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BLACK
C o m m e n t a t o r**
Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
www.blackcommentator.com

Issue 160 – November 24, 2005

Condi Rice's Disdain for the Civil Rights Movement
by J.L. Chestnut, Jr.

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This article earlier appeared in Counterpunch.com.

Mr. Eugene Robinson, a black reporter for the Washington Post, interviewed Secretary of State Condi Rice during her recent flight from Washington to Alabama, and wrote a newspaper column about the experience. Mr. Robinson's revealing observations about Ms. Rice and her family coincide, at least to a point, with what I have said several times on my radio show. However, I know more about the Rice's family relation to the civil rights movement and the black struggle than Mr. Robinson because I was in Birmingham during the tumultuous civil rights years.

Mr. Robinson wrote that the parents of Ms. Rice did their best to shelter their only daughter from Jim Crow racism. The truth is they did a helluva lot more than shelter Ms. Rice. They misled her about the justice of the civil rights movement, misled her about the courage of Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, misled her about the greatness of Rev. Martin King and misled her about all the dedicated people risking their lives in the streets and jails in Birmingham. Ms. Rice and most upper middle class blacks in Birmingham were misled in the 1960s about the black struggle and they were taught that the civil rights movement represented what black folks should not do.

Ms. Rice's father, a prominent pastor in Birmingham, looked down on Shuttlesworth and his small working class congregation, and publicly called them "uneducated, misguided Negroes." But, in 2005, a life-size statue of Shuttlesworth stands majestically for all the ages in front of the Birmingham Civil Rights Museum. Rev. Rice's monument is his daughter's high position in a Republican administration that has 2% support in black America. That is poetic justice personified.

On the flight from Washington, Ms. Rice told Mr. Robinson, "I've always said about Birmingham that because race was everything, race was nothing." So, 40 years after her father denounced us, Ms. Rice reduces segregation, the movement, all the deaths and sacrifices to one word, "nothing." In a sense, she is in 2005 where her father was 40 years ago. I have a feeling she would spit on the grave of King and on all those brave souls whose life and death sacrifices put her where she is now.

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Robinson pointed out that Ms. Rice showed no visible emotion when speaking about her friend Denise McNair, one of the four young girls murdered in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in 1963. Robinson said such an experience would have left a deep scar on him. I don't think it would have left a scar on him if he, like Ms. Rice, had been taught over-and-over not to identify with certain black people and certain black causes. Ms. Rice was taught serious piano lessons and ballet in stifling, racially segregated Birmingham as one way to be identified above the uncouth black masses demonstrating in the streets.

My dear wife speaks with disdain about white people, particularly Southern whites, who exalt blacks like Rice for downplaying the terrible toll of racism, past and present. Every ranking black official in the Bush Administration fits that mold and is a replica of Rice. 40 years ago, Bull Connor and George Wallace called King and Shuttlesworth irresponsible and applauded Rice's father and others of his ilk as "responsible moderate Negro leaders." In truth, they were sell-outs who avoided attacking racial segregation and claimed "separate but equal" were sufficient.

If the plight of black people had been left to the tender mercy of those black leaders that Bull Connor and George Wallace called moderates, we wouldn't be able to vote today or even rent a room at a racially segregated Holiday Inn. If our fortunes in 2005 are left in care of the Rices, our votes will matter less and less and we won't be able to afford a room at the local motel. Let there be no doubt that while white Alabama celebrates Ms. Rice, there is much reserve and distrust in black Alabama about the second black Secretary of State. Also, let there be no doubt why.

J.L. Chestnut, Jr. is a civil rights attorney in Selma, Alabama. He is the founder of Chestnut, Sanders and Sanders which is the largest black law firm in Alabama. Born in Selma and, after graduating from Howard University Law School, he began practicing law in Selma in 1958. He started as the only black lawyer in the town and has been challenging the establishment since then. His law firm now owns two radio stations in Selma and Mr. Chestnut hosts a radio talk show three days a week touted as the most popular radio show in south and central Alabama. He is the author of Black in Selma with Julia Cass (1989 Farrar, Straus and Giroux), and writes a weekly column called the "Hard Cold Truth". He can be reached at tmarshall@csspca.com.