

**The  
BLACK  
C o M M e n t a t o r**  
Commentary, analysis and investigations  
on issues affecting African Americans  
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Bruce's Beat

Are some human beings illegal?

Did immigrants shut down U.S. manufacturing jobs?

What's the meaning behind Tavis's smile?

Email from readers

by BC Editor Bruce Dixon

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Last Week's **BC** [cover story](#) raised the subject of the relationship between African Americans and Latinos, blacks and browns. We singled a particularly contemptible maneuver by Kasim Reed, a black [DLC](#) Georgia state legislator from Atlanta who tried to outdo Republican viciousness when it came to proposing punitive measures against immigrants. Reed authored a bill which would imprison anyone convicted of using a false ID to get a job for five years. Predictably, his proposal was embraced by leading white Georgia Democrats. This is how Georgia's [New Democrats](#) hope to win white votes on the immigration issue.

Reed, who intends to run for mayor of Atlanta in 2009, is certainly not stupid enough to imagine that he is protecting black jobs. All the measures to strip foreigners of civil and human rights, to marginalize them and make them fear jail or deportation at a moment's notice only make them more desirable employees. When given a choice, employers always prefer a fearful, compliant work force with few or no rights to an aware one with enforceable rights. Just having them around, even if an employer chooses not to hire them, effectively lowers everyone's wages.

A reader named Gloria took exception to us. She wrote

I totally disagree with you. This is not a black, white or brown issue, it is not about race. This is about legality, about respecting laws, sovereignty and borders. If people want to come to the USA, or any other country for that matter, looking for a job and a decent living, they need to have a permit or visa to enter the country. Please do not twist the subject.

## The Black Commentator – Bruce's Beat

Another reader put it even more baldly. George Wilson wrote us this one sentence email.

How do Black Americans benefit from having illegal aliens in our country?

Good questions. As African Americans we ought to understand better than anybody how white supremacy works and how language, which frames the way we all think, is a potent tool of oppression, or of liberation. To start with, we need to purge the phrase "illegal aliens" from our vocabulary. Anybody who uses it within earshot ought to be challenged promptly and publicly, just like you would in a case of the unauthorized use of the N-word.

Aliens are from Jupiter. White America defines people as "aliens" in order to justify treatment unfit for a member of the human family, just as our ancestors were once labeled "property," allowing "owners" to buy and sell us like cattle. For those so unable to free their minds from the box of white racist legalism that they cannot part with the adjective "illegal," we should insist that they follow it with the correct noun that says what these folks really are. Illegal persons. Illegal people. Illegal humans.

And if "illegal human" sounds ridiculous and evil, as it ought to in any civilized ear, it's only because white America's law on this score is evil and ridiculous.

Another **BC** reader, Jo Mills made this contribution:

Brown people have played the role of opportunists – at our expense – for many years. Statistics have shown that a huge steady flow of immigrants in your more populated cities always results in a loss of jobs for African Americans. We must become our own advocates. Immigrants chose this life. African American descendants of slaves did not. Let us take care of us first.

Mexicans should not be made villains, but I do want African Americans to take care of their own business before using the little fight we have left to solve anyone else's problems. As a people, we have still not concentrated or harnessed enough energy to take care of our share of problems. Mass incarceration. Mass and historically unequal unemployment, drugs, fractured families, loss of the support systems and networks, self hate and lack of pride enough to build for self, and so on. We have enough to keep us busy. When we finish working these out, we can go to the table of coalescence as a positive and not a negative pull of energy. I see none of the immigrants or their descendants rushing to help us deal with these problems. Instead, they appear to take advantage of them!

The idea that black unemployment in the U.S. is "historically unequal" and the notion that immigrants choose to come here and cause labor market problems for African Americans betray a breathtaking ignorance of human motivation and of the way the global economy works. In recent decades we have seen the US government openly aid and encourage manufacturing and service industry to shut down facilities and factories here and move them first to Mexico, then to the lowest wage overseas hellhole available. At the same time, billions of our tax dollars are paid in agricultural subsidies to agribusiness companies like ADM and Cargill, which dump their goods into Haiti, Mexico, Central America, Africa and Asia killing the market for locally grown stuff and driving farmers off the land and into the cities where there are no jobs, no health care, no futures. Unemployment rates in Kingston, Jamaica or Dakar, Senegal are much higher than any experienced in black America. A few of their daughters find work in the sweatshops. The rest stand around, hustle or starve, or emigrate. Not exactly "choices" as we understand that word.

Tens of thousands walk half the length of Africa every month trying to get to Europe. Can you imagine crossing the Sahara on foot? Chinese pay a couple year's wages in advance to be packed into shipping crates

## The Black Commentator – Bruce's Beat

that might or might not arrive here. Some others walk from Guatemala and Chiapas, from Oaxaca and Michoacan. If these sound like "choices" to you, here are some additional clues.

In the mostly non-union hotel industry in Atlanta where I live, employers like Marriott, Hyatt and Westin a generation ago put their white workers up front as doormen and desk clerks and kept African Americans in the back as kitchen help and housekeepers. Nowadays a few blacks can make concierge and desk help, but if you're African American don't even think of applying for a job in the kitchen, or housekeeping either at many hotels. The first shift in a kitchen might be Filipino, the second Somalis, and the third Mexicans. Three floors of housekeeping will be Ethiopians, and another three floors will be Jamaicans and Haitians. Are these immigrant workers "opportunists"? Is it their idea to carve up the work like that? Or do employers do that for reasons of their own? Is it to the disadvantage of black workers? Certainly.

We have been on the bottom as long as there's been an America. Now the globalized labor market is forcing us to share that bottom with other unfortunate folks. Should we rail against the Mexicans? Should we gripe about the Jamaicans, organize against the Filipinos and Arabs? Lou Dobbs would want us to. Employers would like that, and Republicans too. Even some Democrats. But we cannot escape the bottom by making common cause with the folks who put us down here.

Finally, black America does not have the luxury of turning inward to solve problems like mass incarceration and the HIV-AIDS epidemic first while all this other stuff waits. The world simply doesn't work that way. It will take a broad popular movement to challenge the nation's social policy of mass incarceration, a movement rooted in and led from our black communities. But since mass incarceration of blacks is the social policy of the whole nation, such a movement will have to somehow gain widespread traction outside our communities as well. Likewise, solutions to the crises in black housing, health care, family life and education may start in our communities but must ultimately involve the redirection of the whole society's energies to solve. Even our so-called "internal problems" are not ours alone, nor are their solutions.

As bad as our situation is, we have the longest experience of American white supremacy of anyone save local Native Americans. We are numerous, self aware, and despite our internal differences, we possess a degree of relative political clarity and cohesion found nowhere else in American society. Like it or not, this is a burning house and we are stuck with the role of first responders. Somebody has to lead the fight against these fires, and black America may be better equipped than anyone. The issues on the table now are all on the table *now*, and none of them will wait.

We could go on and on, and **BC** will certainly revisit this subject again. But readers are still writing us about Leutisha Stills' March 2 Guest Commentary, "Why is Tavis Smiling?" Brother Mal Dixon opines:

Tavis is indeed a marketer; he does seminars on branding as well. Interestingly as well is how Tavis every weeknight is both a radio and TV talk show host interviewing a who's who of Hollywood and the literary world and two mornings a week on the TJMS (Tom Joyner Morning Show), he's a radio activist. Once a year at the end of February, he morphs into a Black "organizer."

The most hilarious aspect of the SOBU forum was listening to the speakers discussing white supremacy and supporting Black businesses while behind them on the wall were the McDonald's, Exxon Mobil and Nationwide logos. I hope real organizers and movement leaders who are at this point unknown to the masses will rise and emerge so that the Tavis' and other superstar activists' current fame and pop-culture rhetoric will fade.

Kimberly Taylor attended Tavis's most recent State of the Black Union in Houston and had this to say:

## The Black Commentator – Bruce's Beat

I watched the first session on TV and ventured out in the cold rainy weather for the second session. By the middle of the second session (2 hours later) I stood up and escorted myself to the nearest exit. I could not sit still and look interested any longer. When I arrived home an hour later, the session was still going on. I have to agree with Leutisha, the black community is looking for a quick fix, the Cliff Notes version. We have the "right now" syndrome.

I was astounded at some of the ignorance, as when Minister Farrakhan said, the leaders of our country are going straight to hell, and if he had any powers he'd make sure they would get there. What???? We need to wake up! stop following and begin to lead. We have no power to send anyone to heaven or hell. Why did we give up our Saturday or half a Saturday in my case, to sit in the same room with some well-knowns who like to hear themselves talk?

Leonard Mitchell weighs in with these comments:

I read your guest commentary and I agree with your perspective on the Tavis Smiley forums.

There were too many "thought leaders" on the panel and not enough dialogue between the speakers and audience. I attempted to go to two of them in the San Francisco Bay Area but was turned away both times because of the overflow in the thousands. I went to the Black bookstore and found out that it will take three weeks to get the Covenant book. What I think is missing from the discourse is discussion of organizational forums that would give expression to the 10 Covenants. Without organization the Covenant will be a forum for "microphone radicals" and will be reduced to an annual feel good event where Black folks gather suited and booted and dressed to impress.

There was no focus on organizing schools to provide the tools required for empowerment, for waging campaigns and advocacy. There seemed to be an assumption that the Black community is monolithic and is devoid of class and gender contradictions. I don't have much in common with Condoleezza Rice or Colin Powell or Tom Ass Clarence! There seems to be an assumption, too, that the 10 Covenants can be achieved within the context of the existing socio-economic system.

I was surprised there was no mention of genocide, reparations, peace, the African Diaspora and globalization. There seemed to be too much emphasis on electoral politics at the expense of grass roots organizing and mass movements for social change. I would like to have heard folks from the community who have been organizing around the issues reflected in the Covenant instead of all the "name brand" people.

And finally, Joseph Anderson, a chronic late-night **BC** reader sent us this ringing endorsement:

I'm up at 2 AM reading **BC**. Even in the middle of the night, it's time well spent. I really thank you for publishing the Leutisha Stills commentary on Tavis Smiley and Bruce Dixon's on another Wal-Mart pimp, Andrew Young: it's about time!

I too ain't mad at Tavis for being just as competent and successful as any white radio/TV host is at delivering more or less establishment news & entertainment interviews, or for his ability to politically play all sides when he does it. I wouldn't. Still, to be elevated, in our celebrity-driven, wealth-conscious society, to a Black liberation leader is something else entirely – presenting, yes, once again, a panel of Black marquee celebrities to just talk, on and on, AT us but not with us. Cornel West is usually an exception, but most of Tavis's panelists don't want to be held potentially accountable to critical thinkers.

## The Black Commentator – Bruce's Beat

In our celebrity-driven, dumbed-down society, we have all – but more to our detriment, Black people – been confused between being "a great success" like Tavis, Oprah or Cosby, and being "a great person" like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Paul Robeson, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, etc. People in the latter category are usually not rich or, in the case of Robeson, have been willing to forgo wealth – being "a great success" – in order to be "a great person." I'm glad that I can count on **BC** – the best political magazine on national Black issues – to indeed and truly keep it real.

Mr. Anderson caught the spirit of **BC** on this. We ain't mad at Tavis for being a successful marketer. We ain't the least bit confused either, about the difference between effective marketing and black leadership for social change. Do send us your best, and your worst. We try to answer all our email, and print some in this space each week.

Contact Bruce Dixon at [bruce.dixon@blackcommentator.com](mailto:bruce.dixon@blackcommentator.com).