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OPINION

Balancing the scales of opportunity

What a perfect response to a naïve question.

Recently, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin held a press conference to formally announce his 35 percent Disadvantaged Business Enterprise procurement goal for all city projects and contracts.

He made the announcement at Baker Ready Mix, a concrete plant owned by National Black Chamber of Commerce Board member Arnold Baker. A Fox News reporter approached Arnold and asked the question "Why is the mayor doing this? Can't black business owners network their own way into business development without such affirmative action?" Without raising his voice or showing his anger, Arnold simply said, "Here's the deal - your grandfather did not and would not play golf with my grandfather. In essence, this is why we are here today."

It is concise but is also so profound. It reminds me of my personal story, which isn't much different than yours, depending on which generation you fall in. My grandfather was born and lived as a sharecropper. He did not network with whites, business wise or personal. In fact, in Louisiana it was against the law and downright unhealthy if one would attempt. He never spent a day in school. His 10 children were obligated to work with him nine months a year. In the winter months of December, January and February, (no crops to work) they were allowed to attend school. Three months a year and schooling stopped at the eighth grade. The nearest high school was 40 miles away in Shreveport and the tuition and boarding was totally prohibitive.

Such was the plight of my grandfather. The reporter's grandfather certainly played by different rules as the sky was the limit. Schools were public and access was certain. His grandfather lived the American dream and everything his father had was passed onto him and his siblings. He had inheritance, land, networking infrastructures and other advantages that were very valuable to ensuring that the future would be bright. My grandfather's father was born a slave and, like his son, was illiterate and boxed in by a society and nation that treated him as a bona fide third-class citizen. The contrasts are very enormous and the fact that the times have changed is a testament to the courage of the generation that came after my grandfather.

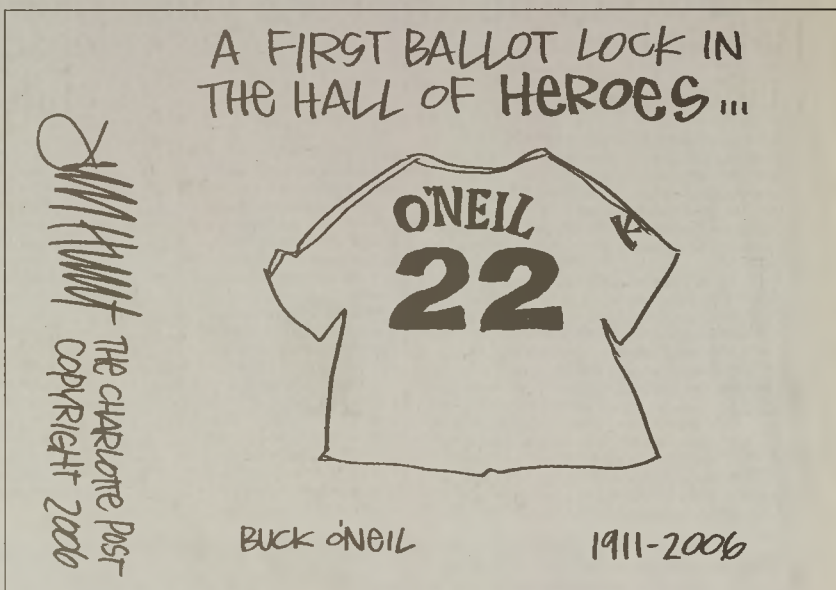
That next generation, my father, decided to make a difference. He took his 8th grade (3 months a year) education and moved to California during World War II and worked the docks of Ventura County, then bustling from the war effort. He later became a local truck driver while my mother was a domestic for Whites whose fathers and grandfathers made big bucks owning gigantic farms and ranches in the Golden State. He was resolved to make a good living, buy land and demand public access at all levels for his children especially when it came to education.

For this, there were multitudes of death threats. We woke up one morning at 4 a.m. and there was a 10-foot burning cross in our front yard. He would often say "They have us up against the Pacific Ocean, all we can do now is fight." One of his proudest achievements was a lifetime membership in the NAACP. He was never really intimidated. I guess the fact that his father would have been lynched for the positions my father fiercely stood up for and remained alive was true progress.

My grandfather didn't know what golf was and my father never dreamed of playing it. If they had, it would not have been a networking event and no Whites or business brokers would be anywhere around to cut deals and make profitable plans. No, it was my generation that finally got to the golf course and that was very late in life. As we attempt to enter this capitalistic society for the first time in the history of this nation, it is obvious that we are playing a very big game of "catch up." Our college degrees are fresh and our skills are newly learned. We enter Board Rooms as a groundbreaking event. Although we have been paying taxes since the Emancipation Proclamation, access to this economy has been extremely limited.

So now we go into the great system of capitalism. We are neophytes to programs that exist through our oppression and unfair advantage benefiting those who really didn't deserve such. Don't think the field is level and nothing ever happened to make you on top. Affirmative action is here to right the present wrongs that were built through exploitation and unfair rigging. The playing field is far from level.

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Haiti represents more than poverty

MILOT, Haiti - When Ron Daniels invited me to accompany his Haiti Support Project's pilgrimage to the cities of Milot, Cap-Haitien and Port-au-Prince last week, I had mixed feelings.

I have traveled around the world, but my trips to the Pyramids in Egypt and the Door of No Return on Goree Island in Senegal were the most memorable - and emotional. I had no doubt that a trip to Haiti would also strike a special chord.

Since childhood, my stepfather had told me how

George Toussaint Louverture led a successful slave uprising against the French, paving the way in 1804 for Haiti to become the first independent black nation in the Western hemisphere. The invitation to visit an island where Africans were dropped off before slave ships continued the journey north was irresistible. We all Africans, whether living in Haiti or the U.S.

But that's not how we're labeled. Usually, when public officials or leaders mention Haiti, they invariably describe it as "the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere." With most Haitians earning only \$2 a day, I didn't know how I would react to seeing such massive poverty. In talking with Joseph Leonard, executive director of the National Black Leadership Forum, I learned that he, too, was experiencing the same kind of conflicting

emotions. We wanted to see Haiti, but we really didn't want to see the poverty.

After a four-hour flight from New York's John F. Kennedy Airport aboard American Airlines Flight 837 to Toussaint Louverture International Airport in Port-au-Prince, we transferred to a small puddle jumper for the 30-minute trip north to Cap-Haitien. We attended a reception that night hosted by Minister of Tourism Patrick Delatour, a graduate of Howard University. The next morning, we were bussed 30 miles to Milot (pronounced Mi-lo) and that's when we really got a look at abject poverty.

Although the poverty may be more concentrated in Haiti, it is not noticeably different from the poverty I had observed in Senegal, Nigeria, Egypt or the backroads of Cuba. But seeing so many people - children in particular - being so poor prompted two immediate reactions.

First, I realized that poor people back home, even those living in the South Bronx and the Mississippi Delta, the two poorest regions in the United States, seem wealthy when measured against the typical Haitian.

Second, as I looked into the innocent eyes of children, I couldn't help but think: Suppose I had been born here? What could I realistically expect from life? After reflecting, you thank God for your blessings.

In general, children are the same regardless of where they live. Here, they are curious, they wave eagerly at the sight of tourists and, more

than in the U.S., they run around in their bare birthday suits.

Also surprising was the age at which some kids are expected to carry out chores. I saw several girls who appeared to be no older than 5 years old, carrying buckets of water. I saw some, appearing to be 7 or 8, balancing large items from the market on their head.

Much has been written about the dire poverty in Haiti, but rarely are articles written about the creativity or ingenuity of the people. There are talented artists living in every region of the country and they are eager to negotiate an acceptable price for their works. The arts and crafts are impressive. And if I were to count people in Haiti who tried to sell me something rather than seek a handout, the entrepreneurs would lead at least by a 4-to-1 margin. Carvings. Fruits. Paintings. Beads. Jewelry boxes. Knives. Canes. You name it, they had it.

Daniels, black America's unofficial at-large ambassador to Haiti, had a two-fold goal for this mission. One, was to take 50 people with him to see for themselves what Haiti is like in hopes of making them ambassadors and to announce a "model city pro-

gram in which the Haiti Support Project would adopt Milot and actively aid in its economic and educational development.

Because of the consistent work of the Haiti Support Project, led by Ron Daniels and his wife, Mary, the touring African-American guests were given access to the highest levels of government. Legislative leaders and cabinet ministers attended receptions in the group's honor. Janet Sanderson, the U.S. Ambassador to Haiti, hosted a reception at her residence and President Rene Preval gave a farewell reception Monday in the group's honor at the Presidential Palace. But neither of those was the highlight of the trip.

That honor came when Daniels was unveiling the architectural plan for an empowerment and visitors center in Milot. Hundreds of children had gathered for the presentation and when the drawing was unveiled, they cheered loudly, excited that descendants of Africans in America had not forgotten about the descendants of Africans in Haiti.

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Chavez's challenge to U.S. hegemony

By Saeed Shabazz

THE FINAL CALL

UNITED NATIONS - In his opening remarks before the United Nations General Assembly, President Hugo Chavez Frias of Venezuela decried the "hegemony" of the United States, describing President George Bush's address the day before as a recipe for ruling the world. He said the democracy promoted by the American president was a false one of elites, for no democracy could be imposed with bombs.

While holding the Noam Chomsky book, "Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance," in his hand, the Venezuelan president commenced to refer to Pres. Bush as "el Diablo," the devil, according to the UN interpreter.

"Yesterday, the devil came here, right here. And it smells of sulfur still today, this table that I am now standing in front of," he stressed. He added that Mr. Bush was intent on the "exploitation and pillage of all peoples of the world."

Those remarks were imme-

diately posted on the Internet, television and every New York City daily paper. However, one high-level Chinese official, who was not in the General Assembly Great Hall at the time of the speech, told The New York Sun that he wondered if the Venezuelan leader's remarks had been "mistranslated from the Spanish."

Jeffrey Laurenti of the Century Foundation, speaking on National Public Radio, called Pres. Chavez's "devil" remarks "a breach of every element of diplomatic protocol."

Greg Grandin, professor of Latin American History at New York University, told Pacifica Radio's Amy Goodman that the Venezuelan president was speaking on many levels. "He was trying to change the script that was being set up by the press as a confrontation between Iran and the United States. And what I think Chavez did was he diversified the struggle, and this speaks to what he is, I think, trying to do on a larger global scale," Mr. Grandin

opined.

The NYU professor said that the speech of Pres. Chavez would go down in history of the UN, along with the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev banging his shoe on the podium in 1960, in response to a statement that had been made by the head of the Philippine delegation, according to his granddaughter Nina Khushicheva in an article that appeared in the New Statesman in 2000.

The pundits also resurrected the 1974 appearance of the former head of the Palestinian Liberation Organization Yasser Arafat, when he stood before the world body with a gun holster around his waist and an olive branch in his hand. "Today, I have come, bearing an olive branch and a freedom fighter's gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand. I repeat, do not let the olive branch fall from my hand," Mr. Arafat said, according to LeMonde Diplomatique.

An article in Middle East News Report Online, claimed that the speech "raised the world awareness of the

Palestinian cause."

Observers also said that Bolivian President Evo Morales had obviously taken note of Mr. Arafat's use of props, when he appeared before the General Assembly on Sept. 20 with a green coca leaf in his hand, which is a major crop for Bolivian farmers. He said the U.S. was using the war on drugs in South America as a "pretext for neocolonialism." The Bush administration reportedly wants the Bolivian farmers to stop growing the coca leaf.

"Bolivia cannot be pressured to change its policies. We don't need blackmail and threats," Pres. Morales said.

"The Non-Aligned Movement threw down the gauntlet to U.S. global power this week," noted Nile Gardiner, a foreign policy analyst at the Washington, D.C.-based Heritage Foundation, in a Sept. 22 story in the Los Angeles Times. "This is a huge diplomacy challenge and also a strategic threat."

SAEED SHABAZZ is a reporter at The Final Call.