

# We Interrupt Your Regular Programming

**You want change? Start by calling for greater personal responsibility on the part of those who are most responsible, who set the worst example and do the greatest damage.**



Archon Khephra Burns

**A**t the Southeast Regional Boulé in Winston-Salem, the conviviality of the opening-night reception was broken by the sounding of an alarm. This was not a test. Several young black men had just been murdered...some-where (it was a statistical certainty), and hundreds more had been arrested. Organizers of the preemptive forum on the plight of the young black male cited a litany of statistics corroborating the state of emergency.

On the evidence alone there can be little doubt that a culture

of violence pervades our urban black communities. We can hear it in the rhymes that celebrate thug life, in the brutishness of public profanity. We see it in the escalating autogenocide and young black males who consciously or unconsciously invite incarceration as a rite of passage. We can readily point to failing schools, peer pressure equating literacy with “acting white,” easier access to handguns than textbooks, absent fathers and the want of greater personal responsibility as factors negatively impacting black youth. But we are curiously myopic, if not deaf, dumb and blind, when it comes to putting our finger on certain other environmental influences.

Without any help at all from black youth, American culture is both violent and profoundly anti-intellectual. We sing secular hymns to bombs bursting in air. A lawless, wild-West mentality has reduced U.S. foreign policy to a prerogative of preemptive strike. Murder and misogyny are nightly entertainments, and the idea of a military-messianic apocalypse lies at the very heart of fundamentalist Christian hopes and dreams.

Proportionately the United States has five times as many homicides, ten times as many rapes and seventeen times as many robberies as Japan. We have seven times as many homicides, twelve times as many rapes and eight times as many robberies as Great Britain. Most violent crimes are not committed by African Americans, but we are almost always the face of violent crime on television newscasts.

According to a Sentencing Project study, 71 percent of African Americans in federal prisons are there on drug charges. While

African Americans constitute 13 percent of all drug users, they account for 35 percent of all drug-related arrests, 55 percent of all convictions and 74 percent all those receiving drug-related prison sentences. African Americans are not the primary users of crack cocaine. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, 64.4 percent of crack users are white, and only 26.6 are black. But 91.3 percent of those sentenced under federal crack laws are black, while only 3 percent are white. Sixty-five percent, black and white, never completed high school; 33 percent were unemployed, and another 32 percent earned less than \$5,000 a year.

They are overwhelmingly uneducated and poor, and poverty is the most important factor in determining who is most likely to wind up in prison. They are poor, in part, because they are mostly from struggling single-parent, female-headed households, and they are from single-parent households primarily because they are poor. This clever Catch 22 comes to us courtesy of one of those peculiar partnerships between business and government that so often seem to be the source of America's problems.

From the end of the Civil War to just after World War II, two-parent households were the rule in black America. But with the influx of successive waves of European immigrants exacerbating racist hiring practices, black skilled laborers and craftsmen were forced out of jobs paying wages that could support a family, and the federal government stepped in with Aid to Families with Dependent Children or AFDC. Craftily engineered to safeguard against “shiftless black men” freeloading off the government dole, AFDC required that fathers absent themselves from the home. The federal government thus virtually assured both the fatherless inner-city family and the pursuit of an illegal underground economy by displaced black men. As a further consequence, we now have several generations of black boys who have grown up in situations with few if any examples of black men in stable, committed relationships, who get up every day and go to work.

Public education has failed them. As Jonathan Kozol has documented, with no home ownership and no tax base to support the schools in their neighborhoods, poor black kids have no textbooks, few working toilets and often no heat or panes in the windows in winter, much less qualified teachers. But public education has failed all of us. With government cuts in funding for arts and music programs in public schools – when studies have shown consistently that such programs boost academic achievement – the liberal arts education of well-rounded, thinking individuals has been supplanted by an emphasis on specialization,

producing graduates who know more and more about less and less and nothing about almost everything else.

And it's not by accident. America wants workers, not thinkers. Thinkers question and are not so easily distracted with the toys and trinkets proffered by the media, nor easily manipulated by the propaganda, fear mongering and simplistic appeals to perverted notions of patriotism. Yale and Harvard have failed us all miserably in producing a U.S. president who represents the masses of Americans most in his exemplary contempt for intelligence. The fish stinks from the head down.

It is a failure evidenced as well by the inability of supposedly educated people to think their way past antiquated rationales for the Second Amendment, granting citizens of a self-destructive nation access to real weapons of mass destruction. Fifty million handguns and rifles currently in the hands of American citizens are no match for the stealth technology and firepower of our military and thus no security against the tyranny of government. But they do explain the statistical chasm between the rates of violent crime in the U.S. and every other industrialized nation in the world. They have armed legions of paramilitary-minded neo-fascists in the backwoods of Idaho, Connecticut, California and forty more states across the country, where America's Brown Shirts are held in reserve for the final regime change. And the chaos these guns create in our inner cities provides a useful distraction for any who might otherwise follow the money trail to the source of our crime.

Crime does pay, though not nearly so handsomely for young black men slinging rock on the corner as for those who profit from incarcerating them. More than \$150 billion annually is expended on criminal justice, producing huge returns for shareholders invested in the Wackenhut Corrections Corporation, Corrections Corporation of America, GE, Shearson Lehman and others that are building prisons and charging states to warehouse large segments of their black and Hispanic populations in privately owned facilities. They're monitoring the failure rates of fourth-grade boys in black communities in order to make projections on the number of new cells that will be needed for the future of a for-profit prison system. It's a business, and the business is invested in those black boys' failure.

Lobbied assiduously on behalf of the crime profiteers, politicians – who secure their re-elections by assuring an ignorant, fearful public that they are hard on crime – divert tax dollars out of education, child welfare, mental health, housing and substance abuse programs, shown to deter people from criminal behavior, and use the money to repay investors in the privatized prison industry while simultaneously ensuring a steady stream of new prisoners for the future.

Making full use of the resources at its disposal, the industry also provides free labor from hundreds of thousands of black bodies to Chevron, IBM, Motorola, Compaq, Texas Instruments, Honeywell, Microsoft, Victoria's Secret and others. A friend, who happened to be one of the highest ranking officers in education, confided once that he could not order anything for his office that was *not* made in prison. With no strikes, no unions, no health benefits, unemployment insurance or workers' compensation to pay, it's America's answer to the abolition of slavery. And it's legal. The 13th Amendment of the Constitution states that “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States.”

There is a sad irony in the fate of some working poor who, having resorted to the local drug trade after plant closings in their communities, went to prison only to find themselves working for free for their former employers, who had reopened the plants inside the prison. In *The Perpetual Prisoner Machine*, author Joel Dyer describes prison communities in places like Chino, Leavenworth, San Quentin and Joliet that function like relocation camps for the hundreds of thousands of uprooted poor and

their incarcerated relatives. Notwithstanding the continuing necessity of trials, all that's missing are the boxcars.

In the last twenty-five years California alone has built twenty-six new prisons and one new university. Plans for another ten new prisons are in the works. America has witnessed in recent years the largest prison expansion the world has ever seen, despite the fact that – according to Census Bureau statistics – crime rates have been relatively flat or falling for the last three decades.

It's not the criminals in the “hood” who populate our fears, Dyer suggests, but the ones who break into our homes nightly through the window that television provides. And for convenience' sake, at home as abroad, the villain is almost always easily identifiable; he's darker than the good folk who make up the Bushes' America: He's Willie Horton and Saddam Hussein and those people on *The Wire*. “According to behavioral scientists,” Dyer writes, “the majority of Americans now base their world view more on the mediated messages offered by television than upon their own firsthand observations.” Welcome to the Matrix.

The confluence of these several streams – media manipulation of the public's perception of crime, hard-on-crime politicians, the prison-industrial complex and a socio-economic culture that supports the warehousing of uneducated black men – has worked together to make perception a reality, a self-fulfilling prophecy. As one cultural anthropologist, the late Marvin Harris, concluded more than twenty-five years ago, prisons cause crime. Individuals who are incarcerated for non-violent drug offenses – who, because of mandatory sentencing laws, are actually serving longer sentences than violent criminals – learn to become hardened, violent criminals in prison.

We are, all of us, products of our environment. You want to change personal behavior? Change the culture that shapes it. Change the economics that shape the culture. Change the obscene avarice of the corporate giants that shape the media and messages that drive a culture of conspicuous consumption and celebrity worship that fill the void in otherwise empty lives. Fix public education. And don't expect an uneducated poor black kid with a gun to value life anymore than leaders in business and government who callously take thousands of lives for much bigger profits. Let's start by calling for greater personal responsibility on the part of those who are most responsible, who set the worst example and do the greatest damage.

Uninformed, shallow analysis and frustrated, simplistic calls for personal responsibility, as a panacea for all that ails the black community, too conveniently absolve the complicit of their own responsibility for ending a pandemic they helped to create. It too easily relieves them of the responsibility to do their homework or even think very deeply about the matter before opening their mouths. It too casually casts responsibility solely in the laps of those who have been hobbled by social engineering for profit and then preempts any useful discussion of causes with allegations of “victim mentality.” It colludes in the media demonization of black men and provides policymakers with justification for denying funding to programs that have been proven to work.

The question is not whether anyone has the right to voice his or her opinion, but rather one of personal responsibility. When the power of the media is placed at one's disposal, and legitimately or not, one is taken to be a spokesperson for black people, does one have a responsibility to know what one is talking about? As funny, as philanthropic and much beloved as Homey the Clown may be, one does not license him to practice surgery and to invite policymakers into the operating room to cut off both anesthesia and oxygen to the patient in the middle of the operation.