

# Black history on film

MELODY MICERE STEWART

In the spirit of Ma'at



With all the discussion about race going on all over the country, it is indeed timely that the movie "Amistad" has been released. All Americans can benefit from a graphic dose of truth from the black pages of American history. Though I don't generally recommend getting the facts about African American history from Hollywood, movies can be excellent vehicles to scratch the surface of consciousness and invite the viewer to seek the real deal via the many available books that accurately record our protracted historical struggle for freedom and equality.

The history of blacks in film parallels the history of blacks in America. The world's first full-length feature film, "Birth of a Nation," was a story about the awful mistake Lincoln made by freeing the slaves and how the Ku Klux Klan was born to save the Union from the treachery of newly freed blacks. In real life, the film inspired race violence all over the nation. Independent black film makers responded by making "race films," designed to counter negative portrayals of black people. The first major black filmmaker, Oscar Micheaux, literally carried his films in the trunk of his car and drove them to segregated movie theaters for viewing. (Flash forward: Reminds me of Hallie Gerima's ordeal with "Sankofa" and Blockbuster Video's refusal to carry it - the need to develop our own distribution networks is great.)

In the last 10 years, there have been a number of films with black history as the subject that are worth the price of a video rental. The list includes, "Rosewood," "Once Upon A Time When We Was Colored," "Ghost of Mississippi," "Sankofa," "Mississippi Burning," "Malcolm X," "Daughters of the Dust," "Get On the Bus," and "Glory." Movies using apartheid and South Africa as subject include, "Cry Freedom," "Bopha" and "Sarafina." While few of them claim to be totally historically accurate, they all provide some aspect of historical truth.

Television has also been a powerful medium for telling slices of black history. Beginning with Alex Haley's "Roots," TV has brought us "The Biography of Miss Jane Pitman" "The Tuskegee Airmen," "Eyes on the Prize," "Miss Evers' Boys," (about the Tuskegee syphilis experiment), "The Colored Museum," "Ethnic Notions" (both about the impact of stereotypes), "Buffalo Soldiers," and "Native Son." Television has also brought us dozens of important biographical programs. (Of course, films absolutely do not take the place of books!)

Although our history is painful, especially when viewed on the "big screen," in living color, surround sound and the pain is in your face, we need to know it. We, black people, need to embrace it, learn from it and be inspired by it as a critical exercise in Kujichagulia - Self-Determination. I have talked with too many African Americans who shy away from seeing such films, arguing that the anger they feel is too much to deal with. If this is your excuse, be brave. Think of our Ancestors and be courageous. See "Amistad." Then, take a deep breath. Embrace and use the painful, angry energy it generates. Do not be afraid - it is the energy of agitation.

The struggle for economic justice and Reparations awaits. "Amistad" is a powerful reminder and an open invitation to rejoin the continuing struggle for our total liberation. We need you.

# Clinton appoints Lee to post

By John F. Harris and Helen Dewar  
THE WASHINGTON POST

Moving to end a political stalemate over affirmative action, President Clinton Monday installed Bill Lann Lee in the Justice Department's top civil rights post on an acting basis instead of waiting for the outcome of a confirmation battle that administration officials acknowledged Lee had little prospect of winning.

By making Lee the acting assistant attorney general for civil rights, Clinton has effectively circumvented Congress, and his actions drew a cascade of criticism from Senate Republicans, some of whom predicted that Clinton's move means they will react even more skeptically to future appointments. But the hostility was tempered by the fact that Clinton did not install Lee through a recess appointment - a rarely used power that White House aides judged would have been too confrontational.

Appearing in the Oval Office with Lee by his side, Clinton said he hopes that the Senate, where Lee was targeted for defeat by some conservatives because of his staunch support of affirmative action, will eventually confirm Lee once people see him carry out his duties as acting civil rights chief.

"I have two objectives," Clinton said. "One is to get Mr. Lee into the leadership of the Civil Rights Division as soon as possible. The other is to maximize the chances that he can be confirmed in the coming year in the Senate."

Lee, an Asian American lawyer from Los Angeles who headed a regional office of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, made quietly emotional remarks in which he invoked his history as the child of Chinese immigrants and described a nation still "haunted by the ghosts of slavery, Civil War, Jim Crow and internment" of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Lee was sworn in a few hours later at the office of Attorney General Janet Reno. Deval L. Patrick, who resigned nearly a year ago, was the last confirmed assistant attorney general to head the division.

The politics of the Lee appointment have been heating up for

several weeks. Conservatives had said that the positions Lee advocated before the NAACP and in his confirmation hearings suggested he was so wedded to racial preferences that he would not abide by recent court rulings that have constricted affirmative action. The administration, launching a public battle, said Lee's views were being distorted, and that the nominee has a "mend-it-don't-end-it" approach to affirmative action that is the same as Clinton's.

While some Republicans acknowledged uneasiness about how their opposition to Lee was being perceived by the public, Clinton's campaign did not win him any new Senate votes.

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah), however, said he was "pleased that the president has not directly ignored the advice and consent of the Senate by giving Mr. Lee a recess appointment."

The distinction between holding a job on an acting basis or through a recess appointment has more to do with appearances than the powers an appointee can exercise in office. The Constitution gives presidents the power to install people in jobs for a year through recess appointments made while Congress is not in session. While people appointed on an acting basis are by law supposed to be there for only 120 days, the statute contains no enforcement provision, and the time limit has been commonly ignored in an era when vacancies typically take eight to 10 months to fill.

But many senators, who jealously guard their constitutional power over nominations, saw a critical distinction, and warned that if Clinton installed Lee through a recess appointment they would regard it as an intolerable provocation.

Even though the president did not take that step, several senators said by installing Lee unilaterally Clinton had ensured that future nominees will get increased scrutiny from Republicans.

"I'm concerned that now the

[Republican] caucus will have a reason to reject judicial nominations and other nominations and maybe tie up appropriations on things the president wants," such as education and the AmeriCorps community service program, said Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), the only Republican on the judiciary panel who supported Lee's confirmation.

Importantly, however, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) - who earlier said his relations with Clinton would be severely damaged by a recess appointment - made no mention of retaliation. In a brief statement, Lott did register his disapproval:

"I want to make it clear I do not believe Bill Lann Lee should be assistant attorney general - even in an acting capacity - because of his positions advocating racial preferences and timetables."

Administration officials said that Lott, in conversations with White House Chief of Staff Erskine B. Bowles of Charlotte, had made it clear that Republican protests would be far more muted if Clinton named Lee acting civil rights chief rather than making a recess appointment.

Clinton took this advice, but by pursuing the less confrontational approach, prompted a debate over whether Lee will have the clout he needs to effectively lead the Civil Rights Division.

Clint Bolick, an affirmative action foe who rallied opposition to Lee from his position as litigation director at the Institute for Justice, said, "Lee will have the job but without the moral authority that comes with Senate confirmation. We'll be watching his actions very, very closely."

For nearly the past year, the Civil Rights Division has been filled on an acting basis by Isabelle Pinzler, who is returning to the private sector. Civil rights groups complained that not having a confirmed nominee on the job was a unacceptable vacancy.



Lee

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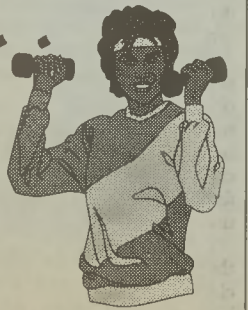
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