

Who is a Sellout?

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Randall Kennedy, Michael R. Klein Professor of Law at Harvard University, is the author of the controversial book *Sellout: The Politics of Racial Betrayal* (2008.) Kennedy was moved to write the book because many African Americans had accused him of being a sellout. Often, he has been accused of being a sellout for not supporting positions that most African Americans support. He was also called a sellout for writing the controversial book *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, in which he argued, among other things, that there are times when even Whites should be able to use the N-word as a “term of endearment” in reference to African Americans. (Kennedy is also fond of using antiquated terms such as “Negro” and “colored” in reference to Blacks.)

Kennedy has stringent criteria for determining that one might be a sellout, and concludes that true Black sellouts are very rare – almost non-existent. He even concludes that Clarence Thomas could not be strictly considered a sellout. He ends his book by stating that the concept of the sellout “is more of a bane than a benefit to black folks’ ongoing struggle for advancement.” (p. 194)

Kennedy notes that when, in June 1822, Denmark Vesey attempted to start a slave rebellion in Charleston, South Carolina, a house slave named Peter Prioleau told White authorities about the plot, and it was thwarted. Kennedy writes that in response: “The South Carolina Assembly enacted special legislation to free Prioleau on Christmas Day of 1822 and to award him a lifetime annual pension of one hundred dollars, which he used to purchase several slaves for himself.” (p. 37)

In the 1960s, Malcolm X popularized the idea of the “house Negro” or “house nigger” as the ultimate Black sellout. However, for Kennedy, even a Black slave that rats out his fellow Blacks to quell an uprising against slavery might not even be a true sellout. After all, Kennedy reasons, that alleged sellout might merely have been worried that the rebellion would fail and cause much harm to slaves after the failure had occurred. In this case, Kennedy argues, the alleged sellout would have actually been trying to look out for the best interests of his people. (Similarly, Kennedy argues that those Blacks that spied and informed on Black groups such as the Black Panthers might have only done so because they sincerely believed that such militant Black groups would only damage the struggle for Black uplift.)

First, the proverbial road to Hell is paved with good intentions, so the alleged sellout could actually be doing harm to the cause of Black advancement. Second, we would have to be fair and consistent with this line of argument. If a Black person truly believed that Martin Luther King was a communist, and that communism was bad for Black people in particular, and that Black person spied on Martin Luther King for J. Edgar Hoover, that Black person could not be truly considered a sellout. Similarly, any Black person that fought for the South during the Civil War that truly believed that the South offered Black people the best chance for uplift could not be considered a true sellout. More importantly for a more recent situation, if an American truly believed that capitalism was bad for the U.S. and that communism was the way to go, that person could not be considered a true traitor if he worked as a spy for the Soviets. It seems clear that supposed good intentions will only take one so far where selling out is concerned.

Kennedy is right to maintain that we must be careful when deeming one a sellout. (After all, during the heyday of the civil rights movement, Malcolm X and other Black militants accused Martin Luther King, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young and other major mainstream leaders of being integrationist, nonviolent sellouts.)

Today, Blacks could be called sellouts just for daring to think outside the box and not supporting affirmative action, not voting Democratic, for embracing or rejecting certain religions, listening to certain kinds of music, wearing certain clothes, “talking and acting White,” having non-Black spouses and other superficial reasons. Similarly, among feminists, women could be considered sellouts for arguing in defense of porn or prostitution, arguing against abortion, etc.

Ironically, those most likely to deem others sellouts are among the worst sellouts. The Reactionary Black Nationalist Marcus Garvey formed loose alliances with the Ku Klux Klan. The Nation of Islam (NOI) formed loose alliances with the American Nazi Party, the White Aryan Resistance and other White supremacists. Worst of all, the NOI under Minister Louis Farrakhan’s leadership served as apologists for anti-Black slave owners in Sudan in recent years. It is hard to imagine that there might be a good reason why a “strong Black leader” should argue that Black people should be enslaved, especially in the 21st Century!

Among non-theists, some of the hardliners believe that those secular humanists arguing for working with like-minded theists are collaborators with the enemy. However, this is hardly the same as reactionary Blacks working with the sworn enemies of Black people and modern day slavers.

Sellouts do exist. However, one must not be labeled a sellout simply for thinking outside the box or working with like-minded people from other groups. (After all, someone once said that where everyone thinks alike, no one thinks very much.) Moreover, there should not be any strong emphases placed upon superficial traits and practices. Yet when someone works with the sworn enemies of their people *against* their people, it does not matter much why they do so. Furthermore, when someone like Clarence Thomas officiates at the wedding of the racially inflammatory Rush Limbaugh and votes against Black people on the Supreme Court every time the opportunity presents itself, Black people are not overreacting when they label him a sellout.

We must have unity without unanimity. We must be free to be ourselves without doing damage to the ongoing quest for freedom, justice and equality. However, first and foremost, we must seriously consider the consequences that our actions are likely to have for our people.