

## FORUM

## African Americans and the Fourth of July

What to the African is your Fourth of July? ...  
A day that reveals to him more than any other  
day of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty  
to which he is the constant victim. ...  
Frederick Douglass  
July 5, 1852

As the eloquent, insightful words of the great freedom fighter and trail-blazer, Frederick Douglass, suggest, African Americans have long viewed Independence Day/the Fourth of July differently from most other (especially Caucasian) citizens.

While many Americans have historically celebrated the Fourth of July holiday with patriotic programs, parades, etc., it has traditionally been the custom (and practice) in most African American communities to view July 4th as "just another holiday."

To be sure, African Americans can take pride in the role our ancestors, such as Crispus Attucks and Peter Salem (among scores of others), played in America's war with its colonizer, Great Britain.

To be sure, our folk have in the past (and for that matter, continue to) commemorated this holiday with



## GUEST COLUMNIST

By CLIFTON E. GRAVES JR.

picnics, parties and family reunions. But again, not out of any real patriotic fervor, but more so because it is the only real holiday of the summer!

Yet, in spite of this tradition borne out of our people's long and continued struggle for justice and against oppression in this yet-to-be "land of the free", it is nonetheless instructive of us to use this American Independence Day weekend to reflect on African and African-Americans efforts toward economic and political independence.

cal independence.

Let us use this July 4th to celebrate - albeit with guarded optimism - the victory of our people in South Africa. Conversely, let us use this holiday to reflect on what role WE must play in the ongoing tragedies in Rwanda and Haiti.

Obviously, our battles on the domestic front must continue to have priority consideration. Yet, in spite of the burgeoning crises confronting our folk socially, economically, politically and psychologically, we must remain committed to insuring that a better day is in store for our children.

We must take heart in efforts underway locally and nationally to address external oppression and internal obsolescence permeating our communities. Thus, be inspired by the NAACP's recent African-American Summit. Critics notwithstanding, Brother Ben Chavis is deserving of our collective support in attempting to be a change agent in our community, bringing disparate

individuals and groups together for the common good.

Let us be inspired by the upcoming North Carolina Black Leadership Caucus convention, schedule here in Winston-Salem July 14-16. The agenda promises to seriously address long standing concerns that need our immediate attention.

Yes, Frederick Douglass' words are as appropriate about the Fourth of July in 1994, as they were in 1852. African Americans yet have no cause to celebrate this nation's "Independence Day", for we are not yet free. But far from wallowing in a quagmire of despair, or conversely, mindlessly partying and picnicking, let us use this holiday to renew our individual and collective commitment to making this land, this world the place it has not been yet, but yet must be!

Freedom ain't free!!  
Peace...

(Clifton E. Graves Jr. is a life-long member of the NAACP and a member of the local Executive Committee.)

## The Long, Hot Summer of the NAACP

As far as fluctuations and shifts in America's civil rights landscape are concerned, the arrival of summer signals the transition time between the season of survival and the coming of change. The old conventions and accords don't give way easily. They hold out, seeking to survive. The status quo pushes to maintain itself.

New ideas and methods, like flowers, are propelled onto the political landscape. If they do not fit into the prevailing panorama, they are weeded out: attempts are made to dissect, cut, slash, and trash them. If the dialectic, on the other hand, is principled and nourished in historical fertilizer, the maturation becomes inevitable. The force of history cannot be reversed. The summer of 1994, forty years after Brown vs Board of Education, marks a clear and certain transition in the organizational life of the NAACP.



## LIFT EVERY VOICE

By WILLIAM H. TURNER

The fuss hinges on the nostalgia about the historic roots of the NAACP and the way Rev. Ben Chavis is advancing the organization. Like a perverse pun on the Association's magazine, the pundits are describing the challenges of the NAACP as a "Crisis." According to a lengthy feature in the New York Times (not insignificantly on June 10, 1994) many longtime NAACP members, corporate sponsors, and other supporters are disgruntled with Chavis' embrace of "radical persons and ideas". Spell that leftist politics: as in the case of Chavis' work with urban gang leaders, gangster rappers like Sistah Souljah, and 60's era black nationalists like Angela Davis. Of course, the tip of the iceberg has been Chavis' attempts to build bridges between the so-called mainline civil rights organizations and Minister Louis Farrakhan.

There is nothing new about this kind of politics. It is but the latest of a longstanding controversy within the history of blacks' struggle for civil and human rights. It occurred when the first generation of education middle-class blacks and their compatriots formed the NAACP. Do we hear the ghost of whites who formed the nucleus of the NAACP, who themselves were chided (by other whites) for the presence of a single black officer at the time of its founding 85 years ago? Was W.E.B. DuBois yester summer's Farrakhan?

In the NAACP's first summer (1909), W.E.B. DuBois and "the radicals" who organized the Niagara Movement - which became the NAACP - were openly attacked too. For a generation after that, DuBois debated with Marcus Garvey and Booker T. Washington argued with both of them.

If we fast forward time, Summer #2 (1954-1974) was without shade or cool. "Long Hot Summer!" became a popular metaphor. The real and imagined differences between Rev. Martin Luther King and Roy Wilkins: on the one hand, and Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, on the other. Integrationism versus pluralism.

Now, as natural as the summer solstice, a new person is upon the NAACP. Some arriving in Chicago next week for the Association's annual meeting may see it as the summer of discontent. The slashing and cutting and backbiting has already begun. Resistance to the changes Chavis would bring to the Association is afoot.

Newsweek's Joe Klein, while "grieving for the NAACP," has accused Rev. Chavis of "betraying his organization's historic mission." To the status quo black middle class and tradition-bound whites in the Association, a key element of that mission is to remain a bastion of heterogeneity and integra-



Rev. Benjamin Chavis

tion. As well, Chavis' reaching-out-to-the-burgeoning-problems-of-the-poor and young is simply new ground they'd rather not plow. To Klein and old-guard critics like Michael Myers and Jack Greenberg (founders of the National Committee to Save the NAACP) Chavis is a publicity-hungry baby boomer with a radical orientation. Ben Chavis, to those getting all the press, is not the man the NAACP needs at this time of crisis. Klein advises African Americans to locate and elevate a "charismatic integrationist" if they are to find peers and equality. For me, the hoopla is all to do about nothing. Change is the only constant. African Americans need a change. Last summer, when Chavis was elected to head the NAACP, these same people were calling the Association a corpse awaiting burial. Well, at least Rev. Chavis' approach puts new and refreshing breath into the last major vestige of the Civil Rights Movement and all the other organizations that are synonymous with it. Thank God for that. I hope this means that our hearts and lungs are pulsating with renewed vigor.

The time between Memorial Day and Labor Day always contain elements of the clash between the old and the new, the cold and hot, the predictable and unpredictable, and the past generation and the new one. The changes Chavis brings to the NAACP are in keeping with the forces of history. Rev. Benjamin Chavis is rooted in the foundation of the total black experience - the black church. And, his ordeal in Wilmington is synonymous with Dr. King's Birmingham jail. Fellows like Klein and Michael Myers have probably not set foot in a black church, let alone a jail cell. It is little wonder that they see things differently from Rev. Chavis. Let a new leader arise. Let the new day dawn. Let a new summer unfold!

The NAACP has known America's political winters, springs, falls, and summers. The men and women of that venerable organization are no fools. It will survive.

Let the NAACP change and survive. It cannot change unless it survives but it will not survive unless it changes. Let this be the Summer of Change for the NAACP.

(William Turner is a regular freelance columnist for the Chronicle.)

## What is the Fourth of July to African Americans?

Thirteen years before the Emancipation Proclamation, Frederick Douglass, the great abolitionist and orator, delivered a Fourth of July speech in which he pointed out the hypocrisy of this country's celebration of Independence Day while it still held millions in bondage. This year, as the whole world had celebrated the freedom of South Africa, African Americans have had a bittersweet feeling of joy for our brothers and sisters in South Africa and sadness that 131 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, we still are not free in our own country.

Some would argue that African Americans are free - that the Emancipation Proclamation provided that. But for nearly a century after that document, African Americans in many southern states were prevented from the most basic tenet of any democracy - the right to vote. Some would argue that African Americans were free with the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, which ensured the right of African Americans to vote. But until the passage of a strengthened Voting Rights Act in 1990, only two African Americans from the South were elected to Congress in 71 years and few were able to be elected to county and state legislatures or to be judges.

Some would argue that African Americans were free with the Supreme Court Brown vs. Board of Education decision, which ended school segregation and began the integration process for other areas as well. But the fact is that although integration has worked for a few, it has meant that those left behind in the inner cities have few positive role models, few businesses and services, poor education and a declining housing stock.

The reality, as we celebrate yet another Fourth of July, is that many African Americans are still slaves in America. We are slaves to violence. According to the Children's Defense Fund, homicide is now the third-leading cause of death for elementary and middle-school children and since 1979 more children have been killed by firearms than soldiers killed in the

Vietnam War. Black children are planning their funerals instead of their proms and three quarters of black adults worry that their children will not live to become adults.

We are slaves to poor education. Many city school systems are almost completely attended by children of color. Meanwhile, one of the dilemmas corporate America now finds itself in is that increasing numbers of high-school graduates can barely read or write or compute and thus, the quality of our work force is declining. In many of our larger cities fifty, sixty and even seventy percent of young people drop out of high school before graduation. Too many of our young people are discouraged from succeeding in school - ostracized by their peers for having "white" values and not expected to do well by teachers and school systems which too often have low expectations for African-American youth.

We are slaves to poor health care or no health care at all. African-American children die at the same rate as children in some third-world countries. Our people face higher incidence of cancer, hypertension, heart disease and diabetes and often have fewer options for medical care. AIDS has increased by 185 percent among heterosexual African-American women over the past year alone and in New York City, 90 percent of all children with AIDS are African-American or Latino. Yet African-Americans, even those with the best insurance, are less likely to receive the best or most up-to-date treatments, whether it be for heart conditions or AIDS.

We are slaves to an economy in which there are millions of unskilled, untrained African-American workers whose strong backs and ability to pick cotton or assemble cars are no longer needed by society. Unemployment rates in the African-American community can be nearly double that of whites and many African Americans have simply stopped looking for work and are no longer counted as unemployed. While a small percentage of

African Americans have prospered over the past two decades, millions have been lumped together into the so-called underclass, where they feel abandoned by society and hopeless about the future. Generations of African Americans are living on welfare and children grow up not knowing anyone with a job.

Frederick Douglass reminded himself of the mournful wail and the bleeding children of his recent ancestors in the Fourth of July speech nearly a century and a half ago. Let us remember those chains and our children as

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By BERNICE POWELL JACKSON

this country celebrates Independence Day once again. And let us also hear Douglass' words once more as well: For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower but the thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwinds and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be started; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be denounced. And let us remember that until all of us are free, none of us is free.

(Bernice Powell-Jackson is Executive Director for the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice)

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