

they had come to Washington to make a statement to America—and that “the best way to make a statement, brother, is to make sure that dollar leaves your pocket. . . . Freedom ain’t free.”

If you needed still more confirmation that this was a political rally and not a day of spiritual atonement, you could look out at the sea of clenched fists—the black power salute was visible often and everywhere (though, just as when O.J. got it from a member of his jury, not on your television, which was pre-set to uplift). Few speakers got as many of them as the Rev. Al Sharpton, the unctuous scandal-monger-cum-power-broker. A lot of the “reformed” L.A. gang members got the salute, too, especially the one who announced to the crowd, “Beatin’ on the womens—it ain’t gonna happen no mo’.”

Farrakhan finally took the stage very late in the afternoon, and his mumbo-jumbo about numerology and the freemasons started many marchers away down Pennsylvania Avenue. But when he launched in on “white supremacy”—it had a harder edge as he pronounced it supremacy—many who had been ambling away stopped in their tracks. Like sex, hate sells, and few peddle it better than Farrakhan. His magnificent oratorical skills made the evil message sound oh so beautiful. There was no way you could separate this message from this messenger, and Farrakhan knew it, telling the audience that they couldn’t separate Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, Newton, and Einstein from their messages, either. God, he declared, had chosen to speak through him.

Farrakhan’s new position as a “true leader,” especially coming on the heels of the Simpson verdict, seemed further evidence that blacks and whites in America no longer have the ability, or even the willingness, to see eye to eye. Two days after the march, I came upon a crowd gathered around a black girl and a white girl having an argument. A black man grabbed the black girl, and pulled her aside. “C’mon,” he implored her, “we just had a march about this the other day.” But then she broke free and smashed the white girl’s face repeatedly, cutting her cheek badly and giving her one hell of a black eye. There were at least thirty witnesses to the assault—but the police who arrived on the scene were all black, and they let the black girl go. Forget about atonement—Louis Farrakhan would call that progress. □



Loony Tunes

by John Corry

The media consensus was this: A gulf now separates black and white America, and somehow it must be bridged. Usually one must be wary when so many columnists and commentators speak with one voice, but this time their judgment made sense. The verdict in the O.J. Simpson case had led to exultation among blacks and disbelief among whites. Shortly afterwards, Louis Farrakhan presided over an enormous assembly of black men in Washington. Columnists and commentators agreed he was a demagogue, although they uniformly declined to note that he was also a nut, despite the great wealth of evidence. At one point in his two-and-a-half-hour Washington speech, Farrakhan did a lengthy disquisition on the number 19: “When you have a 9, you have a womb that is pregnant, and when you have a 1 standing by the 19, it means that there’s something secret that has to be unfolded.” Signs of the secret, apparently, lay in the height of the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials, the Great Seal of the United States, and the 440 cycles of the A tone in music. Farrakhan said they were reminders of Egypt in the Eighteenth Dynasty.

Nonetheless, little of Farrakhan’s gibberish found its way into the press. Fear of appearing racist kept it out, and only those who stayed attentive to CNN or C-Span could get its full flavor. The *New York Times* ran excerpts

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from the speech, but ignored the goofiest parts. (A *Times* news story characterized the speech as “complex.”) The *Washington Post* seemed to be the only major news organization that paid attention to the gibberish, although it placed its story about it in the Style section, and treated it mostly for laughs. The media thought it more appropriate to denounce Farrakhan for his anti-Semitism and homophobia than to ridicule him for his clownishness. Anti-Semitism is a respectable target, but clownishness is not, and consequently Farrakhan was accorded more stature than he deserved. An anti-Semite has a vague monster status—Hitler was an anti-Semite—while a clown has no status at all. For the most part, Farrakhan was depicted as the twisted heir to Nat Turner, when he was really more like the Kingfish on “Amos ’n’ Andy,” posturing and prancing while he hatched gaudy schemes. Farrakhan upholds an old stereotype, and if he did not exist, white racists might have had to invent him. Indeed, at times it seemed that they had.

The week before the Washington rally, “Nightline”’s Ted Koppel declared, even if reluctantly, that Farrakhan “may have to be called one of the most influential leaders in black America.” On the eve of the rally, *Time* magazine concluded that “like it or not, for now at least, Farrakhan is leading the way.” Hours after the rally, an anxious Larry King asked Farrakhan on CNN whether the Million Man March was really the Farrakhan march, and whether he would now be more conciliatory toward Jews. Farrakhan replied with his customary evasiveness, and it would have been

more informative if King had asked him to clarify his remarks about the Washington Monument. In his speech, Farrakhan had said it was 555 feet high, and that this was important because if you added a 1 you got 1555, "which was the year our first fathers landed on the shores of Jamestown, Virginia, as slaves." Sullen-looking guards from the Fruit of Islam murmured, "That's right," as he spoke. In fact, Jamestown was not settled until 1607, and the first slaves did not arrive until 1619. Farrakhan is also an ignoramus.

The press, however, patronized Farrakhan. It ignored his gaucheries, and pretended he had something to say. The irony was that the black men on the Mall, his putative audience, had a better fix on this than all the media analysts. As Dan Rather reported, "The crowd began to diminish as Louis Farrakhan began to speak." The men on the Mall voted on the speech with their feet. By contrast, the analysts, especially the academics, were much more respectful. On "Crossfire," Cornel West of Harvard talked about the "depths of black love speaking to depths of black suffering," and praised Farrakhan for showing "no venom." Earlier, West had performed a neat trick in an op-ed piece for the *New York Times*. He had said he would join the Washington demonstration because he supported the legacy of Martin Luther King; the legacy condemned "patriarchy, homophobia and anti-Semitism." (Never mind now that King worried more about matriarchy than he ever did about patriarchy.) That seemed like a criticism of Farrakhan, of course, but it wasn't. "If white supremacy can be reduced to a minimum," West concluded, "then patriarchy, homophobia and anti-Semitism can be lessened in black America."

West, and others like him—the academics really were dreadful—wanted to have it both ways: Farrakhan was voicing legitimate grievances, and even if he was a little soiled, white America was worse. They ignored the ugliness routinely displayed by Farrakhan's followers, some of whom showed up in Washington on the weekend before the Million Man March for a Black Holocaust Nationhood Conference. Stories about the conference appeared in the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Times*. Coincidentally, the reporting was also an exercise in journalistic perspectives. The *Times* lead, on page one, said

that speakers used the conference "to attack white leaders, bash Christians and Jews, and ridicule fellow blacks." The *Post* lead, on page 10, referred to "speeches sometimes laced with racially inflammatory rhetoric." The *Times* said that about 2,000 people paid \$10 each to attend the climactic event of the conference, which was held at a public high school. The *Post* estimated the crowd at 1,200, and did not mention the fee. The *Times* reported that Malik Zulu Shabazz, the organizer, "said his conference was sanctioned by Mr. Farrakhan." The *Post* reported that Shabazz "did not say the weekend speeches were official elements of the Million Man March." The *Times* used fresh quotes (one speaker described the Twelve Apostles as "a lot of white faggot boys"); the *Post* seemed to be recycling some old quotes.

Both stories were fair, and neither violated any journalistic canon, but the story in the *Times*—by Janet Naylor and Jeanne Dewey—suggested the spirit of the conference more accurately than the one in the *Post*. The conference was demented. The networks were absent, but C-Span was not, and the lunacy was put on the record, along with some startling invective. Khallid Abdul Muhammad, a Farrakhan lieutenant, was the keynote speaker on the second night of the conference. Earlier, the New York lawyer Alton Maddox had described him as the "conscience" of the black movement. Muhammad said he did not know if O.J. Simpson had murdered Nicole Brown Simpson, and anyway he did not care. Simpson, he said, had deserted his black wife, and "found some glorified whore." Then he had "spent his money on her no good ugly mother, no good ugly father, and her whoring sister."

There were other speeches like that, not all of them so nasty, but every one of them, at least those heard and seen on C-Span, just as pointless. Black separatism is a hoax. It pretends to offer a different reality, but instead it parodies the old one. In Farrakhan territory, self-hating people demean themselves. The holocaust conference was a caricature of a minstrel show. The young men in army fatigues who lined up in back of the podium made up the company; a youth in a floppy hat tied under his chin was the interlocutor; visiting celebrities stepped forth as end men.

The poet Amiri Baraka said that Colin Powell "already killed the brown people—he'll come for the black people next." Then he read a poem, its words mostly unintelligible, and when he finished he got a standing ovation. Then City College of New York professor Leonard Jeffries praised Nasser, Mao, Mussadegh, Nkrumah, and Castro, mocked Clarence Thomas, and concluded with mysterious references to the Illuminati and secret societies. He got an ovation, too.

Meanwhile, the Million Man March was scarcely over when speculation about its meaning began. This was accompanied by a controversy. The National Park Service had estimated the crowd at the Mall at 400,000; Farrakhan insisted the figure was at least 1 million, and, as it turned out, he might have been right. An independent team from Boston University, using grids and scanners, came up with a crowd estimate of around a million. "And you're going to have to live with me," Farrakhan had said at a news conference the day after the march. "To some, I am a nightmare. To others, I am a dream come true." Indeed, the new crowd estimate seemed to make that likelihood even greater.

But speculation about the meaning of the march ended almost as quickly as it had begun. "People see what they want to see," Ted Koppel said, which was as sensible a summing up as any. After expressing the usual platitudes, no one knew quite what to say. An angry mob had not descended on Washington. Instead, there had been a gathering of generally amiable middle-class men, few of whom showed any passionate attachment to Farrakhan. Nonetheless, the night after he spoke at the Mall, a series of disturbances began to break out in federal prisons. The Nation of Islam is famous for proselytizing inmates, and about a third of all blacks in the federal prison system are now Muslim. It was reasonable to think there was some connection, even if tenuous, between Farrakhan's speech and the disturbances. No one, however, was prepared to raise that possibility. In the tactful way the press handles these matters, some things are best left unsaid. □



The Hero in Our Time

by Clarence Thomas

When I was young, there was a deep appreciation of heroes and heroic virtue. Art, literature, and even popular culture often focused on people who demonstrated heroic virtues—courage, persistence, discipline, hard work, humility and triumph in the face of adversity. These building blocks of self-reliance were replicated and reinforced at home, school, and church. Nearly everyone who attended grammar school in the 1950s or earlier can remember a favorite account of the integrity and work ethic of George Washington, or of Abraham Lincoln, or of George Washington Carver, or even of some baseball or football legend. It seemed that we all had heroes—not role models, a term of far more recent vintage. Indeed, it would have been odd for a child of several decades ago not to have had a hero.

But today, our culture is far less likely to raise up heroes than it is to exalt victims—individuals who are overcome by the sting of oppression, injustice, adversity, neglect, or misfortune. Today, victims of discrimination, racism, poverty, sickness, and societal neglect abound in the popular press. Today, there are few (if any) heroes. Often, it seems that those who have succumbed to their circumstances are more likely to be singled out than those who have overcome them.

This pattern of ignoring and deconstructing heroes stems from the rise of radical egalitarianism. In the 1960s, many of the cultural elite saw a need to ensure absolute equality. On this view, differences in ability and level of achievement are random or uncontrolled, and to permit these characteristics to dic-

tate human happiness and well-being would be unfair. Denigrating heroic virtue fits quite well with the notion that we must all be the same and that there can be no significant differences in our achievement, social standing, or wealth.

Our culture today discourages, and even at times stifles, heroic virtues—fortitude, character, courage, a sense of self-worth. For so many, the will, the spirit, and a firm sense of self-respect and self-worth have been suffocated. Many in today's society do not expect the less fortunate to accept responsibility for (and overcome) their present circumstances. Because they are given no chance to overcome their circumstances, they will not have the chance to savor the triumph over adversity. They are instead given the right to fret and complain, and are encouraged to avoid responsibility and self-help. This is a poor substitute for the empowering rewards of true victory over adversity. One of my favorite memories of my grandfather is how he would walk slowly by the corn field, admiring the fruits of his labor. I have often thought that just the sight of a tall stand of corn must have been more nourishing to his spirit than the corn itself was to his body.

As victim ideology flourishes, more and more people begin to think that they must claim victim status to get anywhere in this world. Indeed, is it any surprise that anyone and everyone can claim to be a victim of something these days? In his book *The Abuse Excuse*, Alan Dershowitz criticizes countless examples of conditions that "victimize" people and thereby release them from responsibility for their actions. Here are just a few examples:

- the "black rage defense," which asserts that blacks who are constantly subjected to oppression and racial injustice will become uncontrollably violent;

- "urban survival syndrome," which claims that violent living conditions justify acts of aggression in the community;

- "self-victimization syndrome," which maintains that people become less productive and creative, and become severely depressed, as a result of societal neglect and discrimination.

Most significantly, there is the backlash against affirmative action by "angry white males." I do not question a person's belief that affirmative action is unjust because it judges people based on their sex or the color of their skin. But something far more insidious is afoot. For some white men, preoccupation with oppression has become the defining feature of their existence. They have fallen prey to the very aspects of the modern ideology of victimology that they deplore.

Some critics of affirmative action, for example, fault today's civil rights movement for demanding equality yet supporting policies that discriminate based on race. These critics expect the intended beneficiaries of the civil rights regime to break away from the ideology of victimhood: to cherish freedom, to accept responsibility, and, where necessary, to demonstrate fortitude in the face of unfairness. I do not quarrel with this. But these critics should hold themselves to the same standards, resisting the temptation to allow resentment over what they consider reverse discrimination to take hold of their lives and to get the best of them. They must remember that if we are to play the victim game the very people they decry have the better claim to victim status.

Of course, de-emphasizing heroism exacerbates all these problems. Human beings have always faced the temptation to permit adversity or hate to dominate and destroy

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