

**The
BLACK
C o m m e n t a t o r**
Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
www.blackcommentator.com

Issue 168 – January 26, 2006

Bruce's Beat

Belafonte: One of the Tallest Trees in the Forest

More on 'Chocolate Cities'

A Rent-A-Negro for the U.S. Senate

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By some time in the late 1950s, before I was ten years old and without knowing what most of the words meant, I had memorized my child's version of Harry Belafonte's "Banana Boat" song along with a couple others on his *Calypso* album. As many times as I heard those songs, I am certain my parents wore out the vinyl. But mid-century electronics geek that my dad was, he pumped a lot of his favorite music through a suitcase-sized reel to reel tape recorder. Harry was in a lot of those mixes too.

Belafonte is a creative artist, an entrepreneur and public intellectual in the finest sense of those words, and a human rights activist of long standing. Like Ruby Dee and the late Ossie Davis, Harry was a confidante of both Martin Luther King and of Malcolm X. That makes him one of the last surviving flesh and blood links to that piece of our histories, but Mr. Belafonte has always been about way more than showing up at the right place and time.

This year Belafonte led a fact finding delegation to Venezuela of more than a dozen U.S. activists and notables including Cornel West, Danny Glover of TransAfrica and Tavis Smiley during which he raised the ire of the corporate press back home.

For our money, Harry speaks for more African Americans on more issues than any of the black mayors we can think of. But in a time when the Wall Street Journal can blithely declare black public opinion illegitimate because most whites may not agree with it, nobody should be surprised by the corporate press's attempts to denigrate and dismiss Belafonte. Our reader email on the subject indicates that savvy **BC** readers are not surprised either.

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Dear **BC**,

Harry Belafonte got it right when he announced, in company of Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez, that "George W. Bush is the greatest terrorist in the world." Wasn't it Martin Luther King that once said, "The greatest purveyor of violence on earth is my own government?" Belafonte might have added that the president is a liar and "un criminal de guerre" – a war criminal as well.

The press pirates have denounced him as a "has been" and a traitor, bashing the USA. But when did criticizing government policy become anti-American? Just when did truth become treasonous, anyhow?

VF

Harry Belafonte is an esteemed elder, one of the tallest trees in the forest. Beside him, this president is a shrub. A bush.

Dear **BC**,

I'm a middle-aged working-poor white male (though I'm not necessarily without formal education, I live in Pittsburgh and vote across party lines).

I have paid attention to the multiple controversies over Belafonte's statements the past months. Via the Crooks 'n Liars web site I just viewed the recent Harry Belafonte/Wolf Blitzer interview on CNN – twice. Belafonte is absolutely correct in his basic points and observations, as far as I can tell. So, I googled "Harry Belafonte e-mail" to tell him what I think. Your site was near the top of the list. With a name like "Black Commentator" I thought I might be able to write to Belafonte through you.

You just keep going Harry. And thank you. You are reminding us of what America is really supposed to be about. I hope you continue to speak out, and hope you continue to get exposure in the corporate media. Your responses to Blitzer were unlike anything I see from the usual talking heads. Bravo! I agree. And if I do, others do too.

I hope he reads this.

We do too. And we hope Belafonte is around for many more years to come. Keep on giving them hell, Harry.

In last week's **BC**, guest commentator Meizhu Liu, executive director of United for a Fair Economy treated **BC** readers to a small slice of UFE's newly released report, Stalling the Dream: Cars, Race and the Hurricane Evacuation, which she co-authored with Emma Dixon and Betsy Leonard-Wright.

Dear **BC**,

Meizhu Lui is right as far as she goes, but stops short of connecting many of the dots. The automotive centered nature of our country is also directly responsible for the obligation to engage in wars of conquest and imperial control and destabilization of the countries that we depend on for oil to run the cars, e.g., Iraq and Nigeria, and the consequent poverty draft which blows much more lightly on the wealthier white owners of late model gas guzzlers. This same consumption of oil has ushered in a spiraling process of global warming, which is

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linked to the intensifying storms of the hurricane season, of which Katrina may be only an introduction, while on a more local level we have the irony of car-poor African-American communities concentrated in cities where the air pollution is greatest from the exhaust of suburban commuters.

As world oil production reaches its maximum and starts to decline, and gas prices begin to rise, even in the US, the hysteria to expand oil wars (a.k.a. the war on terror) and relax environmental regulations will ratchet up to the benefit of the inner circle of (current) corporate power, sustained by the suburban fear that their lifestyle is in jeopardy (it is, and it is in fact doomed, but set that aside for a moment). The impact of this is guaranteed to differentially affect African American and other communities victimized by capital (who will be forced to work in the newly available dirty jobs?)

Constructing a political response to these multiple crises and not losing sight of their differential impact based on the bedrock racism of U.S. culture is a serious challenge. The environmental/global warming/peak oil activist movements have not (with honorable exceptions) inquired into the relationship between the existence of these crises and the political system which sets them up and devalues them, preferring to believe that the wealthy will just "come to their senses" and focus, still, on asking individuals to tone down their energy consumptive lifestyle, calls which rightly sound absurd to those who don't believe they have anything to spare.

I do think, however, that connecting the dots is possible. Recognizing the limits imposed upon us by our environment can provide a touchstone for separating ourselves from the total concept of the American dream, which cannot exist without the goal of greater consumption and the maintenance of racism, and point us toward a very different vision of what it means to live in physical security and human dignity.

For this reason I am beginning to work with a small group in Philadelphia to develop a local activist response to the peak oil issue, which is exacerbating the deepening general crisis of the US at this time, in a way which connects all the dots. I'm hoping that **BC** will be interested in participating in this effort.

Please let me know.

JS

Connecting all the dots in many directions in a single short article is a tall order, even for our able guest commentators, but this reader raises a valid set of points.

For one, the connection between America's oil-centered domestic economy and its need to conquer and hold the Middle East by military force is beyond dispute. We cannot oppose war and not strive to re-invent the economy.

For another, there is a crisis coming. Most responsible estimates – and the US Geological Survey is not a responsible body in this regard – indicate that around 95% of the world's oil has already been discovered and half of it is already pumped out of the ground. Much of the remaining oil will also be more expensive to bring to market. With the amount of energy the world – and especially the U.S. – uses continually rising while the supply of oil becomes scarcer and more expensive, and the public face of the U.S. oil industry, sometimes known as the federal government in public denial, bad things are bound to happen. Things for which the U.S. economy is not prepared. This is what they call Peak Oil.

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We wish that more local officials, those allegedly responsible for economic development planning in our cities would take account of this crisis. What will happen to passenger air, to air cargo operations, to the hospitality industry, to truck transport, to the price of things in local supermarket where the grapes are from Chile and the apples from New Zealand, and the lettuce from the opposite side of North America? We commend you, and all of our readers who are willing to get busy on this. Time is running out.

A lot of corporate air and ink have been wasted on New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and his foolish "chocolate city" remark, and some other things that have come from the mouth of the junior senator from New York. One reader asked:

Dear **BC**,

What are your views on the comments of Senator Hillary Clinton referring to the current Senate as a, "Plantation if you know what I mean" and Ray Nagin's comments saying New Orleans will be a "chocolate city again." Granted Mr. Nagin did say it does take white milk and chocolate to make a delicious treat – which I find even more offending.

K

BC Co–Publisher Glen Ford offered this response:

The Republicans are almost hilarious in their hypocrisy and cynicism. Their standard line to Blacks is that the Democratic Party is a "plantation," and that African Americans should leave the plantation to join the GOP. Now they claim the word is offensive to Blacks.

Regarding Nagin: he is a loon and a Trojan Horse, a Democrat–in–name–only, who won office with 85 percent of the white vote. He need only have invoked justice, rather than God, in calling for the return of the evacuees. Instead, he exposed the subject to ridicule with his chocolate concoctions and Pat Robertson–like ravings.

Brother Mumia Abu–Jamal, is a man who sees many things more clearly from his cell on Pennsylvania's death row than lots of us in the nominally free world. His latest commentary notes that the white media flap over the mayor's words tell more about corporate media and its facility for seizing any convenient opportunity to whip up anti–black sentiments in white America than they do about Nagin. Mumia Abu Jamal's recorded comments are posted regularly at the link above, and we encourage **BC** readers to check them out.

Unlike some who believe black elected officials are to be uncritically celebrated, we at **BC** are inclined to demand accountability from them. Sometimes it happens, but too often it does not. A habitual offender and one of our favorite targets is the execrable congressman from Memphis, Harold Ford. One reader made the following request of us:

Dear **BC**,

I enjoyed and was informed by your editorial on Harold Ford. I do agree that the brotha is a sell–out, and therefore dangerous. Will you please share the names of the other four or five black members of Congress that you think are sell–outs and/or incompetent whores for Dubya?

EJ

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For a ranking of the performance of current members of the Congressional Black Caucus, based upon their votes on several key issues, except for the member from Milwaukee, Wisconsin who for some reason was omitted from the list, consult **BC**'s issue for September 22, 2005.

Ford isn't dangerous because of any inherent quality of his own. He is dangerous because he is for rent. He is dangerous because of the uses his employers have already put him to. When the bankruptcy bill was in play, so was Harold Ford. You can guess who outbid who for his services. When Social Security privatization was in play, Ford let it be known that he was in play again.

Those who would rent the wannabe senator from Tennessee aim to use him to back up the Wall Street Journal's contention that the political views of most African Americans, including most of those in Memphis Tennessee, are passé. We are all about to be replaced by some new cohort of conservative blacks, the story goes, of whom Mr. Ford is a harbinger.

Harold Ford already votes with Republicans more often than many Democrats, more often than most of the Congressional Black Caucus. In the senate he will not be just one more occasionally AWOL soldier. He will be a dagger pointed at the heart of the Black Consensus.

***BC** welcomes reader comments. We respond personally to many, not all, and print a selection of those nearly every week. Send them to bruce.Dixon@blackcommentator.com.*