

Tony Brown's Journal

The Fight For Black Colleges Pays Off

For the first time in the history of the republic, the federal government is recognizing the true worth of one of its most valuable and valued institutions.

A panel of three federal judges approved an out-of-court compromise that will give Grambling and Southern Universities, Louisiana's two powerhouses for educating Blacks, what can amount to over the next few years as much as \$125 million.

Attorneys for the U.S. Justice Department and Louisiana hammered out a consent decree that will virtually guarantee an equal college education for Blacks at Black institutions without destroying the Black college in the process. Under the former Justice Department and Office of Civil Rights of the Department of Education, heavily under the influence of Jack Greenberg's White, liberal dominated NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF), Black education and the chances of a college degree were rapidly sinking under the myth of racial integration.

Neither good racial relations nor more Blacks finishing college were accomplished. Instead, Black colleges such as Savannah State in Georgia, Central in Ohio, Cheyney in Pennsylvania, Langston in Oklahoma, Morgan in Maryland, Jackson State in Mississippi and a host of others were told to find a "new mission." Translated, that means to shift the emphasis to educating Whites. As a result, some Black colleges today are a shell of their former greatness. A few, West Virginia State and Lincoln in Missouri, are, for all intents and purposes, White schools.

But that climate has changed. Just one year old, the Coalition for Black Colleges has succeeded in dramatizing and exposing the twin threats of so-called desegregation plans (Cheyney State got a 30 percent White quota while White West Chester College got a four percent Black quota) and the loss of money that resulted from the legal stigma of being accused of segregating.

The Louisiana settlement came as a great victory to those in the save Black College Movement. Governor David C. Treen was the invisible hand guiding the settlement of the 7-year-old lawsuit. In Washington, Assistant Attorney General Bradford Reynolds said, "The historic importance of the Black college is recognized and their important traditions are preserved." And this settlement means that the new federal policy is to keep alive the source that graduated over 80 percent - virtually all - of the nation's Black leadership.

The vast majority of Blacks are very supportive of the Louisiana consent decree. Blacks in Louisiana, with the single exception of the NAACP, are ecstatic. The historic settlement will enhance existing programs at Black colleges, give a larger Black voice in higher education and eliminate the threat that Grambling and Southern will be submerged.

More Blacks will sit on the state's Board of Regents, an open admissions policy will guarantee more Black freshmen at White colleges where seven out of 10 fail to get a degree, Black medical students will get a \$5,000-a-year scholarship and Grambling will get new programs in nursing, environmental chemistry and farm research along with advanced degree programs in accounting, special education and computer science. Southern will get a School of Social Work and a host of new bachelor's programs, including print journalism.

But that doesn't make the NAACP happy. "Southern didn't just get to be screwed up overnight and you can't fix it by putting a \$200,000 Band-Aid on it," NAACP attorney Robert Williams is quoted as saying. "What's their problem?" one Black asked. Another said in a public speech: "Where does he think Louisiana's professionals come from? From 'screwed up' Grambling and Southern universities."

Even the federal judges used some strong language in throwing the NAACP's objections out of court. One judge accused the NAACP's lawyer, Margaret Ford (ironically a graduate of Southern's law school), of not reading well enough to understand the consent decree. He also referred to her objections as "specious." Another judge chided her for not proposing any alternatives and for not being specific.

She, of course, was as specific as she could be, facing a climate of absolute approval in the Black community. She asked the three federal judges to stop the plan because it does not do enough to get rid of a dual system.

I interpret her real intent to mean that the NAACP really opposes Black institutions of higher learning. But the political climate in the Black community will not tolerate that position and the NAACP finds itself - once again - isolated from the community it professes to represent.

TONY BROWN'S JOURNAL, the television series, is shown every Sunday, on WMAQ-TV (5), at 9:00 a.m.

*If you want to help please write in.