

BACON'S REBELLION

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UVa Under Siege — from Within

Racial incidents at the University of Virginia last August were all too real. But the administration's over-reaction needlessly fed black students' fears and alienation.

By James A. Bacon

In the dark of night on Aug. 29, with the new academic year beginning at the University of Virginia, three students painted a primitive image and some cryptic phrases on Beta Bridge. The picture portrayed a woman in a spread eagle pose and a pair of breasts; her black face was crying white tears. Alongside appeared the words, "we'll be back," as well as "GSociety," "GWizard" and "G-Bug."

At another time, the incident would have been blown off as a harmless student prank. Beta Bridge on Rugby Road, after all, is renowned as billboard of colorful graffiti where artwork rarely lasts a day or two before someone else paints it over. But August 29 was not an ordinary time for UVa. Fuming over a series of racial incidents the previous week, many black students interpreted the messages as a threat. Some thought "GWizard" signified "Grand Wizard," a high office of the Ku Klux Klan. The black face and white tears seemed to have a racial dimension. The notation, "we'll be back," seemed ominous and threatening.

Concerned, university President John T. Casteen III referred photographs of the graffiti to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Special Agent James Lamb reported back a few days later: "A

review by agents in the Civil Rights Unit found nothing to suggest racial implications."

The next day, the three students wrote a letter of apology characterizing the flap as a misinterpreted stunt. "The graffiti was originally intended to be an artistic expression, and at no time was hate or racism even mentioned in its conception," they wrote. "This letter is first and foremost an apology. An apology for marring a treasured tradition, bringing more racial tension to the already saturated



atmosphere, and for the trouble we have caused our treasured University of Virginia."

But many black students remained unconvinced of the students' innocence. "The fact that those titles and pictures were painted atop the message of two historically black organizations (Kappa Alpha Psi and B.U.C.K.S) during a time when racial tensions are high and incidents are continuously occurring leads me to question how artistic their motives are," wrote Krystal Commons in the *Cavalier Daily*.

Aaron Blake, president of the Black Student Alliance, wasn't buying the artistic-expression story either, suggesting to the *Cavalier Daily* that some of the evidence had been destroyed by the time the FBI and university

authorities reviewed it.

Despite repeated and forceful condemnations of the earlier racial incidents by Casteen and other senior administrators, despite solidarity rallies and sympathetic commentary in the *Cavalier Daily*, many black students remain wary. Indeed, many have made it clear that they do not feel at all welcome at Mr. Jefferson's university.

Students are "scared," Student Council Jequetta Upton told the University News Services three weeks after the Beta Bridge incident. As paraphrased by the News Services, "Upton said that students generally believe that the incidents result from deep-seated intolerance ... are not merely pranks and have not been provoked."

"I have been forced to deal with ... overbearing, regular occasions of hatred towards minorities on [the] Grounds," wrote Krystal Commons, the *Cavalier Daily* letter writer. "I cannot but feel personally attacked, even though I have not been a victim of these incidences directly."

"It's disgusting," Jean Hall, a student and head of the U.Va. chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, told Carlos Santos with the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. "We walk around in fear. ... I don't feel like I belong, like certain students and professors don't welcome me. I'm extremely uncomfortable."

Even M. Rick Turner, dean of African-American Affairs, characterized the string of racial incidents in August as

"unprecedented racial terrorism acts."

Blacks have never felt entirely welcome at UVa, which has struggled for years to overcome its legacy of segregation and, subsequently, less overt forms of discrimination. Yet, despite occasional eruptions of controversy -- such as an infamous white fraternity party in which guests appeared in blackface -- black students have rarely expressed this degree of alienation.

As an alumnus who attended the university in the early 1970s, shortly after it was integrated, I remember race relations as being awkward and tentative but never this divisive. For society at large, race relations are far better now than they were 30 years ago: The mixing of the races in the workplace and public places is so routine as to be banal. Why, I wonder, is the situation at UVa so volatile *now*?

It is no small irony that late this summer, shortly before the first of the racial incidents, UVa had hailed "the most diverse class in UVa history" along with success at recruiting new African-American faculty. The percentage of African-American students stood at 8.8 percent of the student body. And unlike some institutions where blacks are recruited then left to fend for themselves, 87.2 percent of all African-Americans graduate, only a smidgeon under the 92.5 percent white graduation rate. Furthermore, after a year-long national search, the university was preparing to announce the appointment of the William B. Harvey, as the university's first vice president and chief officer for diversity and equity.

UVa is not a racist institution in the traditional sense, nor does it harbor any Bull Connor/Lester

Maddox-style race baiters. But the university long ago abandoned the idea of a color-blind society. Instead, the official mantra is "diversity." Rather than submerging racial differences, official university policy is to celebrate them. In practice, celebration of differences has transmuted into a *cultivation* of differences with the result that, despite their intimate proximity in classes and student housing, blacks and whites arguably interact less on the grounds than they do in broader society. Thus, the brief epidemic of racial incidents must be seen against a backdrop of blacks' self-imposed segregation and the administration's acquiescence to that segregation.

Of course, you'll never hear that perspective voiced by President Casteen or members of his administration. The narrative embraced by black student leaders and the white liberals who run the University of Virginia is this: The seven incidents of August 2005 reflect omnipresent forces of bigotry that still permeate society -- forces that must be combated with ceaseless vigilance. That narrative, too, is a big part of the problem.

Some of the incidents *were* racially motivated, reflecting lingering traces of racism in Virginia. But the administration's response magnified black students' sense of grievance all out of proportion to the true significance to the events, feeding the students' sense of alienation and reinforcing their tendency to disengage from the white community. In the echo chamber of the liberal ivory tower, no one had a chance to present an alternative narrative. Proof of omnipresent racism is not needed. It is simply assumed.

The consequences are terrible, both for the students and the

university. The overreaction to a handful of racial epithets reinforces the belief among blacks that American society is far more hostile to them than, in fact, it is. The sense of victimization discourages many from achieving their full potential as adults. For UVa, the reign of hysteria unfairly stigmatizes the university as hostile to blacks and undermines the goals of making minorities feel more comfortable and accepted there. As bad as they were, the racial slurs are not the important story here. The story is the reaction to them. What we have seen in Charlottesville says far more about what is wrong with liberalism on the American campus than what is wrong with America.

One must read the accounts in UVa publications to understand the parallel universe that exists in Charlottesville. As reported by the University News Services, President Casteen told a special diversity committee of the Board of Visitors that "the evidence doesn't reveal who is committing the abusive acts, but they are obviously *intended to intimidate and isolate individuals, and take away their sense of security.*" On another occasion, Casteen termed the incidents as "vicious, *deliberate* and secretive efforts to insult and abuse members of this community (my italics)."

Those are strong words, but they are diplomatic compared to the sentiments expressed by others. Said Patricia M. Lampkin, vice president and chief student affairs officer: "We believe that the individuals responsible for these incidents represent a small group of perpetrators who somehow *find satisfaction in instilling fear and spreading hatred* (my italics)."

The U.Va. Alumni Association

offered a \$5,000 award for information leading to the arrest and conviction of any person or persons who have "engaged in *racial acts of vandalism, threats or other criminal misconduct* (my italics)."

"Racism and intolerance have no place at U.Va.," declared Edward L. Ayers, dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, insinuating that the acts originated from within the student body. Likewise, Carl Zeithaml, dean of the McIntire School of Commerce, decried the violation of the university's "community of trust."

There was this from Claire N. Kaplan, director, sexual and domestic violence services at the U.Va. Women's Center: "These incidents of racial and homophobic harassment illustrate how different oppressions are rooted in the same *desperate grab for power and control by the forces of intolerance* (my italics)."

And then there was this from Dorothe Back and Deandra Little, assistant professors with the Teaching Resource Center: "We feel ashamed when we talk to new faculty or incoming students who come to U.Va. expecting a vibrant intellectual community and instead are greeted with unenlightened racism. It is one thing to express a difference of opinion publicly and respectfully; it is quite another to display hatred anonymously toward people of a different skin color. Such actions silence dialogue and impede learning."

In sum, the university administration joined with many black students in perpetuating the notion that African-Americans were victims of pervasive racism and intolerance that emanated *from within the university itself*. Although Houston G. Wood, chair of the Faculty Senate, con-

ceded that he didn't know if the instigators were students, he concluded nonetheless that, "We must accept the possibility that some of our students have never been exposed to role models who promote acceptance of all people, regardless of race, color or religion."

No wonder black students were hunkering down and bracing for more abuse. Their white professors and administrators provided vivid confirmation of their worst fears — that the white student sitting next to them in class might well be an unrepentant racist!

It would be instructive at this point to review the list of racial incidents -- the "unprecedented racial terrorism acts," as African-American Affairs Dean Turner put it -- that plunged black students into a state of fear and the administration into an orgy of recriminations against the ubiquitous but furtive racists.

According to a University News Services article by Dan Heuchert, the opening of fall semester was marred by "at least seven incidents of harassment aimed at African-American students." As of Sept. 7, Heuchert cited the following incidents reported to the University Police (and I quote directly from the University News Services):

- In the late afternoon of Aug. 20, eight students at the corner of Rugby Road and University Avenue reported that a car occupied by four white males drove by. One of the passengers yelled a racial epithet out of the window.
- On Aug. 23, a student reported that on two different occasions, groups of white males yelled racial slurs at him as he walked

near the Corner.

- On Aug. 25, a student reported that racial epithets were yelled at her from a pick-up truck on Alderman Road.
- That same day, a student reported that a racial slur had been written on a birthday card attached to the door of her off-Grounds apartment at Eagle's Landing.
- On Aug. 27, a student of color reported being denied entry into a Sigma Nu fraternity party until other black members of the fraternity arrived. Later at the event, she charged that a white female poured a cupful of beer down her back and then mock-apologized while pretending to be drunk. The same student reported that earlier in the week, a beer had been thrown at her as she walked along McCormick Road.
- At some time between 11 p.m. on Aug. 27 and 1 a.m. on Aug. 28, a racial slur and anti-Christian message were written on a dry-erase board outside of a student's Lawn room.
- On Sept. 3, University Police arrested student Darren Thomas Tully, 19, and charged him with underage possession of alcohol after a fellow student observed him removing pro-racial tolerance flyers from the doors of Lawn rooms. Police did not immediately link him to any of the other incidents.

As best I can tell from perusing the University News Services and searching the *Cavalier Daily* archives, that was the last of the incidents. Let us examine each

of these in turn.

By way of preface, I would note that each of these descriptions reflect raw reports of incidents to the police, not a careful and judicious appraisal of what actually happened. No one has investigated "the other side of the story" to verify that the episodes occurred as reported, whether the perpetrators were responding to some perceived provocation, or whether the actions sprang from a racist mindset, as was immediately assumed. Like the university administration, I will accept these reports as accurate accounts of what actually transpired.

The first three incidents unquestionably constituted incidents of racial harassment: white males hurling racial slurs at black students. From the perspective of the person being subjected to such taunts, the precise identity of the insults matters little: Abuse is abuse. But from the perspective of the larger issues raised by the Casteen administration, the identities of the verbal assailants matters very much. There is no evidence that university students committed either offense. Indeed, the fact that the Alderman Road incident involved two males in a pickup truck suggests that the trouble makers might well have been townies.

In none of the material that I have read did anyone suggest the possibility that "town/gown" animosities might have played a role. Such an interpretation does not fit the dominant narrative of a pervasive and undifferentiated hostility from unreconstructed members of the student body itself. I find that oversight remarkable because town/gown tensions certainly existed when I was a student. I well remember how students labeled poor, working-class

whites as "Shifflets," a pejorative for a common name among the whites dispossessed from their mountain farms during the construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway decades before. Townies returned the students' arrogance with resentment. An acquaintance of mine appeared in German class one day with a broken nose -- inflicted, unprovoked, by a couple of white guys in a pickup truck while he was jogging along a country road. Stories of less violent incidents routinely circulated, I recall, at the beginning of every fall semester.

As an aside, it would be interesting to study the attitudes of local white working class males today, given the degree to which affirmative action, racial preferences and the emphasis on diversity have become institutionalized since I was a student. In this context, a *New York Times* interview of Casteen published this May was revealing:

"The system makes a false promise to students," said [Casteen], himself the son of a Virginia shipyard worker. Colleges ... present themselves as meritocracies in which academic ability and hard work are always rewarded. In fact, he said, many working-class students face obstacles they cannot overcome on their own. ...

No flagship state university has a smaller proportion of low-income students than Virginia. Just 8 percent of

undergraduates last year came from families in the bottom half of the income distribution, down from 11 percent a decade ago. That change sneaked up on him, Mr. Casteen said, and he has spent a good part of the last year trying to prevent it from becoming part of his legacy. ...

I wouldn't imagine that any Charlottesville "townies" are intimately acquainted with Casteen's record of emphasizing "diversity" over affordability. But it would not surprise me if many working class whites in Charlottesville perceive the deck as stacked against them in favor of blacks on account of their race and in favor of rich, white "legacies" on account of their influence. Hurling the "N" word against black students can fairly be described as an act of racism, but Casteen is reckless and premature in characterizing the incidents as "vicious, deliberate and secretive" as opposed to being spontaneous outbursts of resentment by the economically marginalized and politically powerless. And there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that yelling incidents reflect the temper of the white student population generally.

The fourth bullet above describes an incident that might legitimately be called an act of racial harassment that originated from a UVA student. But the description of the event is dissatisfyingly vague. What was the racial slur? What else, if anything,

did the birthday card say? Was it, in fact, the black student's birthday, a possible indicator that she was personally known to the person who left the card? Bottom line: Was the insult personal, based upon some previous encounter, or anonymous? The UVa report does not say. Arguably, the use of racial epithets is racist either way, but it is dangerous to draw conclusions regarding the broader significance of the episode without knowing more about it.

The fifth report is especially revealing because it suggests that, after the earlier incidents, black students had become highly sensitive to the prospect of additional affronts -- indeed, that they might be reading racial animosity into encounters where no such animosity existed. While the young woman at the Sigma Nu fraternity party interpreted her disagreements as being racially inspired, the evidence from the police report lends itself to more than one interpretation.

Look at the details of the account: A young black woman shows up at a fraternity party. Her black friends are not yet there so she is denied admittance until they arrive -- at which point, apparently, she is admitted. The non-racial interpretation of the episode is that the brothers of Sigma Nu denied her admittance because they did not know her, not because she was black. (If the frat brothers of Sigma Nu were racist, they weren't so racist as to exclude blacks from membership in the fraternity!)

But that wasn't the end of the story. A white student later poured beer down the black student's back "while pretending to be drunk." Unless Sigma Nu has changed in the 30 years since

I've attended UVa, there was a very good chance that the white woman was drunk! Is it possible that the black woman's perception of the beer-spilling incident was colored by her own consumption of alcohol and her preconceived notion that blacks were experiencing a wave of racial hostility? I don't pretend to know the answer. All I can say for certain is that the university administration, through the medium of the University News Service, repeated the young black woman's report without skepticism. Why? Because, I believe, it confirmed the pre-existing narrative of pervasive racism.

In the sixth incident, a Lawn resident reported that someone wrote the message "Nigger/I hate Jesus" on the dry-erase board outside of his room. No question: "Nigger" is a racial slur. But what was the significance of the remark? Why did someone couple a racial epithet with anti-Christian invective? Was the provocateur an atheist racist? Alternatively, was he equating those who hated blacks with those who hated Jesus? Or, just as possibly, was the author of the insult drunk and incoherent? We can't possibly get into the mind of the scribbler, but the administration infers a racist motivation and lumps the incident with others as part of a deliberate effort to intimidate black students.

The final episode reflects as much upon the university administration as the perpetrator of the act. No one even claimed that Mr. Darren Thomas Tully said or wrote anything offensive. His offenses consisted of the underage possession of alcohol and the removal of pro-racial tolerance flyers from the doors on the Lawn. Based on the police report, what do we know about Mr. Tully's motivations in

removing the flyers? Nothing. Black students and the university administration *assume* that he was moved by racial animus. The possibility that Mr. Tully might have objected on philosophical or political grounds to the tenor of the flyers apparently has not been considered. There is no indication in what I have read that anyone bothered to question Mr. Tully about his motivations. If they did, no one has gone public with his answers. Why bother when whites can be *presumed* guilty of racism?

There you have it. Three incidents of people yelling racial slurs. An episode in which a racial slur was written on a birthday card. A case of a white woman at a fraternity party pouring beer down the back of a black woman. An event in which the "N" word was scrawled on a tablet, along with the words, "I hate Jesus." And a 19-year-old white kid pulling down tolerance flyers.

Out of 1,700 black students at UVa in a student body of 19,600, out of the countless thousands of interactions between whites and blacks every day, those are the "unprecedented racial terrorism acts" reported to the university police. *That's* the wave of vicious hatred that leaves black students feeling cowed and intimidated.

I see two things going on here. First, several real racist incidents did occur. Yes, sad to say, racism is a vestigial element of our society. It may be totally marginalized, unable to express itself except furtively and anonymously, but it still exists. Most Americans look forward to the day when racism disappears from the face of the earth.

Second, a paired phenomenon

far more widespread and debilitating than racism feeds upon and magnifies the real racism: black victimization and white liberal race-mongering. Victimhood is one of the defining cultural traits of black America today, and it holds blacks back by instilling the belief that they can't possibly succeed in the face of an implacably racist white establishment. Such an attitude breeds fatalism and saps initiative among America's most highly educated blacks, the very individuals who should be spearheading black achievement. Fortunately, upon departing the university, most blacks find that the world isn't nearly as hostile as it was portrayed. Many go on to achieve great things.

I'm frustrated to see blacks embrace victimhood because I am certain it hurts them. But I can understand the reasons why they do so. Blacks have been victims. They were brought to this country as slaves, and then they were subjected to nearly a century of Jim Crow. I can understand the temptation of blacks on campus, whether at UVa or anywhere else, to hang together for strength and comfort. While I'm unsympathetic to those who would ostracize their fellows for associating with whites, I can understand why blacks feel the need for solidarity.

What I can't understand, and find unforgivable, is white race mongering. White liberals require black "victims" to maintain their sense of moral superiority over white conservatives and confirm their world view of a society ridden by racism, sexism and homophobia. That, to my mind, explains the hysterical overreaction on the part of the Casteen administration to the real but ultimately harmless incidents of racism. I find it ex-

traordinary that the administration would publicize the seven reported incidents without making any effort to ascertain their validity. The white race is presumed guilty without the tedious necessity of a trial.

Particularly egregious was the decision to publish on the university's website the name of a 19-year-old student charged with underage possession of alcohol along with the implication, in a racially charged atmosphere, that implies he was engaging in racist behavior. Perhaps young Tully *is* a racist and a bigot. I don't know. But the Casteen administration offered no proof whatsoever that he is, and by publicizing his name, it has subjected him to potential ridicule and retaliation by other students.

The administration's reaction should come as no surprise, however, to anyone who has been paying attention to the state of race relations at UVa. President Casteen has presided over the erection of a separate-but-equal black apparatus within the university: special black admittance policies, black pre-school programs, black parental events, a black student union, black fraternities and sororities, informal black dorms -- even an informal black bus stop -- and intense peer pressure on black students not to get too friendly with whites. In the "diversity" that Casteen champions, blacks and whites may live and attend classes side by side, but they interact very little. No wonder blacks find it so easy to believe the worst of whites.

Compounding the systemic failure of its racial policies, the Casteen administration made no effort when the incidents of August occurred to find the truth, much less to dampen the rising hysteria. Rather, white adminis-

trators stumbled over themselves to express solidarity with black victims in the face of the evil but unidentifiable racists. In doing so, President Casteen not only did a disservice to UVa's 1,700 black students, unnecessarily intensifying their fears and alienation, he did inestimable damage to the reputation of the university itself.

While it may be too much to ask Casteen, as isolated as he is in his ivory tower, to mend his ways, it is not too much to ask of the university's trustees, who presumably are tethered to the real world, to hold him accountable for what he does.

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