

Smith, Dungy and Obama breaking through color barrier

by Marc H. Morial

How does our military assign people to recruiting duty? To what level of personnel is this sensitive responsibility assigned? Perhaps we should be looking for answers.

Stretched thin in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Army reportedly redoubled efforts to gain re-enlistments among discharged officers. The campaign included a December mailing to more than 5,100 ex-officers. And if reports are accurate, the returns have exposed some incredible oversights in military management - blunders that can only have rekindled the grieving in many households.

The Pentagon's mailing list is said to have included the names of some 75 deceased officers, mainly casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, plus roughly 200 others who are recovering from war wounds.

There was this statement from an office responsible for the blunder: "Army personnel officials are contacting those officers' families now to apologize for erroneously sending the letters."

Well, we should hope so. But may there be a point at which such high-level mismanagement defies forgiveness? As a continuing saga of ineptitude, the current administration exceeds any in memory. As its failures pile up, we return again and again to the same explanation - the disregard, with few exceptions, that George W. Bush and his leadership team have shown for simple competence in staffing. Assignments too often have been based on a job applicant's ideological convictions, rather than a record of performance.

Examples come readily to mind. A recent choice to direct "population affairs" in Health and Human Services, the offbeat obstetrician Dr. Eric Keroack spurns the family planning goals he is assigned to pursue. There's the Army lieutenant general, William Boykin, whose challenge to the Muslim world, "Our God is greater than your god," didn't stand in the way of his appointment as deputy director of defense for (of all things) intelligence. Numerous lesser officials have been found wanting by inspectors general in a string of departments and agencies.

From among dozens of books that have taken the Bush administration to task, one has proved especially revealing of the manner in which its various levels were staffed. This is "Imperial Life in the Emerald City," by The Washington Post's former bureau chief in Baghdad, Rajiv Chandrasekaran. It compares the American-occupied "Green Zone" of the Iraqi capital to Dorothy's fictional stopover in "The Wizard of Oz."

To manage matters in a country the United States insists it intends to occupy no longer than needed, the White House established what would become its most mammoth of all embassies. January marked at least one major first for blacks. For the first time in history, not one but two blacks - the Chicago Bears' Lovie Smith

and the Indianapolis Colts' Tony Dungy - led their teams to football's premier contest - the Super Bowl.

And another black man - Illinois Sen. Barack Obama - took the first step toward throwing his hat in the ring in the ultimate political contest - the battle for the nation's highest office.

He's hardly the first black to vie for the presidency - he stands upon the broad shoulders of the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Shirley Chisholm, the Rev. Al Sharpton, Carol Moseley Braun and others. Not since Jackson in 1988 has a black been considered a serious contender for the Oval Office. But, unlike his predecessors, Obama probably stands the best chance of becoming the first black to win his party's presidential nomination in 2008 or beyond.

In a recent Zogby poll, the Illinois Democrat led the field in New Hampshire, a historic testing ground for presidential candidates, with 23 percent of voters favoring him compared to 19 percent for Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and John Edwards. Up until 1992, the candidate who won the primary usually made his way to the White House even though Bill Clinton and George W. Bush have defied that trend in recent elections.

What a delightful coincidence that these historic developments would occur in the month that celebrates the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and that Obama would represent Chicago in the hallowed halls of the U.S. Congress.

That Smith beat out his mentor Dungy by a few hours to be the first black coach to guide his team into the National Football League's crown-jewel game makes up for the fact that his Bears handily defeated my beloved New Orleans Saints to get there. I'll forgive Lovie this year because it is truly a great day in history when two black coaches meet at the pinnacle event of professional football. I cannot make promises for next year, though. If Lovie robs my Saints of their Super Bowl dreams next year, I'll have to take it personally.

Roughly 66 percent of National Football League players are blacks but they have long faced formidable obstacles to their populating the coaching ranks. In 1989, Art Shell became the first black head coach in the NFL's modern era. In his own way, Dungy, a former Pittsburgh Steeler who got his coaching start in 1981, played his own role in diversifying the profession by recruiting Smith to be linebacker coach for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 1996.

The institution of the so-called "Rooney Rule" broke down barriers in the NFL's "old-boy" network by requiring teams to consider at least one minority candidate in their hiring processes. By the start of this year's season, there was a record seven black head coaches.

"For years and years, the coaching decisions and many other decisions in professional football really

followed the old way of doing things," Darrell Millner, professor of black studies at Portland State University, told the Portland Oregonian newspaper recently. "These two black coaches today are a reflection that that is changing. Their success gives an additional impetus of the continuation of that kind of change."

In a recent television interview, Bears' fan Obama made a great point about these two men that speaks less to the color of their skin and more to the content of their character, to invoke Dr. King: "What makes it even better is that they're both men of humility. They're both men of God. They never trash talk. They're not yellers or screamers on the sidelines. They're a couple of class individuals," he said.

In a letter to the editor to his local paper, Hal Nelson, executive director of secondary education for the Sarasota (Fla.) County School District, wondered if divine intervention played some role in bringing two black coaches together in the Super Bowl to "illuminate the potential of the American experience" and underscore the importance of three key qualities exhibited by Dungy and Smith - competence, character and tenacity.

"Competence is evident when one is able to achieve the goals of the organization, despite times when others will inevitably say that one has been granted the opportunity because of being a minority, female, etc. Character is evident when, in the face of such adversity, faith and spirituality allow us to first recognize our own flaws, and then forgive the actions of others. Tenacity is evident when one decides to perform well despite unfair treatment, such as being dismissed unprofessionally or compensated unjustly. When we act as a land of opportunity, greatness grows," he wrote.

I cannot agree more and have to extend that same observation to Obama. All three men provide positive role models for future generations to aspire to. They give our children hope that the American Dream is possible for all members of society to attain.

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