

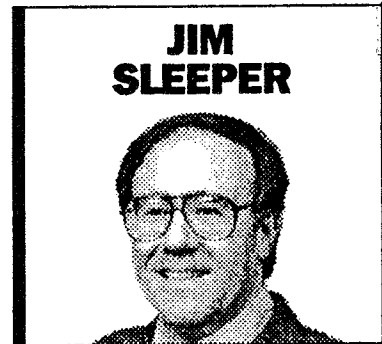
Deep roots of resentment

'GRAY COWAN called about a most able Negro student, Leonard Jeffries by name, who just passed his Ph.D. orals with flying colors," begins a Rockefeller Foundation internal memorandum dated Feb. 2, 1965. The ensuing correspondence opens a small window on the big question of how a promising Africanist became a professor of pigmentation.

Cowan, an establishment type who had founded Columbia University's Program of Studies on Africa, asked the Rockefeller people to

support the 28-year-old Jeffries' doctoral research on Ivory Coast politics. Jeffries was, Cowan wrote, "by all odds one of the best Negro students we have had ..." and "one of the most pleasant and interesting people I know, with a wide contact in, and apparently excellent rapport with, both French and English-speaking Africa."

Jeffries was "perfectly fluent" in French, having spent 1959-60 in Lausanne, Switzerland. He'd been a group leader in Operation Crossroads, a pre-cursor of the Peace Corps that sent mostly white, mid-



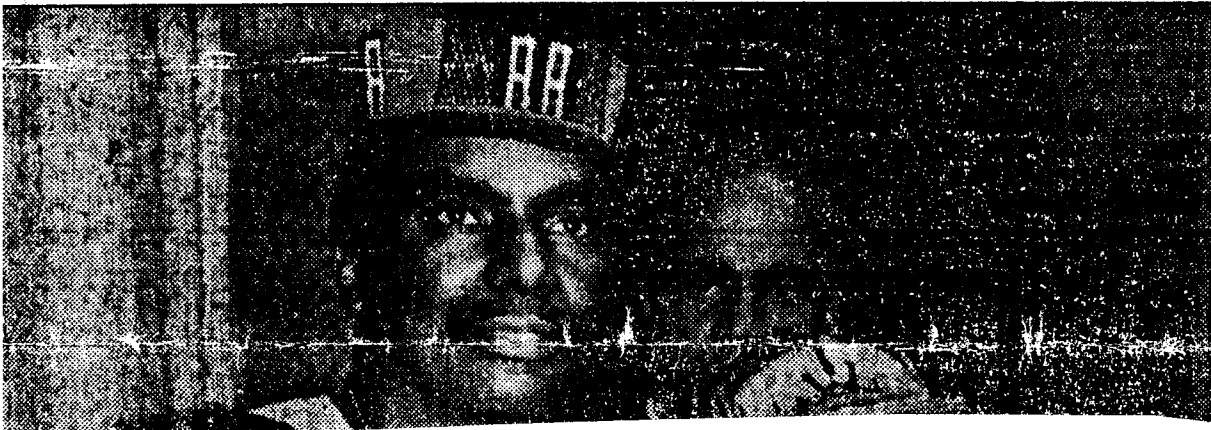
**JIM
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dle-class Americans to work in African villages. While at Columbia, he'd shared an apartment amicably with three whites, including two Jews, before marrying and moving to 304 W. 102d St. in

1965.

But Rockefeller didn't give grants for pre-doctoral research. Any support for Jeffries "would have to be on a most exceptional basis under the foundation's program of equal opportunity," the foundation's deputy director, Ralph Davidson answered Cowan. "How would you rate Jeffries? ... in the upper half of your students? Upper quarter? Top 10%? Top 1%?"

The top 10, Cowan replied, but then waffled a bit, feeling his way into the uncharted territory of affirmative action: "Anyone checking (Jeffries') early record ... would not be inclined, I think, to rate him as highly as I have." Usually, Cowan added, "I make a specific point of not indicating ... that I am recommending a Negro student. ... There are, however, times, I think, when the background of a Negro student should be brought out, not ... to lean over backwards to assist such a student, but simply to point up his relatively comparative position with other students."



is mature, sensible, relatively modest, and has a good sense of humor."

A \$6,500 grant was approved. "We are extremely grateful for your assist and will do everything we can to justify your investment," Jeffries wrote for himself and his wife, who helped in his research. He accounted for every penny and finished his dissertation.

Some observations:

■ Jeffries' benefactors tried honestly to balance equal opportunity with high standards. They didn't insult him by parting the waters for the mere semblance of scholarship. Indeed, the well-traveled, French-speaking scholar whom City College hired to run its new Black Studies program in 1972 was a far better academic than Yolanda Moses, whom CCNY hired as its president 21 years later.

■ Still, CCNY did violate its standards to give Jeffries instant tenure. Why? Perhaps partly because he'd already been vetted and backed by the cream of the WASP elite, who in those days still told people what to do. The Ford Foundation, for instance, had recently convinced the city to accept a school "community control" experiment in Brooklyn that would run off the rails, much as Jeffries has now done. Just as the communal democracy expected by Ford curdled into thuggery in Brownsville, so the "national asset" Cowan and Rockefeller thought they were nurturing became an embarrassment — especially for serious Africanists.

■ But why? Did Jeffries resent being seen as an "asset" to an establishment whose political and national-security agenda wasn't his own? Did it rankle him to be treated as what Yale Law School Prof. Stephen Carter calls the "best black" — one of the best *Negro* students, as Cowan put it, rather than one of the best, period?

IF SO (Jeffries hasn't returned my calls), tenure certainly freed him from having to be poked at and picked over ever again. Whatever other changes he's gone through, Leonard Jeffries seems to have used his academic security to make the white world pay for the dutiful performance it demanded of him 28 years ago.

Then Cowan showed his trump card. What counts, he wrote, is not whether Jeffries will be "among the most brilliant scholars in the field, . . . but rather that, with his combination of personality . . . and the evident confidence which he has been able to develop in African circles, he is an asset which we may well need in this country in the near future. There are some things which our Negro students will be able to accomplish which our white students will not," and that is "to our national advantage in the long run."

In those years of our domestic civil-rights movement, emerging black pride, decolonization abroad and Cold War paranoia, Americans were jittery about the new African republics. Jeffries proposed to show how the Ivory Coast's embrace of capitalism and the West — unlike the failing socialism of Ghana and Guinea — "demonstrates a highly effective model which other African republics may follow."

Davidson and his Rockefeller colleagues got Cowan's hint. They took the "highly unusual" step of interviewing Jeffries on March 25, 1965, and found him user-friendly as well as useful: He "makes an extraordinarily good impression," they reported. "He