

OTHER VOICES

Spike Lee does the unconscionable thing

WASHINGTON — With the election (successfully) concluded, we can now turn our attention to Spike Lee, the cinematic pamphleteer, and his request that only black journalists interview him about his soon to be released film, "Malcolm X."

RICHARD COHEN



Lee and his studio, Warner Brothers, insist that no rigid rule has been set down and only a mere preference has been stated. Nevertheless, no matter what term is used — a request, a demand or something else entirely — it's a bow toward racism. For Spike Lee, the best journalists are born (black) and not made.

Lee gives two reasons for his request. The first is to encourage — or even compel — publications to hire and use black writers. Nothing wrong with that. Experience shows that it has taken more than good intentions to get mainstream newspapers or magazines to hire and use African Americans. Community pressure and bracing legal suits have done wonders. Suddenly, qualified blacks materialize where, supposedly, none existed before. If Lee is merely attempting to make more materialize, then more power to him.

But his other argument is more problematical — and worrisome. A Warner Brothers official put it this way: "Spike genuinely feels on 'Malcolm X' that black writers come interview him with a greater degree of understanding, both spiritually and intellectually" than do white writers. "They come in with a greater depth, a greater understanding. That's not to say that he gets an easy ride from black writers." Maybe not. But it sure seems that's what he's looking for.

To understand what's wrong about Lee's request — and what's wrong about acceding to it, as at least one publication has done — it's important to pay attention to precedent. Lee says he has it on his side. Hollywood stars — and Lee is certainly one — are notorious for seeking out sympathetic journalists and refusing to deal with those they fear will be critical. The names usually mentioned in this regard are Tom Cruise, Michael Douglas, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Julia Roberts.

Lee's obligation as a filmmaker — and as a businessman — is to make a movie that a viewer can understand regardless of race. Otherwise, he has failed as an artist and in his hands Malcolm X remains a parochial figure.

Politicians occasionally attempt something similar. We are told that President George Bush felt he could not get a fair hearing from Peter Jennings and Tom Brokaw, among others, and refused to be interviewed by them. This, at least, was the common wisdom in my business about a month ago and it was — for the record — denied by the White House. Still, for the presidential debates, journalists were chosen and blackballed for reasons having nothing to do with professional ability.

But in all of these cases, the selecting is done on an individual basis. Lee, though, is dealing in a whole class of people — a race, in fact — that he finds unsuitable. He says, reasonably enough, that blacks probably have a different, more sympathetic, take on Malcolm X (the man or the movie) than

whites. Surely, though, that's a gross generality — as pernicious, in its own way, as the generalization that young black males represent a physical threat. This, we are told, is no reason for a cabdriver, for instance, to reject a potential passenger — and, in many cities, the law forbids it.

In his own mind, Lee may think he is practicing a kind of affirmative action of the sort sanctioned by law. But he is not. The selling of a movie (or Spike Lee himself) can hardly be called national policy and it's hard to connect it to a societal good. On the contrary, he has inadvertently put his finger on an aspect of affirmative action that even its defenders (me, for instance) find troubling: its preoccupation with race or ethnicity at the expense of individuality. One may ask, for instance, why a middle-class, African-American law

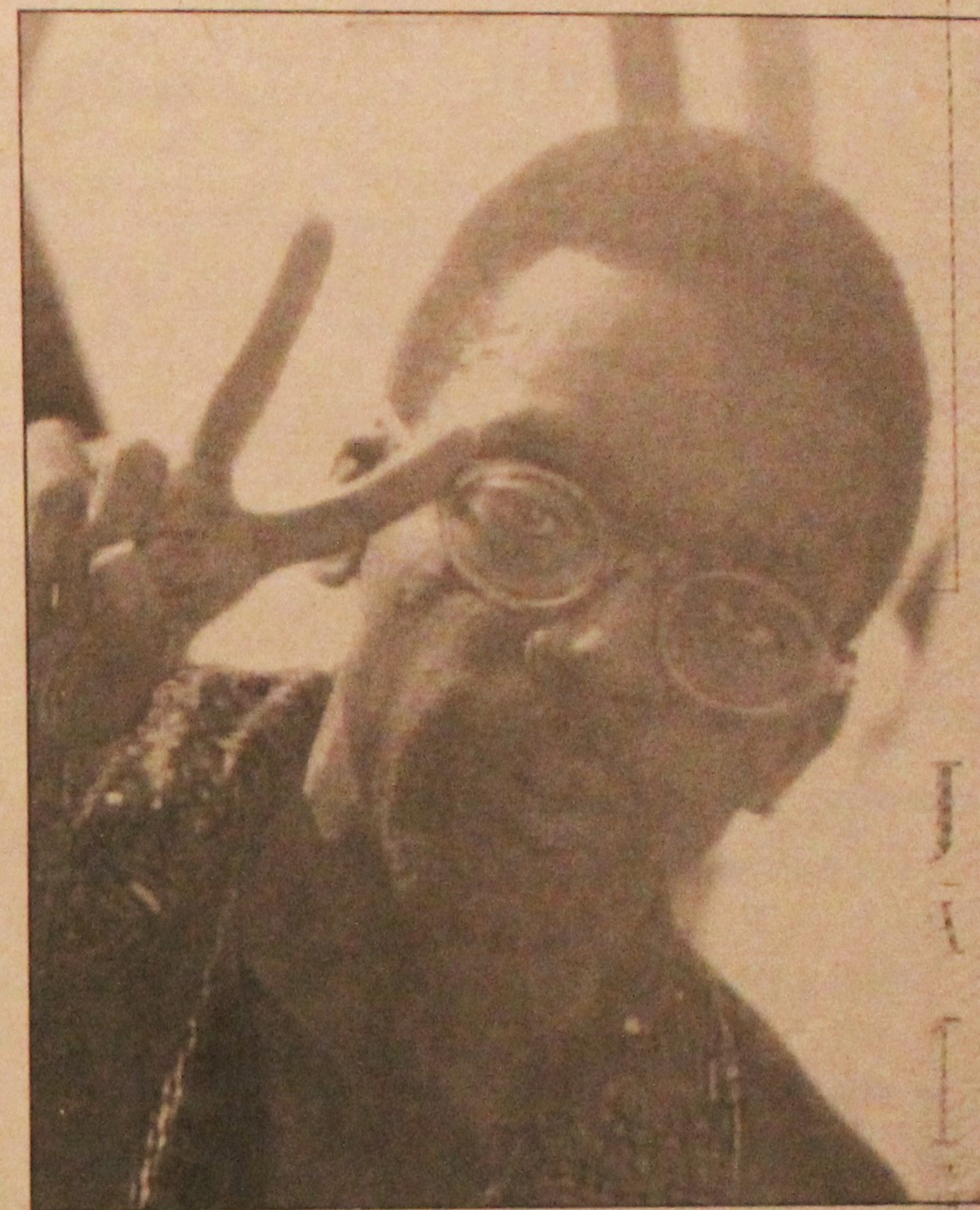
school applicant should be favored over, say, a poor white who has been even more disadvantaged.

Anyone can see what Lee is talking about and understand his stated intentions. But his obligation as a filmmaker — and, incidentally, as a businessman — is to make a movie that a viewer can understand regardless of race. Otherwise, he has failed as an artist and in his hands Malcolm X remains a parochial figure, whose story appeals only to blacks and not someone whose life — and intellectual growth — is of universal interest.

Just as clearly, the obligation of newspapers and magazines is to demand that their writers be judged as individuals, not as members of a particular race, gender or ethnic group. For too long, blacks have been the victims of exactly the sort of practices Lee is now advocating. His policy, no matter how benign his intentions, smacks of the sort of separatism that Malcolm X himself was coming to repudiate before he was killed.

I will see the movie with an open mind. That, it seems, is more than Spike Lee has about me.

Washington Post Writers Group



Spike Lee

French whine, but Bush had no choice but to retaliate against EC barriers

WASHINGTON — Trade wars are preferable to the shooting kind. But the looming \$1-billion misunderstanding over U.S. soybeans and French Chablis is a particularly senseless conflict. It has little to do with trade and everything to do with politics and hidden agendas in Europe.

JIM HOAGLAND



For the foreign policy president — a man who wants to be remembered for ending the Cold War, reuniting Germany and making Europe "whole and free" — threatening trade retaliation is a sad, silly, sour way to spend the dying embers phase of his administration.

But President George Bush has no other choice in responding to the naked provocation of the European Community, which fronts for a French government that is raising the art of political

cynicism to new levels, even by French standards.

The president, by contrast, has acted with restraint and skill in managing this dispute in the midst of the U.S. election campaign. He kept it out of the campaign, even though there may have been electoral advantage to breaking off talks, waving the flag and bashing trade-cheating foreigners.

Bush continued to play Dr. Jekyll in foreign affairs while slashing and burning as Mr. Hyde on the campaign trail. Bush-Jekyll was presidential in private, even as Bush-Hyde left no stone unhurled at Bill Clinton.

The details of the breakdown of the trade talks add some last strokes to the one-term portrait that history will paint of Bush as a man of unconnectable parts. But the mutual threats of new retaliatory trade barriers echoing between Washington and Brussels — at a time when the Uruguay Round talks on global commerce are deadlocked — reach far into the future as well.

Unless the trade war is avoided, President-elect Clinton faces a rocky start with the nations that he most

needs to construct a durable post-Cold War international order, a task that eluded Bush.

In the Cold War, the politics of security drove international relations: America was willing to rebuild Europe and Japan to contain communism and then to make concessions on trade and finance to keep a united anti-Soviet front. Now the politics of trade will dominate the international agenda: Nations must strike internal balances between producers and consumers and reach external arrangements for mutual economic benefit.

Clinton built a large part of his campaign around that sentiment, and repeated it after the election by promising to focus, laser-like, on the U.S. economy. But the soybeans-Chablis dispute shows how difficult it will be to untangle economic and political, foreign and domestic, in today's interdependent world.

To understand this dispute, you do not need to know much about oil seeds. It is French and German politics that explain the otherwise inexplicable European refusal to reach an easy deal.

Generally speaking, Washington wants Europe to cut subsidies to farmers growing soybeans and other oil seeds so America can compete more effectively in European markets. The U.S. position has been upheld twice in international arbitration. Yet Europe refuses to come to terms. Why?

The conventional wisdom is that France's Socialist government, facing elections in March, cannot afford to lose farm votes by conceding anything.

For once that underestimates French cynicism. The Socialists know they cannot win in March. They know they will have to turn over control of the National Assembly to a coalition of centrist and conservative parties five months from now. They are stalling any deal so they can hand off to their successors implementation of the unpopular agricultural reforms the Socialists agreed to last spring within the European Community.

That is the hidden agenda. By blocking the trade talks, the Socialists stall implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy reforms, which take away more from French farmers

than would an oil seeds deal or success in the Uruguay Round. Along the way, the Socialists pick up political credit at home for standing up against the Americans in what is really a phony dispute.

The French unwillingness to accept any deal became apparent to U.S. negotiators by mid-October. But at the urging of British Prime Minister John Major, Bush agreed to one last round of U.S.-EC talks in Chicago the first week in November — effectively postponing the announcement of retaliation until after Election Day and keeping positions from hardening irrevocably, in Major's view.

Bush is right to impose duties on European white wine and keep the pressure on Europe during the transition. He must get German Chancellor Helmut Kohl to apply at long last real pressure on the French to deal. Kohl owes Bush heavily for the U.S. role in German unification. It is time for the chancellor to pay up to the departing president.

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