

By Salim Muwakkil

MOBILE, ALA.

FOR A MAN WHO SAYS HE BELIEVES IN PEACE and pluralism, Ishmael Jaffree sure has caused a lot of trouble in this sleepy Gulf Coast city. First, he challenged Alabama's moment-of-silence school prayer law in a lawsuit and won. This triumph was seen as a defeat by most Alabamians, but his victory was further crowned with a favorable Supreme Court ruling. Then Jaffree sued again to make sure the state's recalcitrant officials actually would follow the ruling.

Although the 43-year-old black attorney has lived here for only a decade, he's managed to thoroughly antagonize the city's black and white leadership alike; given the historical divergence of those two groups' interests, Jaffree's performance is a marvel of political dexterity. Most established black leaders disagree with his civil libertarian views and distrust his lack of religious passion, while white leadership in this town of the Deep South simply regards him as a black atheist, which places him a rung or two above Satan.

His most consistent public opponent, however, is U.S. District Judge W. Brevard Hand, whose recent edict banning certain textbooks from the state school system for pushing "the godless religion of secular humanism" (see *In These Times*, April 1) alerted opponents of theocracy to the need for greater vigilance. Hand's ruling was stayed by an appellate court's temporary injunction, but Jaffree says the judge's action represents the opening salvo in another of their ongoing legal battles.

When Jaffree sued to end the moment-of-silence practice, it was Hand who flagrantly disregarded legal precedent and ruled against him. Hand's ruling was rejected on appeal and in 1983 the Supreme Court struck down the Alabama law. According to Jaffree, Hand perceived the court's decision as a personal affront more than a legal defeat.

"It's as if Judge Hand and his fundamentalist allies are out to show me—who they see as an uppity nigger—that I can't stop white folks in the heart of the Bible belt from teaching what they consider to be God's true religion," Jaffree says. After losing in the Supreme Court, Hand transformed the defendants from the Jaffree case—about 600 fundamentalist parents and teachers—into plaintiffs in the refashioned "secular humanism" case. And as his recent ruling indicated, Hand is not yet ready to concede defeat. There's a virtual consensus among legal experts, however, that the judges' decision will again be overturned.

Is he crazy? Hand's motives are easy to discern: he wants to protect the traditions of the Christian South from assaults by godless liberals. But why would an outspoken black man, already a prime target for racist scapegoating in a region where whites still lynch "uppity" blacks, risk further jeopardy by attacking hallowed religious traditions?

"My wife is a Baha'i and I am an agnostic in matters of religion," he explains. "At the beginning of our marriage we agreed not to force religion on our children. We wanted them to be free thinkers and learn about various religions and philosophies without being pressured to accept any of them. But when they went to school we soon discovered they were being literally indoctrinated into an aggressive 'born-again' style of Christianity. This meant that all of our plans for the children were being undermined by those teachers who doubled as preachers."

A civil libertarian in the Deep South finds few friends, black or white

Jaffree first tried informal methods to protest their blatant proselytizing, but he says the school board ignored his complaints. He sought allies among the area's small populations of Jews and Buddhist refugees from Indochina, but apparently they found his offer easy to refuse. He says the city's black community told him he was barking up the wrong tree.

It was black leadership's reaction that most demoralized Jaffree. "Black leaders are too parochial in their interests," he argues.

IN PERSON

"If it doesn't immediately concern something with racial overtones or have a civil rights angle, most black leaders don't want to get involved."

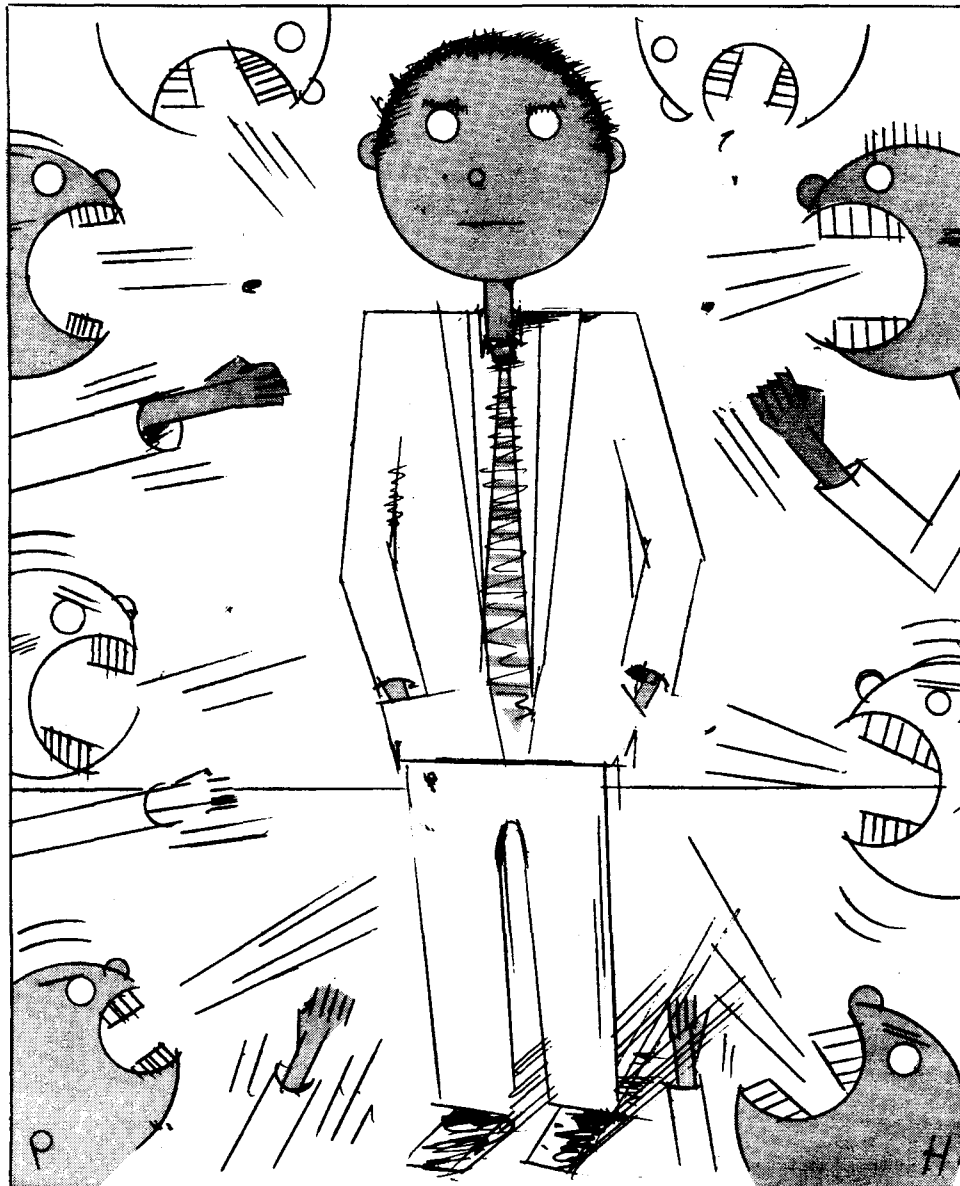
Jaffree explains that when he initially filed his moment-of-silence suit, he was strongly denounced from the black community's numerous church pulpits. Though careful to pay homage to African-Americans' religious traditions, Jaffree wonders if the black community's interests are being hampered by the predominance of Christian clergy in

leadership positions.

He's not alone. For example, the question of whether black leadership's overwhelming commitment to Christian dogma could produce a blind spot in their understanding of the need for protecting minority rights is being raised with increasing frequency by a wide range of analysts. With the national emergence of Rev. Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, a group purporting to link black—primarily religious—leadership with left/liberal white leadership, the question acquires added urgency. For instance, can homophobic preachers and advocates of gay liberation inhabit the same coalition? This is just one aspect of the issue provoked by Jaffree's speculation.

Another aspect was highlighted when *In These Times* sought comment on Hand's secular-humanism decision from Rev. Abraham Woods Jr., leader of the Alabama chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Although Woods is a seasoned veteran in the struggle for blacks' civil rights, he found nothing disturbing about Hand's order to ban selected textbooks. In fact, he demonstrated some support. "As a clergyman I certainly can't agree with any philosophy that gets rid of God," Woods said.

Ishmael Jaffree says whites in Mobile think he's an "uppity nigger." To the black community the lawyer is a "crazy, dangerous atheist." But, as he notes with pride, "I've been a non-conformist since day one."



A nightmare: Jaffree says he lived in hell for the entire year after he filed the suit. "The black community of Mobile treated me like I was a crazy, dangerous atheist," he recounts. "They simply couldn't conceive of any black person who wasn't religious, specifically Christian. I received absolutely no support whatsoever from any black civil rights group. Don't they understand that if we allow a tyranny of the majority in one area, all other minorities' rights are threatened?"

During his hellish year, he says, even his six children hated him. "They thought I was a fool to go up against such daunting opposition. For a while, they didn't even want to be seen with me." Things improved a bit when he was vindicated by the Supreme Court. "All of the media attention finally convinced them that their father wasn't just some cranky old fool."

Jaffree admits to being a chronic iconoclast. "I've been a non-conformist since day one," he notes with pride. On that day, he was in Cleveland, Ohio, and he remained in his native city until he migrated in 1977 to Alabama. He considers himself a product of the militant '60s, with all its passions and paradoxes.

"I was touched by everything that was happening in those days," he recalls. "The writings of LeRoi Jones (a.k.a. Amiri Baraka), Frantz Fanon, Claude Brown and Malcolm X were very influential in the development of my ideas, as was the example of [Rev. Martin Luther] King." He says he also became involved in the movement that in 1967 helped elect Carl Stokes the first black mayor of a major U.S. city. But Jaffree didn't squander all his energy on the frenetic activities of that era; he also managed to earn undergraduate and law degrees from Cleveland State University.

After some rough-and-tumble times in Ohio's largest city, Jaffree became disenchanted with the climate, pollution and politics of the industrial North and he began looking to the South as a way out and up. "I thought the future for black people was in the South, on the land, so I pointed myself in that direction. I eventually hooked up with the Reggie Fellowship Program, which pays attorneys to work in less accessible parts of the country, and I was sent to Alabama."

Jaffree no longer has romantic notions about blacks in the South. He says he's ready to return to the North, or perhaps go west. He counts the intellectual isolation he's suffered as his greatest loss. "I can't remember the last time I had an intellectually or politically stimulating conversation with anyone down here but my wife," he complains.

He's wrong about that, of course, although it would probably be difficult to convince him of his error. But every time the religious right attempts some legal strategy to further blur the boundary between church and state, Jaffree's reasoned voice is heard. His pitched legal skirmishes with the tendentious Judge Hand probably have stimulated more meaningful conversations about the dangers of majoritarian tyranny than years' worth of cultured debate in the top intellectual parlors. If only he could get the black community to join in the conversation....

IN THESE TIMES APRIL 29-MAY 5, 1987 7

By Diana Johnstone

PARIS

ON APRIL 10, THE VERY SAME DAY THAT Mikhail Gorbachov announced the forthcoming destruction of Soviet chemical weapons and proposed talks to eliminate short-range nuclear missiles from Europe, the French National Assembly overwhelmingly approved a huge arms procurement program that includes new chemical weapons and the short-range Hades nuclear missile.

Amid praise for the virtues of "consensus" and "cohabitation" between the conservative government that drafted the law and Socialist President Francois Mitterrand who approved it, Socialists joined the conservatives and the far-right National Front in passing the bill 536 to 35 (see accompanying story). Only the Communists voted against it.

"Our people's profound agreement on defense is an opportunity for France," said Prime Minister Jacques Chirac as he presented the new five-year military programming bill to the National Assembly. An opportunity, that is, to spend at least \$80 billion on nuclear and high-tech arms in the next five years, for an annual increase in arms spending of at least 6 percent. The French public's perceived readiness to allow mammoth military spending provides a chance to use the military sector as an economic growth leader.

The author of the Military Programming Act, Defense Minister Andre Giraud, is above all an industrial planner who as director of the Atomic Energy Commission (CEA) played a major role in developing the French nuclear industry.

In 1981 the newly-elected left government pushed through an increase in the minimum wage and other measures putting more spending money in the pockets of the less prosperous part of the population. The idea was that the spending would increase demand and thus be good for business. It increased demand, but the demand was met by foreign producers. Rising imports gave France a big trade deficit.

The big advantage of military spending is that the government can more easily make sure it goes to domestic rather than foreign producers. And it can be channelled toward new high-tech sectors.

Electronics account for 25 percent of the new arms spending. This is a sector French leaders are most anxious to develop. The model is IBM, which grew to its giant size

One country's costly conversion from a welfare to a warfare state



FRANCE

Conservative Prime Minister Jacques Chirac joined Socialist President Francois Mitterrand (right) in the passage of a new military bill.

by feeding for many years mainly on Pentagon contracts. The biggest single beneficiary of French defense spending is the big Thomson electronics group, which is increasingly concentrating on the military sector. Electronic components will account for a third to a half the cost of the expensive new combat plane to be ordered from Dassault.

"Carpet bombing": The "Soviet threat" is being brandished as never before in order to sell expensive new high-tech weapons to the French people, at a time when social benefits are being steadily cut back. Gorbachov is not being helpful at all in keeping up the

credibility of the Soviet threat. In the view of French arms industry technocrat Francois Heisbourg, the director designate of the London International Institute of Strategic Studies, Soviet disarmament is just another "threat": he likened Gorbachov's proposals to "carpet bombing."

French leaders must worry that the timing may be off for their big shift from the welfare to the warfare state. Chirac warned the National Assembly of a possible new period of detente. A Soviet-American "zero option" agreement to get rid of intermediate-range missiles in Europe would have "negative and

dangerous consequences" if it should seem to set off a process of "denuclearization of Western Europe," Chirac said. French leaders are gambling that any U.S. withdrawal of missiles or other forces will instead lead Western Europe to build up its own military-industrial complex. France can certainly not sustain such an arms program unless bolstered by European NATO allies, notably West Germany.

The Soviet threat is the only one that concerns the West Germans, and is thus indispensable for any joint Franco-German arms buildup. For the French, however, it is not

Socialist Party's backing of Military Programming bill perplexes many in party's rank and file

Socialist Party leaders have successfully avoided any public debate of the issue that has most been troubling rank-and-file Socialists: the party's unanimous vote in favor of the conservative government's Military Programming bill. In fact, there are doubts at the top as well as at the bottom of the party, but it is not in the style of French politics to discuss such delicate subjects in front of the children.

Perplexity was the mood of the party's international and military affairs commission meeting in Lille. Former Defense Minister Charles Hernu, Atlantic alliance faithful Robert Pontillon, Jacques Huntzinger, who has regularly defended French positions in the Socialist International, and Francois Londele, the only Socialist to express publicly his "regret"

at voting for the Military Programming bill, all warned each other that the "consensus" was more fragile than it looked.

Young people, they observed, are asking questions about chemical weapons, the size of the defense budget, nuclear tests in the Pacific and the promised—but never delivered—democratic reform of military service.

Everybody stressed the need to strengthen joint defense arrangements with West Germany. But how? Pontillon wondered how to respond to U.S. disengagement in Europe without raising the question of redeployment of France's overseas forces. And Huntzinger said it was necessary to think of what Britain had done when it withdrew its forces back "east of Suez." Raising such questions would mean completely re-evaluating the

French self-image, basis of the famous "consensus." Huntzinger stressed that this is a daunting task to undertake with elections coming up next year.

The Communist Party's (PCF) own special brand of demagoguery does nothing to clarify the debate. The PCF continues to combine, without a qualm, calls for disarmament with faithful support to the French arms industry as a source of "jobs" and "national independence." Having based its anti-NATO stance largely on latent anti-German feeling, the PCF has been badly placed to build real support for the nuclear disarmament movement centered in Germany.

In the National Assembly, PCF leader Georges Marchais opposed the Military Programming bill with old generalities rather than new facts, comparing the

danger of nuclear weapons to "everyone on earth sitting on three tons of TNT." Marchais pounced on the "consensus" between the right and the Socialists as confirmation of the PCF's current line that the strategy of alliance with the Socialists was a big mistake.

Marchais was suspected in some quarters of trying to pre-empt and spoil the disarmament issue in case Pierre Juquin, the party's leading "renovator" should try to break away and run with it. Formally in charge of disarmament questions for the PCF but never allowed to do much of anything, Juquin seems potentially capable of making more of the arms issue than any other prominent political figure on the French scene should he and other "renovators" strike out on their own.

-D.J.