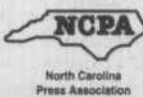


OPINION

THE CHRONICLE

ERNEST H. PITT Publisher/Co-Founder
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One step forward, but still backward

Davidson County finally joined the rest of the nation last week when its stubborn Board of County Commissioners narrowly passed a measure to honor the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday. For years, the commissioners have used every excuse under the moon to justify their refusal to approve the holiday. They said that county employees already had too many days off and that making MLK Day an official holiday would be too expensive, forcing the county to pay employees for a day off from work. Of course, racism, the most valid reason why the holiday took so long to win approval, never was cited, not by the commissioners at least.

Four of the seven commissioners voted in favor of the holiday. The three opponents held their ground and came up with more excuses to justify their refusal to honor a man that many people believe was one of the greatest Americans ever.

Commissioner Rick Lanier told The Associated Press that he would have approved a holiday for an African American such as Frederick Douglass without hesitation. King, though, Lanier said, had scratches on his pristine image, including allegations that he had extramarital affairs and his opposition to the Vietnam War. Lanier said he would not sooner approve a holiday for King than he would one for former President Bill Clinton.

If naiveté and narrow-mindedness are qualifications for politicians (and law enforcement officials) in Davidson County, then Lanier may soon be mayor of Lexington. There are people and events we celebrate in this country every day that are steeped in hate and bloodshed. Maybe these events are not as offensive to Lanier, but to many of us they reek.

We routinely honor men who held people captive and profited from their enslavement. These men did things that Dr. King would have never dreamed of doing, yet they are called our forefathers. Their faces look back at us from the money we spend. Monuments and holidays honor them. Columbus is celebrated each November with massive parades in so many places, but it's a holiday built on a lie, or a misconception at least. We celebrate a man who discovered a land that was already founded and well established, a man who spoke and acted with his sword much more often than with his mind and heart.

If Lanier really thinks that a holiday to honor King will somehow put a "dark spot" on Davidson County's moral image, he has many other battles to fight. The county is run by a sheriff who some see as a law enforcement god and others believe to be a backwoods hick with a badge, gun and a bad sense of humor (remember the less-than-subtle Christmas card he sent to friends). Three of the sheriff's former deputies are facing charges of distributing a variety of drugs. And what is more detrimental, the county, thanks in no small part to people such as Lanier and Sheriff Gerald Hege, faces a huge public relations problem. Outsiders see Davidson County as a place where high-ranking folks place themselves on a moral higher ground but don't have evidence to support their being up there, and a place where folks abandon what's right and just in favor of what's popular among the masses. We certainly hope that Davidson will overcome someday.



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Letter(s) to the Editor

'Black Nativity' was wonderful

To the Editor:
 This is addressed to the editorial department. Shame, shame, shame on all of you who missed the NCBR production of "Black Nativity" under the wonderful, brilliant direction of Mabel Robinson. It was undoubtedly one of the best productions I have ever seen.

I was absolutely mesmerized. The acting, dancing, singing, lighting, costumes and sound were superb - and to think, almost all homegrown talent. We truly are blessed with such talent as Rev. John Heath and his equally talented daughter, and Carlotta. Mary and Joseph were absolutely divine in their expressive dance of the birth of the Christ Child.

I don't know enough superlatives to adequately describe the wonderful experience it was.

I had just returned the previous day from vacationing in Europe where I saw my daughter, mezzo-soprano Tichina Vaughn, sing the role of Azucena in Verdi's "Il Trovatore" (excellent production). (I) also saw the Harlem Gospel singers on tour, so this production was icing on the cake.

Big ups to Mabel Robinson and to artistic director and founder of the company, Larry Leon Hamlin. Please continue to bring us quality performances such as this to the Triad. Hopefully this production will be an annual holiday performance. I am certainly going to make my reservations well in advance.

Sincerely,
 Luci C. Vaughn

Let's learn from recent history

To the Editor:
 The headline of the business section of the Journal on Saturday



Dec. 29, 2001, was a slap in the face, a kick in the rump on a "Hint to the Wise." The Chamber of Commerce announced that the East Area Council (the Afro-American arm of the chamber) would be replaced by the Minority Business Council, comprised of Hispanics and Asians. Actually the Hispanics and Asians already have a sizable successful network of businesses. They did what all successful groups do - they united and helped each other.

To the Afro-Americans, this is a "Hint to the Wise" or even better, a "wake-up call." There is no cause for any African American to feel inferior or subordinate to any other ethnic group. There is no other ethnic group that has endured the struggle African-Americans have since the Emancipation Proclamation. This group

has still risen and been successful in any arena allowed by its counterparts. History is replete with successful Afro-American businesses of yesterday and today. These men and women have left a legacy.

Two of the oldest and most successful businesses in North Carolina are the N.C. Mutual Life Insurance Co. and the Mechanics and Farmers Bank. The Mechanics and Farmers Bank was started in Durham by John Merrick, Dr. Aaron McDuffie Moore and C.C. Spaulding. These men pooled their financial resources and, because of faith, hard work and commitment, these institutions exist today. N.C. Mutual Life Insurance is the largest Afro-American insurance company in the world.

John H. Johnson from Chicago, Ill., of Johnson Publishing Co. started his business with \$250. He took a vision along with faith, commitment, hard work and a first-class product and became a very successful Afro-American.

Locally we can boast of J. Raymond Oliver, who started Jet-way; Mr. and Mrs. Eddie McCarter, who started Special Occasions; and Tom Trollinger, who started Contract Office Furnishings. All of these businesses started small and have developed into highly successful businesses.

No one is more interested in your business than you. African Americans need to come together, have courage and faith, along with love for your fellow man; and let's learn from history. Think about it! When can we get started?

Virginia K. Newell

Shuffling the race card at Harvard



Earl Ofari Hutchinson
 Guest Columnist

Here's one for the books. A privileged black professor at a prestigious Ivy League university spends much of his time writing pop-intellectual books, cutting rap CDs and traveling around the country bagging stratospheric speaking fees to pontificate on the state of black America. The president of the university in frustration at these antics has the gall to suggest that the professor do what he's paid to do, namely teach, read and grade student papers, and be a mentor to the students. He also warns professors, including this professor, against "grade inflation." Translated: ladling out A's to students for merely showing up for class.

Now bear in mind that hyper-grade inflation at this elite university has raised eyebrows in academic and media circles for the ease that graduating students can get A grades and qualify for the honor roll. This is in glaring contrast to other Ivy League schools where honors graduates traditionally rank in the top 10 to 20 percent of the class.

In any case, the university professor is so "insulted" that the president would question his academic credentials, that he threatens to pack his bags and go to another university. It gets better. The piqued professor's department head also takes umbrage at the president's "insult" to his underling, and strongly hints that the president's suggestion that the professor live up to his professional billing and improve his teaching performance is really a sneak attack on the school's affirmative action program.

Never mind that the university's African-American studies department is one of the oldest, best known and funded black studies programs in the country.

Never mind that the professors in the department, and that certainly includes this shattered professor, are routinely touted in the media (the department head has carte blanche to discourse in the New Yorker and New York Times on black America's plight), wined and dined by foundations, fawned over at universities, and courted by top politicians and business leaders. Never mind that neither the university president nor board of regents has fired or laid off any of the program's staff or faculty members, cut its funding or even so much as restricted their use of the copy machine.

The sorry little drama gets even better when black America's top race man, sniffing a chance to grab a headline, quickly and predictably jumps into the fray. He rushes to the university, flanks himself with a handful of local activists, publicly saber rattles the president with veiled hints of protests and boycotts unless he keeps hands off the professor,

and the department, and demands as penance that the university convene a national conference on racial justice and action.

What at best was no more than a private in-house spat at Harvard University between President Lawrence H. Summers, and two hurtling university professors, Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates, became a full-pitched race war when Jesse Jackson muscled into the act. If this sounds like racial correctness once more gone amok, it is. After all, we're not talking about a fight over real issues such as police abuse, failing public schools, the HIV/AIDS crisis, drugs and gangs, or criminal justice system disparities that plague poor blacks. It's not even clear that this is even a legitimate fight over academic freedom or free speech, as West hinted. He says that Summers chided him for supporting Al Sharpton's hinted-at presidential campaign. Summers denies it.

The saddest thing of all is that this silly brouhaha fits in with the shop-worn pattern that whenever a black politician, preacher, or in this case a pampered professor, is called on the carpet for misdeeds or failings, many blacks instantly circle the wagons, turn the tables on their accusers, scream racism, and spin dark tales of white plots and conspiracies to nail them.

That was certainly the case with Jackson when the news broke that he had fathered a child out of wedlock, kept a mistress and was accused of paying her hush money to shut up about it. We then saw the sad and pathetic spectacle of black elected officials, civil rights leaders, community activists and people on the street parading before the cameras offering prayers, and pleading for understanding and forgiveness for Jackson. Some even stood Jackson's profligacy on its head and praised him for publicly admitting it.

Wayward black public officials and celebrities get away with it because many whites regard blacks as so far outside the political and social pale that they see blacks solely through the prism of a racial monolith. They are profoundly conditioned to believe



Harvard professor Cornel West is one of the most noted African-American intellectuals in the country today.

that all blacks think, act and sway to the same racial beat. They freely use the words and deeds of the chosen black leader as the standard for African-American behavior. When the beleaguered chosen one makes a real or contrived misstep, he or she becomes the whipping boy among many whites, and blacks are blamed for being rash, foolhardy, irresponsible and prone to shuffle the race card on every social ill that befalls them.

Jackson, Gates and West masterfully shuffled the card at Harvard. And it paid handsome dividends for them. Jackson got yet another chance to media grandstand and a much-needed boost in his frantic quest to reclaim his tarnished throne as black America's exclusive mouthpiece. West and Gates almost certainly will get an even sweeter deal to stay at Harvard. This was indeed one for the books.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is an author and columnist. Visit his news and opinion Web site: www.thehutchinsonreport.com. He is the author of "The Crisis in Black and Black" (Middle Passage Press).