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## **Civil rights rhetoric is useless in today's crisis**

### *Fighting the Wrong Battle*

**By Will Moredock**

The story of the Gadsden Green public housing evictions is as complex as it is tragic.

In October, six boys, ages 14 to 16, were arrested for allegedly confronting people on Wentworth Street late at night in two separate incidents and demanding money. One of the victims was shot in the hand with a pellet gun.

The six youths were members of five families — all headed by women — who lived in Gadsden Green. In signing their federal Housing and Urban Development leases, the women had agreed that if serious criminal charges were brought against any member of their respective families, the whole family would be subject to eviction.

The five women and their 25 other children may soon be on the street. Their appeals have been turned down by HUD.

Last Saturday, Charleston City Councilman Wendell Gilliard held a rally for the five families at Nichols Chapel AME Church, across President Street from Gadsden Green. About 50 people came out in support of the families.

There was a jarring disconnect Saturday between what I saw in that small church and the reality of what was going on.

"I chose to work from the church," Gilliard intoned to his constituents. He went on to invoke the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. He called the eviction of the five families from public housing a lynching and said the HUD code that made the eviction possible was a Jim Crow law.

Gilliard shamelessly played the victim card, demanding that HUD put central air conditioning in Gadsden Green and revamp their eviction policies.

Apparently the councilman has been caught in some kind of time warp. He seems to think he is leading a civil rights crusade 40 years ago. He has certainly adopted the rhetoric and props of the civil rights movement, but that's where the similarity ends. There are no police dogs or fire houses, no Klansmen and — despite Gilliard's fatuous claim — no Jim Crow laws.

The forces which seek to destroy the black community today are largely internal. I refer, of course, to the disintegration of the black family and the concomitant social ills of crime, poverty, illegitimacy, and academic failure. And the disintegration of the black family is at the core of the eviction controversy at Gadsden Green.

What are we to make of five women with at least 31 children among them and not a single man willing to come forward and be a part of any of these families in their hour of crisis? What about the youths who went out on the street and got themselves arrested for armed robbery, knowing it would subject their families to eviction? And what can you say about the mothers who allowed their sons on the street at an hour when no child should be out without a responsible adult?

Councilman Gilliard referred only obliquely to any kind of dysfunction in the black community. ("I don't want our kids walking around with monkey pants on, looking like apes.") There was nothing for a politician to gain in pointing his finger at these women and at the men of the community and saying, "Shame on all of you."

Most of the talk last Saturday was about the rights of the five families. I wish the councilman and his constituents had given some consideration to the rights of the citizens of Charleston to not be robbed by young punks on the street. What about our right to live in safety, councilman? We are not your constituents, but we have rights, too.

After eviction goes through, there are public and private resources within the community to keep these families from living on the street. In fact, this might be an excellent opportunity for some of that "compassionate conservatism" we used to here so much about. This town is full of loudly pious Republicans and Christians who might step forward to put their money where their big mouths are.



But whatever church, agency, or individual offers these families shelter, there will certainly be some rules and regulations attached to the deal, and I am confident that one of those rules will require these families to stay out of trouble with the law. There is nothing unfair or unreasonable about that. The only thing unreasonable is Wendell Gilliard contending that these wards of the commonweal should not be subject to such restrictions. Such demagoguery accomplishes nothing in terms of solving the root cause of this eviction. In fact, it is a distraction from that root cause.

I wish these five women had spent as much time, energy, and imagination restraining their wayward sons as they have spent turning this tragedy into a political and media event. Almost certainly none of this would have ever happened.

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