

FORUM

Bighouse's Homecoming Story on the Road Black Colleges Are On

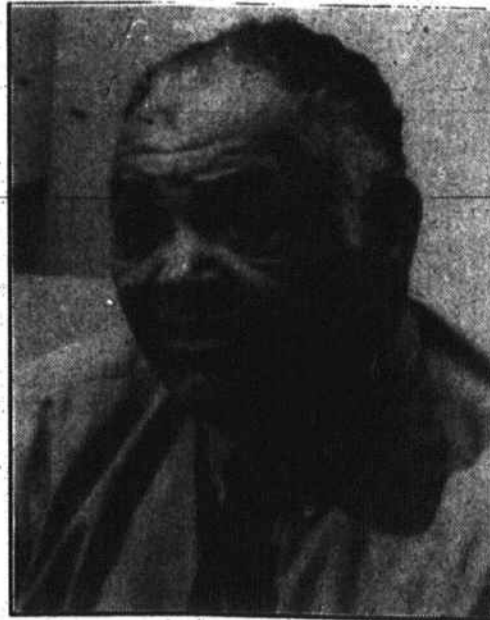
Fall. College is back in session. Clarence "Bighouse" Gaines leans on his car, talking to adoring students through the ritual of watching football practice accompanied by the band. A black college is special. The band played as we hummed to "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," and Bighouse told a story in an answer to a direct question. It was a special and magic moment in the fall—at a fork in the road—on the campus of WSSU.

There were, nearly forty, across from WSSU's largest facility, which is named for him. He was quite in his element and in a good mood. He went straight into his answer about whether the fall of programs at North

The local drunk, according to Bighouse, was steadying himself by holding on to a tree, in the fork of a road, when the preacher came by and asked: "When are you going to get off the fork in the road, Preacher?" "Fifty-two years," he said proudly. "I don't know, Preacher," the drunk said. "If you been on a road fifty-two years and ain't got no further than this fork in the road, I believe I'd try a new road!"

Bighouse talked of the road that he and his generation of black educators had helped to lay and build. He told us of how it was sometimes unpaved, off-times crooked and forked by the peculiar history of race relations in the South. He talked about the relationships and network of people—black and white.

He took us back to times in his early Kentucky childhood and high school and Maryland collegiate days. He told of his awareness of challenges to the existence of black colleges in the last half of his nearly fifty years in North Carolina—WSSU. How it all seems to be finally catching up to the road public black colleges have been on in Kentucky and Maryland for a long time. Most had never hear of some of the black colleges that Bighouse and his generation have actually "outlived." That's at least forty black col-



Clarence "Bighouse" Gaines

leges, since 1950, he asserted directly.

Fall. He talked of how the number of black students graduating from college is falling. He looked away, glistened-eyed, as though he saw in the mirror of the early evening sun the faces of those six in ten black college students who fail to blossom to full fruition, to a degree from college, in five years. He called the names of his students who, to him, were leaves from the trees that he represented. He spoke proudly of the black teachers and administrators he had helped to nourish. The seeds of historically black colleges, who now, like he, were approaching the fall of their lives. He looked down into young eyes that reflected uncertainty. He too seemed uncertain if they would have a chance to replace the aging leaves.

He didn't tell the moral of the story. He left it in indirection, for us to understand, to decide about and to act upon. Like the great teacher that he is.

He never said that he had been on the wrong road or under the wrong tree. No regrets in the soft eyes. He never preached. He came off as neither the drunk at the tree nor the road on which the preacher was passing.

He finally asked the students if they really knew what the band was playing. There we were, listening and humming along—at a typically historically black college—WSSU. We were shaded by one who had been on the road for a long time. Was he the drunk, the preacher, or the road. Whichever, I hope the young ones did not miss the intended misdirection of his story. Like leaves in fall, we hung onto a big learning tree at WSSU, at the fork in the road, the week before Homecoming.

The lyric asked if we were "drunk from the wine of the world," as Bighouse told more stories, "true to his native land." It is fall at black colleges—Homecoming Season—as the band plays on, at the fork in the road.

(William Turner is a regular freelance columnist for the Chronicle.)



LIFT EVERY VOICE

By WILLIAM H. TURNER

Carolina black colleges were really about unfair comparisons between historically black and predominantly white colleges.

He was befallen by questions like leaves at the foot of a giant oak tree. The learning tree, I thought. The questions centered around the recently announced closing of graduate-level programs in education at historically black colleges in North Carolina.

With the sense of verbal indirection that is so common to the best southerners, Bighouse told a ditty I first heard from Loyal Jones of Kentucky's Berea College many years ago.

Political Leaders Falsely Believe Their Power Belong to Them

With the approaching of the mid-term elections, a discontented public is about to make a statement about our government leadership—or lack thereof. Congress and the Administration have lost the confidence of the American people through poor performance and a string of scandals. People don't like the direction our country is headed. Americans perceive our present leadership as straying from our original national charter, the Constitution, and abandoning the principles upon which our nation was founded. This November may be the time when enough Americans say "enough!" to vote in new leaders with fresh ideas.

An infusion of fresh, idealistic blood into the Capital's culture is indeed welcome and necessary. Yet one should be wary of high expectations for a change in the spirit of Washington and its attitude toward the governed. The blandishments and seduction of power in Washington are often too much even for the best-intentioned souls. Once new faces arrive in Congressional offices or slide behind bureaucratic desks, newcomers become Important Persons. And the problem with Important Persons is that they lose perspective.

There is a poster common Washington-area stores that shows a view of the world from Washington, D.C. It depicts a looming Capitol building, the White House, large administration buildings, and the monuments on the Mall. Then, across the Potomac is the east of the country and the world, increasingly distant, indistinct, and unimportant. Jokes about this perspective are a common theme of Washington humor, showing that we recognize the incongruous irony of that kind of inflated self-importance. But in every jest there is some truth. Depicting the pomposity of the powerful is funny yet infuriating because it is accurate.

The hubristic attitude perceived among our high officials, and especially in the Clinton clan, results from a misunderstanding of the purpose of

power. Even in a democracy, there is an all-too-human impulse to believe that the power one exercises is an inalienable right—thus politicians' opposition to term limits on the basis that it infringes on their "right" to hold high elective office. Power corrupts to the extent that our leaders believe that the power they wield belongs to them, and to that extent our liberties are endangered.

Power is not a right—at least not in a democracy—but it does carry responsibility. Authority is justly exercised only for the good of those subject to that authority, not for those who hold it. In the clearest instance, a child is the beneficiary of the power and providence of his father, who exercises his parental authority for the good of the child, not for himself. When a parent uses his power over a child for his own purposes, the result is usually horrific, and universally recognized as such.

Likewise, all power is abusive and corrupting when it is used to serve those in power rather than those under it. When power is turned to serve the powerful, the vision of leadership is lost. Real leadership must include a vision for the good of those who are led, and a practical means of achieving goals. It must involve a vision of something bigger than oneself. That is why Hillary Clinton's dawning realization that there are things bigger than herself was so unnerving. If she was not aware of a higher good than her own while pursuing her power and position, for what end did she seek it?

Where real leadership is dynamic, Americans see smug complacency among political leaders in Washington, D.C. Where real leaders are capable of self-sacrifice, because they look first to the good of those under their care, people believe that our leaders would sacrifice even important national goals for the sake of political advantage. Like demigods, they are the center of their universe, and the beneficiaries of their exercise of power.

Politicians and the media that share in their power are jealous gods

though, and hostile to the idea of a higher Power upon which human authority is based. Thus, in the name of Constitutional amendment designed to protect religions from the federal government, they have made repeated



THE RIGHT SIDE

By ARMSTRONG WILLIAMS

efforts to banish all religions from influencing the public sphere. But it may be that no secular ideology can supply the spirit for real leadership. To understand anything as it really is, we have to have the proper perspective. Important Persons can't have that perspective, because they believe that the power they hold belongs to them. Real leadership requires that an understanding that there is something greater than ourselves, and the recognition that leadership derives from the Creator. The very name of God implies his authority...He is Lord, or Our Father. Leadership which defiles or disfigures creation, or which harms human well-being rather than promoting it, is not legitimate leadership. Pontius Pilate, representing the archetype of earthly power, asked Jesus, "Do You not know that I have power to liberate You and I have power to crucify You?" Christ admonished him: "You have no power whatever of your own, but only what is granted you from above." That is the beginning of wisdom for any true leader.

(Armstrong Williams is a freelance columnist for the Chronicle.)

Helping the Poor Become Economically Self-Sufficient Demands Attention

Helping poor people to become economically self-sufficient is a major, unmet challenge that demands urgent national attention.

Urban economics have undergone profound changes that undermine the ability of marginally skilled and low skilled workers of all races to adequately support their families.

Just a generation ago, these blue collar workers were the backbone of the American economy. Now, the market economy that works for most Americans has all but collapsed for inner-city folk.

There are fewer and fewer jobs for low skilled workers. And the wages for those that exist are just plain lousy, all too often at or below the poverty line.

The result: the rapid deterioration of urban neighborhoods, the rise of crime and anti-social value systems among young people who see no viable future for themselves, and the break-up of families whose fathers can no longer be proud providers.

To break that cycle, we must attack the source of the problem — the growing inability of inner-city adults to find legitimate jobs that enable them to adequately support their families.

In my view, many politicians and economists are in denial about the depth of this problem.

Some blame its victims, saying they don't want to work anyway, despite convincing evidence to the contrary. Others say high unemployment and low wages for low skilled workers are natural in a modern market economy. Still others optimistically argue that there will be a happy ending when

technology eventually replaces the lost jobs with more highly skilled and highly paid new ones.

The trouble is that none of these scenarios helps inner-city people trapped in poverty today. It's unrealistic to expect all of them to upgrade themselves overnight from laborers and welfare recipients to office workers and critical thinkers.

Both the private sector and government must do more to encourage economic self-sufficiency.

Employers should make every effort to cut poor people in on the local job action, so that everyone has a shared stake in their community's quality of life.

One way would be for employers to reserve training slots and real jobs for residents of neighborhoods or census tracts with high unemployment rates.

This would not be a politically-contentious race-based approach. It's a more palatable alternative which recognizes that poor people of all races need decent jobs.

Since such local measures are unlikely to employ everyone, there simply may be no alternative to government action if legitimate work is to be reintroduced as the prevailing way of life in poor neighborhoods.

Most people agree that it's the private sector's responsibility to create jobs. But where the private labor market fails, as it has today in the inner city, then government must step in.

Government should create a new labor-intensive public enterprise to perform services valued by taxpayers.

For instance, there's plenty of infrastructure work to do. Schools are crumbling. Subways and bus stations are strewn with graffiti and railroad



TO BE EQUAL

By HUGH B. PRICE

rights-of-way are littered with trash. Many public parks in cities and suburbs alike are poorly maintained.

There's a strong case for a labor-intensive public enterprise employing thousands of marginally skilled workers to help produce goods and services the public values.

It won't be cheap, but investing in schools, parks and people will enhance the quality of life for all and reduce crime and anti-social activity. It will be more effective than the billion more we now spend much less productively on public assistance, police and prisons.

(Hugh B. Price is president of the National Urban League.)

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