "Don't be a free loader. Join the NAACP today." The cartoon remains relevant today.

NAACP membership has remained static for the last decade at around 500,000. The demands placed upon that membership, by non-members has increased each year. You

might think that the struggle is over, but you would never be able to tell it by the calls reaching my office. The NAACP state conference receives over 10,000 calls each year for assistance. This figure does not count the calls received by our branches nor the NAACP special projects and programs operating in North Carolina. If we were to assume that NAACP

SPEAKING OUT

By KELLY M. ALEXANDER JR.



branches receive no more than 5 calls for assistance per day during a five day business week (an unrealistically low assumption), then over 176,000 calls are being received by NAACP branches each year.

NAACP membership in North Carolina bounces back and fourth from a low of 18,000 to a high 35,000. The last time I checked we were at 25,000 dues paying card carrying members. Any idiot can see that we have not even scratched the surface of the NAACP's membership potential in this state. The NAACP has the organizational structure; the training; the contacts; the credibility - the only thing missing is you.

(Kelly M. Alexander Jr. is the state president of the NAACP.)