

Anti-snitching means putting community at risk

For as long as there has been crime in the streets, there has been a code of silence in the streets. You break that code - you could get hurt or killed. Now the reach of that code is at an all-time high (or low, depending on how you view it), and this once unspoken rule is being broadcast loudly and clearly.



ANGELA LINDSAY

Lines of t-shirts that boldly state "Stop Snitchin'" "Ditches Are For Snitches", "Snitches Get Stitches" and any number of similar sentiments have swept across America, particularly within the black community, "encouraging" residents to mind their business when it comes to police investigations. Their rapidly growing popularity has helped propel the anti-snitch movement, if you will, from Main Street to the mainstream, making the job

of law enforcement in many cities even more difficult than before. In fact, a judge in Massachusetts had to ban the shirts from a courtroom earlier this year because of the intimidating effect they were having on witnesses.

The widely available 'snitch' shirts can often be seen in music videos, CD covers and hip hop posters, and the message is often heard in the lyrics of some of today's hottest rappers. The plight of some rappers lately has been a lesson in life imitating art. Currently, rapper Busta Rhymes, nee Trevor Smith, is being sought by the NYPD to disclose information concerning the shooting death of his bodyguard Israel Ramirez. He has remained defiantly mute. Another high profile case involving Brooklyn Rapper Lil' Kim ended with the rapper being sentenced to 366 days in a Philadelphia prison for choosing to lie to a grand jury instead of snitching on members of her entourage believed to have been in a shootout with a rival group.

Both Busta Rhymes and Lil' Kim have garnered an enormous amount of respect and street credibility or "street cred" for choosing to keep silent rather than cooperating with the legal system. Whatever their reasons for doing so, they no doubt realize that those who do snitch risk being labeled a rat and are routinely shunned and threatened as a result.

Besides the fear of retribution, there are various other reasons why some blacks refuse to cooperate with law enforcement. Many grow up in culture that says blacks can not trust the police. For some, it is purely a matter of loyalty. Others feel that they can handle the situation themselves. The adoption of a "hear no evil, see no evil" attitude is yet another reason. Popular culture, mobster movies and TV shows, such as HBO's highly rated "The Sopranos," have reinforced and, according to some critics, even glorified this mantra and the gangster lifestyle in general.

There is something to be said for loyalty. It can be said that the no-snitch vow grew from the roots of slavery. When working toward a greater cause, black people banded together to protect each other out of necessity. The Underground Railroad, for instance, may very well have not flourished but for the collective secrecy amongst slaves and their desire to reach a common goal—a successful escape. Their silence for the most part kept that movement from being sold out. But what is the noble cause now?

I am not an advocate of the tattletale mentality, but at some point there has to arise a desire to battle the forces that are keeping black community in a self-destructive state. Distrust of police and the fear of retaliation by criminals are understandable. But what is the alternative? The cycle of violence and crime will not cease if people remain silent. In fact, it will only aid in allowing innocent people to be victims and prove anti-climatic when trying to rid neighborhoods of drugs and crime.

I often hear black people complain that the police do nothing about crime in their neighborhoods, but then they do not cooperate with investigations and even get irritated when they see a convoy of police cars on patrol in their neighborhoods. I understand the apprehension. There are some members of law enforcement and the legal system who may be just as dirty as the criminals themselves, but it's hard to have it both ways. Being unwilling to testify is a frustrating hurdle toward effectively policing the neighborhoods that need it most. The stop snitchin' shirts further undermine efforts to quell violence and do little to improve what is often an insecure relationship between police and some neighborhoods.

Despite what society and often the media would have us believe, there is a clear line of distinction between selling out and seeking justice, especially in situations where people, even whole communities, are suffering. Working toward removing negative and harmful elements from the community is not selling out. Not doing so is.

ANGELA LINDSAY is Charlotte attorney. E-mail her at lindsay-lav00@yahoo.com.

Where is the March for black folks?

Can you believe all the attention and consternation caused by the recent demonstrations and protests on behalf of illegal immigrants? Millions of people out in the streets, standing up for their "rights," boycotting, stopping traffic, and doing an in-your-face reality check all over this country. The issue of illegal immigrants has taken center stage, and there may be no turning back. Like my man, Gil Scott-Heron said in his timeless stirring tribute to Jose Campos Torres, this country needed some "new n—s." And as Claud Anderson has been saying for more than a decade, "If you (Black people) didn't get anything when you were in second place in this country, what do you think you are going to get in third—and maybe even fourth place?"



JAMES CLINGMAN

Yes, the nation's attention is now focused on the plight of the immigrants. The only non-immigrants in this country, the only ones who suffered slavery, Jim Crow, and blatant discrimination, even to this present day, are not even a blip on the social radar screen. The people with whose labor this country was built, the lives of those from which this country's wealth was obtained, Black people of African descent, are no longer the n—s of America. Well, is that a good thing or a bad thing?

We didn't sneak into this country, we did not come here voluntarily in the relative comfort of ships, we were not given sanctuary on these shores, we were not sworn in as citizens of the U.S.; we were not allowed to participate in the Gold Rush and the Land Grab, our businesses were not subsidized by the government; and, despite using our talents and skills to cultivate the land, to harvest the cash crops, to invent new tools and conveniences, to care for White children, to clean the homes of White folks, to serve them and fight their wars, despite all of that and more, we were not even considered 100 percent human in the U.S. Constitution.

Not only do we not count to the rest of this country, we obviously don't count to ourselves. Why? Did you notice some of our so-called leaders marching and supporting the immigrant cause? Hey, nothing against the immigrants for seeking an edge in this "land of opportunity" but give me a break, Black folks! After nearly 400 years since we "officially" entered this country, don't you think we would have held our march, our boycott, our demonstration, our protest by now? I can hear you saying, "But we had ours in the 1960s when we marched and boycotted and demonstrated for civil rights."

Yes, we did. But what about our economic rights? We are still at the bottom of every economic category in this country. Why? Maybe it's because we have not brought this country to a screeching halt for a day or even a week. Maybe we are being pushed to the end of the line because we have not been serious in our indignation at being mistreated in the country that our fathers built. Maybe we are just such nice people, and we willingly subjugate ourselves in deference to other groups, especially White people.

I don't know what it is about us, but I sure am ready for a Black people's march, I am ready for "Blackout," a day without the labor of Black folks. If people who are in this country illegally can do it and make such an impact, what do you think the impact would be if Black people, supposedly made legal by default, would have? It sure would be interesting, and exciting, to find out.

I cannot get over the fact that some Black folks are marching in support of this latest cause de jour, as if they have some say in what happens to the immigrants, and yet have not organized a march, and I said a "march" not a stand-in, for Black people. What is wrong with us? We see millions of folks on the move, working together, willing to sacrifice for one another, not asking and begging but demanding rights for "illegal" immigrants, while we engage in rhetorical doublespeak about what someone else deserves.

Don't reduce this to an "us against them" argument. That only shrouds the important issues and diverts us from our own battle. Don't fall for the retorts that suggest you are a hater or a bad person when you choose to speak out on behalf of Black people in this country. And don't be swayed by those who suggest you should stand up for others even before you stand up for yourself and your own children.

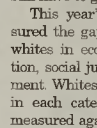
Those who are marching indeed have every right to do so, quite honestly, it is refreshing to see people who are unafraid, willing to make sacrifices, and people who are resolute in actually fighting the power, as opposed to just singing the song. However, Black people not only have the right, but we also have the greater responsibility of an obligation to do the same and much more to attain the collective status and recognition our ancestors' legacy demands of us.

The blood of our relatives cries out from the ground, like Abel's blood called out after he was slain by his brother. Will we answer positively or continue to languish in despair, only finding solace in the struggles of others? When will our marches be held across this country to the extent that the economic impact will be felt by those who hold us in disdain and steal from us everyday? When?

JAMES E. CLINGMAN, an adjunct professor at the University of Cincinnati's African American Studies department, is former editor of the Cincinnati Herald newspaper and founder of the Greater Cincinnati African American Chamber of Commerce.

The state of Black America

The National Urban League recently released The State of Black America 2006: The Opportunity Compact, its annual report on the status of black Americans. The report features the "Equality Index," a statistical measurement of disparities or "equality gaps" between blacks and whites across five key areas. The Equality Index gives a unique picture of how black America is doing, and it shows how far we still have to go.



MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

This year's Equality Index measured the gaps between Blacks and whites in economics, health, education, social justice, and civic engagement. Whites were given a value of 1 in each category and blacks were measured against their performance; a score higher than 1 meant blacks were doing better than whites, and a score less than 1 meant Blacks were doing worse. Overall, the Equality Index showed blacks are at 0.73 of the status of whites. On most report cards, that's a C. The National Urban League report makes another comparison: "Article 1, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution counted an enslaved African American for tax and state representation purposes as 3/5 of person, or 60 percent (0.60) index value". So from slavery to 2006, we haven't made it all that far.

Where exactly do we still fall short? The biggest gap is in economic equality.

The report found the median net worth of the average black family is 10 times less than the average white family—\$6,166 versus \$67,000, mainly because of the differences in both income levels and home ownership rates. Median income levels for blacks were significantly lower than those for whites, and unemployment rates were twice as high. Meanwhile, homes remain a key source of net worth and wealth, but just under half of blacks own their homes, compared to 70 percent of whites.

The persistent black-white health gap is another key concern, especially since the National Urban League has identified some discouraging trends, including increases in the proportions of Black children and adults without health insurance. As the study points out, "Take a group that suffers disproportionately from health care issues, and couple that with a higher percentage of that group not having the means to combat illness or receive preventative treatment—the outcome is a vicious cycle that holds the promise of perpetuating itself for years to come."

The National Urban League also points out that this year's report is especially ironic in the wakes of last year's natural disasters. "Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the tragically slow government response exposed, in the starkest and most depressing terms imaginable, the race and class gaps that our previous reports and Equality Indexes had highlighted. Sadly, these numbers were illustrated in sharp relief last summer when America was forced to see the gaping chasm between white and black America, the haves and the have-nots. Hurricane Katrina was a wakeup call for the nation to lift many from the depths of poverty. Unfortunately, the initial flurry of concern and attention to poverty and injustice has given way to the status quo of neglect, domestic budget cuts, insensitivity and shortsighted policy priorities."

So what can we do about the persistent inequality? The Opportunity Compact is the public policy foundation of the National Urban League's agenda for closing the gaps. This year's report focused on four policy areas: homeownership, jobs, economic development, and children's needs. There are specific solutions, including fighting racial discrimination in housing and mortgage lending, increasing economic literacy and information about access to credit, strengthening anti-discrimination laws, and eliminating further tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans and redirecting that money to a Child Poverty Elimination Fund. Answers are out there. We don't have to settle for being three-fifths or three-fourths of full Americans forever.

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN is president and founder of the Children's Defense Fund and its Action Council whose *Leave No Child Behind* mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start, and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.

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