

## **Cosby Defends His Remarks About Poor Blacks' Values by FELICIA R. LEE May 22, 2004, B7**

Bill Cosby, known mostly as a genial father figure who contributes to a wide range of black philanthropic causes, found himself immersed in controversy this week. After making inflammatory remarks on Monday about the behavior and values of some poor black people, Mr. Cosby said yesterday that he had made the comments out of concern and because of his belief that fighting racial injustice must also include accepting personal responsibility. Mr. Cosby spoke yesterday after a week of discussion on the Internet, on talk shows, on radio programs and in newspaper columns about his comments Monday night at a gala at Constitution Hall in Washington commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Brown vs. Board of Education desegregation decision. He has been attacked and applauded for saying that "the lower economic people are not holding up their end in this deal." He was also reported to have said: "These people are not parenting. They are buying things for their kids -- \$500 sneakers for what? And won't spend \$200 for 'Hooked on Phonics.' . . . They're standing on the corner and they can't speak English."

Mr. Cosby said yesterday that what was left out of those comments, first reported by The Associated Press and The Washington Post, was that he began his remarks by talking about what he said was a 50 percent high school dropout rate among poor blacks. The National Center for Education Statistics, a federal agency, says that in 2000 the dropout rate for blacks was 13.1 percent. Mr. Cosby's publicist, David Brokaw, said it was Mr. Cosby's understanding that the rate was 50 percent in some inner-city schools.

Mr. Cosby's remarks, which also included the observation that not all incarcerated blacks are political prisoners ("people getting shot in the back of the head over a piece of pound cake, and then we run out and we are outraged") were meant to frame the complexities of black struggle 50 years after Brown, Mr. Cosby said, when so many legal barriers have fallen. Some people said Mr. Cosby's comments had simply brought to the surface long-simmering generational and class schisms among blacks. Some applauded him for using sharp language to reiterate a long-running debate among blacks about the direction of the black struggle. Still others said they feared that his remarks would become fodder for racists or conservatives who believe that blacks alone avoid personal responsibility. "Mr. Cosby was addressing the 50 percent dropout rate that he knows to be true," Mr. Cosby said of himself in a telephone interview from San Francisco, where he was raising money for a program to get teachers into low-income schools. "Was Mr. Cosby taking about all lower-income people? No." "I am in as much pain as many, many people about these people," he continued. "The 50 percent dropout rate, the seeming acceptance of having children and not making the father responsible and calling him in on it. It's easy to pass these things on like some kind of epidemic." He said later in the conversation: "A 50 percent dropout rate in 2004 is not all about what people are doing to us. It's about what we are not doing. The Legal Defense Fund and the N.A.A.C.P. can deal on those points of law, but something has to come from the people."

Theodore M. Shaw, the director counsel of the N.A.A.C.P. Legal Defense and Education Fund Inc., said yesterday that Mr. Cosby's comments had upset him. But they spoke afterward, he said, and agreed that black inequality needed to be attacked on many fronts, both personal and political. "I was concerned that people in the media would attempt to drive a wedge between Dr. Cosby and those pursuing issues of systematic racial discrimination," said Mr. Shaw, who spoke to the audience on Monday night after Mr. Cosby's comments, asserting that many problems in black communities were not the result of personal failures.

But the cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson said that Mr. Cosby's comments "betray classist, elitist viewpoints that are rooted in generational warfare." Mr. Dyson, a professor of religious studies and African studies at the University of Pennsylvania, said Mr. Cosby was "ill-informed on the critical and complex issues that shape people's lives." Mr. Cosby's comments, he added, "only reinforce suspicions about black humanity." Addressing that point, Mr. Cosby said yesterday, "The conservative groups are not saying anything that they weren't already saying about us." Kweisi Mfume, the president of the N.A.A.C.P., said yesterday that he agreed with much of what Mr. Cosby had to say. He said he thought most of the agitation came simply because Mr. Cosby, who has so much credibility among many blacks, said it publicly. Mr. Mfume said he, too, had often said that blacks now face many challenges that are beyond the scope of the law. He said he disagreed with Mr. Cosby for singling out low-income people as having failed to hold up their end through destructive behavior in the post-segregation era.

Mr. Cosby said yesterday, though, that it is mostly in poor neighborhoods that black children are being felled by bullets and let down by their schools and too many adults. He said he made his comments to inspire people to take back their neighborhoods and express outrage about everything from obscene rap lyrics to negative media images of blacks years after "The Cosby Show" broke new ground.

### **A Short History of Class Antagonism in the Black Community by Brent Staples, May 29, 2005, 4/9**

Bill Cosby spawned a cottage industry among opinion writers when he ascended a podium in Washington last year and harangued inner-city parents for doing too little to educate their children. He threw salt in the wound by saying those parents were spending too much on expensive sneakers and not enough on books. Those brief remarks have continued to reverberate through the court of public opinion. Conservatives are hailing Mr. Cosby as the tough love truth teller of the moment. Liberals have come close to describing him as a race traitor, as Prof. Michael Eric Dyson of the University of Pennsylvania recently pointed out in his incendiary book, "Is Bill Cosby Right? Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?" Professor Dyson, who is known for rhetorical pyrotechnics, is fiercely critical of Mr. Cosby for what he sees as unfairly attacking the poor. But Mr. Dyson doesn't stop there. He also reaches into the past, attacking earlier members of the black elite for doing the same thing. Professor Dyson is at least aware that class conflict in the black community goes back to the very beginning. The most striking thing about the discussion that has followed the Cosby comments is the extent to which even well-educated Americans have been surprised to learn that class antagonism exists in the black community at all. This entrenched ignorance about black life was a long time in the making, and is only now being dislodged.

Americans no longer bat an eye when a black actor portrays a surgeon, a chief executive or even a president of the United States. It was not so long ago, however, that black actors who could find work at all were largely limited to playing criminals, servants and simpletons, roles that confirmed the doctrine of black inferiority. Sidney Poitier was the exception, in movies like the one that cast him as a learned psychiatrist treating white patients. These movies were seen as groundbreaking, even in the North, because they offered black characters who were superior intellectually and in class terms to the whites they encountered on screen. But these glimpses of the black elite on film were not sufficient to counteract the race message that emanated from the American cultural apparatus through most of the 20th century.

That message portrayed black Americans almost exclusively as ill-educated and poor, and argued by omission that the black elites and intelligentsia did not exist. Thus misinformed, the nonblack world came to think of the black community as a socially homogenous zone where class antagonisms did not exist. It should surprise no one that black elites pressed into close contact with the poor were often more class-obsessed and more condescending toward the commoners than their white counterparts. White elites, after all, could escape the poor by packing up and moving. The black elite would make its getaway when the walls of segregation came down. But for the first half of the 20th century, black doctors, dentists, lawyers and teachers often had to carve out enclaves in the areas set aside for blacks in cities like Philadelphia, Washington and Baltimore.

Class was trickier in the black world, and not just because of physical proximity. The early black elite started and led the civil rights movement, which involved making common cause with the lower classes. But, as might be expected, the black upper classes took elaborate measures to insulate themselves from too much contact with "the wrong kind of people." This meant attending the right churches and joining the right clubs, some of which judged potential members through a complex set of criteria that often included class, education and skin tone. Black-against-black class barriers were particularly byzantine in Washington, which was the seat of a hypereducated black elite that was known as "the colored 400." As the historian Constance McLaughlin Green wrote in "The Secret City," her famous history of class-obsessed black Washington: "Whites [who were] prone to think Negro social distinctions absurd lost sight of the obvious truth that the cultivated Negro had no more in common with the lower-class black than the white society leader with the white ditchdigger." The elites enrolled their children in tony schools, where possible, and in childhood social organizations like Jack and Jill, where they learned public service and encountered their peers. The elites summered in black enclaves in Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard and Highland Beach, Md., where the poor could not easily follow. To avoid segregated hotels and second-class treatment, they lodged in one another's homes when they visited other cities.

This version of black life was shut out of the white press, which had little interest in black faces until they landed in a perp walk. The black community, however, kept tabs on the goings-on among those in the upper crust by voraciously reading the magazines and newspapers that made up the Negro press. The Pittsburgh Courier, The Baltimore Afro-American and The Chicago Defender offered black political news from Washington and abroad. But the Negro press specialized in society news that covered high-toned banquets and literary teas. In these ways, the black elites served the same basic functions as their white counterparts. They produced the literary class, led social movements and provided life examples for the upwardly aspiring poor. But they were often ferociously intemperate toward the poor. Comments like Mr. Cosby's would not have been at all out of place in the salons of the black elite in the 1940's or 50's or even more recently. That some of these people also adopted frankly bigoted views of the poor may be distasteful, but it is indisputably true. That the truth is finally out represents an important signpost along the way to a realistic discussion of race.