



Eye on Culture



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Anointing Misguided Leaders: the Networks' Disservice to Black America

By Brian Fitzpatrick

Are the major networks helping the African-American community to rise above the history of slavery and oppression, or holding black Americans back?

Major media have great influence in determining which Americans emerge from obscurity to become recognized as leaders. America's TV networks have to make a consequential choice: to elevate people into leadership who will encourage African-Americans to accept personal responsibility for improving their lives, or raise the profile of people who reinforce the false notion that African-Americans are powerless victims.

As Black History Month draws to a close, the Culture and Media Institute is examining which people the networks are featuring as leaders of the African-American community. As a benchmark, CMI looked at ABC, NBC and CBS coverage of the biggest civil rights story of 2007, the Jena Six, to find out which African-Americans the networks chose to cover and interview.

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The Jena Six are six black high school students who were charged with attempted murder for beating a white student senseless in Jena, Louisiana on December 4, 2006. The beating was the last in a series of racially-tinged incidents triggered by three white students who hanged nooses in a "whites-only" shade tree at Jena High School in August, 2006. The three white students were suspended for three days. Soon after the suspensions, several

confrontations and fights took place, and on November 30, 2006, as-yet unidentified arsonists burned down the high school's classroom building. Authorities filed attempted murder charges after the December 4 incident, which landed the victim in the emergency room.

Blacks from across the United States viewed Jena as an illustration of over-prosecution and judicial double standards. Though the attempted murder charges were soon reduced, activists organized a march in Jena on September 20, 2007 to protest stiffer prosecution of black defendants around the nation. Some have called the demonstration, which reportedly attracted more than 10,000 participants, the biggest civil rights march in decades.

Between July 31, 2007 and January 22, 2008, ABC, NBC and CBS national news programs mentioned Jena 80 times. Some of the mentions were lengthy stories about the legal case and protest march, some were teases or brief updates, and a few were tangential references to Jena in stories on other topics.

In these 80 stories, network news shows covered or interviewed 10 prominent civil rights figures about Jena. Nine of these people represented "liberal black establishment" attitudes, blaming black problems primarily on white racism and seeking improvements in the African-American community through political action. The tenth was a rapper/actor promoting an album and a movie.

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Sharpton on *The Early Show*,
CBS, September 20, 2007

In short, the networks sought only "liberal black establishment" opinions about the biggest civil rights story of the year.

The two men most frequently cited by the news networks achieved their prominence by jumping in front of the Jena protest parade and becoming part of the story. The Rev. Al Sharpton was covered or interviewed 21 times in the 80 stories. The Rev. Jesse Jackson appeared six times.

The rest of the list:

- Morris Dees, founder, Southern Poverty Law Center (a white member of the liberal civil rights establishment)
- King Downing, ACLU, Campaign Against Racial Profiling
- Michael Eric Dyson, professor and author
- Dennis Courtland Hayes, interim president and CEO, NAACP
- Wade Henderson, president, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights
- Martin Luther King III, former head, Southern Christian Leadership Conference
- U.S. Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas
- RZA, prominent rapper/actor/producer

Which other outstanding black Americans might the networks have consulted about Jena? Perhaps Dr. Thomas Sowell or Dr. Walter Williams. Perhaps columnist Star Parker, writer Shelby Steele, pastor Ken Hutcherson or entrepreneur Herman Cain, all of whom emphasize personal responsibility and character above victimhood.

Seven of these 10 people are current or former leaders of prominent liberal civil rights organizations. The eighth is a far-left member of Congress and the ninth is a prominent left-wing intellectual. Each of these nine delivered a variation of the angry victim theme:

- Rev. Sharpton: “We sit and stand in a city that says it’s a prank to hang a hangman’s noose, but that it is attempted murder to have a fight.” [Six attackers kicking an unconscious victim is a “fight?”]
- NAACP’s Hayes on nooses: “There are some people who are resorting to terror, fear, instilling fear, intimidating people, to win their demands, the demand being that black people stay in their place.”
- ACLU’s Downing: “The people who were here are going to be just as angry or more angry than they were before.”
- LCCR’s Henderson: “The noose has become the modern version of the burning cross.”
- U.S. Rep. Lee: “I don’t know what else to say! I am outraged!”

Why ABC's *Today Show* chose to interview the tenth person, rapper RZA, about Jena is anybody's guess, but his comments were more constructive than any of the others. RZA cautioned, "I don't know if we should take [nooses] so personal," and acknowledged that, "we come a long way in this country":

I've been on tour traveling the country and it seems that the majority of people are coming together, we're starting to respect each other's culture, whether Black-American, Asian-American, Latin-American, people are respecting each other's culture and kind of bonding together in this generation... So I think us in America and this generation, we taking the - we erasing all those old school stereotypes, and I see more mixed couples and more things, that's just I mean astounding actually.

Which other outstanding black Americans might the networks have consulted about Jena? Perhaps Dr. Thomas Sowell or Dr. Walter Williams, two of America's finest economists and most insightful writers about race and society. Perhaps columnist Star Parker, writer Shelby Steele, pastor Ken Hutcherson or entrepreneur Herman Cain, all of whom emphasize personal responsibility and character above victimhood.

How about two men actually interviewed by NBC on October 14, 2007, Dr. Bill Cosby and Dr. Alvin Poussaint? Esteemed comedian Cosby and Harvard psychiatrist Poussaint are coauthors of a book, *Come On, People: On the Path from Victims to Victors*, that encourages blacks to accept personal responsibility, face the problems in their own communities, and rely on their own efforts to improve their lives.

NBC didn't bother to ask Cosby and Poussaint about Jena when they were already in the studio, but the network did bring in Georgetown professor Michael Eric Dyson three times to discuss Jena. Dyson is the author of a book that directly challenges Bill Cosby's message of personal responsibility and self-reliance, *Is Bill Cosby Right? Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* The articulate Cosby seemed dumbstruck when *Meet the Press* host Tim Russert brought up Dyson's themes:



Poussaint (left) and Cosby, NBC's *Meet the Press*, October 14, 2007

RUSSERT: Michael Eric Dyson wrote a whole book, *Is Cosby Right?*, saying that [Cosby] overemphasizes personal responsibility...

COSBY: Wow.

RUSSERT: ...and it's structural and systemic racism that's the real problem.

COSBY: Wow.

NBC deserves credit for interviewing Cosby and Poussaint about their idol-shattering book, but why didn't the network ask them, or likeminded African-American intellectuals, what they think about the biggest civil rights story of the year? Wouldn't African-Americans, and all Americans, be better off hearing Bill Cosby's assessment of Jena as well as that of Michael Eric Dyson?

The media function as the gateway to public prominence. As long as the networks continue to showcase "liberal black establishment" preachers of victimhood and anger, at the expense of visionaries who emphasize self-reliance, personal responsibility and character, they will retard the progress of black America.



Nightly News, NBC
September 23, 2007

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