

Malign neglect's harvest of bitterness and resentment

By Michael A. Weinstein

Although the Steve Cokely affair has ended with his dismissal, it continues to raise concerns far beyond the range of those that captured the public debate. Just as many were surprised by the breadth and depth of support for Jesse Jackson's presidential candidacy, they displayed a disquieting born-yesterday attitude toward the steadfastness of support for Cokely by significant segments of black opinion.

The larger community should not be shocked by current expressions of political militancy among blacks and other groups that feel they have been slighted during the Reagan years. The sensibility of dissent has been mounting slowly and steadily for more than a decade, only now to become obtrusive.

A generation has passed since Daniel Moynihan suggested that a period of "benign neglect" toward blacks and other insurgent minorities would be beneficial for healing the scars of the social conflicts of the 1960s. Although there was an outcry against Moynihan's prescription when he made it, we have lived through its application in the

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passing years. Now its results are becoming obvious in a harvest of bitterness and resentment that is symptomized with telling clarity by the Cokely controversy.

It's easy for a reasonable person to be indignant about the message of the Cokely tapes. The proposition that Jewish doctors are plotting genocide on Afro-Americans by injecting them with the AIDS virus touches the abominable depths of 20th Century anti-Semitism, recalling Hitler's tirades against innate Jewish evil and Stalin's ravings about a Jewish "doctors' plot" against his life. How can anyone, especially someone in government, say such things and perhaps even believe them? Righteous indignation mingled with shock can pose that question, but it cannot answer it. We must get beyond moral outrage to understand the phenomenon.

There is a Louis Farrakhan and a "Final Call." He and his movement have some devoted followers, more fellow-travelers and an even larger number of sympathizers who vary widely in the extent and intensity of their commitment to the message. That message is hatred, and it spreads like a drop of poison in a pool, ever weaker but still present. Why do so many people have so little resistance to the poison, so little, indeed, that some of them drink it in as medicinal truth? Why do so many others pass over the terrible content of the

message and focus only on the political consequences of its dissemination?

We must face up to the fact that a generation of neglect, some of it benign, but much of it malign, has ended up isolating sizable groups of Americans from the narrowing mainstream of our national life. Neglect, as Moynihan correctly understood, can sometimes really be an opening to the peace and freedom to grow, to experiment and to create fresh possibilities. But neglect is only benign when it fosters a protective environment in which those left alone have reason to trust that the others maintain good will toward them. When that perception of trust is absent, neglect turns malign, leading to a predictable response by those who have been pushed out of the way.

There will always be people like Louis Farrakhan who have been wounded sufficiently at some time in their lives to turn their pain against the world and to direct their best efforts toward abusing their social environment. For them the "final call" is the "final solution." But such people only find a ready response to the self-hatred they project on imagined enemies when they can tap onto a reservoir of bitterness, frustration and anxiety flowing from the sense of exclusion. The Cokely affair is a sign of the times, warning of substantial disaffection that betrays a social and not

merely a personal source. A festering sore of wounded pride has grown wider and deeper under the bandage of neglect.

The mob scene around City Hall after Mayor Harold Washington died, the overt racial conflict that keeps boiling over in New York City and, though many may wish to put a more pleasant face on it, the campus revolt at Washington's Gallaudet College (where students demanded a president who was deaf) are all incidents in a growing wave of protest against exclusion. The disturbing feature of this phenomenon is most evident in the Cokely affair.

Unlike the dissent of the 1960s, which was inspired by a will to participate in an inclusive or a greater community, the new protest reacts to exclusion by wearing isolation and difference as a badge of honor, by rejecting any hope for a more expansive community in favor of retraction into jealousy and suspicion. The formula for contemporary dissent apparently is separatism within the system, a very dangerous paradox which is born of desperation.

American society has a great deal of difficult work to do to restore the integrity it has lost through the era of neglect. Top priority on the national agenda, even ahead of disarmament and deficit reduction, must be given to proving to ourselves, through deeds, that we belong with each other.