

Smiley takes on Obama at Florida Memorial

Contributed by JOY-ANN REID

Talk show host and political commentator Tavis Smiley dove headlong into the controversy over Barack Obama's former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, as he headlined Florida Memorial University's Second Annual Presidential Scholarship Banquet last weekend.

Smiley addressed the controversy over his frequent criticism of Obama's presidential campaign, calling Obama "a friend of mine"; but admonishing "all the Obama supporters in the room"; that voting for the candidate won't wipe the historical slate clean between black and white America, "just as voting for Hillary won't do away with the legacy of sexism in America."

Smiley chided Obama for his recent condemnation of Wright, the recently retired pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, over sermons that were recently distributed over the Internet, including one

in which Wright tied the 9/11 terror attacks to the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and U.S. policy in the Middle East and South Africa.

Smiley said he was distressed by what he called Obama "throwing Wright under the bus"; adding that many of Wright's criticisms of U.S. policy have been echoed in the work of black intellectuals, including Harvard University law professor Charles Ogletree, Pulitzer Prize winning author Toni Morrison, and his friend and mentor, Cornel West, whom Smiley said wrote in his book, Democracy Matters about America's "chickens coming home to roost"; on 9/11.

The March 15 event commemorated the university's 40th anniversary in South Florida. The school, founded in 1879 in St. Augustine, moved to Miami Gardens in 1968.

"We're very proud of our institution," university president Karl S. Wright said before the event. "We're looking forward to another 129 years."

School seeks donors

The event, emceed by NBC 6 anchor/reporter DeMarco Morgan, was part celebration, part fundraiser. The need to raise resources for the school was addressed by several speakers, including Barbara J. Edwards, the university's vice president for institutional advancement.

Edwards reminded the crowd that the purpose of the event was "to raise money for scholarships to help our students stay in school."

During his remarks, Karl Wright emphasized that 75 percent of the school's 2,000-plus students are the first in their families to go to college, and that most receive tuition assistance. "In August of 2007, we had to send 240 students home who had come to register for classes because they had no money," said Karl Wright, who invited those in attendance, along with the entire South Florida community to "adopt the school as its alma mater."

The school hopes to convince donors to give at least \$40 to the school in honor of their anniversary.

Alumni could be key to the university's efforts: according to the university's president, Florida Memorial graduates rank sixth in the state for starting salaries after graduation.

"That's higher than U.M.," he said.

And while the emphasis of the event was on fundraising, the focal point of the evening was the conferral of an honorary doctorate on Smiley, who noted that "it's not even commencement season." The honor was his first this year.

In his speech before receiving the degree, Smiley noted that the school's inaugural year in South Florida coincided with "the very year that we lost the greatest American ever produced," Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Smiley credited Mack King Carter, pastor of New Mount Olive Baptist Church in Fort Lauderdale and a Florida Memorial trustee, for getting him to South Florida.

"I'm here because Mack King Carter called and told me to get on a plane," he said.

Smiley lauded the school for striving to produce leaders in the "Kingian" mold, saying that as he sees it, the challenge for Florida Memorial or any historically black college is to provoke students to "wrestle with what it means to be a free black man or a free black woman in America in the 21st century."

"There are just two kinds of black folk" in America, Smiley continued. "Those running free, and those running scared."

Addressing the Obama issue

Smiley seemed to address Obama over the Rev. Jeremiah Wright controversy as he told the sometimes apprehensive crowd, "If you're gonna condemn the remarks every time someone shows you a transcript, you're gonna be throwing Negroes under the bus every week." And he added, "we ain't got to demonize 'us' to prove our loyalty to 'them.'"

Smiley, who has been sharply criticized by some African-Americans for his lack of support for a man many consider to be the most credible black candidate for president to date, said he has received threats following caustic commentaries about Obama on "The Tom Joyner Morning Show."

Yet he pulled no punches in taking on the Illinois Senator, turning his keynote speech into a vigorous defense of Rev. Wright, and of African-American patriotism.

"The thing about the Jeremiah Wright situation that's so troubling to me is that you can't let other folk define the terms. Some folk have learned to love this country 'because of …,' most of us in this room have learned to love this country 'in spite of,' and we're still patriots. So I'm not gonna let Sean Hannity, or John McCain, or anybody else define for me what patriotism is. You've got to love your country enough to tell the truth."

Smiley even took a page from Obama's campaign, saying black America has historically been "living in a place called hope" – hoping to live in a country "as good as its promise," even though evidence that the country has lived up to its promise failed to materialize.

He told the assembled students, faculty and supporters, that to be "free," they had to be prepared to tell the truth.

Of Obama, he asked, "if you're asking for black folks' support, do you love us? Will you tell the truth about our suffering?"

Smiley praised the university's work in helping to educate a new generation of leaders. And he closed his remarks quoting both King and West, choosing the King quote: "Cowardice asks the question: 'Is it safe?' Expediency asks the question: 'is it politic?' Vanity asks the question: 'Is it popular?' But conscience asks the question: 'Is it right'," saying, "there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because one's conscience tells one what is right."

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Photo: Tavis Smiley