
Don't You Dare Use the "R" Word

The successful campaign to defeat the new Johnson County jail produced unusual political alliances. The small Vote No committee included libertarians, Republican central committee members, Trotskyites, AARP officers, and a few aging Democrats with civil liberties sympathies. On the other side was the entire Democratic Party in Johnson County, including all local elected officials who took a position with the honorable exception of city council member Jim Throgmorton.

The organizations that endorsed the jail constitute a virtual catalog of the local Liberal Establishment: the Johnson County Democratic Party, Iowa City Federation of Labor, Johnson County Bar Association, Iowa City City Council, League of Women Voters, University of Iowa Student Government, Iowa City Area Crimestoppers, Johnson County Local Homeless Coordinating Board, Painters & Allied Trades District Council 81, Public Professional & Maintenance Employees Local 2003, and (my favorite) The "Friends of Historic Preservation".

How could all of these liberal organizations endorse a proposal to jail even more victims of the war on drugs, and more African-Americans? The answer to that question lies in the initial success of the Jail Coordinating Committee in disguising the causes of over-incarceration in Johnson County. Approximately 50 beds were needed to deal with jail overcrowding, which still left 80-100 to explain. Jail advocates said that we must "plan for growth", but they were unable to explain who would be incarcerated in the new jail cells

Local statistics about race were readily available to anyone who asked: 40% of those incarcerated locally are African Americans, who constitute slightly less than 6% of the population of Johnson County. All the Vote No campaign had to do was cite these figures to cause an electoral turnaround among many Iowa City liberals (note the voting totals at

Horace Mann and Longfellow schools). Sheriff Pulkrabek responded to these figures with a series of dizzying non-sequiturs, while other liberal Democratic leaders responded with simple indignation that you would dare raise the race issue.

There is a considerable degree of denial about race among Iowa City liberals. It would be worthwhile having a video of the meeting of the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union,

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which was actually divided on whether to take a position on the issues of racial disparity raised by the Vote No campaign. One member denied that the 40/6 ratio should even be discussed as evidence of racism on the local level, and this denial has continued after the defeat of the jail. Jail supporter and Press Citizen columnist Bob Elliott, normally a reasonable person, published a post-defeat article entitled "lies, damn lies, and statistics" in which he suggested that even raising the issue of racial disparity was an "insinuation" of racism in the community, as if that were intrinsically outrageous. Pro-jail statistician John Neff posted on Facebook an outright denial that racism was an important factor in the 40/6 ratio.

Well, perhaps these liberal Democrats are right, and there is no racism at all to be found in our well-meaning and color-blind People's Republic of Johnson County. It is certainly true that calling people racists, or even public policy is-

sues racist, is counterproductive. But it is equally true that this community needs to face up to the racial polarization that has occurred in Johnson County, and especially in Iowa City, over the growth of a working class African-American population. The proposed jail does not exist in isolation from other racial issues that have not been addressed.

In 2009 a homeless immigrant from Africa, John Deng, was shot and killed by an off-duty Sheriff's Deputy dressed in civilian clothes. This incident was referred by County Attorney Janet Lyness to the office of Iowa Attorney General Thomas Miller, who issued a report in September of 2009 that is well worth reading. Like almost all reports on police killings, the report exonerates the officer, but in this case the racially charged nature of the incident is simply whitewashed.

The report wades through a cloud of contradictory evidence, but it appears that one way to read this incident is that a white man came out of a bar and got into a fight with a highly intoxicated black man because he was spilling cans, apparently retrieved from dumpsters, on to the street. It is possible that John Deng was using what the report describes as a "small knife" to defend himself against this attack, although that is unclear. What is clear is that an off-duty (white) sheriff's deputy arrived, intervened in the fight, watched the white man knock the black man down, ordered the white man to leave (which he refused to do), and then when the almost unbelievably intoxicated black man (blood alcohol of .295) stood up, shot and killed him. As far as we know, County Attorney Lyness never filed any charges against the white man. John Deng has been, for the most part, forgotten.

As the investigation into the John Deng killing proceeded, the Iowa City Council was imposing an unprecedented

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curfew on young people. Unlike other Iowa cities, Iowa City had never imposed a teenage curfew, largely on civil liberties grounds. Why impose one in 2009? In the color-blind language of the curfew resolution: "Whereas, persons under the age of eighteen are particularly susceptible by their lack of maturity and experience to participate in unlawful and gang-related activities.....the City has found that there has been a significant breakdown in the supervision and guidance normally provided by parents and guardians for juveniles resulting in an increase in crimes and other unacceptable behavior", etc. In other words, we now have black teenagers in town, and therefore must put them under police supervision.

Two years later the irresponsible behavior of black young people came up again. For many years white bus passengers have waited in cold weather behind the glass doors of the Old Capitol mall, watching for the bus. As the number of African-American students at City High and Southeast Junior High grew, many came downtown after school, and made the mall a kind of gathering place. In response to complaints about their behavior, a new apartheid-style sign appeared: "Stand Ten Feet Back from the Door", complete with a security guard to enforce the rule. Now bus passengers either have to wait outside in the cold, or stand behind the sign under the supervision of a security guard. As someone who grew up in the legally segregated south, I can recognize signs telling black people where to stand and sit when I see them. So can they.

Jail advocates will no doubt be back soon with new proposals to incarcerate more African-Americans and more victims of the war on drugs. Perhaps this time around, we can actually have a community conversation about how to deal with issues of racial justice in Johnson County.

— Jeff Cox

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