

National News

Portrait gallery displays life of Frederick Douglass

The National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. is observing the centennial of Frederick Douglass's death in February, which is celebrated as African-American History Month, with an exhibit titled: "Majestic in His Wrath: The Life of Frederick Douglass," which will be on display until Nov. 19. The exhibit contains more than 80 paintings, sculptures, photographs, engravings, documents, and personal memorabilia—from Douglass's days in slavery, through the Civil War, and on into the post-war period.

Among the items on view are papers granting Douglass's freedom in 1846, his letter to President Abraham Lincoln of 1864, and Douglass's own 1817 edition of *The Columbian Orator*—a book that fired him with ambition to become a public speaker and introduced him to anti-slavery thought.

Nettie Washington Douglass, who was on hand for the press opening of the exhibit, posed before a photograph of her great-grandfather. She is also the great-granddaughter of Booker T. Washington.

Calif. Speaker rakes Orange Co. proposals

California State Assembly Speaker Willie Brown criticized proposals by bankrupt Orange County for legislation to help it out of its financial crisis in a statement released on Feb. 12. "Whatever reasonable actions the legislature can take to help Orange County resolve its problems should, and, I am confident, will be pursued," he said. However, Orange County's plan "appears to go far beyond those measures which might be necessary to restore financial stability to encompass a political agenda which Orange County representatives have been trying to push through the legislature for years."

He said these measures included the removal of state mandates for social programs and the contracting out of county services to

private vendors. "Little consideration has been given to raising revenues internally, even though Orange County is one of the wealthiest municipalities in the nation, and even though leaders of the Orange County Business Council have called for some form of temporary tax increase to pay off the county's debts," Brown said.

The state legislature is "more than willing to cooperate in appropriate ways" in helping Orange County, he stressed. "However, it is important to remember that this crisis was not precipitated by some random and destructive act of nature over which no one had control. Rather, the problems are the result of irresponsible investment practices that, at times, appear to have been indistinguishable from high stakes gambling with public funds," he said.

Miss. privatization spree set back in state senate

On Feb. 9 the Mississippi State Senate by a vote of 25-24 again slapped down Gov. Kirk Fordice's efforts to privatize state services, this time by stopping expansion of the private collection of child support payments by the Maximus company. Fordice considers his state the "cutting edge" for the Conservative Revolution championed by U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), including privatization, prison and welfare slave labor, tax cuts, and a balanced budget. In his State of the State address, Fordice continued: "Much has been said and written about the new revolution in our nation's capital and the Contract with America. But when I examined the composition of this new revolution, I noticed something very striking. Virtually every reform measure being discussed has either already been done in Mississippi, or is in the process of being done."

George Bush has visited the governor several times, most recently accompanied by Lamar Alexander and Oliver North; the trio reportedly raised over \$800,000 in a single day for Fordice's upcoming reelection campaign.

The original Fordice plan involved expanding existing pilot programs in privatization in select counties to 82 counties, with the goal of privatizing the entire De-

partment of Human Services (DHS) budget. Budget belt-tightening aside, more than \$4 million has been spent in electronic and billboard advertising for the privatization spree.

Major opposition to privatization began last June, when Rep. Jim Evans (D-Jackson) introduced a two-sentence amendment to the enabling legislation for that year's \$400 million DHS budget. The amendment prohibited privatization of any office, division, or agency without a vote by general law of the legislature. Fordice vetoed the enabling legislation, rather than allow the Evans amendment to pass.

Thatcher's son target of \$7 million RICO suit

John Laughlin, a Houston, Texas businessman, has filed a \$7 million civil suit under the Racketeering and Influenced Corrupt Organizations statutes against Mark Thatcher, son of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The suit, filed in Harris County in mid-February, charges that Thatcher and several co-defendants engaged in a conspiracy to take over Ameristar Fuels, the jet fuel-trading company that Laughlin founded in 1990.

The suit alleges that the conspiracy began in May 1992, when Laughlin sought investors in his company to provide financing. He negotiated an agreement with David Wallace, a business partner of Mark Thatcher's (both men live in Dallas). By January 1994, they had forced Laughlin out of his company. (At the final board meeting he attended, Laughlin was physically thrown out of his own offices by Thatcher's personal bodyguard.)

Laughlin's suit charges that "Wallace and Thatcher, with the active assistance of . . . Akin, Gump attorneys have raped and pillaged the Ameristar Companies, misappropriating bank collateral, making fraudulent payments to themselves and related parties, suppressing financial information regarding the company, usurping corporate opportunities, and wasting assets." With its subsidiaries, the company, which was assigned a book value of \$2 million at the end of 1992 by an accounting firm, was put into

bankruptcy by Thatcher and Wallace in August 1994. By that time, according to the bankruptcy petition, the companies were showing a negative net worth of \$6 million.

Virginia ships 'excess' prisoners to Texas

The first shipment of what could be as many as 800 Virginia state prison inmates was sent to Texas on Feb. 15, in an outrageous violation of fundamental human rights. The prisoners were only told that they were going to a new prison, but not that it was in Texas. Virginia has now joined Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and North Carolina in shipping out their inmates like so many head of cattle to states where there is surplus prison space. Kent Willis, executive director of the Virginia American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), protested the policy: "Inmates who maintain contact with their families are less likely to repeat crimes when released. . . . You couldn't do this to a regular citizen."

On the same day, the Virginia legislature passed a bill requiring that prison inmates pay for their medical care. Many local jails have already instituted this practice, charging as much as \$10 for a dose of Tylenol. Proponents of the measure say that it dissuades prisoners from making "frivolous" demands for medical care.

Reich asks Armev for debate on wages

Secretary of Labor Robert Reich told an television interviewer on a Washington, D.C. station that the American "wage structure has been collapsing for 15 years," and went on to challenge House Majority Leader Richard Armev (R-Tex.) to a debate over the minimum wage law. Armev is working to block the Clinton administration's attempts to raise the minimum wage. Reich said the issue is "not just minimum wage workers. It's workers who are low wage workers. It's workers at the median wage."

"That Contract with America or on

America—whatever it's called—is doing nothing for average workers or minimum wage workers. They're taking a position against it. They want to take away student loans. They want to attack health and safety for ordinary workers. Their welfare plan that they just revealed basically doesn't move people from welfare to work. It keeps people, essentially, on welfare, it just turns off, gives the states an envelope and says, 'You figure out how to do it.'"

Reich noted, "We have 11 million workers who are now working under \$5.15. The President wants to raise the minimum wage. You cannot get off welfare and move into work if you are at the minimum wage; \$8,500 or \$10,000—that is just not enough to live on."

Reich concluded that Armev "likes to debate. . . . I think he owes it to the American people. And I'm looking forward to it."

'Frontline' cites North role in Barry Seal death

The public television broadcast "Frontline" in mid-February cited Oliver North's involvement in the death of Drug Enforcement Administration informant Barry Seal, in an hour-and-a-half exposé on Colombian cocaine king Pablo Escobar. In 1986, North, who was aware that his Nicaraguan Contras were running cocaine, allowed photos of the Sandinistas and Escobar loading a drug shipment onto one of Seal's cargo planes, thereby targeting Seal for the drug cartel. He was gunned down in Florida shortly thereafter.

According to Frontline, when President Reagan was planning a national TV address that would include a plug for aid to the Nicaraguan Contras, Oliver North approached the DEA and wanted to have the President show the photos. Frontline interviewed a top former DEA official, who told Frontline that he had informed North this "wouldn't be such a good idea." Reagan gave his speech, and within days the incriminating photos appeared in the *Washington Times*.

Frontline did not mention the drug-running operations of North and the Contras, nor that North was working for George Bush.

Briefly

● **MISSISSIPPI'S** Senate, some 130 years after the Civil War, voted unanimously on Feb. 16 to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which outlawed slavery in the United States.

● **GREENPEACE U.S.A.** Executive Director Barbara Dudley led a demonstration on Feb. 17 in front of Mexico's Washington embassy on behalf of the Zapatista terrorists in Chiapas.

● **THE NATIONAL SCIENCE** Foundation, "alarmed at how badly minority students across the country are faring in math and science," will direct \$105 million in grant money to seven school districts over the next five years. Experts who have developed new, "voluntary" standards are urging educators to spend more time in "creative, interactive" learning, rather than in memorizing terms or equations.

● **THE WHITE HOUSE** has beefed up its legal staff in anticipation of hearings on Capitol Hill and more Whitewater subpoenas, adding two lawyers from the firm of Lloyd Cutler, the veteran Washington attorney who temporarily served as Clinton's counsel last year.

● **THE FBI** now has more than 100 agents based in Little Rock, Arkansas, working on the Whitewater investigations, according to the Feb. 16 *New York Post*.

● **THE NAACP** executive board, by a one-vote margin, ended William F. Gibson's decade-long tenure as chairman of the nation's oldest civil rights organization and voted in Myrlie Evers-Williams on Feb. 19.

● **AFL-CIO** longtime president Lane Kirkland may face a challenge to his leadership, according to a Feb. 22 *New York Times* story about the organization's winter meeting. Some member unions are said to be upset about the lack of pressure on the Clinton administration.