

By Salim Muwakkil

ISLAH THOMAS, THE NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION's (NBA) premier point guard, has decided for now to shut up about sports and race. Stunned by a blizzard of negative publicity he received after his comments about basketball rival Larry Bird, Thomas at first tried to shift the public focus from his teasing jibes to a larger examination of racial stereotyping. The mainstream media, however, has preferred to characterize the comments of Thomas and his Detroit Piston teammate Dennis Rodman as the flip side of Al Campanis' infamous "blacks...don't have the necessities" gaffe.

According to associates, Thomas was badly shaken by what he felt was a deliberate attempt to cast him as a villainous reverse racist. One confidant said he "plans to more comprehensively address the larger issue" of racism in sports at a later date.

"Isiah was badly burned in this Campanis backlash and it was very unfair," said George Andrews, Thomas' agent and attorney. "He was badly misinterpreted and he's held two press conferences, one of which Larry Bird attended, and an interview on national television to rectify matters. That's about all he can do. Isiah is certainly no racist; he was just kidding a friend."

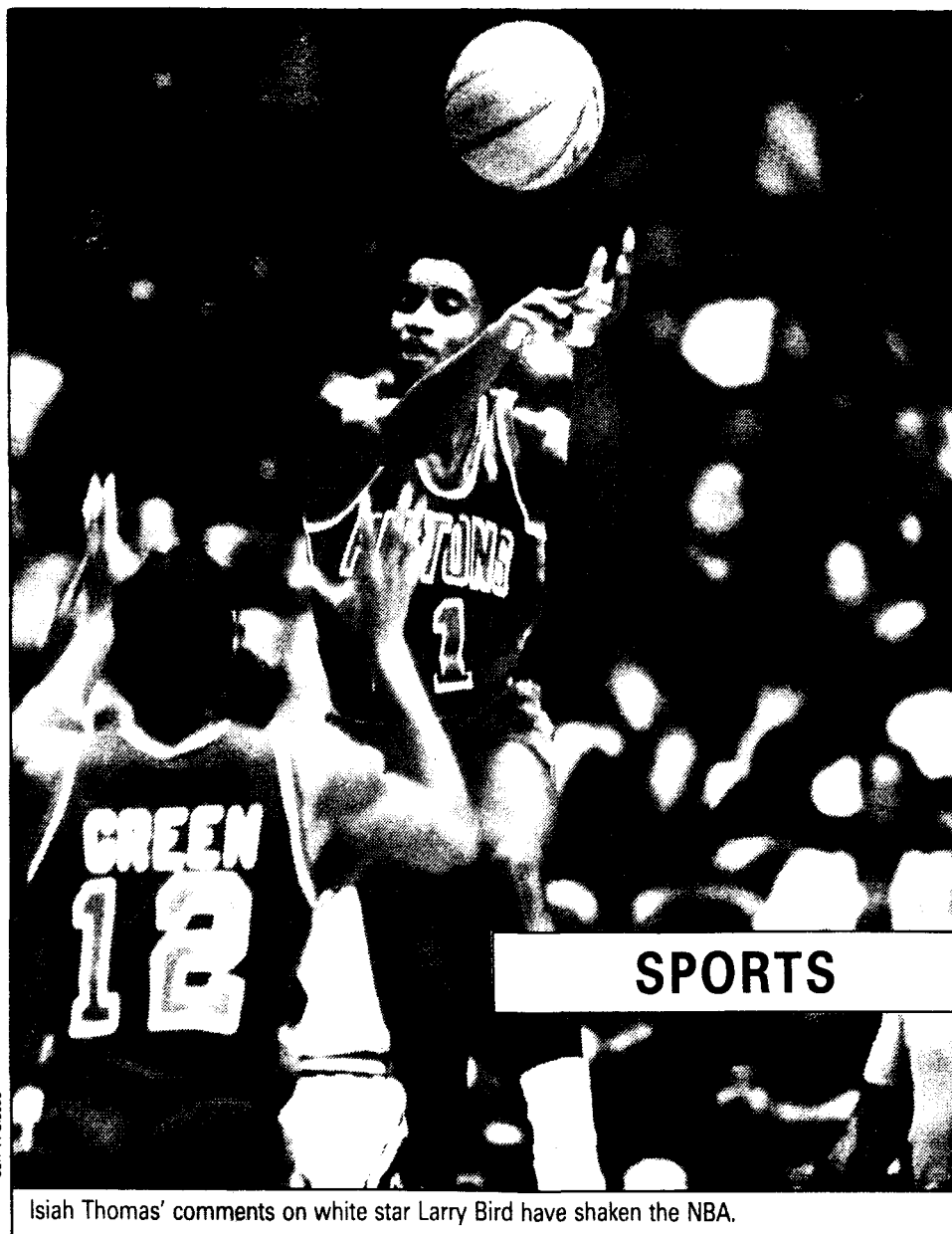
What actually happened? Following the Pistons' loss to the Boston Celtics in the NBA's Eastern Conference finals, Thomas was quoted as agreeing with teammate Rodman that Bird was overrated and that the Celtic star's status is due to his race. "I think Larry is a very good basketball player, an exceptional talent," Thomas said in a tape recording of the incident. "But I'd have to agree with Rodman, if Bird was black he'd be just another good guy."

Hundreds of sports writers and commentators in broadcast media pounced on these "sour grapes" comments with an intensity usually reserved for major political scandals. And since the sports beat is the metaphor capital of contemporary journalism, lurid and hyperbolic denunciations of Thomas and Rodman were issued by jock-watchers—a vast majority of whom are white—from across the country.

"It was much ado about nothing," said Kenny McReynolds, sports director for radio station WBMX-FM, an occasional columnist for the *Chicago Sun-Times* and a former assistant coach at DePaul University, echoing the current official line on Thomas' comments. "It was said during the heat of the battle. Isiah said it was a joke and has apologized if he unintentionally hurt anyone's feelings, and Bird has accepted his friend's interpretation of events. The end. Controversy over." McReynolds, who is black, was critical of the amount of negative press the two Pistons' remarks provoked. "Maybe if we had more black people in sports writing and broadcasting, the tendency to misinterpret certain things wouldn't be so pronounced," he said.

One white sports writer, Ira Berkow of the *New York Times*, allowed Thomas to expand on the gist of his comments. Thomas told Berkow that he wasn't referring to Larry Bird specifically, but about the perpetuation of stereotypes about blacks.

"When Bird makes a great play, it's due to his thinking and his work habits. It's all planned out by him. It's not the case for blacks," Thomas charged. "All we do is run and jump. We never practice or give a thought to how we play. It's like I came dribbling out of my mother's womb."



Isiah Thomas' comments on white star Larry Bird have shaken the NBA.

SPORTS

Off-the-court games and unwritten rules of race

Thomas said the word "athlete" has become a racial codeword. "Magic and Michael Jordan and me, for example, we're playing only on God-given talent, like we're animals, lions and tigers who run around wild in the jungle, while Larry's success is due to intelligence and hard work. Blacks have been fighting that stereotype about playing on pure instinct for so long, and basically it still exists—regardless of whether people want to believe it or not."

Blacks and buoyancy: In some ways, Thomas' comments are refractions of Campanis' fateful words. When the former baseball executive told *Nightline*'s Ted Koppel that blacks were not as buoyant as whites, he expressed a deep-seated cultural notion so casually assumed and presupposed that Campanis didn't even realize it was a gaffe. His presumptions are the standard in his field and are so widely held as to seem obvious. A glance at statistics spells out Campanis' attitude in black and white.

In 1987 major league baseball is 25 percent black, including black Latin players. Only 17 of 879 front-office jobs are held by blacks. But racial stereotyping doesn't start at the management level. According to Richard Lapchick, director of Northeastern University's Central for the Study of Sport in Society, racial stereotypes pervade athletics at all levels.

When baseball managers at college and professional levels were surveyed about characteristics they seek in players at different positions, it was revealed that in pitchers, catchers, second basemen, shortstops and

third basemen they look for the ability to think, make decisions and be team leaders.

"Of the major league pitchers, 88 percent are white," Lapchick reported. "The catching position is even more pronounced, with 91 percent of them white, no black Americans and nine percent Latin. The percentage of white third basemen is 85 percent, for second basemen it is 63 percent and for

The phenomenon of Larry Bird is an emotional issue among many black sports fans. While he is widely recognized as one of the NBA's best players, many blacks are suspicious of his value as a great white hope.

shortstops it is 54 percent. Thus the 'thinking positions' central to the game itself are dominated by whites."

Lapchick said the same managers and coaches are looking for outfields and first basemen with speed and reactive ability—read: athletes. "A staggering 82 percent of all blacks playing offensive positions in the majors play either first base or outfield." Campanis' ideas on blacks and buoyancy

may have helped sink his career, but those views are still afloat.

What's more, there is an element of truth in this crude understanding of racial physiology. There is a consensus among physical anthropologists that there are quantifiable, though minor, differences between the physiological characteristics of blacks and whites. To pretend such differences do not exist is disingenuous. On the other hand, acknowledging racial differences in a society that has yet to transcend its racist heritage is a risky enterprise. And in a culture that traditionally has precluded participation in certain social activities because of a presumed racial inferiority, the question of whether racial differences are innate or cultural is moot.

Just as Campanis' slip of the tongue upped the tempo of racial reform in major league baseball—resulting already in the bombshell appointment of Dr. Harry Edwards, one of the most articulate critics of racism in sports, as a consultant on the recruitment of blacks and Hispanics into every aspect of baseball—perhaps Thomas' comments will aid the process in other arenas. The most obvious need is in the media. A black sports writer would have understood better the context of Rodman's and Thomas' remarks.

The phenomenon of Larry Bird is an emotional issue among many black sports fans. While he is widely recognized as a superior player, many blacks are suspicious of his value as a great white hope. "Whenever black people begin excelling in something, white folks begin a feverish search for someone white who's better," explained Ferman Beckless, sports columnist for the black-owned *Chicago Metro News*. "Black folks are simply getting tired of having to always deal with that."

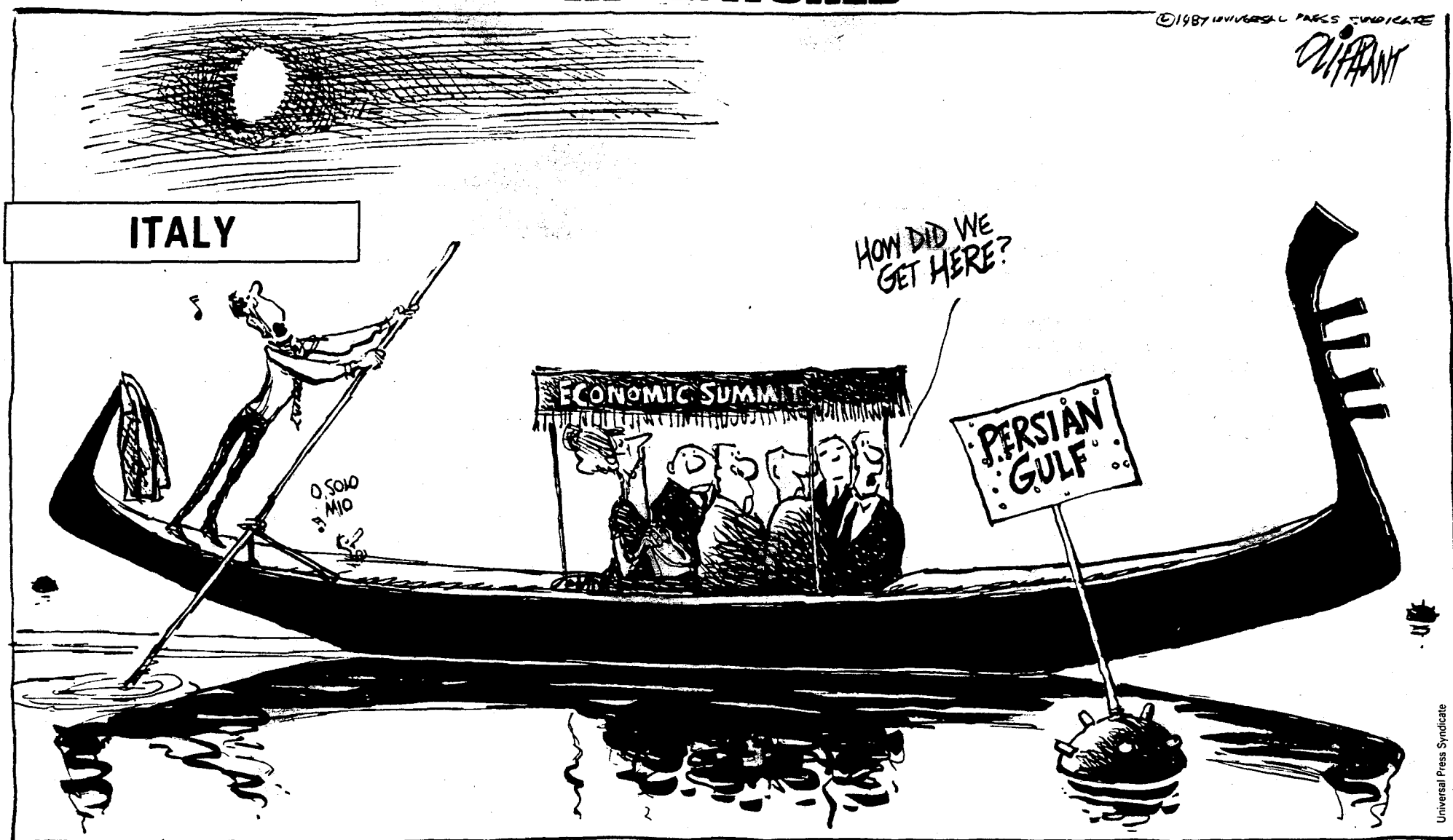
The recent heavyweight championship boxing match between challenger Gerry Cooney and title-holder Michael Spinks, which Spinks won handily, is emblematic of this process. Cooney, who is white, was widely regarded as little more than a hack fighter with little talent. Still, he earned an estimated \$5 million for the fight, while more deserving black contenders cooled their heels. "How are black people supposed to feel when they are constantly presented with those kinds of injustices?" Beckless asked.

Some argue that since there are more white than black fans of these various sports, team owners have an obligation to reflect this demographic reality in their player rosters. These observers see white players as marketing tools. Boston Garden, for example, seldom fails to attract sellout crowds, and some question whether that would be the case if the Celtics lacked talented white players like Bird, Kevin McHale and Danny Ainge. When Len Bias, the Celtics' top draft pick, was felled by a cocaine-induced heart problem, a sick joke made the rounds in many black communities that white Boston fans were behind it.

Many social critics see sports stadiums as the cathedrals of our time. While that analogy may be stretching things, it's surely no exaggeration to note that this country is obsessed by sports. Many have concluded this preoccupation offers an opportunity to address social problems that may otherwise be intractable.

Chicago journalist Keith Boseman put it this way: "When I saw this neo-Nazi demonstrator wearing a Walter Payton tee-shirt, I realized that our salvation as a society may just have to take place on one playing field or another."

CLIPART



Venice summit was good for Christian Democrats

By Diana Johnstone

VENICE

THE CAMPAIGN LEADING UP TO THE JUNE 14-15 elections was the most modern ever seen in Italy. Each contending party sought to win voters by projecting a favorable image, relatively unblemished by political issues. Thus the voters had no idea what was really at stake, beyond greed for power, nor even exactly why the elections were being held.

When Socialist Party (PSI) leader Bettino Craxi resigned last March after a postwar

record term of three-and-a-half years as prime minister, the deal was that the Christian Democrats were to take over leadership of the five-party coalition government until elections next year. But the post-Craxi government proved impossible to form, as the politicians hurled obscure insults at each other.

No nuclear vote: The only clear reason of policy for bringing down the government and holding the elections this year instead of next was to prevent the referendum already scheduled for June 14 on nuclear power. Over a million signatures—twice as

many as required by law—had been gathered. Since Chernobyl, a clear majority of the population and even of the parties say they want to stop Italy's nuclear power program. Italy is a country rich in renewable energy sources—hydroelectric, geothermal solar—with no need for nuclear power beyond ambition to keep its stake in international nuclear power (and eventually arms) production.

The Christian Democrats were most anxious that the referendum not take place. Party leaders support nuclear power, while most of the rank and file do not. A referendum on nuclear power risked splitting and weakening *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC) as the referendum on divorce did a decade ago.

In the wake of Chernobyl, both the PSI and the Italian Communists shifted to an anti-nuclear position and officially welcomed the referendum. However, despite a potential anti-nuclear majority in the parliament, they were unwilling to form a temporary caretaker coalition that would have allowed the nuclear referendum to be held before elections were called.

Instead, they let the Christian Democrats call elections that could delay the referendum and take the momentum out of the anti-nuclear movement.

But during the election campaign, none of the big parties talked about nuclear energy nor any other real issue. All the talk was of who should govern, and with whom. Eugenio Scalfari, the influential editor of the daily *La Repubblica* who is feuding with Craxi, warned that Italy would be ungovernable unless voters made a clear choice between the PSI and the DC. But as it turned out, both the DC and the PSI profited from the focus

on their rivalry. Exhorted to decide whether Craxi's Socialists or Ciriaco De Mita's Christian Democrats were best qualified to govern a modern nation, voters were incited to choose one or the other. The Christian Democrats improved their largest-party standing in both the senate and lower chamber, picking up about one-third of the vote nationwide. The Socialists, meanwhile, picked up 21 seats in the 630-seat lower chamber, bringing their total to 94. They held about even in the senate. With a majority between them, the two parties must now stop their quarreling and divide the spoils.

Seeing red: In an election that was only about who will govern, the big loser was the Communist Party (PCI), which lost 22 of its 198 seats in the lower chamber. In 40 years, the message has got across that whatever its virtues, the PCI is not allowed to govern.

Yet after 40 years in the desert, that is all the PCI wants to do. Never has its respectability been so total. Politically, it has long since moved to the right of the German Social Democrats. Its lists of "independent" candidates—who will not be subject to party discipline in parliament—were studded with the names of pillars of society, the most surprising being Milan financier Guido Rossi, the head of the stock exchange regulatory commission. With such candidates, the PCI wanted to show that it is better equipped than Craxi's party to do what Craxi set out to do four years ago—modernize the Italian state to fit the dynamic and successful Italian capitalist economy. This may well be true, but the other parties have no wish to give up their power to the PCI, and no compelling reason to do so.

A few days before the elections, the leftist daily *Manifesto* ran a series of articles by Bob Wingate showing that back in the '50s the U.S. National Security Council had planned military action in case the PCI won the

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