

Who Knew?

A Fraternity For Those Who Need One

Lionel Tiger, 04.29.09, 12:00 AM ET

The story from the White House is that President Obama has asked that each day 10 of the thousands of letters he receives are selected and brought to his attention. With this device he wants to know, to the extent that he can, how his correspondents regard his administration.

One letter he is sure to read, or at any rate should without question read, is dated April 17, 2009, and signed by Herman "Skip" Mason, who is general president of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity.

It's a 200,000-member group of African-American men at American universities that has churned out members of the American elite--both the light- and dark-skinned varieties. Its roster includes Martin Luther King, John Hope Franklin, Edward Brooke, Thurgood Marshall and Adam Clayton Powell, among many others.

The fraternity system has long been a significant spinal chord of social and professional life among African-American men. These organizations' initiation ceremonies are among the most demanding of any in the country; their esprit de corps among the most resilient. When I was serving as a witness in legal case against a (light-skinned) fraternity whose poorly supervised initiation led to the quadrapeligia of a recruit, data emerged describing actual branding with hot irons in one African-American national fraternity.

And of what do they write to the president?

The group is committed to developing leaders and providing advocacy for its communities. The letter asks the president to follow up his recent executive order, which established a White House Council on Women and Girls, and quickly create a White House Council on Men and Boys.

The female version was stimulated by Michelle Obama's policy group of highly educated activist concernocrats. Its establishment was about as controversial as the "Happy Birthday" section of the Hallmark card selection.

There is already a lively array of organizations devoted to female advancement, from the Title IX bureaucrats in the federal government to the Association for the Advancement of University Women, which remorselessly cries of poverty despite the fact that the great majority of university students and graduates are women.

But these Alpha males are drawing attention to a disastrous neighborhood of the City on the Hill, one that is most critical for men of African origin. It's also parlous for men of any lineage, skin color or region--and for the women and children who are in their lives or would like to be or should be.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics has announced that during our current economic misery, no less that 82% of job losers are men. (See: "[In This Recession, Men Drop Out](#)" and "[Life With Father](#).")

A Schott Foundation report from 2006 found that, in Chicago, only 35% of black male students graduated from high school. In the same year, New York boasted 26% of its black students reached that essential rung of the occupational ladder.

Beyond that, relatively few Afro-American men who actually complete high school then attend college. It appears to require an improbable giant step. And despite all the costly guilt-soothing government-mandated Vice Presidents for Affirmative Action and Remedial Programs in This-and-That, only 22% of the tiny number of African-origin college entrants nationally actually earn a degree.

With rather quick aggression, these fraternity males have asked the president--who should understand their rue and sense of curtailment--to begin in their community what should be a national renovation of an educational system which, for whatever reason, serves boys sharply less effectively than girls.

A tsunami of aggrieved feminist certainty has been justified in the past and still has vibrant utility somewhere and sometimes. But the shrinking disparity between male and female income prospects has had various impacts, not the least of which is that many men are now unattractive partners to many women because they are unlikely to be able to provide financial and occupational stability during the years of raising families that the majority of women still anticipate. So they have babies on their own, outside of marriage, with relative frequency. Meanwhile, the males become outlaws, not in-laws.

Since he is not a charter member of the kind of group that sent the letter, the president may understand the issue he is being asked to address less well than Michelle Obama could intuit the needs of women and girls, of whatever color and origin.

But this is a massive problem in one of the communities within which the president has taken personal and communal action. His functional response to this letter, which came from an impeccable and virtuous source, will be significant.

A vote of support from Obama is, however, likely to be a vote-loser; think of other pressing issues--teamsters and Mexican trucks and the UAW and financial sanity.

For some reason, there is only a wan constituency among females for pro-male action despite the fact that about half of children are boys and many women cohabit with the grown-up version. Nevertheless, when my book, *The Decline of Males*, was published, the warmest category of response was from the mothers of boys who saw their sons, whose energies of which no one fully comprehended, engaged in unequal struggles within the school system.

But little has changed for years, and countless young men live on an abrasive island with no bridges to anywhere.

Obama's personal example could have and should have an impact on the activity of males colored like him. I recently had the good fortune to witness a remarkable performance by Savion Glover, one of the finest tap dancers in the world. In the program notes for the show, he describes himself as "Savion Glover, hoofer, husband, father."

Lionel Tiger, a weekly columnist at *Forbes*, is the Charles Darwin professor of anthropology at *Rutgers University*. He is the author of *The Decline of Males* (St. Martins, 2000), *Men in Groups* (Marion Boyars, 1999) and *The Pursuit of Pleasure* (Transaction, 2000).