

# Civil rights takes a beating in '80s

By DENISE SMITHERMAN  
Special to the DTH

Despite boasting degrees from such universities as Harvard and Cal-Berkeley, UNC history professor Nell Painter credits federal legislative action with launching her academic career.

"Believe me, if it weren't for affirmative action, I wouldn't be teaching at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill," Painter said.

But legislative and judicial action has not eradicated fundamental socio-economic problems afflicting much of black America, say three civil rights experts who observed the civil rights movement of the '60s and follow its effects today. These experts attribute subtle messages issued by the leadership of the Reagan administration for compounding those problems.

"The climate of culture is such now that it gives a license to a resurgence of prejudice and discrimination," UNC history professor Joel Williamson said. "A great example is the cutting down on programs for the poor."

Painter labels the United States of the 1987 "a racist country." While today's civil rights issues do not evoke the extensive protests and marches of the '60s, racism in America still remains, and extreme accounts of

racism receive prominent national news coverage. Three incidents within the last six months depict radical displays of racism.

■ Aug. 28: Four white men in Toledo, Ohio, were linked to shotgun attacks on the houses of two black families living in white neighborhoods. A cross was burned at the house of another black family in the same neighborhood, and windows were broken at the new home of a black family in another neighborhood.

■ Nov. 14: United Press International reported that a black cadet at The Citadel left the South Carolina military school after being harassed in his room by five white cadets dressed as Ku Klux Klansmen.

■ Dec. 20: Michael Griffith, a 23-year-old black man and his two black companions were beaten by as many as a dozen white men after their car broke down in the predominantly white, middle-class neighborhood of Howard Beach, N.Y. Griffith, whose skull was crushed in the beatings, died after he was struck by a car on the Queens highway to which he had fled.

Racial violence is not the only challenge for blacks. One of the nation's leading scholars on Martin Luther King, Jr., targets "growing class bifurcation," or an increasing

number of blacks in the underclass, as the single most important problem for blacks today.

"The biggest need is for an education and economic training program for the underclass population. That is the fundamental issue," said David Garrow, a former UNC political science professor now teaching at City College of New York. (Garrow's latest book, *Bearing the Cross*, a biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., is reviewed on page 7.)

Officially, one out of every four black male teenagers are unemployed, Williamson said. But unofficial figures are more startling.

"Another 25 percent are not even making themselves visible to the people who are collecting the statistics," he says.

The statistics weigh heavily against blacks. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the median income in 1984 for blacks was \$15,430. The figure was highest in the West (\$19,210) and lowest in the South (\$14,860). The bureau also reported that "for every \$100 a white family received in income, a black family received \$56."

The number of blacks below the poverty level rose from 8.6 million in 1980 to 9.5 million. The black poverty rate soared at 33.8 percent, almost three times the rate for whites. About 31 percent (2.1 million) of all



Samuel Williamson, currently University provost, speaks with students during a BSM protest in 1979

Tar Heel file photo

black families were below the poverty level.

But Garrow is reluctant to blame such economic problems solely on racial differences. "We are really talking about questions of class nowadays, much more than single questions of race," he said.

Garrow links the economics of the black underclass to the lack of quality education.

"The core variable to me," Garrow says, "is whether people stick with the educational system. . . . The vast majority of affirmative action programs in this country benefit the middle class. I really think they are speaking past the underclass."

Painter was more direct in her criticism of education as contributing to the difficulties of blacks.

"The assumption is that if you're black, you're stupid," Painter said. "You have to prove you're not."

When blacks live in poor neighborhoods, they attend poor schools and don't get into good colleges, Painter says. "And good colleges are the key to the rest of your life." Education from good schools leads to the ability to donate money to political campaigns and certain foundations in order to get favorable legislation passed, she says.

In 1985, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) reported that between 1975 and 1981, the number of blacks graduating from high schools increased 29 percent, but the percentage of college-eligible blacks going on to college dropped 11 percent.

The report also noted that since 1978, aid to enrolling white students increased 8 percent, while aid to black students decreased 4.7 percent.

"There is still a lot that is counterproductive and hurtful," Painter said. "Counterproductive in that there is lost talent." For example, Painter said her cousin, who earned a doctorate in astrophysics from the California Institute of Technology, left the U.S. to teach in Africa after growing frustrated and becoming fed up with racism.

"How many people can you afford

to lose?" says Painter. "How many people can you afford to waste?"

Legal equalities can be legislated and enforced in the U.S., while attitudes of individuals cannot, Williamson says. "Racism will have a long life. . . . The alternative is thought control."

Williamson predicts greater action by blacks in the future. "My guess is that things will be better after the next confrontation. There will be another civil rights movement, for lack of a better term. Certainly by about 2010, people will be shocked into the necessity of equality for black people."

At least one black student leader agrees with Williamson's assessment of the future. "I believe that people will not allow these incidents to go unrecognized and unanswered," said Eric Walker, vice president of the Black Student Movement. "Blacks will soon realize, along with all minorities, that the gains that they fought to achieve in the early '60s and '70s are slowly being taken away. We're going to get to fight all over again."

On the UNC campus, Williamson says that blacks are faced with adapting to an environment "that is basically brushing against them."

If a group of black students are seated in the cafeteria laughing and being noisy, Williamson says that white students react negatively. If a group of white students acts similarly, white students tend to think that the group is just having a good time, he said.

"White students would be a lot happier if they could develop a capacity for toleration of black culture, and they would be tremendously benefitted if they could develop an appreciation of black culture."

The holiday commemorating the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., was designed to do just that. Garrow said that while it is a gesture, its accomplishments are minimal.

"The King holiday bill ain't feeding nobody," Garrow said. "It makes people feel better but it doesn't do anything."

## Schedule of Events for Martin Luther King Birthday Celebration

### Thursday, Jan. 15

3:30 p.m. — Film "Martin Luther King Jr.: From Montgomery To Memphis," in Union Auditorium. Speaker: Czerni Brasuell.

Following the showing of the 27-minute film, Brasuell will present a comparative look at the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and the South African struggle today. Brasuell, one of 19 people invited by the South African YWCA for a study tour of their country, is the director of the Durham YWCA. Presented by the Campus Y.

Noon — Black Student Movement Rally in the Pit. Campus leaders will speak, and the "I Have a Dream" speech will be played.

### Friday, Jan. 16

7 p.m. — Second Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Banquet, Carolina Room, Carolina Inn.

Charles E. Day, UNC School of Law professor, will be the keynote speaker. Student tickets \$6, available from BSM office, 215 Carolina Union. General public tickets \$12, for information call 942-1422 or 929-8513. Presented by the South Orange Black Caucus, Office of University Affairs and the BSM.

### Saturday, Jan. 17

8 p.m. — "The Heart of Blues" musical revue, Memorial Hall. The Kuumba Theatre of Chicago offers portrayals of immortal blues artists. Reserved tickets are \$3 for students and senior citizens, \$5 for general public, and are available at the Union Box Office noon to 6 p.m. Presented by the Carolina Union Performing Arts Committee.

### Sunday, Jan. 18

5 p.m. — Melvin Watts will speak in the Student Union's Great Hall.

8 p.m. — BSM performing groups in the Student Union's Great Hall.

### Monday, Jan. 19

1:30 p.m. — Rally and march from the Franklin Street post office to First Baptist Church. Sponsored by the Anti-Apartheid Support Group and Rainbow Coalition of Conscience.

3 p.m. — Martin Luther King, Jr., Community Church Service, First Baptist Church.

7:30 p.m. — Vigil in the Pit, followed by march to the lecture in Memorial Hall.

8 p.m. — Lecture by the Rev. Floyd McKissick in Memorial Hall. Presentation of Martin Luther King, Jr., Scholarship. McKissick, along with three other black students, sued UNC to allow blacks to attend the School of Law, and in 1951 became one of the first black students ever to attend UNC. Presented by the BSM.

### Tuesday, Jan. 20

7 and 9:30 p.m. — Film, "King: A Filmed Record . . . Montgomery to Memphis," in Union Auditorium.

Historical documentary tracing King's leadership from the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in 1955 to his assassination in 1968. Presented by the Carolina Union Film Committee.

# Activist's viewpoint of 1963 and the protests of that year

By RANDY FARMER  
Managing Editor

The sides were clearly divided in 1963.

There was Birmingham Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor armed with a firehose and an electric cattle prod, with a growling dog at his side. Nearby, standing defiantly in a school doorway, was George Wallace, then governor of Alabama.

On the other side was Martin Luther King, armed with non-compliant speech and supported by the passive bodies of his followers. Nearby was John F. Kennedy, toiling for ways to remove the Connors and the Wallaces.

1963 was, as one witness would later describe it, a "very, very tense time." But if tension was an ingredient of that year, so was brutality and death. Dogs would be released onto protesters in Birmingham. Two civil rights proponents would be murdered: Medgar Evers and John F. Kennedy. Perhaps best encapsulating the significance of the deaths to the civil rights to the time are the words of Archibald MacLeish: "Our deaths are not ours; They are yours; They will mean what you make them."

But violence did not always dominate the scene as demonstrated one August afternoon when some quarter of a million people gathered peacefully in Washington, D.C. The protesters were attempting, on Aug. 28 to be exact, to persuade Congress that action on civil rights legislation was of the utmost importance. It was on that day that Martin Luther King delivered his timeless "I have a dream" speech.

"Even though we still face the difficulties of today and tomorrow," King said in front of the Lincoln Memorial steps. "I still have a dream. . . I have a dream that on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit at the table of brotherhood."

In the same speech, King said: "In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by

drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred."

One of the protesters listening to those words and witnessing the day's event was Joseph Straley, an UNC physics professor emeritus.

"It was awfully hot," Straley said about the day. "There were people as far as the eye could see. They stretched from the Lincoln Memorial to Washington Monument. It was an occasion for people of a like mind to gather and protest what was going in this country." It was also a time to try to overcome, as the old Baptist hymn goes, but the overcoming to be done wasn't isolated to the Capitol Building.

"(The march) drew attention to the scene, but it was not the scene," Straley said. "The scene was what was going on in Chapel Hill, in Greensboro, in Charlotte."

"It took no courage to go to Washington. It took plenty of courage to walk into one of (Chapel Hill's) restaurants downtown when there was a very angry proprietor sitting back there."

And, as the 72-year-old Straley recalled, it was in places like Chapel Hill that the battle for civil rights was being waged and the costs were being accumulated.

"My role (in the Chapel Hill protest movement) was to advise and mostly I advised on the conservative side," said Straley, who came to UNC in 1944 and retired in 1980. "I was always terribly frightened about what people might do. I had the feeling they didn't fully understand the enormity of what could happen to them. They could be killed, or they could be put in prison. . . ."

John Ehle, a writer and former UNC professor, wrote a book entitled "The Free Men" on several students who were civil rights protesters during the early 1960s. "Lightning struck in Chapel Hill in 1963 and 1964," Ehle wrote. "And the reactions of the town have to be evaluated in terms of that."

During the early 1960s, the civil rights movement in Chapel Hill was an active one. It staged sit-ins on local restaurants with segregated lunch-counters, blocked Franklin Street, held sidewalk marches and fasted for

two weeks underneath the flagpole in front of the post office.

Straley said he advised the protesters as to the procedure to take. "I considered it pretty careless driving what the activist leadership was attempting," Straley said. "I imagine the individuals who were into this were sort of intoxicated with the peer pressures that were involved. That is, they hadn't thought through what the total consequences could be."

Straley said there were about 2,000 charges on about 150 civil rights protesters for trespassing, resisting arrest, refusing to disperse and so on.

"If the judge was to give (the protesters) the full penalty or sentence, I could see some of these kids being in prison for several years. Of course, nothing like that happened. But how do you know nothing like that is going to happen."

"I just feared for their security. I was also wondering whether they could bring discredit to their own movement by doing things that were a little too flamboyant. They were playing the game very, very carelessly at times."

The tensions of the time were reflected in a protest during Easter of 1965.

"The core leaders (of the demonstration)," Straley said, "there were five, fasted for two weeks at the flagpole in front of the post office on Franklin Street. By Easter, this had generated in the community a tremendous amount of reponse. The Ku Klux Klan decided to have a meeting here to protest the fasters, so they rented a field out near Durham."

"One of the things that happened was that the Grand Dragon had made a speech, one sentence of which is that 'There are those bastards down there underneath the flagpole desecrating the flag. We ought to go up there and drag them away.'"

The Klan never harmed the protesters, Straley said, but several observers came by and harassed the fasters.

Straley said the reason he didn't participate in any protests was: "I suppose the easiest answer is that I

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# Civil rights made him King

James Surowiecki  
Books

transformed into the Calvary where King was finally nailed to the cross he always bore.

The trouble with this fable is not merely that, like all myths, it obscures reality. The more serious problem is that the canonization of King makes him not just the preeminent symbol of the drive for civil rights, but rather the embodiment of that drive. According to this vision, the movement did not make King — King made the movement. And once that premise is accepted, much of the glorious vitality of the battle for civil rights, of ordinary people effecting radical change, is lost.

David Garrow's new history of

King and the SCLC, *Bearing the Cross*, is on its face an attempt to resurrect that vitality and provide a balanced portrait of the Montgomery preacher and his accomplishments. There is a demythologizing air to Garrow's writing that is refreshing, but at the same time the author seems anxious to avoid desecrating King's tomb. The reality of King's life, which was far from saintly, is set out exhaustively. But as Garrow tries, not always successfully, to thread the theme of bearing the cross through King's life, he imbues the messianic image with considerable power.

This is a narrow tightrope Garrow is walking, between hagiography and a cynical dredging up of the less savory aspects of King's life. It has been persuasively argued that every favorable biography is in some sense

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A Carrboro man is removed by police during a 1963 civil rights demonstration

Photo Courtesy of Roland Giduz