Acel Moore
Urban Perspective

Language, learning are key to race dialogue

The first presidential dialogue about race, held in a town meeting format in Akron last week, was a revealing trial run that perhaps will lead to some adjustments in future discussions.

I, for one, am not bothered that the effort was polite rather than heated, as some observers had anticipated. What did they expect? The 1,500 invited participants obviously respected President Clinton and were not willing under national and international television coverage to insult or be rude to him.

What we need is more honesty, recognition of a few basic principles, and a common language.

All must acknowledge that African Americans are different from any other group — including Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans and white women — listed as minorities. We are the only group that has been enslaved in this nation.

Yes, slavery ended in the last century, but there must be an acknowledgment that the generations of whites born after slavery, although not individually accountable or responsible for slavery, have benefited from it to the detriment of black Americans.

African Americans also must recognize the progress of the past 30 years. Civil rights laws have eliminated explicit racism, and a black middle class has emerged as a result of affirmative action and other civil rights legislation.

Despite that emergence, African Americans are still the most loathed group among the so-called minorities. Consider adoption. Even though black children are most at risk, and many white couples want to adopt children, few would ever consider adopting a black infant or child, and many, in fact, choose Asian, Hispanic or any other nonwhite minority over a black child.

Black shoppers are often followed when they enter stores. Black consumers and mortgage-seekers don't have the same access to capital, the same choice of places to live, as do their white or other counterparts.

It must be acknowledged that, whether it is race-based or not, black youth are the most at risk. A disproportionate number of them are in prison. This is not to excuse criminal behavior — but I don't accept that black people are being imprisoned because of a genetic or character flaw.

We are treated differently and unfairly by the criminal justice system.

And there is more fervor in punishing perpetrators than there is in understanding the underlying causes of criminal behavior. The incarceration rate of black Americans is being used by others to profit from our misery, through the construction of prisons and the privatization of prison management.

Beyond recognizing these principles, all parties to the dialogue must find a common language. Although the dialogue was polite in the President's town meeting, it was obvious that not all participants were talking the same language.

For example, it is the perception of most African Americans I talk to that those who oppose affirmative action base their arguments on a lie. I have gotten literally hundreds of letters from white people not only saying that "affirmative action discriminates" but also asking, "Why are black people looking for a handout? You must work hard and achieve on merit."

The implication is that white people have done well because they have demonstrated merit and have worked hard. The reality is that white Americans often achieve within a well-established network of white preferences and nepotism that excludes others.

In the recent controversy last week over Latrell Sprewell, the NBA player who assaulted his coach, blacks and whites were speaking different languages.

Some whites might think a white person could be "verbally abusive" of a black person without racial overtones. But few blacks would agree. Many blacks, even those who felt Sprewell was wrong and deserved his penalty, felt that there were underlying racial implications.

Once again, we see whites and blacks speaking from different assumptions, different understandings of history.

For the dialogue to be meaningful, we must not only speak the same language but also be open to *learning* about our interlocutors.

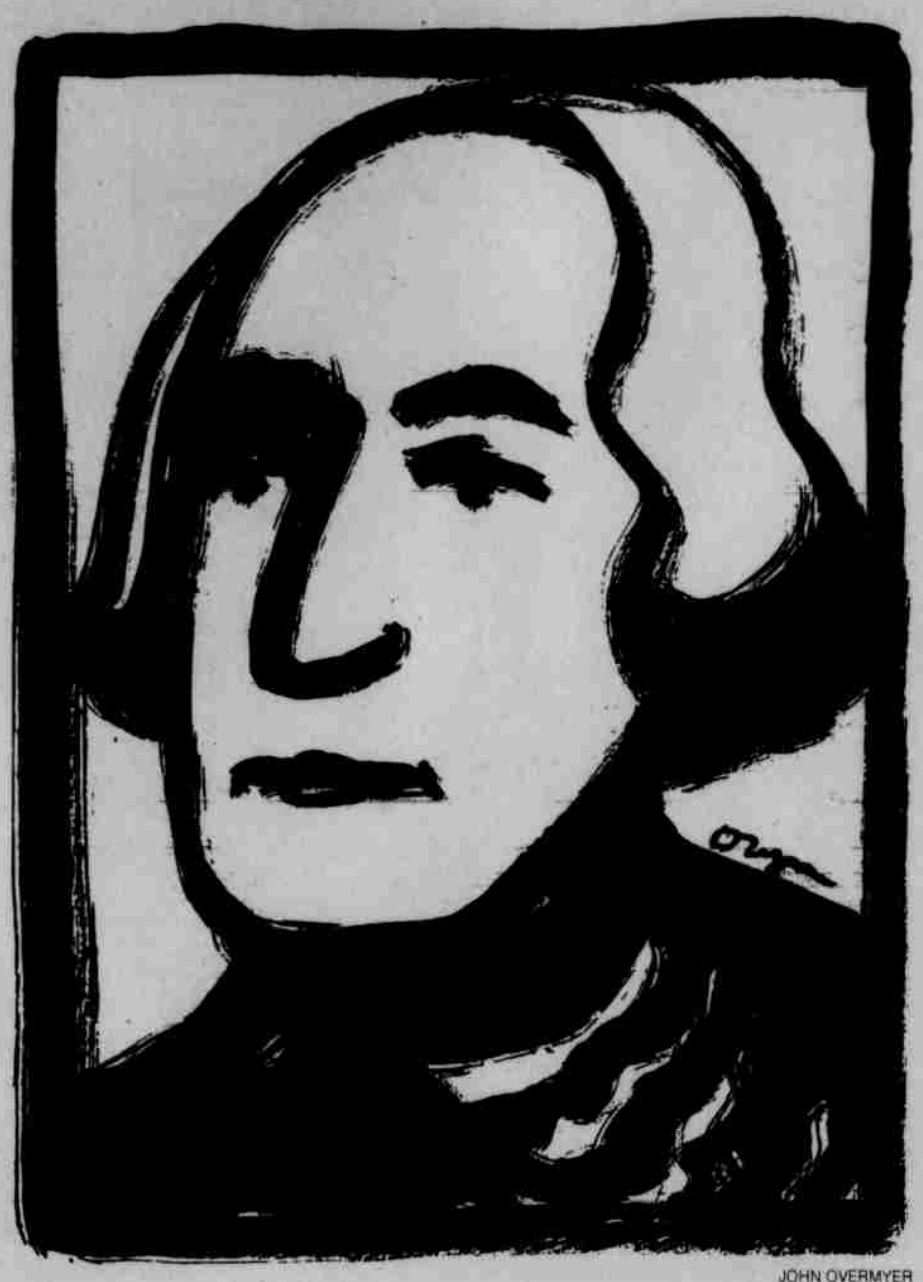
Acel Moore's column appears on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

■ **Tomorrow:** The Latrell Sprewell case: To punch a coach; To punch your boss.

Written in history, erased in New Orleans

Washington owned slaves — but does that destroy his good name forever?

By Alvin S. Felzenberg



JOHN OVERMYER

Change the name of the nation's capital and of the bridge that spans the Hudson? Remove the statues of the nation's first president from Independence Hall, Boston Common and Wall Street?

Banish the Gilbert Stuart, Rembrandt Peale and John Trumbull portraits of him from the U.S. Capitol, the New Jersey State House, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the dollar bill? Level the Washington Monument? Kick him off the quarter?

Such measures may not be all that far off, if the latest venture in political correctness becomes a national fad. This fall, the Orleans Parish School Board voted unanimously to rename George Washington Elementary School the Charles Richard Drew Elementary. The action conforms with a policy that forbids naming schools in honor of former slave owners. This is the 22d such name change in the past five years.

To be sure, Dr. Drew deserves to have schools named for him. A highly regarded scientist, he served his country well in World War II, first by devising ways to preserve blood plasma and then by protesting what was then army policy of segregating blood by the race of its donors. Like Thurgood Marshall and Robert McNair, the astronaut killed on the shuttle Challenger, whose names also replaced those of slaveholders on New Orleans schools, Drew is a worthy role model for young African Americans.

Replacing the names of Gens. Robert E. Lee and P.G.T. Beauregard with those of Marshall and McNair sparked less controversy than the campaign to replace Washington. Lee and Beauregard, we are told, fought to dismember the union and for the continued enslavement of what was then one eighth of the population of the United States. Yet even they might have something to offer children in minority neighborhoods — namely, examples of valor and courage. Thurgood Marshall certainly had plenty of both.

And Washington: Is the man who did more than any other to win American Independence, this man who helped create institutions that provided the basis for both emancipation and civil rights, in the same league with ardent segregationists, states-rights politicians and former members of the Ku Klux Klan?

The man who led the campaign to rename the schools thinks so. He says that "to African Americans, George Washington has about as much meaning as David Duke." He also has likened Washington to Hitler.

The simplicity of his statement, and the blanket policy it helped produce, makes one wonder how history is being taught in New Orleans. With a single gesture, they ban the names of all former slaveholders. They fail to consider whether those they judge favored or opposed slavery, whether they acted to end it, whether the laws by which they lived allowed for abolition, whether it is fair to weigh them by our standards rather than those of their times, and whether they were able to rise above slavery — which Madison called a "blot on democracy." Had these so-called educators pondered these questions, George Washington's name might well have remained on the school's walls.

Whereas Jefferson Davis (also fallen from grace in New Orleans) saw slavery as a good that ought to be preserved and extended, Washington saw it as an evil that ought to be ended. This gets him no credit from his graders in Orleans Parish.

George Washington ranks with George Mason as one of the few of the founding generation who actually freed his slaves. In his will, he manumitted them on the death of his wife and provided funds for the education of the young and the care of the elderly among them.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, such as Thomas Jefferson, Washington was never rumored to have had intimate relations with those in his charge. Nor did he tolerate the taking advantage of those in his care. One visiting foreign officer actually complained about that. Too bad they won't be learning those things in New Orleans.

Washington would not sell a slave against his or her will. He refused to break up families at the auction block. He made those decisions at considerable financial sacrifice. That does not count for much either in New Orleans.

Sadly, the school board's moral absolutist position spares students and teachers from having to consider the moral dilemmas Washington confronted. Northerners such as Alexander Hamilton and Benjamin Franklin, abolitionists from the start, could remain true to their consciences without incurring either political, personal or financial risks. Washington could not. Like the rest of us, he had to balance many forces in his life.

A school board interested in education would have asked more probing questions about Washington and his times. Would Washington have risen to a place of prominence and standing in 18th-century Virginia without the slave system? Could independence have been won without the South? Would the South have entered into the struggle if forced to abandon slavery? Which was of greater concern to the one third of the colonists who favored separation from England — independence or slavery? Would slavery have been ended without independence?

What drew 25,000 African Americans into the ranks of Washington's army? How did their actions affect the outcome of the war? How were they treated in the Continental army? What did they think of Washington?

Do not suspect for an instant that the surrender of Washington's name from an elementary school in New Orleans will prompt such discussions. Published accounts to date suggest the contrary. New Orleans schools may be the latest to see history as an endeavor to raise self-esteem at the expense of thought. Victimization continues on the rise as test scores plummet.

Meanwhile, hold onto your dollar bills. They might soon become collectors' items.

Alvin S. Felzenberg is a political scientist who writes and lectures on the presidency.

Apollo brings culture, health to the community

By B.G. Kelley

Wherever there is a court, there will be flashbacks. Jump shots that went in when the game was in the balance. A fake-left, spin-right move that freed you for a drive to the hole. In all your October-to-March dreams, that one winning championship game that came true.

Tonight, flashbacks will be born for a new generation of kids.

Tonight, the Apollo of Temple, the cyber-age sports, entertainment and education complex, debuts when the nationally ranked Temple basketball team takes on Fresno State.

The Temple kids, running the break, jumping and jamming, plucking rebounds out of the air, will remember tonight's game with vivid retention for the rest of their lives. They are history-makers.

This new-age Apollo, with its up-close-and-personal basketball venue, is the direct product of the efforts of all the Temple coaches and players who toiled in spartan facilities. Their contributions, large or small, certainly helped bring Temple's 101-year-old men's basketball program to this point.

I was lucky enough to be one of the players. I am proud of the Apollo, and not simply for basketball reasons.

Apollo was the Greco-Roman god of light, music, poetry, sport and healing. The healing part is most important aspect of the Apollo's presence in this North Philadelphia community. The other aspects — athletics, entertainment, education and culture — are crucial, to be sure, but the healing is what will make the Apollo good for everyone in the community.

That's because, to be honest, Temple hasn't always been the best neighbor. At times, it has been insular, less than sensitive when gobbling up homes and land for expansion.

But give Temple president Peter Liacouras his due. He steadied the course and made the University more responsive to and responsible for the concerns of the community. As part of the Apollo deal, he pledged nearly $12 million to build and rehabilitate houses in the neighborhood and to revitalize the decaying Cecil B. Moore commercial retail strip.

In return, the university received the community's blessing to build the Apollo.

Temple basketball deserves such a showcase. The basketball program is and has been the most visibly successful sports program on campus.

Proof? Temple ranks sixth in all-time victories — with 1,479 — in the history of college basketball. The Owls have made 33 postseason tournament appearances. One of its coaches — in fact, my coach — Harry Litwack, is enshrined in the National Basketball Hall of Fame. Without question, John Chaney, the present coach, will be there someday.

But more to the cornerstone: The program has been clean. There has never been even a hint of dirty dealing in Temple's program, despite the often seedy reputation of college basketball recruiting. The priorities have always been in the right order. Basketball is important, but only as a game. Players are at Temple to get an education, graduate and go on to be productive citizens.

Temple is a basketball success story. Maybe this new arena will help Temple be a good neighbor, too.

Litwack would gather us like a patriarch every October, right before the beginning of practice, and remind us why we were there: "Basketball is for four years. Education is for life." Chaney preaches from that same pulpit. We came to learn, not to learn how to become basketball players — which is, after all, possible only for a very few.

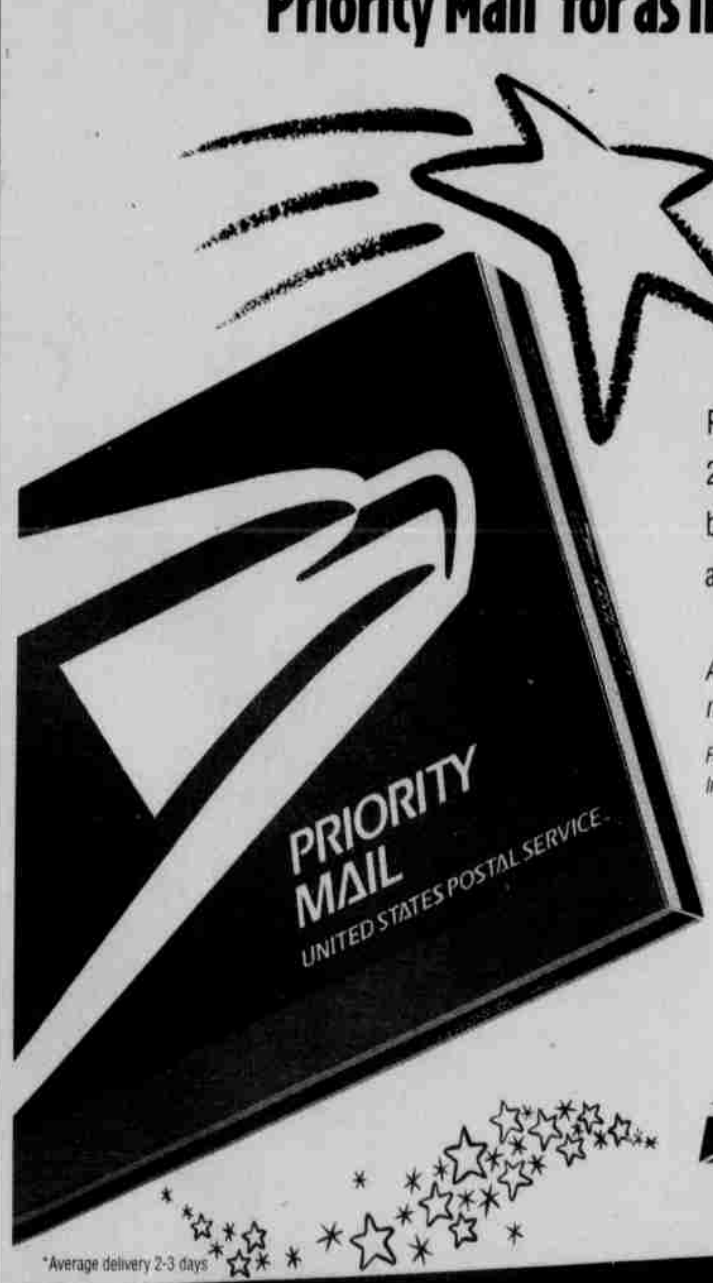
So tonight, when I watch the Temple guards work their fakes and feints on the polished hardwood of the Apollo, certainly I will see myself, in grainy flashback, old number 3, brimming with bravado, reversing a 360-spin-dribble past a pestering defender, then stopping and popping a J, the ball arching and spinning, the arc unbroken, until the ball finally drops through the basket as if some geometric justice were being served.

Swish.

B.G. Kelley writes about Philadelphia for the Commentary Page.

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