

book house

Critiqued by Claude Reed Jr.

The following is a comparative historical critique on the book *FORTY YEARS A GUINEA PIG* by E. Frederick Morrow

In reading E. Frederick Morrow's autobiographical account of his seventy-year effort to attain equality one is both encouraged and discouraged by what he reveals. The encouragement results primarily from the unyielding courage and determination exemplified by Morrow throughout his eventful life—in spite of formidable odds against his success. The chief source of discouragement is in the fact that it is 1981 and so very little has changed.

Morrow provides a vivid chronicle of life in Hackensack, New Jersey (his birthplace) in the 1920's and 30's. He pinpoints aspects of American racism that he was exposed to at that time and ironically, Black Americans are still being subjected to many of the same, old inequities.

For example, Morrow explains the "unwritten" laws of segregation in New Jersey that Blacks automatically adhered to in the 1920's like having a separate beach called "The Inkwell." This among other blatant insults to the very humanness of one's existence in Morrow's words

"...was a debilitating, defeating experience and after a few years the effects of living in this kind of atmosphere dulled the ambitions and aspirations..."

Today, although there are no laws prohibiting Blacks from most public places or accommodations we are still restricted in much more subtle ways. If you don't believe we are still discriminated against publicly, try to catch a taxi in New York City on a busy street. More often than not, if whites are also seeking a taxi they will be picked up first—even though you may have been waiting for some time.

When Morrow illustrates conditions for Black youth growing up in the twenties and thirties there are direct and obvious parallels drawn that apply to the current situation.

Morrow recalls, "With every recreational, social and economic avenue closed to Black kids and the conspiracy in the school system to give them an inferior education by relegating them to 'special classes', a Black child's horizon was in the dust of the street."

Tragically, today many of these same avenues are only partially open to a few Blacks while the overwhelming majority have been ostracized socially, economically and educationally. Socially, television has molded our present image for white America. Unfortunately, it is a false image of contentment perpetuated by the facade of equality. For the most part,

Blacks, still portray maids, servants and entertainers. Economically, we are still the last hired and first fired. Although some of us have attained positions that allow a degree of economic freedom in comparison to the whole this number is very small. Educationally, our children are still sent to "special classes" as they were in Morrow's school days. Our children are still subjected to an educational system that has never wavered from its inherent objective to "miseducate" our youth.

As a result of this invariable situation, most Black Americans (as in Morrow's childhood) will never make it to the "starting line" in the race for a full, productive and rewarding life.

When E. Frederick Morrow entered Bowdoin College in 1926 he recounts how a quota system prevailed within America's universities. In fact, Bowdoin really had a quota of one Black. Morrow was able to enroll as the unprecedented second Black only because he had been mistaken for the son of a prominent white alumni with the same last name. When the administrators saw him in person they practically went into shock.

His college experience found him and fellow Black classmate Bill Dean for the most part ostracized by whites at the school. Because both Blacks were relegated to a lonely plight, they directed all of their energies into academic achievement.

Regarding Bill Dean Morrow recalls, "For four years, Dean had nothing but straight A's in every course and kept this record up through his M.A. and Ph.D. at Harvard. He was a mental giant."

Unfortunately, Dean was eventually to commit suicide. The suicidal nucleus was formed in his junior year at Bowdoin when a white student was given an award that Dean had rightfully earned for academic superiority.

Even today Blacks do not always receive all the things they deserve for academic achievement. There have been cases of academically qualified Blacks not being made aware of scholarship monies available to them—but being steered towards school loans instead or only being made aware of academic grants after they have volunteered some knowledge about them.

Morrow graduated college in the heart of the Great Depression of the 1930's. His first job was for a WPA program which led to his working as a messenger on Wall Street. Eventually, he took a job with Opportunity Magazine, the official organ of the Urban League. Morrow says that this was a fascinating period in his life. He worked with the likes of James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. DuBois, Thurgood Marshall and Roy Wilkins.

One of the most interesting obser-

vations to be made about this period in history was the fact that in spite of how well educated Blacks were, professional positions for them within white America's business structure were practically non-existent. This explains why so many great Blacks of this era sought employment among themselves—creating their own livelihood.

By the time Fred Morrow joined the NAACP the cancerous effects of American racism were festering in his very soul. Morrow was determined to do what he could to alleviate this disease. In fact, he has dedicated his life to seeking the cure. Morrow became a courageous, uncompromising spokesman for the rights of Black Americans even at the occasional risk of facing irate, white lynch mobs. Throughout his life, he has practiced a rare form of honesty despite the consequences. This is probably the single-most character trait that has made Fred Morrow's life both dangerous and rewarding.

In retracing his World War II army experiences, Morrow gives substantial historic insight into the problems of the Black soldier. Ill-trained, ill-equipped and given the most degrading tasks to perform, it is a wonder that so many Blacks served their country admirably under these circumstances.



E. Frederick Morrow in his White House office.

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Although in today's army many of these kinds of injustices have been eliminated, one cannot ignore the plight of drug addiction suffered by many Black (and White) Viet Nam veterans. Of course, this is just an