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How friction flared into racial tension at Penn

By ELIJAH ANDERSON

To understand why the Penn "water-buffalo" incident has become such an emotionally charged issue, one must look at it in the general context of contemporary American race relations.

The incident grows out of the unfinished business of the civil rights movement and the incomplete inclusion of blacks into mainstream society. That is a difficult passage made incredibly more difficult by the tense atmosphere that surrounds much of the racial coexistence that has been achieved. In addition, this incident must be viewed in context of 12 years of national retreat on race matters.

In the late '60s, in the midst of the civil rights movement, college campuses were generally tolerant of the idea of black presence — in part because black and white activists demanded it and black presence was virtually nil.

Today, college students and other Americans sense a shrinking economic pie. More people question the value of affirmative action, and some whites feel they now suffer as a result of black gains. At the same time, the racial and ethnic configuration of the campus has changed. Students now come from a greater variety of backgrounds, including lower-middle-class backgrounds traditionally less tolerant of others outside their group, in large part due to decades of competition for jobs and neighborhoods.

Moreover, many whites feel put upon to some extent by black presence, asking, "Why should blacks have any special treatment?" Such people very often ignore the peculiar racial history of the country in which blacks have been left out of so much. These whites have no real sympathy for government actions to remedy decades of second-class citizenship. And some are letting their feelings be known by physical and verbal acts of intolerance, which then result in the kind of



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frictions that become interpreted and defined as racial tension, even if the problem was not originally caused by prejudice. The context becomes racially charged.

The consequences of persistent racial tension can be found on campuses all over this country, not just Penn, but Dartmouth, Duke and the University of Massachusetts. Some schools, Penn among them, have put in place institutional mechanisms to adjudicate these incidents. To its credit, Penn has formulated a racial harassment policy, but a policy cannot of itself change attitudes; nor does the process satisfy everyone. In all of these places, there is a vocal minority of students on either side of the line, who have been conditioned to see the campus as contested terrain. They look on members of the other group with suspicion and distrust and are more than ready to approach one event or circumstance with hostility.

The history of black students at Penn reveals that they have received their share of

harassment over the years. People have reported to me isolated incidents in which they have been called "nigger" or had urine-filled balloons thrown at them or been subjected to hostile shouts from windows of dormitories.

Whenever black students gather, they become something of a spectacle for others who may be ready to insult them. Occasionally an incident does occur, especially around dormitories and especially when the people who do the insulting think they can be anonymous, by hiding be-

hind building walls, for example. One black professor told me that he had eggs thrown at him from a dorm window one night. Of course, not all white students — or even most — are engaging in this kind of behavior, but enough are to make life uncomfortable for blacks.

In such an uneasy environment, any activity can quickly take on a racial edge — speeding bicyclists, loud marching bands, or rowdy fraternity parties cause irritation and take on a peculiar racial meaning when black students are involved. These students complain that the campus police consistently treat them more harshly than they treat white students who engage in similar behavior. This may be due in part to the inability of the police to distinguish between black students and "troublemakers" from the surrounding community, but the result is that black students often do not feel at home on campus. Blacks are further frustrated by the knowledge that most white students are un-

aware of this state of affairs since such incidents tend to occur at night when there are few witnesses. The Daily Pennsylvanian, the student newspaper, ignores them.

In the most recent incident at Penn — near midnight in January at the beginning of the spring semester — it appears that a group of black women were outdoors celebrating their sorority's founding. The people who claim to have been disturbed were on the sixth floor of a nearby high-rise dormitory. There is a question as to how much noise penetrated the building, but at any rate, a number of the students in the building began yelling racial epithets at the women. One young man evidently shouted out, "Shut up, water buffalo!" The authorities were called. This student was the only one to admit having said anything, but he insists that what he said was not a racial slur. However, other students were heard by the women and other students yelling things like "nigger," "black bitch" and "Go back to the zoo!"

The term "water buffalo," which I've never heard used as a racial epithet, easily becomes interpreted as such because of the context, and the emphasis on this trivializes the important social issues. Ordinarily, this would just be a normal dispute among students, without the racial edge. But because the people are of a different color and because of this history, this friction can be defined — by the participants — as racial. It becomes hard for blacks to believe that this white male student did not have racial connotations in mind. They ask, "What if . . . ?" What if the women had been white? Would they have been subjected to similar abuse? Blacks think not.

Not all white students are resistant to black presence at Penn, but some really do feel threatened as black students begin to make their presence felt as ordinary students. These people take exception to black students claiming to be full persons on campus and hold them especially accountable for not walking a very sharp line of propriety. Any deviance that a black student displays is likely to be magnified, especially by those

who are intolerant of the diversity that they add to the campus.

Willfully ignorant of conditions for blacks in this country before the civil rights movement, many white students view affirmative action as a bad policy, one that has a negative impact directly on them and their friends. These same students feel they are exercising their rights of free speech by reminding blacks that they are outsiders, marginal people lacking full rights, obligations and duties. These students reserve this right no matter how inhospitable or hurtful such words might seem.

The resulting polarization makes black students feel that whites are outsiders in the struggle for an egalitarian society. Blacks say, "I do not want to be reminded that I am not a full citizen. I *am* a full citizen."

The fact that they have to claim it, to pronounce it, speaks volumes about their actual sense of inclusion in university life and the social tightrope that they walk. The Daily Pennsylvanian, the student newspaper, is viewed by many black students as racist, inclined to remind blacks repeatedly of their inferior status on Penn's campus. And with this in mind, some black students sought to demonstrate their profound dissatisfaction with this organ that represents the student body at Penn by intercepting and throwing away most of one day's copies. To many, this protest was successful because it drew attention to the desperate plight of black students on campus.

So each camp approaches the other with something of a deficit model in mind. Each group has a hole to get out of before it can begin to communicate with the other. In this context, it is hard for them to see each other without prejudice, and the result is that ordinary behavior engaged in by students who are not yet deemed ordinary becomes racially significant.

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