

Time to get to the truth in Duke lacrosse case

Court of public opinion won't serve the interests of justice

We are devastated that, once again, the word of a young black woman has been casually dismissed by some media, a woman who according to the grand jury indictment was violated in the most heinous way.

We are devastated that, as we wait for the indictment men to stand trial in court, we must watch her on trial in the media. In 2006, this is unacceptable. People of color have experienced 'blame the victim' tactics for centuries when they accuse the powerful. These same tactics are routinely used against survivors of sexual assault-women of all colors. Sexual assault must be a civil rights priority for all people of goodwill.

Only 40 years ago, Blacks in America were dying for the right to be treated equally and then, as now, in many parts of this nation the press was used as a tool to distort truth, and to defame our leaders and innocent citizens. Yet it was in this same time that the courage and determination of the press to record truth helped awaken the conscience of this nation. We call now upon the media to reject spin and report truth. Today, as then, the truth will set us free. The indicted men have hired the best lawyers and PR men money can buy.

There's a reason that the defense doesn't mention the racial slurs that define this case, or the extraordinary violations of civil rights and liberties, or that the survivor's life has been damaged forever. But there is no excuse for our media to be silent about these realities. This case does not need spin; it needs truth.

When the Coalition of the Concerned here in North Carolina opened the ourheartsworld.com website dedicated to supporting the assault survivor and millions of other survivors of sexual violence, hardly a drop of ink was spent on the story. When the defense team announces its cherry-picked pieces of evidence, throngs of reporters, cameras and pens in hand, scramble to repeat carefully crafted announcements as if they were objective truths. The heavy scrutiny of the nation has successfully been diverted from the actions of the white privileged men to the moral purity of the survivor. The media calls her "the stripper". She is a US Navy veteran, a mother of two and an accomplished student at North Carolina Central University.

We are not called to the offhand condemnation of people, but to the righteous hatred of sin. Where is the chorus of moral condemnation against holding beer parties for 44 mostly under-aged men, starting at two on a Monday afternoon?

Where is the chorus of condemnation about an apparently common varsity team practice of hiring female entertainers? Where is the chorus of condemnation of men brandishing a broomstick at women? Where is the chorus of condemnation against racial slandering overheard by a neighbor, "Thank your grandpa for my nice cotton shirt?"

Don't let this case be decided by innuendo, money, guess work, superstar lawyers, or community speculation. Take it to the courts. These allegations are too sad, sinister, and sadistic to be trivialized. We may not know everything that has happen, but we must insist that the judicial system work and that there is a fair fight and a level playing field.

Duke was once called Trinity College. In this case, there are triune challenges of racism, sexism, and classicism. In this crisis is the ugly trinity of human failure, humanity deprivation, and human exploitation. The only way out is a triune response. We must face the evidence; face whatever truth this reveals; and face whatever justice demands.

REV. WILLIAM BARBER is president of the N.C. branches of the NAACP.

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Our responsibility is to protect children, not firearms

Is protecting our children important to us as a nation? On June 12, the Children's Defense Fund released our annual report on gun violence against children, "Protect Children Not Guns."

The report shows that the 2,827 children and teens who died from gun violence in 2003—just one year—is higher than the number of American fighting men and women killed in hostile action in Iraq from 2003 to April 2006—three years.

In some U.S. cities, children and teens are in as much daily peril as they would be if they were walking the streets of Baghdad. The bodies of young gunshot victims are streaming into urban hospital trauma centers on the front lines of an undeclared war on America's children.

The children who die every year from gunshot wounds come from all racial groups and are all ages. Some of them are too young to start kindergarten: in 2003, 56 preschoolers were killed by firearms while 52 law enforcement officers were killed in the line of duty.

When it's more dangerous to be a preschooler than an on-duty police officer, we know something is seriously wrong in our society. The deaths of thousands of children each year are morally obscene for the world's most powerful nation, which has more resources to address our social ills than any other nation.

The Protect Children Not Guns report is being released as a number of U.S. mayors across the country are demanding action from the White House and Congress to staunch gun violence. In April, 15 mayors gathered for a summit on gun violence led by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Boston Mayor Thomas Menino. I strongly applaud Mayor Bloomberg's statement that "It is time for national leadership in the war on gun violence." But sadly, for tens of thousands of children and teens, long overdue leadership in the war on gun violence will come too late.

Here are a few more of the deadly facts outlined in CDF's new report on the toll gun violence is taking on America's children: More 10- to 19-year-olds die from gunshot wounds than from any other cause except motor vehicle accidents. Almost 90 percent of the children and teens killed by firearms in 2003 were boys. Boys ages 15 to 19 are nearly nine times as likely as girls of the same age to be killed by a firearm.

There were more than nine times as many suicides by guns among white children and teens as among Black children and teens. But despite white youths' higher rate of gun suicides, gun violence still disproportionately affects black children.

The firearm death rate for black males ages 15 to 19 is more than four times that of white males the same age. More black children and teens have been killed by firearms over the past six years than all the black people of all ages we lost in the history of lynchings. Where is our voice? Why don't we care and protest when our children are being killed and killing others? It's time for us black adults to get our act together.

The seven states that recorded the most firearms deaths among children and teens in 2003 were California, Texas, Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania, Florida and North Carolina. The U.S. has the immoral distinction of having the highest rate of child firearm deaths. The rate of firearm deaths among children under age 15 is far higher in the U.S. than in 25 other industrialized countries combined.

"We have many more handguns and much weaker gun laws than any other country," says Harvard Professor David Hemenway, who has worked to develop strategies to combat illegal firearms.

What can we do to change this? CDF calls for the support of common sense gun safety measures; Congressional passage of legislation that closes the gun show loophole requiring criminal background checks on those purchasing guns from unlicensed dealers; and renewal of the ban on assault weapons. Parents should remove guns from their homes; organize nonviolent conflict resolution support groups in their congregations and communities; monitor what their children watch on TV and listen to in our violence-hyped culture; and refuse to buy video games and other products for their children that glorify violence or make it socially acceptable or fun.

Community leaders should turn schools and places of worship into venues of quality summer and after-school programs for children as positive alternatives to the streets and with positive role models. They should also adopt proven programs like Ceasefire Initiatives that bring families, faith groups, social service providers, and the police together to halt the killing of teens by other teens. It's imperative that we work together to make our homes, our streets, and our communities safe from firearms now for the sake of our children.

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President Bush's feeble effort to isolate Cuba

It never ceases to amaze me that logic and rationality are completely absent from President Bush's foreign policy. Despite no evidence of either a terrorist threat or threat of weapons of mass destruction from Cuba, the Bush administration continues its senseless and rabid efforts to overthrow the internationally recognized government of Cuba.

The most recent effort is one that is getting very little attention in the U.S. media. The Bush group is allegedly pressuring the European Union to reverse course away from diplomatic engagement with Cuba and move in the direction of isolating Cuba, including the possibility of economic sanctions. Such a reversal would be largely unprecedented given the long history of relations between European nations and Cuba, including European governments that have been quite conservative (the right-wing dictatorship of the late Spanish leader Francisco Franco even had diplomatic relations with Cuba!). Nevertheless, in these days of open international bullying by the U.S., all bets are off.

This bullying is really going over the top, I should add, and is not limited to the Bush attitude toward Cuba. U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton, was so upset at a criticism leveled by a top U.N. official regarding the attitude of the U.S.A. toward the United Nations that Bolton, in essence, threatened the United Nations demanding that UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan repudiate these comments...or else???

Reading the statements attributed to Bolton, one finds it nearly impossible to believe that they are not the ravings of a 15-year-old whose high school colors were challenged. Yet, the combination of the new round of coercion directed at Cuba along with the threatening posture toward the United Nations is integrally linked. From the standpoint of the Bush administration there is only one foreign policy that any nation can follow and that is the one that is determined by the Bush administration.

As much as the Bush administration attempts to carry out spin-control and improve its image with the world's peoples, public relations efforts, such as those by Undersecretary Karen Hughes, are doomed to failure. Fundamentally, there is nothing there. It is difficult to assure the world that the U.S.A. is committed to acting as a responsible global partner when each of its actions demonstrates the opposite.

Thus, one returns to the question of Cuba, a lightening rod for Bush foreign policy. Irrespective of any overtures by the Cuban government toward improving relations with the USA, e.g., its offer to assist Katrina survivors in the aftermath of the disaster, the Bush administration displays contempt, and worse, implies or threatens the use of outside intervention—and quite possibly the use of military force—if the Cubans fail to cave.

One cannot take for granted that the Bush administration will leave Cuba alone or that the administration is simply engaged in rhetorical saber-rattling for political purposes. The exhilaration and self-righteousness of the administration when it comes to threatening Cuba (and other perceived antagonists) reminds me of someone who has been using PCP. God help us but that they are the ones with their fingers on the button.

Should it surprise us, then, that most of the world is more worried about the Bush administration than they are Al Qaeda? What a damning conclusion; a conclusion too many of us are prepared to dismiss because it does not correspond with the manner in which we would rather see ourselves, or see the presidency of the United States of America.

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