

# Racism

## **Some Southerners understand collateral responsibility**

JUNE 25, 2000

Southerners have a tortured relationship with their history. If they are not romanticizing it, they are denying it.

Rarely do Southerners look themselves in the eye and fess up to the racism, the violence and the rascality that shaped the region's character.

Merely romanticizing and denying history are no great matters unto themselves. But their consequences—the broad human damage they foment—continue to act as a ghostly blueprint that subtly determines and guides behavior, especially behavior between white people and black people.

Ultimately, though, romanticizing and denying the past ostensibly absolve Southerners of what I call collateral responsibility. I define it as our moral duty to correct the residual effects of the collective wrongs of earlier generations.

I have written about this subject several times during the past 10 years, and the response from whites always has been the same: anger and the argument that white people today bear no responsibility for the past.

Fortunately, not all whites believe such nonsense. An important example of someone who understands collateral responsibility is Florida Insurance Commissioner Bill Nelson. On Wednesday, Nelson, a Demo-

crat running for the U.S. Senate, announced the settlement of a nationwide class-action suit during a press conference in Tallahassee. Nelson indicated that tens of thousands of low-income blacks in the Sunshine State will receive cash refunds because of years of being charged more than white customers for the same burial and other low-value policies.

Some companies, by the way, charged blacks 33 percent more than whites, a practice that did not stop in Florida until several weeks ago, when Nelson issued a cease-and-desist order. The evil is that the practice was institutional nationwide. White and black agents throughout the South, who went door-to-door, were given two books, with two different sets of premiums.

Here is what James D. Crane, who went to work for Independent Life & Accident Insurance Co., in 1964, told the *Wall Street Journal* of orders from his Gadsden, Ala., district manager: “You write the white people out of this and the niggers out of this.”

For their wrongs, these companies must shell out \$206-million, not including other adjustments. And one of those so-called “niggers” is Bessie Jones, 71, a grandmother originally from Quincy, who has lived in Sarasota for more than 40 years. She, like many other blacks over the years, including my grandparents, tried to tell someone, anyone, that something “was funny” about their policies.

After a relative died, for example, many survivors discovered less than \$100 in their accounts even though they had paid in as much \$1,600 over many years. Jones did not give up. Nelson listened to her and others and initiated a probe that has resulted in a landmark decision.

Nelson and I have spoken often about this crisis, and I am convinced that his concern transcends burial insurance. He understands the need to set the past right, to commit oneself to collateral responsibility.

“The reason we’re doing this is for the Bessie Joneses of the world,” he said in a telephone interview. “There are millions of consumers who, like her, were taken advantage of by being charged more because of their race. It’s inconceivable—and unconscionable—that this practice would continue up until the present.”

Inconceivable? Unconscionable?

Not when people refuse to assume collateral responsibility.

Thankfully, Nelson is not the only Southerner who may have seen the light. Throughout the South, in fact, a handful of other public officials are trying to right some old wrongs, wrongs whose legacies perpetuate human cruelty.

Mike Moore, Mississippi's attorney general, the man who sparked the nationwide fight against the tobacco industry, decided to reopen the infamous 1964 case in which civil rights workers Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goldman and James Chaney were murdered by the Klan. I have spoken to Moore, and I am convinced that he understands the relationship of history to the present—of how we need to be honest with ourselves about the past's hold on us, the cyberspace living.

In Alabama, brave prosecutors have revisited the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, where, in 1963 (the year I went to college), four black girls died in a bomb blast. Two former Klansmen have been indicted for these atrocities.

Down in Louisiana, the FBI recently restarted an investigation into the 1964 deaths of two black men whose bodies were found in a swamp. Then something unheard of in 1970, when the incident occurred, happened recently in Mississippi when a jury went over 30-year-old evidence and convicted three white men of killing a one-armed black sharecropper and throwing his body into a river.

Similar crusades are taking hold elsewhere in the South. These awful crimes are being given the attention they should have been given when they occurred. *The Economist* magazine aptly describes the men and women who are bringing some long-overdue justice to the South:

“Most of the momentum to reopen these cases comes from a defiant group of young lawyers and prosecutors, determined to discover the truth before time erodes the evidence or puts the suspects beyond reach. Many of this new generation grew up when the passions of the civil-rights struggle was still fresh in people's minds.”

Simply stated, they, along with Commissioner Nelson, understand the concept of collateral responsibility—the moral duty to correct the residual effects of the collective wrongs of earlier generations.

## **A black man's plan for success**

AUGUST 9, 2000

An open letter to black males and people who care about them:

Academics, journalists, public speakers and others used to label the black male in the United States an “endangered species.” Because of political correctness, the term has fallen out of favor and is rarely used in any public forum.

If truth be told, too many black males nationwide still are in big trouble. And we black people are duty-bound to find ways to break this cycle of endangerment once and for all.

Yes, racism, especially the institutional kind, is a problem. It has destroyed generations of lives and continues to do terrible harm to the most vulnerable. But we no longer can let it prevent us from aggressively doing what we can on our own to save our boys, of instilling in them the traits, practices, habits, attitudes and philosophies that will enable them and their children to succeed.

Let me begin by describing the lay of the land: We, black males, are the least-desirable group in the United States. We are not wanted. White racists despise us, fear us and want us to evaporate or, at the very least, buy a one-way group ticket back to Africa. Most white liberals who want to help us also fear us, especially our boldest youngsters whose behavior mocks society's expectations of what is acceptable.

The bottom line is white liberals cannot help us. Welfare cannot. School reform cannot. Bill Clinton cannot. George W. Bush cannot. Al Gore cannot.

Only we can save ourselves by committing ourselves to reversing what Berkeley University linguistics professor John McWhorter calls “self-sabotage”—a counterproductive condition that encourages separatism, victimology and, perhaps worst of all, anti-intellectualism that views being smart as “being white.”

Because we know from the get-go that society naturally rejects us, we must have the savvy to avoid everything that plays into the hands of the enemy. Why should we willfully set ourselves up for failure and contempt and societal abuse? Why do we re-enact all of the negative stereotypes?

I see such re-enactments each day: young brothers playing out the in-your-face style that turns off everyone else; getting arrested for stupid reasons; perpetually getting their mugs in newspapers and on prime-time TV; accumulating long rap sheets that destroy futures; roaming the streets all times of night; never reading a book or completing homework; dissing schoolmates who use their brains; refusing to master spoken and written English; rejecting the experience and wisdom of adults.

Why do we set ourselves up for mistreatment? Sometimes I believe that we want to be disliked. I hope that I am wrong. One thing I know for sure is that many brothers believe that they are getting back at white society with their behavior and attitude.

Simply stated, admissions officers do not give scholarships to those they perceive as dumb. Employers do not hire people they fear. Landlords do not rent to people they believe are destructive. Lenders do not lend to those they mistrust. Get the picture?

Yo, brothers, here is a secret I learned as a child: The best way to get back at white society—the ultimate revenge—is to succeed precisely where we are expected to fail, to do the unexpected.

What do I mean? To avoid miscasting someone else, let me use myself as an example. When I, a former migrant, arrived at the University of Chicago, few whites there expected me to succeed. Determined, I kept my nose in a book and surrounded myself with smart, well-traveled people. When I drank, I did so at Woodlawn Tap, where brilliant students and professors interacted, where I absorbed their intellectuality. I attended every play on campus and bought tickets to the Goodman and other theaters. I stalked the museums, the Art Institute and even acquired a lukewarm taste for chamber music and opera. I took part of my stipend to pay a doctoral student to teach me *The Chicago Manual of Style* so that I could write proper papers immediately. Using recordings, I even taught myself enough French to read *Madame Bovary* and appreciate Flaubert's *l'art pour l'art* as he had intended.

In other words, I had a personal plan—a black man's plan—for success beyond racism. A major part of my plan, as it is with most other successful blacks, is the simple matter of minimizing encounters with external, societal barriers to success. By avoiding external barriers, we enable ourselves to maximize our native talents and intelligence.

While continuing to battle racism as an external reality, we also must stop adopting self-sabotaging thought and conduct. Racism is never going away. Therefore, we must stop letting it be an excuse to fail. We must survive and thrive despite racism.

## **This confusion has no white equivalency**

NOVEMBER 15, 2000

Several days ago, my colleague Elijah Gosier and I wrote columns about how we, along with other black men, are mistaken for each other all the time, mostly by white people. The pieces were intended to inform and entertain. Here in the *St. Petersburg Times* newsroom, we have had noth-

ing but fun, with our white and black colleagues jokingly misidentifying not only us but other African Americans in the company as well.

Much of my correspondence from whites outside the company, however, has been either angry, defensive, ill-informed, recriminatory or zany.

With some overlap, the overwhelming majority of my letters, email and telephone calls have come in three main categories: attempts to show white equivalency, denial and defensiveness.

White equivalency is a logical fallacy. It attempts to show that for every black problem, whites have the same problem, and with the same import and ramifications.

In this case, white people are saying that like blacks, they also are victims of mistaken identity. A white television producer, for example, sent an email telling me that she is often mistaken for another white female producer. Her boss said, "Well, you're both producers and you both have brown hair." Yo! Dye your hair red. Elijah and I cannot change skin color unless, of course, we pull a Michael Jackson.

She writes also that people routinely mistake Marti Matthews of Channel 10 for Martie Tucker of Channel 28, "both blue-eyed blonds with the same name. Sometimes Sue Zelenko gets thrown into the confusion, too."

The woman's logic breaks down on several fronts and begs comment. Does she not know that mistaking one petite, blue-eyed blond TV news anchor for another is not the same as mistaking a black man for another? In the case of the blonds, we are talking about a specific group of people, a subset of the white race, who have been made to resemble one another because the news industry requires a generic look for its female talking heads. You had better look a lot like Marti Matthews or Martie Tucker or Jessica Savitch for that matter. If not, you are out the door, if you got through the door to begin with.

Mistaking one black man for another is not the same; we are not a generic subset of the group. Each individual black man is a generic entity in a generic group. In other words, "all niggers look alike," as a white man told me several years ago. Black computer techs here at the *Times* are mistaken for me. They are not columnists. Believe it or not, a 26-year-old *Times* employee on another floor (no gray beard or nappy gray coiffure) gets mistaken for me. No, he is not a columnist or writer. His mug is never in the newspaper.

Anyway, I have never heard of the police blowing away a petite, blue-eyed blond because she is mistaken for another petite, blue-eyed blond. We could, though, produce a long list of black males, from different professions, who have suffered this fate. In other words, no white equivalency exists.

Other readers deny that such mistakes occur at all. Still others become defensive to the point of hurling insults. The most interesting are whites married to blacks. Trying to show that they do not mistake one black for another, they became “deeply offended” by the columns, called me “ignorant,” felt “betrayed” and miss the point of the pieces. Most whites married to blacks delude themselves into believing that they know as much about the black experience as I do. That offends me.

An excerpt from a typical letter in this category is worth quoting: “Yes, I am white. I am also a graduate of (historically black) Howard University and the wife of a black man. When you see me on the street, you assume I am as blind as the other white people you have encountered. You don’t want to assume you are the same as any other black person, so how fair is it to judge what I might think about you when you don’t know me?”

“If I thought all black people looked alike, I would not know half of my family. I might have even spent my honeymoon with the wrong man. I might have asked the wrong girlfriend to be my maid of honor. And I might have sat in on the wrong lectures in college. I assure you that did not happen. People call me by the wrong name all the time, I’m just another physical therapist. It seems to me that it’s natural to confuse people you don’t know or have met only once. It just doesn’t happen to black people.”

Again, I do not know of a white, female physical therapist blown away by cops because she resembles another white, female physical therapist.

I will repeat one simple premise of my “invisible men” column: Far, far more whites than blacks mistake me and other black men for someone else. This phenomenon is a fact of life. It is not trivial. It has no white equivalency.