

**The
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Bruce's Beat

Tavis is a marketer, not a movement leader
Andrew Young misspends the movement's moral capital

BC answers a hater
and emails from our readers
by BC Editor Bruce Dixon

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Last week's **BC** Guest Commentator Leutisha Stills hit a nerve with her contribution, "Why Is Tavis Smiling? And Why Are We Still Watching?" It seems that many engaged and astute **BC** readers were asking themselves the same questions as Ms. Stills. A fellow worthy of his name, rapper Wise Intelligent has some of the answers.

Peace, my name is Wise Intelligent of the rap group Poor Righteous Teachers. I appreciate you much. Our people need more inquisitive writers like yourself who demand more out of our so-called "leadership" than the dog and pony shows which demonstrate to major corporations that those putting on the show can deliver them the black consumer in return for their sponsorship dollars.

There it is. Brother Tavis is a marketer, not a journalist. Tavis is not an organizer of a movement, he is an organizer of black audiences. Audiences to consume his products – TV, radio shows and now books – black audiences to be delivered to the sponsors of his shows, chief among them the two largest and most notoriously low-wage employers in the county, Wal-Mart and McDonald's.

A great deal of Tavis's audience appeal comes from the fact that there is next to no news coverage of black America produced for and aimed at black audiences. Broadcast media monopolies, including black owned Radio One have all but eliminated black radio news, withholding from the African American community what any human society needs most to remain viable: information about itself. As **BC** Executive Editor and Co-publisher Glen Ford spelled it out in "Who Killed Black Radio News?" the **BC** cover story of May 29,

2003:

"...the absence of news operations at Black radio stations results in atrophy of existing Black political groupings and the stillbirth of new organizations. Talk shows do not empower communities, vibrant grassroots organizations do. And these organizations can only flourish when their activities are given proper coverage in the media that their constituencies listen to – Black radio."

Black audiences are hungry for any sort of black oriented news and near-news. In the context of the information vacuum, it is possible for Tavis to appear to some as a kind of community or movement "leader" himself. He probably believes it himself at least some of the time.

We ain't mad at Brother Tavis for being a successful marketer. But when we let ourselves be led into Tavis's marketing contraption, because we mistake it for a movement, or something that might lead to a movement for social change, confusion, disillusion and disappointment are inevitable.

Says *BC* reader Timothy Godfrey:

I enjoyed the article written by Leutisha Stills. I attended one of Mr. Smiley's gatherings several years ago at the University of Southern California (USC). For your information, I am a Morehouse College graduate and a student at Fuller Theological Seminary.

My motivation for making the drive from Pasadena to USC's campus early that Saturday morning was to hear Dr. Cornel West. I've been a fan of Dr. West for years now. Dr. West did not disappoint me. He was probably the most on point and thought provoking participant on the panel. However, I must say that I was let down by that whole gathering. That Saturday turned out to be a waste of my precious time because I failed to get the point or the objective of the gathering. Years later, Mr. Smiley is still hosting these elitist gatherings, and the "State of the Black Union" is still the same. My question to Mr. Smiley is: "What's your point" in hosting these events?

Reader Denise Slaughter opines:

I thought your commentary in the recent *BC* was well written and on target. You said a lot of things that I, too, have felt, not just about that event, but also the endless rounds of forums, briefings, and other masturbatory expressions I must attend in my arena (education) that don't seem to go anywhere. It's like knowing I need to drive to CA, gathering my friends around to discuss the possible routes and challenges along the way – over and over again – without ever getting to the maps, money, contingency plans, and oh, yeah, the car.... Maybe not the best analogy, but at 53, I'm tired of the Million Men/Women/Families/People marches (haven't had the Pets yet) and boycotts, and I'm tired of a new breed of ministers more prepared to cry foul about the prospect of gay marriage and link arms and vote for George Bush because he gets on his knees to pray to Jesus, with no common voice about what he does when he's on his feet to help keep us down.

Guest commentator Leutisha Stills drew this from Cincinnati's James Clingman:

Thanks so much for your piece in Black Commentator on the Tavis Smiley Forum. I have never met you but I sure would like to, and shake your hand and give you a big hug. Your article is like a well tuned twelve cylinder engine, never missing a beat. It says everything our people need to know – and subscribe to – when it comes to these "feel good" celebrity ga

The Black Commentator – Bruce's Beat

ga sessions we seem to love so much. There is such a big difference between feeling good and "doing good." We need more action. As you said, we already know what the state of the Black union is. If we don't, then the game is really OVER. We must have more than speechifying. We must have direction, strategy, and ACTION!

It's pretty difficult to deal effectively and realistically with economic empowerment among Black people with McDonald's and Exxon (of all companies) looking over your shoulders.

Jim Clingman, www.blackonomics.com

Sometimes the corporate overlords don't have to look over your shoulder. Sometimes you're on their speed-dial list. Or in their pocket. Or their underwear. Last week's **BC** cover story, "Andrew Young, the Shameless Son" drew attention to the recent career of Andy Young, a former associate of Dr. Martin Luther King who went on to congress, served as UN ambassador and mayor of Atlanta before founding an international "business consulting" firm.

The Freedom Movement of the 50s and 60s was enormously influential not just in the U.S., but in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and bequeathed to its leading participants a vast amount of moral authority and credibility. Moral authority is a dangerous weapon in the hands of greedy and amoral corporations. Imagine Nelson Mandela hiring himself out as a PR spokesperson for Exxon, Monsanto and Halliburton, and you understand the business model of Andy Young's consulting firm, Good Works International. The services Young provides to murderous oil companies and the kleptocrats who love them in Nigeria, to the sweatshop barons of Nike, and most lately to Wal-Mart are how he has chosen to spend his portion of the Freedom Movement's moral capital. It's time to revoke the account of Andy Young, our shameless son. **BC** readers seem to agree. From Fanon Che Wilkins:

Thank you so much for your piece on Andy. Man we needed that. I could not believe how naked these cats are in being running dogs for capital. I am a Professor of History here at the University of Illinois @ Urbana-Champaign. We recently screened the Wal-Mart movie here and it was a knock out. Keep up the great work and thanks for wielding a powerful unequivocal pen against these Civil Rights Negroes who have King and Fannie Lou doing Olympic-gymnastics in their graves.

And from reader V.G. Thomas:

Right on! I was devastated to read about Any Young's alliance with Wal-Mart. I also learned about his pr company's involvement with Nike and other ventures. My estimation of him has hit rock bottom. What would Dr. King say to him? Who does Andy consult? Why does he need this kind of money? I guess rubbing shoulders with the high and mighty leaves a good feeling and a craving to establish oneself in their presence permanently.

Reader Paul Billings weighs in:

Excellent piece on the Black Commentator web site. Compare Andrew Young to his mentor, Martin Luther King. How many folks today, of King's stature, would have supported a trash haulers strike? I doubt Andrew Young would.

You point out the perils of fame and financial success. I think once people start traveling in the corporate sphere, receive excellent pay, attend lavish parties and vacations and constantly meeting dignitaries, etc. it is hard not to be seduced by this lifestyle. The farther one proceeds down this path, the easier it is to rationalize working for outfits like Nike and Wal-Mart.

The Black Commentator – Bruce's Beat

You guys do a great job. I always tell people that the Black Commentator was one of the few publications which had a good understanding of the invasion and occupation of Iraq back in 2003. Keep up the good work.

Some **BC** readers were following the treacherous career of Andrew Young long before his Wal-Mart caper. Dr. Gary Busch, was one of several who gave us tips on other exploits of the Freedom Movement's shameless son:

Nice piece. Among much else, Andy Young and his business partner Carlton Masters reportedly hide money for Nigerian President Obasanjo. Their company is widely believed to have an oil allocation which it uses to move money outside Nigeria, and it is said that they support Obasanjo's son in Atlanta and New York on the proceeds. [Here's](#) an article in Sahara Reporters you might have missed.

There is a lot of info on Andy and Masters; none of it good. In addition to the Africans, they are said to have been hustling black American businessmen for years, allegedly promising to introduce their services and products to Africa and coming up with nothing, but charging a retainer and a fee. They also hire retiring diplomats who have served in Africa, all senior black State Department employees, and send them back as their company representatives, such as Howard Jeter, for example, to promise the Africans continuity on the private level for a fee.

BC is certain that these and other ugly tales about Good Works International's business dealings are well-founded in fact, and that they are, as Dr. Busch indicates, the tip of the iceberg as far as Andy Young's practice as an international "bid-ness" man goes. **BC** hopes that real journalists, instead of being satisfied with chummy interviews granted by our shameless son would serve the African American community better by investigating the allegations swirling around Andy Young.

Dr. Busch shares with most **BC** readers, a burning hatred of injustice. Wherever you find hatred and allegations you're bound to find haters and (sic) allegators. Sorry. Couldn't help that. Yes, **BC** gets mail from haters too. When it's not profane or insulting, and when answering it serves a useful purpose we print that too.

Hence this communication from reader Russell T. Flowers

If you don't like Wal-Mart don't shop there. Go to the neighborhood store who you know will watch your every move and even shoot you, if you act as if you are taking anything. Don't down Andy Young, and down all the black folks that support Wal-Mart by shopping there. You don't complain about the prices in Wal-Mart. You can't have it both ways: either higher prices and higher wages or lower prices and lower wages.

Wal-Mart would like us to do as Brother Russell does, to limit our discussion of Wal-Mart to where to shop or not, and where to get the lowest prices. But there's more to life than shopping, and Wal-Mart is bigger than a place to shop, or to avoid.

Wal-Mart is the biggest private sector employer in the US. McDonald's is number two – that should tell you a lot about America's 21st century economy. Every company that is not Wal-Mart is aching to, and is pressured by the financial sector and stock market to follow Wal-Mart's business model of outsourcing manufacturing to the lowest-wage hell-hole available on the planet, while paying retail employees less than it takes to support a family, and getting all the free money from taxpayers they can.

Even if you don't shop at Wal-Mart you pay higher property taxes to make up for the seven figure corporate welfare handout and property tax breaks Wal-Mart gets from state and local governments for each of its

The Black Commentator – Bruce's Beat

thousands of stores. Visit the Wal-Mart Subsidy Watch page for a glimpse of how this works, and how much it costs all of us.

Even if you don't shop at Wal-Mart your tax money funds Medicaid, which provides the medical coverage Wal-Mart refuses to grant most of its employees. In this way, employers that do provide medical coverage for employees are undermined, and more new jobs are coming on line with higher co-payments or no medical coverage at all. Medical costs are the single largest cause of bankruptcy among US families.

Even if you don't shop at Wal-Mart you are affected by its wage policy and its practice of threatening and firing workers who whisper about joining a union.

Wal-Mart's business practices drive the whole economy. The fact that we let them get away with it forces other business to do the same or die. Wal-Mart buys the laws it wants, purchasing politicians and preachers wholesale. Wal-Mart's "charitable" arms bankroll bogus research and phony community organizations that pretend to speak for us, and advocate the dismantling of public education in the name of "choice."

Finally, it is ridiculous to say, as Russell does, that if we criticize Wal-Mart we are "downing" the people who shop there, or that the folks who do shop there endorse everything Wal-Mart does. If that were true, Wal-Mart wouldn't need to spend tens or hundreds of millions each year on PR to hide what it does from customers and the public, controlling and manipulating the news about itself – from buying sponsorship of major chunks of ABC's World News Tonight, Good Morning America and programs including some on NPR, to ensuring that the only discussion most people hear is about shopping choices, and those irrational people who just don't like low prices.

We do value all our readers, even Russell, and encourage them to get out here and in motion, to spread information and do something to make this a better world. And if they have any time left over, to write us.

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