

## Pausing and pondering on the Fourth

**CLIFTON E. GRAVES JR.**  
Chronicle Columnist

NORMAL, Ala. — As this nation prepares to commemorate both the 100th "birthday" of the Statue of Liberty and its 110th "Independence" Day, it would do well for African-Americans to pause and ponder, rather than party and participate.

We must pause and ponder — even today in 1986 — for we do not yet have much to celebrate. We still live in a nation which judges us by the color of our skin rather than by the content of our character.

We still live in a nation whose policies and laws result in black folk being arrested and jailed at rates three times those of whites; a nation where unemployment, crime and drug addiction are at epidemic proportions in our neighborhoods; a nation where justice is dispensed on the basis of the size of one's bank account or of one's skin color; a nation where the black infant mortality rate is nearly three times that of whites; a nation which daily in-

sults 25 million of our people with its unholy alliance with racist South Africa.

It is against this backdrop of historic oppression and present-day repression of our people's hopes and aspirations that we pause and ponder as our fellow citizens honor "Lady Liberty."

We should be mindful that while progress has been made, we as African-Americans have yet to receive our piece of the pie, have yet to achieve the dream.

Thus, as we pause and ponder, let us remember the words of black abolitionist Robert Purvis, who, as an organizer of the First Annual Convention of Free Colored People in Philadelphia in 1857, admonished us:

"We owe no allegiance to a country which grinds us under its iron hoof and treats us like dogs."

But, in this writer's opinion, the best analysis of why we — the yet oppressed descendants of slaves — should be subdued rather than festive as the national celebration nears comes from the pen of the great orator, statesman and human rights activist Frederick Douglass.

In his memorable, insightful Fourth of July oration, delivered to a predominantly white audience in Rochester, N.Y., in 1852, Douglass presented an argument as applicable to present-day conditions as it was in pre-Civil War America.

Brothers and sisters, ladies and gentlemen, the often quoted, yet never outmoded, words of Frederick Douglass:

"What to the slave is your Fourth of July? It is a day that reveals to him, more than any other day of the year, the gross



injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.

"To him, your celebration is a sham. Your boasted liberty, an unholy license. Your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery.

"Your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless.

"Your prayers, and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings are to him mere fraud, bombast, deception, impiety and hypocrisy. A thin veil to cover up

crimes that would disgrace a nation of savages.

"There is not a nation on this earth guilty of crimes more vicious and bloody than are the people of these United States — at this very hour.

"Go where you may, search where you will ... search out all the abuses of this world. And when you have found the last, lay your facts by the everyday practices of this nation, and you will

agree with me — that for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy — America reigns without a rival!"

Amen, Brother Douglass.

Think about it — and act accordingly. The struggle continues.

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## Vouchers: A way to privatize the public schools

NEW YORK — The Reagan administration recently proposed that current federal aid to education for the poor should be replaced by a system of educational vouchers. Poor families would use them to purchase education for their children at public or private schools.

The trouble with that superficially seductive idea is that it won't improve education for poor children, and it very well could harm it.

The current program now costs about \$3.2 billion per year, and while the funding is far below what is needed to do the job, the

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program is working. It has been credited with the rise in black scores on standardized achievement tests.

That program would be replaced by vouchers worth \$600 — far below the cost of virtually all private schools. Even if they do serve as an incentive for private schools to admit poor students, very few would be admitted.

Most likely, private schools would skim the best and the brightest, leaving average

youngsters and problem students to the public schools. The result can only weaken the public schools and further deprive them of citizen support.

Supporters of vouchers argue that since the public schools will be forced to compete for voucher money, they'll improve. Maybe they will, and maybe they won't.

Problems like rigid administrative structures, below-standard physical plants and indifference to student needs won't be changed by a system that offers an incentive for families to abandon the public schools.

Even if the administration's

plan is passed, the vast majority of poor children will continue to be educated in the public schools. And those schools need more than a voucher system to shape up.

The voucher plan would offer some individuals the opportunity to attend private schools when the nation's priority should be making the public schools provide quality education for all children.

Government exists to provide services all citizens desire and need for society's good. Of these, education is among the most im-

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