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"We Shall Overwhelm"

By Tara Murphy

"What the f--k are you doing here?" he spat at me. I tightened my grip on Dakota's leash, not because he would have attacked the man, but because I was frightened. "What the f--k are you doing here?" he repeated. "You don't belong here. This (neighborhood) is for blacks and Latinos, not for blue-eyed bitches!" He wore a cheap suit, high-heeled boots, and a wide-collared shirt unbuttoned to the waist. A detailed portrait of the martyred Jesus gazed out at me in tattoo blue. Would the crown of thorns deflect a bullet, I wondered.

I concluded that he was not a "cholo," a street gang member. He wasn't wearing the ultra-white T-shirt, baggy pants and black Nikes of the V-13, the Mexican gang in Venice. This guy was more likely in the Mexican mafia, a *La Familia* felon formed by many years in the California penitentiary system—a common type of enforcer sent to Venice to stake out turf, and intimidate its residents. Still, knowing what I already knew from my twelve years in Los Angeles, I did see him as a domestic terrorist playing his part in the take-over agenda.

"We (Latinos) will take over house by house, block by block. We shall not only overcome, we shall overwhelm!"

Over the past five years Venice had become fifty-percent Latino. On a visit to the community health center I was struck by the ethnic composition in the waiting room: the vast majority were Latina women and children. The rest consisted of an Asian Indian family, one black woman and myself, the only "anglo." The director told me that in 1993, sixty-seven percent of her clients were Latino while they accounted for approximately thirty-nine percent of the general population of Los Angeles County. I surmised that the additional twenty-eight percent who availed themselves of the free clinic's services must be undocumented immigrants.

Browns vs Blacks

I sat in my living room and studied the sounds: sharp, loud, rapid fire. "Semi-automatic," I thought.

"Not a Saturday Night Special (a .38 caliber revolver). "Right behind the house. Really close," I calculated. It was dusk on a weekday, the "magic hour" as they call it in the movie business. This time I chose not to sit and wait for ensuing sounds. How often had I measured the crisis level by listening to the siren of a "black and white?" If it was joined by another; if the wail of an ambulance followed; if chopper blades churned the air, and if its powerful beam strafed the rooftops and alleys it meant there had been a hit, that the shooter was still at large.

I decided to see for myself. Still no sirens. I would get to the scene early. I turned the corner, walked a short block and saw the young black man on the sidewalk, and the blood seeping out from under him like an oil slick. A group of black men and women in their twenties were gathering on the corner, their faces yellowed by the street lamp, distress in their eyes. High-pitched moans slipped through fingers pressed over mouths. The Latinos from the immigrant households across the street began to gather. An old woman in an apron, a gaggle of boys at her side, looked at the boy's body with something more than curiosity. Two Latino boys on a bike hovered behind us; the one on the handlebars hoisted himself up to see past the crowd just as a police cruiser appeared. The expression of the young men on the bike, and of those around the Latina woman stunned me: were they smirking? Was that exhilaration in their eyes? The old woman turned to go home. The dying boy wasn't one of hers.

The next day I learned that the two young men on the bike had been the shooters, so brazen they had lingered until the police came. I also learned that the boy who had been murdered was a nursing student at UCLA and that he had been killed because he was black.

Education Derailed

Not long before this murder, Latino UCLA students, led by radical MeCHA (*Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán*) activists and a Latino professor had protested for the inclusion of a Chicano Studies Department. The professor had fasted for days. Protesting students set up tents on the campus lawn, and others broke into a student lounge to vandalize computers and furniture. At the time, UCLA's budget was under review to see if it could still accommodate the School of Public Health, or whether it ought to be scaled

back. It struck me that health issues, a critical part of any sound society, were being usurped in the media by an ethnocentrist group violently agitating for special treatment and funding.

I found a similar connection in Aptos, a small community on the Central Coast of California. Again, funding was at issue when Aptos High School decided to merge with the Pajaro Valley School District which includes Watsonville, a predominantly Latino farm community. Desegregation was invoked, but rather than a gradual introduction, four hundred Latino students were dramatically infused into the school population. A MeCHA chapter was quickly established at the high school, cries of "racism" and "discrimination" quickly followed. The MeCHA activists advanced the cause of a Latino student who was elected student body president despite his academic record and no history of civic activities, the traditional hallmark of that office. MeCHA and the Latino students then demanded a Chicano Studies course at the same time that the high school administrators considered terminating the Debating Club for lack of funds. Charges of racism were then levelled at the principal who devoted precious time countering these charges in the local media. Eventually, the rest of the student body spoke out, expressing how the quality of their education was being contaminated by the racially charged politics that had infiltrated the school. Resentments deepened and the principal contracted with a "multicultural mediator" to facilitate workshops on racism and diversity. Ultimately, the principal left his position and moved on to a start-up school in Northern California. The school and the community have been so fragmented by these events that the residents of Aptos are requesting that Aptos High School secede from the Pajaro Valley School District, which would terminate the busing of students from Watsonville. The parents cite increasing concerns about the ability of their children to receive not only a quality education, but an adequate one. They are concluding that, among other things, bilingual education, as it stands, has failed. They are watching as standards appear to slip in proportion to accommodations made to Limited English Proficient students. State-wide scores highlight this concern: California student literacy test scores are on a par with those of Louisiana.

Urban schools in Los Angeles have already lost their traditional base of middle-class families. Families of working poor and a dwindling middle class endure campus violence, language barriers, racial tensions, high drop-out rates and low student achievement. This growing disparity between the demands of a 21st Century economy and the dwindling abilities of its future workers is a significant problem. Southern California may well reign as the new century's world center for international trade, finance, manufacturing and entertainment. But the region's growing education and income gap can yield a region wracked by social

unrest.

A Black Exodus

The flight of the middle-class from Los Angeles is mirrored by an exodus of working class blacks. As the California state budget allocates more and more funds to respond to the overwhelming needs of K-12, its renowned higher education system becomes more expensive each year, making it increasingly out of reach for many, including black youths.

Entry-level jobs, once the training ground for so many black teenagers, are now held almost exclusively by middle-aged Latinos, as evidenced by a visit to any fast food outlet in Los Angeles. Similarly, affirmative action has taken an unintended twist with Latino-owned businesses hiring within their ethnic community, to the exclusion of all others. Perhaps more troubling is the busting of the mostly black custodial workers union by low-wage, non-union Latino workers. The union formerly had lucrative contracts with the high rise office buildings of Los Angeles and Century City. In 1993, *The Los Angeles Times* reported that a combined effort by the INS and the Border Patrol revealed that "at least 35 %" of the members of the Los Angeles Drywallers Union were illegal immigrants who had presented false documents in order to join. Their wages ranged from \$15 to \$20 per hour.

The exodus of working class blacks is well under way. They are leaving South Central, Watts, Compton, Bell Gardens, Mar Vista, Venice and numerous other communities that are now up to fifty percent Latino. Blacks are heading for the desert communities of Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, or back to the South where the post WWII migration of blacks to the West began. This displacement of blacks from their traditional neighborhoods is not the gentle surrender of territory. It is in response to current reality: economics (including the greed of employers seeking low-wage labor), and the sheer force of demographics. In Venice, the economics of the drug trade degenerated into racial slaughter as the Latino population exploded. As Xavier Hermosillo put it on a MacNeil-Lehrer segment on Los Angeles after the riots: "We (Latinos) will take over house by house, block by block. We shall not only overcome, we shall overwhelm!" The flooding of Venice and other Westside communities set the stage for the domestic terrorism that followed: the two remaining black families in Bell Gardens were fire-bombed out of the neighborhood by Latino gang members. A black family in a predominantly Latino housing project in Mar Vista was also struck by drive-by arsonists. The passivity of recent and illegal immigrants co-signs the actions of gangsters who view this silence as carte blanche. Crime increases, ethnic paranoias set in, and racially-motivated murders become the hallmarks of "multicultural" communities.

Who Are the Victims?

"Concerned citizens have called this meeting with

the Los Angeles Police Department to talk about all the violence in Venice," Chief Willie Williams told the large crowd gathered at the Community Center. The bleachers were filled with gang members in baggy pants and Raiders windbreakers. They scanned the room dramatically, then left the auditorium in single file, some hooded, others baring shaved heads and surly mouths. My survey revealed that out of approximately four hundred people, there were fifteen Latinos at the most. Marilyn Martinez, a reporter for the *Evening Outlook*, had already declared in a banner headline: "Race War in Venice," but tonight's assault would be on the police. Fingers jabbed toward the men and women in blue who sat on either side of their Chief. The police were restrained. Their stoicism deflected one accuser after another. The news cameras were there, lights glinting off the police badges, searching the audience for newsworthy faces. Surely someone would name the problem: the gang/drug war that had degenerated into racial slaughter. Someone, anyone would described the "eye for an eye" murders and attempted murders that were rotting Venice. But there was too much fear. We already knew that to place a Neighborhood Watch decal on a front window invited a late-night Molotov cocktail to shatter the glass. And by now we also knew that to be "anglo" or black in Venice was to be a target.

There is an attempt to persuade us, all of us, that Latinos are the true victims in our society. I am galled by the attempt of immigration advocates to hitch a free ride on the Freedom Train by characterizing the "plight" of Latinos as on a par with the enslavement of blacks. How can someone who sprinted across the border last week be considered in the same breath as people who are, in many cases, still struggling to overcome the atrocious psychic scars of slavery?

I watched as the Latino media propagandized this "oppression" on a KMEX television broadcast immediately after the Northridge earthquake. A Latina was shown outside a barely damaged apartment building; the legend beneath her identified her as a *victima*, whereas the next shot of an anglo man standing in front of his utterly devastated Northridge home bore the legend *surviendo* (survivor).

Why is it that the children of illegal immigrants are granted the same rights and privileges as the descendants of slaves for whom the Fourteenth Amendment was written into the Constitution? Why should a black child compete with that Latino child for a seat in school, quality attention from educators, diminishing social services and ever-distant opportunities? Why is the proud refrain, "We Shall Overcome" now muffled by the clamor of "We Shall Overwhelm?" ■