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“Black Americans’ International Relations”

There are “urban legends” concerning Black Americans who may have strayed ever so slightly from blind support of the US *status quo* when engaging at the international level. If you are post-millennial, then you may not be familiar with two important Black Americans, who were associated with the US Government, but who lost their lives while abroad: US Representative Mickey Leland (D-TX); and one-time Chairman of the Democratic Party and Secretary of the Department of Commerce Ron Brown. They were both killed in airplane crashes.¹

At the same time, we should recall Rev. Jessie Jackson’s effort to secure the freedom of a Black American US Navy Pilot, Lt. Robert Goodman, who was held in Syria in 1984. Also, Minister Louis Farrakhan is well known for his myriad trips abroad, which may be interpreted as efforts to obtain international support for Black Americans.

We raise these historical notes in connection with Brittney Griner’s current detainment in

Russia. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be a Black American personality today who is of sufficient stature to intervene and secure Griner’s release. This is unfortunate.

Importantly, the Griner case raises political, social, and economic concerns about which Black Americans should be cognizant.

On the political front, illegal drug trafficking, use, and abuse in Russia is widespread and well known.² Therefore, Griner’s detention on an illegal drug (marijuana concentrate) possession charge could be viewed as highly political. Accordingly, Black American overseas travelers should recognize that we may become pawns in political skirmishes between the US and foreign governments.

Socially, the US media has emphasized Griner’s drug charge without explaining specific details of the charge.³ Moreover, the US media has amplified Griner’s sexuality. In combination (drugs and sexuality), these two factors stand to orient conservative

¹ Another related example is Malcolm X’s troubles while traveling abroad during the 1960s.

² See Mark Galeotti (2016) “Narcotics and Nationalism: Russian Drug Policies and Futures;” <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/galeotti-russia-final.pdf> (Ret. 072922).

³ For example, to our knowledge, the press has not specified how much of the illegal substance was in Griner’s possession, nor that possession of the

substance is illegal in the US (regardless of the amount) at the Federal level; selected US states permit use of the substance. We observed only one press statement that Griner’s use of the substance was approved by her physician in Arizona (see Jim Heintz, (2022), “Griner lawyer: WNBA star had doctor’s note for cannabis use;” <https://apnews.com/article/brittney-griner-trial-updates-142a994fb4067c2b48029e4566169f04> (Ret. 072122)).

Americans against US Government forceful action to secure Griner’s release. It goes without saying that the media’s persistent reminders concerning Griner’s role as an athlete reinforce adverse Black American stereotypes.

From an economic perspective, we should never forget that Griner was engaged in enterprise abroad—potentially to the disquiet of the US corporate enterprise that also engages her services.⁴ We have observed no indications in the press that her US employer is vigorously pressing the US Government to seek Griner’s release.⁵

In addition, there is potential negative fallout from the Griner case for Black Americans who desire to engage in enterprise abroad as

foreign governments and people may link us—consciously or subliminally—to the scourge of drugs and other illegal activities. This raises another hurdle for Black American individuals and firms seeking to expand market access to do business internationally. To be successful despite the Griner case, we must identify methods for inoculating foreign governments, peoples, and business partners against such perceptions and ensure them of our honorable intentions and practices.

As Black Americans move ever more freely at the international level to live, work, invest, study, or just to tourist, we should keep the Griner story in mind. Most importantly, we must always be security conscious to avoid becoming an urban legend.

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⁴ It is worth mentioning that, according to ESPN, there is some consternation between the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) and its players who perform internationally. Apparently, players’ WNBA base salaries are capped. Certain players, including Griner, draw salaries abroad that exceed WNBA salaries by a wide margin. See Mechelle Voepel (2022), “WNBA prioritization and overseas play: How they will impact the league and its players going forward;” https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/33740278/wnba-prioritization-overseas-play-how-impact-league-players-going-forward (Ret. 072122).

⁵ Another economic concern is the extent to which the Biden Administration has expanded at the margin

the US diplomatic corps in response to the Griner case. A new travel (D) indicator will be produced that signals the likelihood of being detained in foreign countries; <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/19/background-press-call-on-president-bidens-new-executive-order-to-bolster-efforts-to-bring-home-american-hostages-and-wrongful-detainees/> (Ret. 072022). Unknown to most Americans is the widespread bureaucratic arrangement that was created to address American detentions abroad using the so-called “Levinson Act;” <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/712/text> (Ret. 072022).