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OPINION

How far have we come in equality for all?

THE STAR'S VIEW: Rosa Parks' passing compels the obvious — how far would a nonviolent act of civil disobedience go in changing the country today?

To the outside world of 1955, nothing about Rosa Parks would indicate that her simple act of defiance might become the seed of a major upheaval in the social history of the United States.

She appeared to be a simple seamstress who refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery, Ala., bus, which was at that time a legal requirement.

In fact, Parks was much more than a seamstress. She was a respected community leader who had worked with the local chapter of the NAACP to register people to vote. She also worked with youth groups. And she had attended a workshop earlier that year at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee held specifically for the freedom fighters of the time.

And, in fact, the local NAACP had been looking for a person and a case to challenge the hateful Jim Crow laws of the South. Her refusal to give up her seat to a white passenger was not planned. But it was timed perfectly.

That decision would set in motion the Montgomery bus boycott, would give Dr. Martin Luther King a path to national prominence and would give life to the civil-rights movement — all pivotal events in American history.

Parks, 42 years old at the time, was arrested and booked. Pictures of this prim and proper woman being fingerprinted showed the world outside the Deep South how the Jim Crow laws worked to dehumanize blacks.

Today, we look back on those times as a period when there was no doubt America had a social caste system based on skin color. We tend to see Parks as a symbol of another era, not our own.

But today, we must ask ourselves how far we have really come in race relations and whether we are still an America that lives by a caste system.

In 2005, overt segregation is essentially gone. We no longer have separate railroad cars for blacks and whites. We no longer require blacks to sit in the back of the bus.

And the notion of "separate but equal" was eliminated long ago. What's more, interracial marriages, although not common, are not rare.

Today, our methods of segregation are more subtle, but no less pernicious. We still live in a stratified America. Instead of race, it is the gaps in income that separate the classes in America. But those separations still fall along racial and ethnic divisions.

In 1955, Rosa Parks was fighting for the equality promised to everyone — regardless of race or ethnicity. She fought to give blacks access to a better life that was routinely denied them.

Today it is difficult to see beyond hardened racial, economic and political divisions for signs of change from the sacrifice of people such as Parks.

It is difficult to imagine a similar movement today addressing the disparities targeted by the civil-rights movement but that linger in the reality of economic stratification.

Rosa Parks, who was 92 when she died, will remain an iconic American figure. Surely, her simple, principled act will inspire others.

By remaining in her seat on that Montgomery bus, Parks became a member of that rare group that throughout history has confronted injustice with clarifying conviction.

In 1955, Jim Crow had pushed Rosa Parks to a line her conscience would not allow her to cross. She knew it, stood firm and earned a unique place in American history.

—M.H.

My opinion
MOLLY IVINS

Activist spins heckuva (true) yarn

I am writing about the most extraordinary book by the most extraordinary woman, and I would have interviewed her at length, except she's going to be arrested if she ever sets foot back in our home state. That's pretty much the way life goes these days for Diane Wilson, who used to be just a shrimper and mother of five kids, until she accidentally became an activist.

Then, all hell broke loose. The results are described in "An Unreasonable Woman: A True Story of Shrimpers, Politicos, Polluters and the Fight for Seadrift, Texas." It is the rare, clear, moving voice of a working-class woman goaded into action against the greatest forces in the world today: globalized corporate greed backed by government power.

Going up against all that can make you feel slightly outmanned and outgunned. But Diane Wilson has discovered a weapon I believe is the greatest strength of many women: pure, cussed stubbornness. She is an unreasonable woman. God bless her. Unreasonable women may yet save the world.

One day in 1989, a shrimper with three different kinds of cancer brought Wilson, who was running a fish house, a small clipping from The Associated Press saying Calhoun County was No. 1 in the nation for toxic-waste disposal.

Wilson had lived in Seadrift all her life and never heard anything about it. So, she called a meeting of shrimpers about pollution and the entire local establishment came unglued. They were furious that anyone would question the *chemical plants*, the county's largest employer.

Specifically, Wilson took on Formosa Plastics, a Taiwanese chemical company then building an enormous PVC (polyvinyl chloride) facility near Seadrift. Vinyl chloride, which is used to make PVC, can cause liver, stomach and brain cancer.

Formosa Plastics insisted the plant was "the jewel of the Texas Gulf Coast" and would put out "zero toxic emissions" into the community. The economic development crowd was overjoyed, and Texas government at all levels scrambled to offer tax abatements to this lovely new enterprise.

Of course, Wilson and her watchdogs found shoddy construction, the Environmental Protection Agency found massively contaminated groundwater, Formosa was repeatedly fined for water quality violations, Occupational Safety and Health Administration violations, same old, same old.

On the other hand, on Oct. 4 of this year, there was an explosion at the Formosa plant at Seadrift, the entire town was terrified, and 11 workers were hospitalized.

Wilson has become an international activist and is working to get justice for survivors of the 1984 horror at Bhopal, India, where 500,000 people were poisoned by a Union Carbide pesticide plant. At least 20,000 died.

Warren Anderson, then-CEO of Union Carbide, initially promised to stand trial in India. But the case was settled with what most observers felt was unseemly haste, and Anderson decided prudence should keep him out of India. India tried to extradite him, but the FBI kept saying it just couldn't find the man. He was cleverly concealed in South Hampton on Long Island.

Union Carbide has since been bought by Dow Chemical, and Wilson was arrested for demonstrating in front of the Dow plant in Seadrift — charged with criminal trespass and sentenced to four months in jail.

She figures, why should she go back to face the music when Anderson is still dodging extradition? And besides, Texas is unlikely to send the Rangers after her for criminal trespass. She is currently on book tour in California. What a gift. What a story. What magnificent unreasonableness.

Molly Ivins, a nationally syndicated columnist, appears Saturdays in the Star. Contact her through Creators Syndicate, info@creators.com.

MY VIEW: By David Fitzsimmons

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My opinion
TONY SNOW

Bling fight tarnishes blacks' image

Rosa Parks, the Jeanne D'Arc of the civil rights movement, died this week at age 92. Unfortunately, the movement to which she had devoted her energies and name died long before.

She invited arrest to draw attention to the idiocy of enforced segregation and worked with a young Martin Luther King Jr. to overturn Montgomery's antediluvian transportation laws. Parks set a standard for grace and common sense and inspired a riot nation. That was then. This week, as she breathed her last, American "civil rights" leaders were haggling over something far less exalted: the right to wear bling.

National Basketball Association Commissioner David Stern decreed that NBA players must wear at least business-casual attire when traveling with their teams or appearing in basketball arenas. He also banned chains, necklaces and related geegaws.

He was branded a racist on the odd theory that gangsta culture expresses something valuable about black people. Not even the KKK would claim blacks are predisposed to mayhem, ignorance and early death. That, apparently, has been left to the boneheads who claim title to Rosa Parks' cause.

Ironically, Parks got a taste of this "authentic" culture some years ago, when a young man assaulted her on a Detroit street.

While millionaire basketball stars carped, North Carolina State University distanced itself from Kamau Kambon, an "occasional" professor in the university's African studies program.

Kambon livened a debate about race relations in the wake of Hurricane Katrina by blaming whitey for everything and thundering:

"We have to exterminate white people off the face of the planet. ... We just have to set up our own system and stop playing and get very serious and not be diverted from coming up with the solution to the problem, and the problem on the planet is white people."

(While some participants sat numbly onstage, civil-rights activist Lawrence Guyott saved the day by slamming Kambon — something it took N.C. State nearly a fortnight to do.)

Also this week, The Washington Post published a review of Don Diva, described as "a magazine about gangsters ... for gangsters — and wannabe gangsters," meaning drug-dealing gang bangers.

The periodical regularly sports two covers — a tame one with a picture of a rapper or other celebrity; the other, "a scene of gangster life: a staged shot of kids cooking up crack cocaine ... or an authentic photo of a dead Chicago dope dealer laid out in a coffin built to resemble his Cadillac El Dorado."

The advice column tells how to beat a money-laundering rap, get the hottest paraphernalia and procure motor vehicles that resist bullets.

Finally, this Condoleeza Rice returned to her hometown of Birmingham, Ala., only to face jeers from some "civil rights" hucksters.

Rice, the product of an intact home where parents loved and nurtured their daughter, apparently lived too "sheltered" a life for her critics — despite the fact that she was friends with Denise McNair, one of four girls murdered in the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church.

If anybody deserves the title of Rosa Parks' rightful heir, it is Condoleeza Rice, who combats herself without bitterness or self-pity and carries herself with graceful assurance.

That, after all, was what the Montgomery bus boycott was all about. It was about the right to succeed — not the right to wear bling.

Tony Snow, broadcast talk show host and nationally syndicated columnist, appears Saturdays in the Star. Contact him at tonysnow@hotmail.com.

DESERT WHISPERS

Brief observations from a Southern Arizona perspective

Higher-ed options shrink with costs, caps

As the University of Arizona moves to cap its enrollment at 40,000 students by the year 2010, it will have to keep the number of undergraduates close to the number enrolled this semester, according to a new report published this week in the Arizona Daily Wildcat, the student newspaper.

The news comes as other studies indicate fewer high school students can afford higher education. The Atlantic magazine reports this month that if you hope to obtain a bachelor's degree by age 24, your chances are roughly one in two if you come from a family with an annual income over $80,000; one in four with family income between $61,000 and $80,000; and one in 10 if it is between $35,000 and $61,000. The chance is just one in 17 for families that make less than $35,000 a year.

This combination of factors points to a looming crisis that will require strong state leadership to address. Doing nothing puts this key to a better life out of reach for more of Arizona's youth.

Chris Richards/Arizona Daily Star

The U.A. Mall is the place to be for students and their families to have tailgate parties on a big game day.

O'Connor gets one last chance to upset foes

The withdrawal of Harriet Miers as a candidate for Supreme Court leaves Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, through no fault of her own, in a peculiar position.

O'Connor, 75, announced her retirement in July but said she'd stay on until a successor was named. Politics conspired against her: John Roberts, originally named to succeed her, was instead tapped for chief justice after William Rehnquist died.

Then President Bush named Miers, sending the right into high dudgeon and forcing her withdrawal.

The same group on the far right is now lamenting that O'Connor, a thoughtful moderate who is not in anyone's pocket, may get to vote on an upcoming case involving parental consent for abortions. Some believe she would reject the consent requirement.

We are happy O'Connor will be around to help decide the case but also wish she'd get the rest and retirement she so richly deserves.

Practice says more about torturer than tortured

To torture or not to torture remains a hot topic in Washington as a ban passed by the Senate makes its way to the House, where the going will be tougher.

Sen. John McCain wrote the bill banning cruel and degrading treatment of prisoners in U.S. custody. Opponents argue that terrorists don't deserve the same consideration as prisoners of war. They would exempt the CIA from the bill.

McCain, tortured as a prisoner of war, is right to hold his ground. It's not the level of treachery among prisoners that should drive this debate. It's how the practice reflects on our standards as a nation.

—*D.J., S.N.*

These pages are set aside for the expression of opinion — ours, yours and some from out of state. To find the news report, please start at the front page.

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