

American foreign policy and the new year

Being the end of the year, everyone is writing columns about what to expect out of 2006 or what to think of what took place in 2005. I am doing neither. I am suggesting a call to "arms."

After recently giving a lecture concerning U.S. foreign policy, I was approached by someone in the audience. He looked at me, and was quite angry. I thought that I had said something that had offended him. Instead, he said that he was really stirred up about U.S. foreign policy and how the U.S. treats the rest of the world. He wanted to know what he could do.

I wish that I encountered more angry people like this individual.

For 2006, we should all make a collective commitment or promise to spend a few hours each week on a foreign policy matter. The stakes are too high. Consider for a moment:

- The Bush administration continues to deny the significance of global warming. Most of the rest of the world is pleading for standards that will result in the decrease in the production of air pollutants. The Bush administration wants no such standards;
- 2000-plus U.S. soldiers are dead in Iraq and at least 30,000 Iraqis are dead, all for an illegal and immoral war that has taken on more the form of piracy than any sort of human rights intervention or effort at stopping weapons of mass destruction (which were not there);
- The people of Haiti languish under a repressive, coup regime that has the active support of the Bush administration;
- The Bush administration continues to threaten Cuba, Venezuela, Syria, Iran, North Korea, and virtually any other country or group that it believes to be an alleged threat to its interests and
- Genocide continues in the Darfur region of the Sudan, as the government of General Al Bashir continues to prosecute its counter-insurgency via ethnic cleansing. All we get from the Bush administration is rhetoric but insignificant support to the African Union which has been trying to mediate a political solution.

The list can go on and on. In other words, the world is very unsafe; each day it feels that it is getting less and less safe; and we live in a country that has a great deal to do with pushing the planet into this perilous situation.

While there are those who believe that we have enough of our own problems right here at home, it is important to keep in mind that the policies being advanced by the Bush administration nationally and internationally are driven by the same philosophy of greed and global domination. It should not surprise us, as I have said elsewhere, that the same administration that allowed the people of the Gulf Coast to suffer in the aftermath of Katrina and, in fact, took few steps to strengthen public safety in advance of the storm, is the same that has pressed to support its corporate friends in ravaging post-invasion Iraq.

Whether one is focused on domestic issues or international issues, let us be clear that very little will change in the absence of organized resistance. Despite, for instance, the outrage in the aftermath of the Katrina disaster, the Bush administration went forward undaunted and pushed its own pro-privatization approach for the rebuilding of the Gulf Coast region ignoring the views and concerns of the people of that region. This should not be surprising because outrage is not enough to stop anything. The arrogance of the administration must be met through organization and mobilizing.

The bottom line is that each of us needs to make a commitment to follow through, at the level that makes sense for each of us, to turn things around in this country. We can:

- Join with coalitions that are working on issues, such as United for Peace & Justice (www.unitedforpeace.org), a group protesting the Iraq war.
- Join with organizations such as Black Voices for Peace (www.bvfp.org) or the Black Radical Congress (www.blackradicalcongress.org) that are involved in both domestic and international issues and
- If you do not have time to work in an organization or coalition, you can make sure to write letters-to-the-editors in local newspapers or magazines expressing your concern, outrage as well as suggestions as to what the U.S.A. needs to be doing internationally. You can also make sure to call into radio talk shows (the right-wing does this all the time).

We all need to commit ourselves to action in 2006. We cannot afford to sit back and hope that someone in elected office will come to the same progressive conclusions that we have.

BILL FELTCHER is president of TransAfrica Forum, an educational and organizing center that raise awareness in the United States about Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America.



BILL
FLETCHER

Historian holds a mirror to America

John Hope Franklin's memoir a telling dissection on race

"Living in a world restricted by laws defining race, as well as creating obstacles, disadvantages, and even superstitions regarding race, challenged my capacities for survival. For ninety years I have witnessed countless men and women likewise meet this challenge. Some bested it; some did not; many had to settle for any accommodation they could. I became a student and eventually a scholar.

And it was armed with the tools of scholarship that I strove to dismantle those laws, level those obstacles and disadvantages, and replace superstitions with humane dignity. Along with much else, the habits of scholarship granted me something many of my similarly striving contemporaries did not have. I knew, or should say know, what we are up against."

So begins "Mirror to America," the extraordinary new autobiography by preeminent black historian John Hope Franklin. Franklin has written many other books, including "From Slavery to Freedom,"

the definitive resource on African-American history that has gone through eight printings and sold 3.5 million copies since it was first published in 1947. But in "Mirror to America," Franklin shares more details about his own extraordinary personal history, and how he met the "challenge" of a world defined by race - and not only survived but thrived. The book follows him from his childhood in a poor small black Oklahoma town to the height of his accomplishments as a Fisk- and Harvard-educated scholar, world-renown historian and university professor, and the recipient of hundreds of honors and awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, our nation's highest civilian award.

Along the way, as Franklin shares his experiences witnessing our nation's dramatic racial tensions and transformations in the 20th century, his autobiography becomes its own history of race in America - and includes many of this history's ugly sides.

Franklin was born in Oklahoma in 1915, and when his father's small law practice was destroyed during the Tulsa race riots of 1921, his family was separated for four years while his father struggled to rebuild a financial footing. That same year John Hope, his sister, and his mother were ejected from a train in the middle of the woods and forced to walk several miles to get home after his mother refused to walk through the train cars to the black section with two small children while the train was in motion.

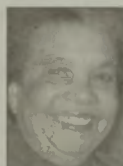
Franklin remembered that as the experience that taught him about race: "Just six years old, I was confused and scared. The uselessness of my mother's reasonable refusal to endanger her children, the arbitrary injustice of the conductor's behavior, the clear pointlessness of any objection on our part, and the acquiescence if not approval of the other passengers to our removal brought home to me at that young age the racial divide separating me from white America."

Some later experiences were more terrifying. As a 19-year-old, while working on a research project about black farmers in the Mississippi Delta the summer before his senior year at Fisk University, Franklin found himself surrounded and threatened by a lynch mob as he tried to buy ice cream one hot summer night. Many other experiences were just more ordinary racism: being refused service while out on a date as a graduate student, or turned down for a home loan even though he was an established university professor, or turned away from five motel rooms in a row while traveling with his wife and small baby. Even on the night before he was to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1995, as Franklin was hosting a dinner for friends at a private Washington, D.C. club, a white guest singled him out, gave him her coat check, and asked him to bring her coat.

Stories like these, which are common experiences for so many people of color, are all the more powerful woven throughout the larger story of Franklin's uncommon and extraordinary life. But they help make "Mirror to America" a road map for just how Franklin was able to "level those obstacles and disadvantages" and achieve so much despite all the small slights and large barriers that always threatened to stand in his way. The lessons Franklin shares in this book - about self-confidence, dedication to excellence, commitment to hard work, dignity, and grace - are ones all our children need. As Franklin celebrates his 91st birthday this January, his readers are the ones who've received a gift.

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN is president and founder of the Children's Defense Fund.

The lessons Franklin shares in this book - about self-confidence, dedication to excellence, commitment to hard work, dignity and grace - are ones all our children need



MARIAN
WRIGHT
EDELMAN



Franklin

Why Christmas should be more commercial

By Leonard Peikoff
SPECIAL TO THE POST

Christmas in America is an exuberant display of human ingenuity, capitalist productivity, and the enjoyment of life. Yet all of these are castigated as "materialistic"; the real meaning of the holiday, we are told, is assorted Nativity tales and altruist injunctions (e.g., love thy neighbor) that no one takes seriously.

In fact, Christmas as we celebrate it today is a 19th-century American invention. The freedom and prosperity of post Civil War America created the happiest nation in history. The result was the desire to celebrate, to revel in the goods and pleasures of life on earth. Christmas (which was not a federal holiday until 1870) became the leading American outlet for this feeling.

Historically, people have always celebrated the winter solstice as the time when the days begin to lengthen, indicating the earth's return to life. Ancient Romans feasted and reveled during the festival of Saturnalia. Early Christians condemned these Roman celebrations—they were waiting for the end of the world and had only scorn for earthly pleasures. By the fourth century the pagans were worshipping the god of the sun on December 25, and the Christians came to a decision: if you can't stop 'em, join 'em. They claimed (contrary to known fact) that the date was Jesus' birthday, and usurped the solstice holiday for their Church.

Even after the Christians stole Christmas, they were ambivalent about it. The holiday was inherently a pro-life festival of earthly renewal, but the Christians preached renunciation, sacrifice, and concern for the next world, not this one. As Cotton Mather, an 18th-century clergyman, put it: "Can you in your consciences think that our Holy Savior is honored by mirth? ... Shall it be said that at the birth of our Savior ... we take time ... to do actions that have much more of hell than of heaven in them?"

Then came the major developments of 19th-century capitalism: industrialization, urbanization, the triumph of science—all of it leading to easy transportation, efficient mail delivery, the widespread publishing of books and magazines, new inventions making life comfortable and exciting, and the rise of entrepreneurs who understood that the way to make a profit was to produce something good and sell it to a mass market.

For the first time, the giving of gifts became a major feature of Christmas. Early Christians denounced gift-giving as a Roman practice, and Puritans called it diabolical. But Americans were not to be deterred. Thanks to capitalism, there was enough wealth to make gifts possible, a great productive apparatus to advertise them and make them available cheaply, and a country so content that men wanted to reach out to their friends and express their enjoyment of life. The whole country took with glee to giving gifts on an unprecedented scale.

Santa Claus is a thoroughly American invention. There was a St. Nicholas long ago and a feeble holiday connected with him (on December 5). In 1822, an American named Clement Clarke Moore wrote a poem about a visit from St. Nick. It was Moore (and a few other New Yorkers) who invented St. Nick's physical appearance and personality, came up with the idea that Santa travels on Christmas Eve in a sleigh pulled by reindeer, comes down the chimney, stuffs toys in the kids' stockings, then goes back to the North Pole.

Of course, the Puritans denounced Santa as the Anti-Christ, because he pushed Jesus to the background. Furthermore, Santa implicitly rejected the whole Christian ethics. He did not denounce the rich and demand that they give everything to the poor; on the contrary, he gave gifts to rich and poor children alike. Nor is Santa a champion of Christian mercy or unconditional love. On the contrary, he is for justice—Santa gives only to good children, not to bad ones.

All the best customs of Christmas, from carols to trees to spectacular decorations, have their root in pagan ideas and practices. These customs were greatly amplified by American culture, as the product of reason, science, business, worldliness, and egoism, i.e., the pursuit of happiness.

America's tragedy is that its intellectual leaders have typically tried to replace happiness with guilt by insisting that the spiritual meaning of Christmas is religion and self-sacrifice for Tiny Tim or his equivalent. But the spiritual must start with recognizing reality.

LEONARD PEIKOFF, is founder of the Ayn Rand Institute in Irvine, Calif.

