

Chronicles

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LEON TODD is the bravest man in Milwaukee. While Afrocentric "education" has always had its white conservative critics, Todd is perhaps the first black school official to seek to cut the explicitly Afrocentric content from his district's curriculum. A member of the Milwaukee School Board, Todd believes that black children would best be served not by efforts to boost their "self-esteem" or any other therapeutic silliness, but by rigorous education that would prepare them for the world outside. Todd learned the price of being an "Oreo" when his house was firebombed in December.

Despite insinuations that Todd is an agent of the white establishment, it seems that he learned by accident about the content of the curriculum at Milwaukee's two black "immersion" schools, the Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School and the Malcolm X Academy. In the course of a financial audit of these two institutions last fall, he stumbled on some of the materials assigned to 1,100 children in social studies and other classes. This literature contained what Todd later described as "racist pseudo-science" that "mythologizes and falsifies the past and provides inaccurate information about the treatment of blacks in the ancient Mediterranean world." Todd was referring to the Portland Baseline Essays, a set of papers which were originally commissioned for use in the Portland, Oregon, public schools and

now form the basis of Afrocentrist curricula in schools nationwide.

For example, according to the Essays, ancient Egyptians were black, all the achievements of the Egyptians are therefore black achievements, the black Egyptians had the technology to fly, and Cleopatra was "a distinctly African woman, dark in color. . . . If living today, she would probably be living in one of the Black communities of the United States." This Cleopatra-'n'-the-hood idea helped convince Todd, who has degrees in both Latin and Greek, that the public schools had thrown out all standards in order to foster "self-esteem" and a militant attitude among minorities. Todd says that he was also concerned about reports that the Milwaukee schools were introducing children to the rites and customs of bizarre African cults, such as genital mutilation and the use of cocaine for communion. If the separation of church and state keeps Christianity out of the schools, Todd reasoned, shouldn't it keep drug use and female circumcision out as well?

Prompted by complaints from parents at a half-dozen schools, Todd penned a resolution condemning Afrocentrism as "racist pseudo-science" and calling on the schools to jettison it. Not surprisingly, school officials grew defensive. "We didn't create a curriculum," said Ken Holt, principal of the Malcolm X Academy, in the *Wisconsin State Journal*. "We just researched and presented the truth." Josephine Mosely, principal of the Martin Luther King School, insisted that "Teaching children about their culture, history, and heritage does make a difference. . . . We do look at telling the whole truth about history and . . . telling our children that they are the descendants of queens and kings." These were the most polite responses to Todd's resolution. Parents also told Todd that he had become "whitenized," that because he had registered his marriage at the county courthouse, he was a sellout to the white establishment.

Todd's resolution was defeated in early December by a 3-2 vote at a meeting of the School Reform Committee attended by some 400 parents, students, and teachers. In addition to taunting him with catcalls, one of the attendees handed Todd a package of Oreo cookies.

But the Afrocentrists had not won. The School Reform Committee's decision was forwarded to the full School Board, which overturned it with a 7-2

vote. As a result, outside auditors will scrutinize the curriculum and then make recommendations to the Board. This does not mean, of course, that Afrocentrism is on the way out. While the School Board as presently constituted is sympathetic to Todd's position, it remains to be seen how long an incensed "community" will allow Board members to hold onto their seats. Some members of the community may take action outside the Eurocentric, parliamentary channels, as happened half an hour after the vote, when Todd's house was set ablaze by a Molotov cocktail.

A group of black scholars is reportedly working on a book which will debunk the "racist pseudo-science" of the Portland curriculum. They may be missing the point. It is easy enough to trash Afrocentrism on scholarly grounds, but historical accuracy was never the paramount concern of radical educators. As the case of Leon Todd shows, revisionism and "self-esteem" have eclipsed the old, quaint standards.

—Michael Washburn