

# Justice mourns reputation

By RICHARD CARELLI  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON - Clarence Thomas once scorned blacks he considered co-opted by "the man," or white America. The irony is not lost on him.

"What youthful wrath I visited upon them is now visited upon me," he acknowledged last week in his most important speech since joining the Supreme Court and becoming the nation's highest-ranking black judicial official seven years ago.



Thomas

The estrangement hurts. "It pains me deeply, more deeply than any of you, could imagine, to be perceived by so many members of my race as doing them harm," Thomas told about 1,000 black lawyers and judges at a National Bar Association convention in Memphis, Tenn.

In the same speech, however, Thomas, 50, asserted his freedom to think for himself and to eschew race-based orthodoxy.

His political conservatism - particularly his opposition to affirmative action - has enraged civil rights groups and led some prominent blacks to label Thomas a traitor.

The late William O. Douglas, the Supreme Court's liberal lion, opposed affirmative action just as vigorously three decades ago and suffered no such personal attacks for his views. But Douglas was an important ally for other issues on the civil rights agenda. And he was white.

Despite some strong language aimed at his critics, Thomas' trip to Memphis was not about defiance. Instead, it was a call for coexistence. The message: I'm on the court. I'll be there a long time. Get used to it.

Some cannot. Keith Watters, a Washington lawyer and former National Bar Association president, picketed outside the hotel while Thomas spoke. "I just couldn't turn my back on all those who have marched the marches, made the sacrifices," he said.

Watters believes Thomas "is a very lonely, isolated individual who is desperately trying to find his way back home, back into the African American community."

Warren Hope Dawson, a Tampa, Fla., lawyer and another past NBA president, says Thomas' jurisprudence goes against the "group love" that envelops the black community. "He says, 'This is not about groups; this is about individuals,'" Dawson said. "He has distanced himself."

Perhaps the trip to Memphis was a first step closer.

Speaking of affirmative action, Thomas said, "Any effort, policy or program that has as a prerequisite acceptance of the notion that blacks are inferior is a non-starter with me."

Some who heard his speech were impressed with his courage - it was a polite but unfriendly crowd - and sincerity, while others criticized him for not taking questions or participating in any panel discussion.

Some saw hypocrisy in Thomas' failure to mention that his admission to Yale's law school resulted from the very kind of affirmative action he now votes to abolish.

Damon Keith, a federal appeals court judge, hopes Thomas has taken "a first step in opening a line of communication with those who have a differing point of view."

While in Memphis, Thomas met privately with the six black judges who are their respective states' top-ranking jurists. And he told NBA President Randy Jones, a federal prosecutor in San Diego, he is willing to discuss blacks' lack of success in obtaining jobs as Supreme Court law clerks, traditional stepping stones to high-powered legal careers.

Thomas spoke just a mile from the old Lorraine Motel, where Martin Luther King was assassinated 30 years ago. A very personal part of his speech was reminiscent of the strife that had drawn King to Memphis.



The family of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. is calling for an apology from the FBI. "The healing process can never be done until we sat publicly that maybe we made some mistakes," said King's son Martin. Pictured above from left, Christine King Farris, Martin Luther King, III, Coretta Scott King, and daughter Yolanda.

# King says FBI owes apology

By DAVID PACE  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON - The son of the late Martin Luther King Jr. says an apology from the FBI is in order for harassment and spying on the civil rights leader endured during the 1960s.

Martin Luther King III said the FBI should eventually apologize because the agency, under former director J. Edgar Hoover, "spent years and years trying to discredit my father and my family and spent millions of dollars of taxpayers' money."

"The healing process can never begin until we say publicly that maybe we made some mistakes," said King, who recently assumed the presidency of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference founded by his father.

The King family has been lobbying the Clinton administration

to create a national commission to open a new investigation into the assassination of King, who was gunned down on a motel balcony in Memphis, Tenn., on April 4, 1968. Attorney General Janet Reno is reviewing the family's request.

FBI spokesman Frank Scafidi said it would be inappropriate for the agency to comment on King's request for an apology while Reno is considering whether to reopen the assassination investigation.

James Earl Ray, who was imprisoned for the murder until his death of liver disease this year, disavowed his initial confession and spent years futilely seeking a new trial. The King family joined the effort in recent years, arguing that Ray was innocent.

King, speaking to reporters after the conclusion of the SCLC's annual conference, said a new trial "would have raised a lot of issues

that needed to be raised" concerning the involvement of the FBI and other government agencies in the harassment of his father.

Those same issues, he said, can be aired if Reno decides to reopen the investigation into King's assassination, focusing on new evidence that has surfaced over the years.

In March, for example, former FBI agent Donald Wilson broke 30 years of silence and said that papers he took from Ray's car after the assassination support claims of a conspiracy.

Wilson, who worked in the FBI's Atlanta office in 1968, claimed to have found in Ray's car an envelope containing two pieces of paper with the name "Raul" written on them. Ray contended he was set up by a shadowy gun-runner named Raoul, a man whose existence has never been verified.

The FBI discounted Wilson's story.

# Urban League releases study

By RONALD POWERS  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON - Black Americans face being left out of the nation's economic prosperity unless community leaders set a new civil rights agenda focusing on ways black families can accumulate wealth and assets, the National Urban League said last week.

Many people believe the growing black middle class and the emergence of many black millionaires have moved black Americans closer to economic equality with white Americans, Urban League President Hugh Price said in releasing his organization's annual report.

"The reality is, no matter how great incomes become for individual blacks, our wealth is not sustained because we have very few assets that can be passed on from generation to generation," he said.

The authors of the study, "The State of Black America 1998," say the nation cannot afford to have so many black families trapped in inner-city poverty, where they are isolated from mainstream society and their children are poorly educated.

The Urban League urges America's universities, businesses, labor unions and governments to make a renewed commitment to affirmative action.

"Individual self-sufficiency, as important as that is, cannot be the ultimate goal," Price writes in the report's introduction. "Black folks must push past that and go for economic power."

Among the study's findings: Black families lag far behind their white counterparts in the accumulation of wealth and personal assets. Even among households earning \$50,000 or more, where the wealth gap is narrowest, blacks possess barely one-half the median net worth of their white counterparts, the report said.

The Chronicle's e-mail address is: wschron@netunlimited.net

While young white families often get a head start in accumulating wealth, usually in the form of help with a down payment on their first homes, blacks usually don't have that advantage, the study's researchers said.

Black families have been hardest hit as manufacturing and other well-paying jobs have moved out of the nation's cities. "The disappearance of work has had devastating effects not only on individuals and families, but on the social life of neighborhoods as well," the study said. The level of "of inner-city joblessness ... reached during the first half of the 1990s was unprecedented."

Because of old and outdated infrastructure, many minority schools and neighborhoods are in danger of being left behind as advances are made in the field of computers and high-speed telecommunications.

While America is rapidly changing, the head of the Urban League concludes that the answer to many of his community's problems is rooted in traditional wisdom.

"Unless more African American youth get the message that learning is important, their chances of earning the income that will enable them to construct productive lives for themselves will range from slim to none," Price said.

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# Officer loses suit

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHAPEL HILL - An administrative law judge has rejected an embattled University of North Carolina police officer's claim that he was the victim of racial discrimination.

Friday's ruling by Administrative Law Judge Fred Morrison Jr. also upheld UNC-Chapel Hill Chancellor Michael Hooker's decision to suspend Lt. Edwin Swain Jr. for one week without pay for falsifying his time records.

Swain was fired last year, two months after accusing the UNC police department of squelching an underage drinking citation he gave to a university trustee's stepdaughter at a September football game.

Hooker later rehired Swain, saying the punishment was too harsh, but suspended him for a week without pay.

Swain claimed the school had retaliated against him for his comments about the drinking citation and had discriminated against him in his annual job review because he is black.

UNC officials said Swain was disciplined for spending two hours at a local newspaper office while on duty and in uniform to discuss a grievance he filed against the university. Swain was offered several opportunities to amend his time sheet, but he refused to do so.

"Lieutenant Edwin Swain was not the victim of illegal discrimination or retaliation," Morrison wrote in his decision.

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