

FORUM

Is your halo on too tight?

Nigel Alston

Motivational Moments

"Life leaps like a geyser for those willing to drill through the rock of inertia."

— Alexis Carrel

Immorality and a dependency on welfare are the root causes of the cries for help from thousands of people in New Orleans, resulting from Hurricane Katrina's destruction. Welfare dependent people were waiting for the government to step in with a handout. They were not resourceful enough to take care of themselves.

That's the opinion and perspective of some people who lay the blame for the mess in the city at the feet of the powerless people we all saw on television without food and water and on the government they say created the monster.

David Warren, writing in The Ottawa Citizen, took direct aim at the faces we saw in need. "Sooner or later we must acknowledge that welfare dependency creates exactly the sort of haplessness and social degeneration we saw on display, as the floodwaters rose."

He believes that the great majority of those not evacuated lived in assisted housing and receive food stamps, prescription medicine and government support through many other programs. "Many have, all their lives, expected someone to lift them to safety, without input from themselves," he wrote.

I believe he and others are like the man who went to the doctor with an awful headache.

"Doctor, could you give me something for it?"

"I will," said the doctor, but I want to check a few things out first. Tell me, do you drink a lot of liquor?"

"Liquor?" said the man indignantly. "I never touch the filthy stuff."

"How about smoking?"

"I think smoking is disgusting. I've never in my life touched tobacco."

"I'm a bit embarrassed to ask this, but — you know the way some men are — do you do any running around at night?"

"Of course not. What do you take me for? I'm in bed every night by 10 o'clock at the latest."

"Tell me," said the doctor, "the pain in the head you speak of, is it a sharp, shooting kind of pain?"

"Yes," said the man. "That's it — a sharp, shooting kind of pain."

"Simple, my dear fellow! Your trouble is you have your

halo on too tight. All we need to do is loosen it a bit."

Of course a tight halo doesn't deter the critics, like retired New Orleans police Capt. Robert Johnson. While sympathetic, he believes the situation was predictable. According to an Internet message, he said, "We are now reaping the benefits of a welfare state."

How?
"We have provided food, clothing and shelter to the extent that the recipients became entirely dependent on government resources to live. They have reached the point that no longer do they have the knowledge to take care of themselves. They will sit there and drown or go hungry, and curse the fact that the government has not gotten them out of this mess."

Welfare depletes available resources, according to Johnson, instead of addressing the true needs of the community, such as roads, bridges, levees, police and fire protection, sanitation and drinking water. I believe he needs to loosen his halo a bit too.

The Rev. Jesse Lee Peterson, an African-American, has a tight halo too. "If you're black and a hurricane is about to destroy your city, you'll probably wait for the government to save you," he wrote in a piece on worldnetdaily.com. He is the founder and president of BOND, the Brother-

hood Organization of A New Destiny.

There is a hint of moral superiority in his tone. The people left behind in the city were "primarily immoral, welfare-pampered blacks that stayed behind and waited for the government to bail them out."

According to his perspective, the black community's performance was pathetic. It would not have happened 40 years ago. He believes if white people were to leave the United States, blacks would turn America into a ghetto within 10 years.

He has now changed his mind as a result of what he observed in New Orleans. He was too optimistic. "I gave blacks too much credit. It took a mere three days for blacks to turn the Superdome and the convention center into ghettos, rampant with theft, rape and murder."

It was blacks' moral poverty — not their material poverty — that cost them dearly in New Orleans, according to the reverend.

Now I know what the real problem is. Some people need to loosen their halos.

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Racial double standard

Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Guest Columnist

Last March, Atlanta hostage Ashley Smith got a rousing cheer from public officials, law enforcement, and much of the media for cajoling accused rampage shooter Brian Nichols to give himself up. Smith deserved the praise. It took courage, compassion, and good sense to do what she did. But it also took something else, drugs.

In her recently released tell-all book, "Unlikely Angel," Smith admits that she got Nichols to give up by plying him from her stash of methamphetamine. Meth is deadly, destructive, and, of course, patently illegal.

A month before Smith publicly announced she's a former drug user at the launch of her national book promo tour, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales called meth a scourge that devastates families and communities. Gonzales, Bush drug czar John Walters, and Mike Leavitt, Health and Human Services secretary, met in Nashville, Tenn., in August. They announced that the feds would pour more resources into drug prevention and treatment, but they also promised a big crack-down on meth sale and use.

Gonzales claimed that the Justice Department had more than quadrupled the number of cases filed during the past decade. The DEA has aggressively targeted meth producers and traffickers, resulting in the initiation of nearly 3,000 criminal cases related to meth production, distribution, or diversion of ingredient chemicals in 2004.

But Smith didn't have to worry about being one those prosecuted. Police didn't catch her with the dope in her apartment and prosecutors quickly made it clear that they wouldn't file charges.



Police escort Brian Nichols after his capture on March 12.

And they shouldn't. Smith is a victim, and needs counseling and treatment, not jail. Smith, however, is white, middle class, and a former housewife, and she would likely get the help she needed anyway without risk of a prison sentence.

Yet Smith, far more than her captor, Nichols, fit the profile of a meth user, as well as the profile of the majority of America's drug users. Surveys have repeatedly shown that middle-income young whites use drugs more frequently than blacks or Latinos.

The drug pass that Smith got — and thousands of low-level, mostly poor and desperate small-time black drug offenders don't get once again exposed the glaring racial hypocrisy and double standard in America's drug war. That double standard has been enshrined in the popular culture. The entertainment magazines, scandal tabloids, and TV talk shows are crammed with legions of articles, and news features on and interviews with high-profile

white stars, starlets, and athletes who openly brag or cry about their drug escapades. They are not vilified or stereotyped. They are the object of public pity for their heroic battles against addiction. Hollywood celebrities such as Robert Downey Jr., and conservative talk show mouthpiece Rush Limbaugh continued their careers even after they had been convicted or accused of drug offenses.

Newly turned celebrity Smith got the same royal treatment. An exuberant Oprah shouted to her audience, "Jesus loves you girl," during Smith's appearance on her TV show as part of her national book tour. She was publicly praised for her heroic fight against drug addiction. While the lopsided meth use by middle-income whites, such as Smith, ignites no public outcry for mass arrests, prosecutions, and tough prison sentences, the consequences to society are just as disastrous as heroin or crack cocaine use.

Meth manufacture and use are blamed for automobile accidents;

explosions and fires; environmental contamination; increased criminal activity, including domestic violence; emergency room and other medical costs; spread of infectious diseases, including HIV, AIDS and hepatitis; and lost worker productivity.

The penalties for use and sale are every bit as severe as crack cocaine sale and use. The basic mandatory minimum sentences under federal law are five to 10 years in prison. Lawmakers even talk of dropping the amount of meth that an individual caught with can be prosecuted for. It's not clear just how much meth Smith had in her illegal stash, but presumably if police found even a small amount she could have been prosecuted.

If whites such as Smith, though, were jailed and prosecuted for their criminal drug use, it would radically change the complexion of the nearly 2 million prisoners that now jam America's jails and prisons. At present, nearly half of them are black. The overwhelming majority of them are there for petty crimes, and drug offenses.

The Comprehensive Methamphetamine Control Act of 1996 mandated seizures of chemicals, the destruction of meth labs, and longer prison sentences. That was supposed to be a major step toward preventing meth from becoming the next crisis in drug abuse.

A decade later, Smith is glaring proof that the act didn't do much to stop that from happening. Smith was declared a hero for getting Nichols to surrender. She is not a hero for using or kicking her meth habit. If the public and law enforcement praised her for her action, thousands of others who aren't heroes but are drug addicted should get help, not jail. After all, Jesus loves them too.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is political analyst and social issues commentator, and the author of "The Crisis in Black and Black" (Middle Passage Press).

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