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INTERVIEW: Juan Williams has had enough

By Tim Louis Macaluso On Oct. 2nd, 2007

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"There is a seductive, serpentine logic at work on young black people," writes Juan Williams in his latest book: "Enough: the Phony Leaders, Dead-end Movements and Culture of Failure that are Undermining Black America."

"Without anyone saying a word, black youngsters find themselves in a hypnotic, self-defeating trance that has them walking blindly into a back alley of failure," Williams writes. "Brainwashed by popular culture to ignore reality, they are in a confused state of mind and doubt the value of schooling."

Statements such as these have led to accusations that Williams is not an authentic black man. Williams, an award-winning journalist and senior correspondent for NPR and Fox News, spoke at the Frederick Douglass International Underground Railroad Conference last Friday.

Williams has reported extensively on the racial myths that have left many black families - black youth in particular - in a state of crisis.

In "Enough," he decries the lack of black leaders. He says many black people develop their self-image through media that largely presents black men as gang bangers and black women as hookers. Instead of wringing every advantage out of education, many black youngsters, Williams says, believe that excelling in math and science is "acting white."

Much of "Enough" chronicles the controversial speech that actor and comedian Bill Cosby gave on May 17, 2004 at DC's Constitution Hall to a crowd of America's black elite. The evening was intended to mark the 50th anniversary of the Supreme Court's Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka decision. Instead of his usual benign humor, Cosby shocked and offended many in the audience when he spoke frankly, Williams says, about the state of Black America. Enough with the excuses, Cosby said, according to Williams.

"Everybody knows it's important to speak English except these knuckleheads. You can't land a plane with 'Why you ain't. You can't be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth. These people are fighting hard to be ignorant," Cosby said.

Like Cosby, Williams asks what good are the sacrifices of true black leaders like Douglass or decisions like Brown vs. Board of Education "if nobody wants them?" He says calls for reparations have perpetuated the image of black people as victims, when the survival of blacks despite slavery's horrors is a clear testimonial to the

community's strength and dignity.

"In 1940, the out-of-wedlock birth rate for blacks was 19 percent," writes Williams. "Today it is close 70 percent. If slavery is the cause of today's social problems in the black community, why did black people in closer historical proximity to it do better than today's black community with regard to keeping families together?"

Williams says he has been criticized for some of the views expressed in "Enough" and in recent speaking engagements, but the criticism has convinced him that he is on the right path. He says many Democratic city leaders and strong teachers unions in the nation's large urban school districts are failing poor children. He says he is alarmed, not just for poor black and Hispanic youth, but children in middle-class families, too, who are embracing values manufactured by entertainment-savvy executives who prey on their insecurities.

In an interview after his speech at the Underground Railroad Conference, Juan Williams talked about his book, the importance of Douglass' legacy, and poverty. The following is an edited version of that interview.

City: You open "Enough" with a description of Bill Cosby's Constitution Hall speech. Cosby was criticized for that speech. Is it hard for people to hear his message without questioning his credibility? He's not just a doctor or lawyer-he's one of the most successful entertainers in the world?

Williams: People did question his credibility and I find that insulting because he is a guy who has given generously to black colleges, fundraisers, major civil rights organizations and organizations that support children. Not only that, look at his art. If it was "I Spy," "Different Strokes" or "The Cosby Show," he portrayed black people in a dignified and hopeful way. These were very strong, positive images that hold up. It was not the kind of thing that relied on pornography or insulting images. The guy is 70 years old and I don't think he has suddenly changed his strategy. A lot of the business that he is a self-hating black man or he is just a comedian, what does he know, it really doesn't make sense to me. And frankly, a lot of the issues he is bringing attention to are obvious to anyone with eyes in America.

You quote from his speech, "We are not Africans. Those people are not Africans, they don't know a damn thing about Africa." Recently, our city school board approved a policy that would infuse the curriculum with African-American history. Is this the right direction or is this the self-indulgent thinking that Cosby references?

I think there's two ways to look at this. One way is that the curriculum does need to accurately reflect African history. Well, not African-American history, but the history of the United States, which as it turns out includes a lot about black people in America from the very beginning. The whole notion of racial struggle in this nation from the days of slavery, for example, can't be taken out of American history and you can't call whatever is left an accurate curriculum. To understand something like the Civil War, you have to understand race in America. To understand the struggle over Civil Rights laws, you've got to understand the history of race in America.

You've got to have these stories being told to all Americans, but it is especially important to young black people

who want to see themselves accurately, and see the authentic contributions they have made to our history. That needs to be reflected in the history books they are using.

But the reason that I said there are two ways to look at this is because it can go overboard if this is all about Africa, and so on. The intent is to instill pride in young people, but at some point it becomes so distant from their reality that I think it becomes fanciful. These are black American children. That's what Cosby was talking about. They certainly have roots in Africa, but they have so much affirmative, positive history right here that they need to learn about, that needs to be told.

Here in Rochester, we have people living in desperate poverty, unemployment, shootings in the street nearly every week and a 39 percent four-year graduation rate. What do we do? How do we reverse this?

Oh gosh, I wish I had a wonderful answer for this because no matter where I go, it seems like that's the question that comes up over and over again. But I think it's about getting back to basics, which is to say why are people engaged in the drug trade. That is usually why there is the problem of violent crime like murders in our cities. And the problems with schools, of course: why are families not instilling in their children the right values and sense of purpose like the importance of staying in school and getting an education? Who is telling them that they have no business dropping out? Where are the raised expectations? And why are we allowing our public schools to become chaotic warehouses for our children instead of demanding that they be places of inspiration and learning?

As adults and as parents, we have to give our young people a sense of love and belonging, but they also need to know that we expect them to someday become our doctors, our engineers and our political leaders. These are the building blocks and I think we have to get back to the very basics.

In your recent op-ed piece about the Little Rock Nine and in Enough, you talk about schools that are becoming more segregated. Rochester is a good example. How do we address this when the middle and upper-middle-income families move to the suburbs? It's not just an abandonment of the school district; it's an abandonment of the city.

Times change and people change. It goes full circle and people once again become interested in living downtown. There are certain aspects of living downtown that become attractive again.

But the other thing is many school systems who are finding themselves with so many minority students reach a point where they realize that they still have to educate these kids. They have to give up on waiting for people to come back from the suburbs. And the question becomes, at what point does the older population still living in the city and the younger population with children in those schools say this is unacceptable? If we're going to be held accountable, whether it's through No Child Left Behind or whatever, at what point does the community say we've got to do whatever it takes to do a better job with these kids? At what point does the political leadership of a city say we do have to educate these kids?

Given some of the urban problems we've talked about, what do you think should be the urban agenda during the 2008 elections, or do you think government doesn't have a role? To put it in better context, cities like Rochester and Buffalo were important cities at one time, but have lost that economic edge over the last 20 years.

Oh, I think the role for government to play in the urban agenda is huge. Look, I think that one of the realities of society is that our cities are the focus of our civilization. That may sound rather grand, but I don't think it is. If you look at the change in the American economy, our cities are a reflection of that change. You have the major cities, but you also have the emergence of the boutique cities. Rochester is an extremely affordable city. There is a strong sense of neighborhood and community in this city. I know things have looked bleak for a while, but you guys are not far from being one of those cities that people look at and say that's one of those prize cities to live in. You're close to Canada, you have wonderful colleges, a growing health care and technology base. Sure, some of the bigger companies have downsized, but they are still here and the fact that they are re-tooling themselves here is something other cities would love to have.

And the role of government is to help enhance and support this process. Whether it is state government or at the local level, they need to be looking at ways to partner with business. They need to be taking advantage of what is already here-technology, biomedical, energy-and work to make it attractive for businesses to stay here and for young entrepreneurs to step out.

You talk a lot about self-defeating behavior when you pose the question of how did we get here? What has changed in our culture in the last 25 years? Why have the poor and the middle class embraced the "prison" culture depicted in fashion and music?

Because they are poor, insecure about it and vulnerable. There are so many young people, especially in the minority community, who fit this. And they are trying to figure out who they are, how to dress, how to be hip, how to be cool and here comes Madison Avenue saying this is how you need to dress to be authentically black. You have to dress like you just got out of jail, pants down around your butt, the do-rag around your head and you don't need to stay in school. These are images that young black people see about themselves in movies, music and popular culture. A real black man is threatening and violent, that's what they are learning. And I think it's terrible.

And when you ask what has happened in the last 25 years, you have to look back at where these people live. A lot of the blue-collar jobs have disappeared, which were jobs that still earned a living, still paid a decent salary. An education is more important than ever if you're ever going to lift yourself out of that. But how can you if no one is showing you that there is a way out and telling you it's cool to rob and do drugs and have children when you're a child yourself.

A lot of "Enough" indirectly references acts of courage and selflessness. Is it harder to be a leader today? Frederick Douglass casts a pretty tall shadow. It would be hard to fill his shoes in the eyes of a lot

of young people.

I think it's harder to speak out. There's pressure on conformity. But you don't have to be a Cosby to help your community and that's what he's talking about. That's what Frederick Douglass was doing. If you look around you right here in Rochester, there is so much opportunity to lead, whether you get involved in helping people learn to read, helping an aging population or helping young people finish school. There is no shortage of needs and opportunities.

You dedicated your book to survivors of Hurricane Katrina. I wondered if you felt a little conflicted when you saw some of the images coming out of New Orleans? Some people looking at those images might say nothing has really changed.

Katrina was a storm, but that can mean many different things. People can do all the right things and then something like this hits and you still have to overcome terrible obstacles.

Look, what we saw in Katrina and what we see in many places all across America is poverty. But we know what causes poverty. We know that dropping out of school causes poverty. We know that girls getting pregnant at 14, 15, 16 and 17 leads to poverty. We know that if you can't read, you can't get a job that pays anything.

I'm optimistic because we should be telling young people to delay marriage until they are fully educated. We should be telling young people not to have babies until they have a job, and until they are married. I am optimistic because I think that is a positive message. And I'm optimistic because we know how to eliminate poverty.