

What Michael Sam Has Taught Us

BITTER DEBATES OVER HOMOSEXUALITY INVITE A RETHINKING OF BLACK MASCULINITY AND CHALLENGE THE USE OF RELIGION TO SANCTIFY SEXUAL BIGOTRY.

By MICHAEL ERIC DYSON

A bristling paradox grips Black America: We are at once on the cutting edge of the sexual orientation revolution and also among its most vocal opponents.

President Obama's announcement of support for gay marriage blunted resistance in some Black quarters while stoking the fury of conservative Blacks. U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder's refusal to enforce laws against same-sex marriage led a coalition of Black pastors to call for his impeachment. When NBA veteran Jason Collins came out of the closet to become professional sports' first openly gay player, a noted Black sportswriter claimed that Collins was living in "open rebellion to God." And when All-American college football player Michael Sam recently announced, "I am an openly, proud gay man," his own father confessed in the media to being "old-school" and "a man-and-a-woman type of guy" and that he didn't want his "grandkids raised in that kind of environment."

The war between progressive and reactionary approaches to Black sexual politics is, in part, a battle over the Black male body. Disputes over Black masculinity have been at the heart of the republic since Black male loins were examined for their support of the slave economy. Robust images of Black male eroticism have for centuries flooded the culture and sparked psychosexual fear of Black manhood.

The fear of Black male sexuality was deepened by the belief that Black men are social deviants who threaten White male power and exploit White female vulnerability.

Black men have eagerly embraced the myth of our sexual prowess; we relish being envied our sexual swag. The heterosexual monopoly on the myth of Black male sexual superiority, however, takes a beating at the hands of gay men. And a defensive end such as Michael Sam sacks the argument that gay men aren't real men. It is an irresistible metaphor of complicated Black masculinity that two athletes known for their punishing physical presence are pioneers

of American homosexual progress.

Conservatives up the ante by recruiting God to co-sign their beliefs. Black religious folk often use many of the same arguments against gays that prejudiced White Christians have used to reinforce Black oppression. That approach can be summed up in a nutshell: as God ordained it, tradition supports it and the faith demands it.

The Bible is the tackle box of homophobic tools, including scriptural proclamations of gay savagery, just as there were similar protests of Black savagery; trumpeting the abomination of homosexuality, just like there'd been with Black skin before it; and a literal reading of the Word that proves a greater enemy to the faith than either homosexuality or Blackness could ever be. Reading homosexuality through the same distorted lens that White bigots viewed us through is to sabotage our best spiritual and moral instincts.

Collins and Sam make one thing clear: Real Black men can be gay, and gay Black men can be saved, not from their sexuality, which is not a sin, but from our self-righteous condemnation. Sam, and a million more like him, may prove to be greater men with closer ties to God than their naysayers could ever hope to be.

Michael Eric Dyson is a noted author, professor and political analyst for MSNBC.



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Hard Times for Black Colleges

GEORGE COOPER, PH.D., IS A MAN ON A MISSION. BUT SAFEGUARDING AMERICA'S 106 HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES IS NOT AN EASY JOB. **By MICHAEL H. COTTMAN**

Appointed by President Barack Obama as the executive director of the White House Initiative for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in 2013, George Cooper is faced with a tremendous challenge: finding creative ways, with limited federal funds and scant support from Republicans on Capitol Hill, to uplift Black institutions of higher learning that are struggling to survive.

Many HBCUs grapple with lack of funding from tuition costs because of low enrollment, dwindling alumni financial gifts and cuts in federal funding, so these schools have difficulty paying basic bills and salaries for teachers. The New York Times recently reported that Black colleges with 1,000 or fewer students are particularly struggling. In fact, Fisk University in Nashville, Tenn., once a flagship institution in the HBCU hierarchy, has fallen on hard times, with only 645 students currently enrolled. Some Black educators believe that more HBCUs could be on the brink of extinction if someone doesn't throw out a much-needed lifeline.

When meeting with Black college presidents, Cooper explains that although his department does not disperse federal funds to Black schools, it helps their administrators find grants to apply for funding and assists the colleges through a range of technical support services and other academic assets.

"What we want to do is provide additional resources to allow

these institutions to survive," Cooper told EBONY in an exclusive interview. "I wish there were a thicket of funds that we could open up and meet all of the needs. [But] we are providing complementary support to help these institutions keep their doors open."

Cooper, who served four years as president of South Carolina State University, said "branding" HBCUs is a top priority in his effort to help struggling schools increase enrollment. The White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities recently announced its first class of HBCU All-Stars, recognizing 75 undergraduate, graduate and professional students for their accomplishments in academics, leadership and civic engagement. Cooper said these all-stars will serve as ambassadors of the White House initiative by providing outreach and communication with fellow students about the value of education at HBCUs.


"The president's Fiscal Year 2015 budget includes continued investments in HBCUs through \$75 million for a College Success Grants program for Minority-Serving Institutions and Historically Black Colleges and Universities that would support the development of sustainable strategies for reducing costs and improving outcomes for students," an Obama administration official told EBONY, adding that "under the Obama administration, the Department of Education has increased its overall funding for HBCUs from \$3 billion in 2007 to \$4 billion in 2012, including increased Pell Grant funding to support 200,000 students."

Although Cooper acknowledged the tremendous challenges he faces, he insisted that he's prepared for the task ahead.

"I am really excited about being here," said Cooper, who has also served in administrative and faculty roles at Alabama A&M University and Tuskegee University. "This is a great time to be here and a great opportunity for me to use my skills as an advocate for HBCUs."

"I am proud that I am a graduate of two HBCUs," he added. "My parents are HBCU graduates, my daughters are graduates of Florida A&M and Bowie State University. So it's true that the HBCU experience has really prepared me and my family to be successful, and those are the things that are important."

Michael H. Cottman, an author and award-winning journalist, covers the White House for BlackAmericaWeb.com. He is also co-host of the nationally syndicated radio show Keeping It Real With Rev. Al Sharpton.



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