

[VIEWPOINT]

WHITE PRIVILEGE: AN UNLEARNING EXPERIENCE

LAST SATURDAY AT THE PEACE AND justice rally in Ithaca, a diverse group of people expressed their emotions concerning the acquittal of four white cops in the beating of Rodney King, and the following events. Some people, mostly white, called for compassion and respect. Others indicated that the revolution, not riots, had begun. Still others acknowledged their anger, while calling for an end to the violence.

Yet, for the four and a half hours I was there, I didn't hear what I was feeling — what all white people who were outraged by the events of the last week should be feeling right now. Shame.

White people should be ashamed that it took something so blatant as the Rodney King beating at the hands of four white cops and their subsequent acquittal to be angry about racial issues. For 12 years, since Ronald Reagan first took office, African Americans have been asking white America to pay attention to their worsening economic situation and the decay of their neighborhoods and civil rights.

Have we responded? Not really. Sure, we wrote articles and lamented how tragic it was, attended marches, made donations. But were we listening or getting angry? Not until we saw it on TV, and because it was so obvious we couldn't ignore it anymore, did we finally start to believe and get angry about what African Americans have been telling us all along — that the system screws them.

White people at this rally and all over America were not acknowledging their shame because we are in such denial we don't even know that we should be ashamed. I watched white people at this rally fumble their way through confusion and despair and what I mostly saw was denial that we had anything to do with that verdict and the violence that followed. Nobody in that crowd, I'm sure, thought of themselves as racist, but by virtue of the fact that we don't work to undo racism and that we benefit from a system at the expense of people of color, we are racist. By virtue of the fact that all of us white folks, whether we admit it or not, share white privilege, we are racist.

What is white privilege? It is knowing that if you are stopped by a cop you won't get beaten up because of your skin color. It means not having to prove yourself because someone is making assumptions about your intelligence

based on your skin color. It means not having to carry 350 years of oppression, violations of civil rights and anger about the way society has treated your people.

So what can we do as white people? Most importantly, we need to tell the truth. This is not a time to call for compassion and respect (i.e. "don't be mad at me, it's not my fault") but rather a time to acknowledge the anger and historical oppression of people of color in this country as well as to accept our own role in perpetuating racism. We are born into a system of institutionalized repression which teaches us as whites to be racist.

Be glad that racism is not congenital — if it is learned it can be unlearned. But don't expect people of color to educate you. Instead, go to the library. Check out books such as *before the Mayflower* and *The Shaping of Black America*, both by Lerone Bennett, or *They Came Before Columbus* by Ivan Van Sertima or any other of the many books that tell history from the non-dominant point of view.

Cornell University also offers the Connections series every September, a six week intensive program open to the whole community, which teaches people to understand links between sexism, racism, anti-semitism, ableism and homophobia. (Call Peer Educators in Human Relations at 255-7450).

Go into the community and volunteer. But be aware that if you go to work in a community of people of color, the agenda is set. In other words, check your ego at the door, and be open to learning and listening.

Commit yourself to taking a personal stand against racism; when you hear racist jokes don't let them go. Tell the perpetrator that it offends you to hear something that perpetuates negative stereotypes.

Taking a strong stand against racism is not easy. Understand that you don't need to feel guilty for being white — you have no choice about that. But you do have a choice about working against racism. And be aware that if you take a stand, you will be targeted and challenged. Above all, have some faith in yourself that if you learned racism, you can unlearn it, and that every act you take against racism, is an act of building community.

—Diana Friedman

Diana Friedman is a Cornell graduate student who works with the Multicultural Project, a program that educates teacher's assistants about diversity in the classroom.

GUESTWRITER

gas released when fossil fuels are burned — and the U.S. emits nearly one-quarter of the world total. All the other industrialized nations as well as third world countries have arrived at broad international consensus to try to stop global warming. What's our problem?

Well, our president is running for re-election. In fact, on March 13 President Bush specifically declined to say whether he would even attend the UNCED summit in Rio (100 other heads of state will be there), indicating he is too busy running for re-election. The sorry state of our economy is much on his mind.

At issue are "targets" and "timetables." The Bush administration worries that reducing CO₂ emissions from cars and coal-fired power plants will harm the U.S. economy so he doesn't want to get pinned down to a target reduction amount by a certain date. In fact he even proposed letting the U.S. increase its CO₂ emissions 15 percent by 2000 since we had agreed to cut CFC emissions — ignoring the fact that although CFC emissions harm the atmospheric ozone layer, that is different from the global warming threat. Germany, on the other hand, is willing to talk about reducing its CO₂ emissions 20 to 30 percent, as is Japan. Both of these countries — major economic competitors of the U.S. — see a payback in moving toward alternative fuels and increased energy efficiency. They see a payback in terms of reduced energy and fuel costs — and an investment in developing alternate energy technologies that they can export. President [Bush], the oil man, is trying to avoid any change in the structure of the U.S. energy industry, and may (ironically) be setting us up for falling further behind in the competitive world marketplace instead.

So — maybe we each should write Bush to urge him to attend this Earth summit and make a strong commitment for the U.S. to participate equally in trying to forestall global warming. But maybe all we can really do is remember, this November, the global damage being done by this self-proclaimed "environmental president" and vote accordingly.

—DOOLEY KIEFER
Ithaca