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Thurmond story tells harsh truths

It's time to be honest about racial and sexual hypocrisy

By Annette Gordon-Reed
SPECIAL TO THE POST

In responding to the story of white supremacist Strom Thurmond having a black daughter, most commentators have keyed in on the hypocrisy of racism. It's certainly fascinating to think about a staunch segregationist campaigning against the rights of blacks and ranting about the dangers of the "mongrelization" of the white race while he was giving money to his secret black daughter and paying her college tuition.

But in addition to the heavy load of racial hypocrisy that the story unearths, it also has another important element. That is the sexual advantage that is often taken by one with more wealth and social standing than another.

Essie Mae Washington-Williams's mother, Carrie Butler, was a 16-year-old maid for the Thurmond household when she became pregnant by 22-year-old Strom. Although the age of consent in South Carolina at the time was 14, the circumstances make you wonder if this could have been a consensual relationship.

Think of the Thurmond household in 1925. Here was Carrie Butler — a poor, black, female — 16 years old. In contrast, Strom was older and the scion of a prominent family. His power was in inverse proportion to her vulnerability. With such a power deficit, could she have said "no" to him?

We all have our instinctive responses to that question, based upon our knowledge of power, race and gender relations.

I am inclined to agree with those who give an immediate and emphatic "no," for reasons that I'll explain shortly. Yet, I pause over that response because I don't want to imply that every black woman who worked in the homes of white people in the South had to have sex and babies with the white men in the household whenever they asked them to. That is not true. There were black women who resisted the advances of white men, kept their jobs and struggled on. They must not be forgotten as we try to do justice to Carrie Butler.

Butler's age at the time is the major cause for suspecting it was not truly consensual.

Even if Thurmond didn't knock her down and drag her into the bedroom, teen-age girls are notoriously susceptible to abusive manipulation by older men. Even today, men who are six years or more older than their teen-aged partners cause a disproportionate number of teen pregnancies.

The age differential definitely affects the outcome in these sexual encounters. This may be because the teens aren't able to stand up to older men who demand sex without protection, or because they fall for promises of support from men who are out in the workplace. Either way, they are in over their heads.

Carrie Butler was left to make decisions that no one her age should ever have to make.

She struggled alone for six months before she left town to give her daughter to relatives who could provide a better life than she could. Young Strom, a teacher at the local high school, was apparently exiled to Florida for a time to sell real estate. He returned to study law with his father. Soon he began his meteoric rise in South Carolina politics, fueled in great part by catering to his constituents' hostility toward people such as Carrie Butler and the daughter he had with her.

Who knows what Carrie Butler really thought about Strom Thurmond? The absence of her voice is poignant.

Essie Mae Washington-Williams says her mother described Thurmond as "a nice man" and took her to meet him many years after what transpired in 1925.

That intrigues me, and makes me think that at least the grownup Carrie Butler had a lot of backbone. Imagine being a Southern black woman in the early 1960s and walking your half-white daughter, the very image of her white father, into his law office to introduce the two. By then Butler was gravely ill and may well have wanted to leave her daughter with something positive, some connection that might make her path in life smoother than her own had been. Mothers often do that.

But we owe it to Carrie Butler not to gloss over the harsh world she lived in and brought her daughter into. There's nothing left to do but try to tell the truth of that time.

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Charlie's Hustle



Republicans trying to 'fool' blacks

GEORGE E. CURRY



The Republican Party, after receiving only 8 percent of the African American vote in the 2000 presidential election, has established a goal of winning 25 percent of the black vote in this year's contest.

Instead of making that announcement when most people were preparing to make their New Year's resolutions, the GOP should have delayed that announcement for three months. Then, it would be clear that this was some sort of April Fool's joke.

What has George Bush done to quadruple his black support? Let's ignore the rhetoric and look at the record.

First, Bush pledged during his 2000 campaign that he would govern as a compassionate conservative. As has been observed, he has been compassionate toward conservatives. For example, most of his tax cuts benefited the wealthy, the majority of whom vote Republican. Meanwhile, Bush did not seek to fully fund his No Child Left Behind education law, he has proposed changes in programs such as Head Start that will be detrimental to black children, and the president has no significant domestic policy that

will uplift African Americans.

Bush had a chance to show some compassion by supporting affirmative action in a pair of University of Michigan cases that came before the Supreme Court in 2003. Instead, Bush ordered his solicitor general to oppose the cases and had the insensitivity to announce his decision on Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday. That's a strange way of showing compassion.

A conservative Supreme Court — with seven of its nine members appointed by Republican presidents — upheld the concept of affirmative action in the case involving the University of Michigan's Law School. And true to form, Bush praised the virtues of diversity after the ruling while neglecting to point out that his position would have made that goal more difficult to achieve.

In a move that will make courts of the future more likely to reflect his politics, Bush has packed the federal courts with right-wing judges. One of them, Janice Rogers Brown, is so far out of the mainstream that she is a frequent dissenter on the Republican-controlled California Supreme Court. Bush wants to elevate her to a seat on the U. S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. The black conservative is so extreme that the white chief judge in California, also a Republican, says she minimizes the harm of racial dis-

crimination in order to make political points.

Bush has displayed his disdain for black America by meeting only once with members of the Congressional Black Caucus, despite repeated requests for meetings. Like them or not, black members of Congress were fairly elected by voters — and that's more than we can say about Bush. When Bush thumbs his nose at them, he thumbs his nose at all African Americans.

By disrespecting authentic black leaders, Bush seems to be subscribing to the thinking of Newt Gingrich, the former House speaker. In 1983, Gingrich said, "It is in the interest of the Republican Party and Ronald Reagan to invent new black leaders, so to speak..."

The GOP has "invented" several black front organizations that they are propping up with money. But money can't buy credibility and these groups that oppose affirmative action and favor school vouchers have little, if any, influence on African American thought.

In one sense, Bush's problem is a GOP problem. Republicans have established a clear record of hostility toward the interests of African Americans, yet they want to dupe us into believing that they are our friends. That's an insult to our intelligence.

One of the best barometers of legislative support for

issues important to black America is the NAACP's annual report card on civil rights. Year after year, it is difficult to find Republicans in the House or Senate who earn a C-grade or higher on civil rights. Most earn Ds and Fs.

But Bush and the GOP don't want us to get confused by the facts. So they are targeting young black voters they feel are more likely to be receptive to their message, they are planning a barrage of commercials on black radio, ads in black newspapers and parading their black Cabinet members before us — all of whom except Colin Powell opposed the University of Michigan affirmative action programs — to say why we should vote for George Bush in 2004. It won't work.

George Bush began his administration by putting on a minstrel show in Philadelphia. He should realize that no amount of buck dancing by black entertainers or trying to replace legitimate black leaders with his hand-picked black appointees will blind African Americans to his sorry record on civil rights.

GEORGE E. CURRY is editor-in-chief of the NNPA News Service and BlackPressUSA.com. His most recent book is "The Best of Emerge Magazine," an anthology published by Ballantine Books. He can be reached through his Web site, georgecurry.com.

Oppose Bush's judicial nominees

By Sheldon Richman
SPECIAL TO THE POST

Senate Democrats were right to block several of President Bush's judicial nominees for the federal courts.

In the last few weeks, two African-Americans have appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee in hopes of gaining seats on some of the country's most important federal courts. One nominee was blocked, and the other is still pending confirmation.

I'm an African American lawyer, so you might think I'd be rooting for them to become members of the federal bench.

I'm not.

Both of Bush's recent African American nominees are hard-line conservatives, and Bush was wrong to select them in the first place.

Janice Rogers Brown, a justice on California Supreme Court, was the first of Bush's nominees to seek Senate confirmation. Fortunately, her nomination was one of the few blocked by Democrats on Nov. 14.

Bush nominated Brown to

the important U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. She not only has a well-documented ultraconservative judicial

record but she has also given numerous speeches where she has expressed her hard-right views openly.

At the recent Senate hearing, it was reported that Brown compared President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal legislation to a "socialist revolution," and that she has stated that government causes the disintegration of society and the promotion of "moral depravity."

Many African American organizations opposed her nomination.

Hillary Shelton, director of the NAACP's Washington, D.C., bureau, said that Brown "has a record of hostility to fundamental civil and constitutional-rights principles." The Congressional Black Caucus

opposed her nomination, as well.

Another African-American judicial nominee, Claude Allen, is still awaiting confirmation. Bush nominated him to serve on the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. Allen is currently deputy secretary at the Department of Health and Human Services. The 4th Circuit is one of the nation's most conservative courts, and Allen would make it even more so.

Senate Democrats would be wise to block his nomination, too. Allen has no judicial experience. He served faithfully on the staff of arch-conservative Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., back in the 1980s.

The NAACP board of directors opposes Allen's nomination. It cites his refusal to distance himself from Helms' filibuster of the 1983 bill that created a national holiday for the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

The National Organization of Women (NOW), the National Council of Jewish Women, the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL) and Americans for Democratic Action all oppose Allen's nomination for his views. These include questionable stances on AIDS prevention, right-to-die issues and, especially, reproductive rights of women.

By nominating Claude Allen and Janice Rogers Brown, Bush has attempted to use race as a cover to place ultraconservative, reactionary judges in the federal courts. It has been done before with Clarence Thomas, but this time it must fail.

Do not judge Bush's nominees by the color of their skin. Judge them by what they have said, written and done while serving as public officials.

BRIAN GILMORE is a lawyer and poet with two collections of poetry, including "Jungle Nights and Soda Fountain Rags: Poem for Duke Ellington" (Karibu Books, 2000). He can be reached at pmproj@progressive.org.



Thurmond



Washington-Williams