

No Defense For Webster's "N" Word

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson

Perhaps no word in the English language stirs more passion and outrage among blacks than the word "n-----r," or its politely sanitized version, the "N" word. It's happened again. This time the offender is not a loose-lipped politician, celebrity, or athlete. It is none other than one of the bibles of the English language, Merriam-Webster's **Collegiate Dictionary**.

The dictionary is now the target of a national campaign by some black academics, local NAACP chapters, and **Emerge** magazine. They claim that Webster's redefinition of the word "n-----r" racially stigmatizes blacks and other nonwhites.

They have a point. In the 1996 edition of Webster's, "n-----r" is defined as "a black person—usually taken to be offensive." It went even further and applied the word to "a socially disadvantaged person." It's easy to see the danger in Webster's redefinition. One could easily infer that the word "n-----r" refers exclusively to blacks, the poor, and other nonwhites, and that all blacks are "socially disadvantaged."

So far, Webster's has stuck to its guns and refused to bow to blacks' complaints. Frederick C. Mish, Webster's editor-in-chief, insists that that is the intent of the word. Mish further justified the definition by claiming that blacks use it among and about themselves, "Its use by and among blacks is not always intended or taken as offensive." Apparently this puts the final stamp of racial approval on the word.

This is self-serving, but unfortunately, true. In past issues of such popular black magazines as **Essence** and **Emerge**, black writers have gone through lengthy gyrations to justify using the word. Their rationale boiled down to this: The more a black person uses the word the less offensive it becomes. They claim that they are cleansing the word of its negative connotations so that racists can no longer use it to hurt blacks. Comedian, turned activist, Dick Gregory, had the same idea some years ago when he titled his autobiography, "n-----r." Black writer, Robert DeCoy, also tried to apply the same racial shock therapy to whites when he titled his novel, "The N-----r Bible."

Many blacks say they use the word endearingly or affectionately. They say to each other, "You're my n-----r if you don't get no bigger," or, "that N-----r sure is something." Others use it in anger or disdain, "N-----r you sure got an attitude," or, "A N-----r ain't S-----." Still, other blacks are defiant. They say they don't care what a white person calls them because words can't hurt them.

The black defenders of the word miss the point. Words are not value neutral. They express concepts and ideas. Often words reflect society's standards. A word, as emotionally charged as "n-----r," can reinforce and perpetuate stereotypes. The word "n-----r" does precisely that. It is the most hurtful and enduring symbol of black oppression.

In **Huckleberry Finn**, Mark Twain captured the total worthlessness of black lives during slavery. Aunt Sally asked Huck why he was late arriving. Huck lied and told her that his boat had been delayed:

Huck: We blowed out a cylinder head.

Aunt Sally: Good gracious! Anybody hurt?

Huck: No'm. killed a n-----r.

Aunt Sally: Well it's luck; because sometimes people do get hurt.

Novelist Richard Wright in his memorable essay, "The Ethic of Jim Crow," remembers the time he accepted a ride from a "friendly" white man. When the man offered him a drink of whiskey Wright politely said, "Oh, no." The man punched him hard in the face and said, "N-----r ain't you learned to say, 'sir', to a white man?" The pain from the blow would pass, but the pain from the "N" word would stay with him forever.

During the era of legal segregation, some of America's major magazines and newspapers continued to treat blacks as social outcasts. Historian Rayford Logan surveyed early issues of **Atlantic Monthly**, **Century Monthly**, **North American Review**, **Harpers**, **The Chicago Tribune**, **New York Times**, **The Boston Evening Transcripts**, **The Cincinnati Enquirer**, and **The Indianapolis Journal**. He noted that they routinely referred to blacks as "n-----r," "niggah," "coon," and "darky."

In news articles, blacks were depicted as buffoons or dangerous criminals. The NAACP and black newspaper editors waged vocal campaigns against racist stereotypes and the use of racist epithets. Black scholar, W.E.B. Dubois, frequently took white editors to task for refusing to spell "Negro" with an upper case "N." Dubois called their policy a "conscious insult" to blacks. In that era, being called a Negro was a matter of pride and self-identity.

Even some of the black defenders of the "N" word have realized their mistake and recanted. Following his return from a trip to Africa in the late 1970s, Richard Pryor told a concert audience that he would never use the word "n-----r" again. The audience was stunned. The irreverent Pryor had practically made a career out of using the word in his routines. Pryor softly explained that the word was profane and disrespectful. He was dropping it because he had too much pride in blacks and himself.

In this volatile climate of mounting racial hostility and polarization, a campaign to get Webster's to "deracialize" its definition of the word, or better yet, delete it completely, as some dictionaries have done, is worthwhile. But black protestors would be wise to wage the same vigorous campaign to get African Americans to delete the word from their vocabulary too.

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