



# Black Journalism's Bright Light

**V**ERNON JARRETT, WHO DIED ON MAY 23, WAS a black journalist who covered the African-American story so doggedly he became one of its major characters.

That story charts a journey through racial slavery, Jim Crow apartheid and on through the civil rights revolution, the black power movement, the rise of black elected officials and further still. It's a story with many twists and turns, and Jarrett chronicled many of its signposts.

At his May 29 funeral at Operation PUSH's Chicago headquarters, a large, multiracial audience listened respectfully as Jarrett was lovingly evoked and praised as yet another of those signposts. During his stint with the legendary *Chicago Defender*, where he got his start in 1946 after moving to Chicago from Paris, Tennessee, Jarrett covered most of the major stories of the civil rights movement. He also interviewed W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson, Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson and Martin Luther King Jr., among many others.

In 1970, he got a mainstream gig as the *Chicago Tribune's* first black columnist, and for 13 years he wrote about issues from a black perspective, with a leftist, pro-labor tilt that shocked readers of what was one of the Midwest's most conservative publications. He moved over to the rival *Chicago Sun-Times* in 1983.

Jarrett believed black journalists should not simply report on events but should serve the struggle for social justice. In 1987, for example, he commandeered the microphone at a memorial rally for his good friend, the late Chicago Mayor Harold Washington, and launched into an emotional speech that *astonished* the audience.

He was a *Sun-Times* columnist and board member, but Jarrett passionately urged those assembled to take action against the late mayor's "scheming" opponents. His actions were criticized severely as overstepping the bounds of professional propriety. He replied that his actions were perfectly reasonable. "I was loud and angry because I was mad as hell," he recalled in a 1995 interview. "They were trying to bury Harold's programs even before he was in the ground."

Jarrett never addressed his critics' point that his political passions were incongruent with journalistic objectivity. For him, pushing the politics of fairness was journalism's highest calling. Jarrett may have been out on a limb with his editors, but his beliefs were firmly rooted in the tradition from which he emerged.

Black journalism was born in a spirit of protest, and

that tradition has been a touchstone for many black activists who considered journalism a natural extension of their mission. Several of black America's most pivotal figures—from Frederick Douglass to Ida B. Wells-Barnett to W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey—were journalists as well.

Jarrett was of that lineage. And although his venue for most of the last 25 years was the mainstream media (where he earned an impressive array of awards, including five Pulitzer Prize nominations), he seldom wavered from the principles of his activist tradition. He decided to focus his energy more specifically within the black community during the final chapter of his life. Until his death at 85 (and his true age has come to light only after his death), Jarrett again was a columnist for the *Chicago Defender*.

Aside from his professional accomplishments, Jarrett founded a number of institutions that address his major concerns about the black community.

In 1975, he helped create the National Association of Black Journalists, an organization that has since become a power in the industry. In association with officials at the NAACP, Jarrett also created the Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympic (ACT-SO) program, which inspires academic achievement among black youth and generates hundreds of thousands of dollars in scholarships.

In 1993, Jarrett was selected as a professional scholar at the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University. He initiated the Vernon Jarrett Oratorical Society for Kids in 1994 as a joint effort with Chicago's DuSable Museum of African American History and local churches to help introduce black children to what he called the lost art of oratory. A few months back, he enlisted my support for a program he called "Freedom Readers," the most recent in his relentless attempt to get black youth excited about reading.

Jarrett kept up this busy schedule until he was forced to enter the hospital. He always had a hard time saying "no" or surrendering his battle station to some Young Turk. Just two years ago, for example, he assumed leadership of a faction of the National Association of Black Journalists Chicago chapter because he was discontent with its leadership.

Jarrett's chapter in the African-American story will be a large, bright one for those of us who knew him and bathed in his light. ■

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## The First Stone *By Joel Bleifuss*

# Listen to the Canary

'Saying you don't believe in global warming is like saying you don't believe in the second law of thermodynamics.'

**T**HE DAY AFTER TOMORROW tells the story of a planet suddenly beset by catastrophic weather. Yes, the movie is hyperbolic but not entirely off the mark. Contrary to conventional wisdom, global warming could well make its presence felt suddenly and catastrophically, unless humans do something about climate change soon.

About 10 years ago, Richard Alley, a professor of geosciences at Penn State University, went up to the middle of Greenland and collected a core of ice that contains the annual ice deposits of the last 100,000 years or so. Alley found that about 12,000 years ago Greenland's climate changed within the space of 10 years from a climate that was cold, dry and windy to one that was warmer, wetter and less windy. It was, he told National Public Radio's Richard Harris, as if in one decade the weather in Chicago became like that of Atlanta.

"What we know is that there are threshold points, there are flipping points, in the Earth's climate," he said. Alley provided this analogy: "If you sit in a canoe and you lean a little bit, not much happens, and you lean a little more and not much happens, and you lean a little—and you're in the water."

Are we approaching such a tipping point?

The '90s was the warmest decade on record and probably the warmest in the last 1,000 years and probably longer, says Mark Lynas, author of the just released *High Tide: The Truth About our Climate*

*Crisis*. The top five warmest years ever recorded are 1998, 2002, 2001, 1997 and 1995.

The U.N.-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has examined several scenarios and predicted a rise in

enced thunderstorms. "Some Native American elders thought that the loud bangs of thunder were bombs going off," he writes.

The permafrost in Fairbanks, 125 miles south of the Arctic Circle, is disappearing and the wooden houses in the town are sinking into the melting soil. Vicki Heiker's house is totally lopsided. She told Lynas, "When you spill something it's like you don't have much of a chance. You've got to clean it up fast otherwise it will get away from you."

Indeed, the Arctic is experiencing temperatures that are rising 10 times faster than the rest of the world. "In many ways Alaska is the canary in the coal mine, showing the rest of the world what lies ahead as global warming accelerates," writes Lynas.

So what does global warming portend? The IPCC predicts that hurricanes will get stronger and floods and droughts will become endemic. Tropical diseases will move northward. (West Nile virus anyone?) Billions of people will lose their supply of potable water. Ecosystems will unravel. The agricultural economy will become chaotic as food supplies are endangered. And the safer, northern climes, writes Lynas, will become the destination of "environmental refugees, when millions will be made homeless by extreme weather and seawater flooding of low-lying areas."

"The most realistic aspect of *The Day After Tomorrow* isn't its scientific basis but its portrayal



temperature in the 21st Century between 3 and 10 degrees Fahrenheit. The lower estimate is more than double the change in the 20th Century, while the higher projection is in the catastrophic range—a point at which civilization, indeed life, on Earth as we know it ceases to exist.

Lynas traveled the globe to chronicle the climate changes humans are already experiencing. He went to Barrow, Alaska, 340 miles above the Arctic Circle, where average wintertime temperatures have shot up an average of 11 degrees Fahrenheit. For the first time in recorded history the people of Barrow have experi-