

Observers debate nominee's conservatism

By Laurie Hansen
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Does Clarence Thomas, who started life as a poor, black child in the segregated South, have the right to be a political conservative?

Does Thomas have a responsibility — because he is African-American in public life — to take certain stands on behalf of those who will follow him?

Civil rights groups — including the Congressional Black Caucus, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights — have publicly opposed Thomas's nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court, saying his political philosophy is detrimental to the interests of blacks.

"The NAACP and the black community must and will continue to fight until an appropriate replacement who embodies the views of the majority of black Americans is nominated and confirmed," said William F. Gibson, NAACP chairman of the board.

Such a rationale for opposing the Thomas nomination prompted George Wesolek, writer for the *San Francisco Catholic*, monthly magazine of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, to ask in his September column, "Are all African-Americans supposed to think like Thurgood Marshall?"

Marshall, the nation's first black Supreme Court justice who championed civil rights during his years on the court, announced his retirement in June. President Bush nominated Thomas to succeed him.

"This is nothing against Thurgood Marshall, but don't blacks have a right to think differently from him?" Wesolek asked.



AP/Wide World Photos
Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas ponders a question during the second day of his confirmation hearings before the Senate Judiciary Committee Sept. 11.

He said some liberals' response to a black, conservative Supreme Court nominee appears to be, "You can't be a real black, unless you're the kind of black we want." Wesolek called such sentiment "patronizing" and a kind of "reverse racism."

In the eyes of some liberals, Thomas's views obviously fall short of being "politically correct," Wesolek observed.

"But that is hardly enough to keep him off the bench of the highest court in the land. Rather, what are his abilities as a

judge? What are his abilities as a lawyer and a thinker? And fundamentally, what are his abilities to be a clear and compassionate interpreter of the Constitution?" he asked.

Marist Brother Cyprian Rowe, a former executive director of both the Washington-based National Office for Black Catholics and of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, told Catholic News Service Sept. 12 that he "absolutely" believes Thomas has the right to be a political conservative.

But, he said, it's not uncommon for members of an oppressed group to demand certain behavior from the group's prominent members.

Thomas has spoken out about his beliefs which run contrary to those of black civil-rights leaders and, in so doing, produced a "family argument," Brother Rowe said.

In reality, Brother Rowe said, he's not certain that Thomas's ultimate goals for

society are so far from the goals of "traditional civil-rights leadership."

He said, however, that Thomas's apparent distrust for government institutions that traditionally have helped blacks get ahead "seems to fly in the face" of the fact such institutions also helped Thomas "to the top."

Critics of Thomas have noted that affirmative-action programs helped the nominee to gain admission at Yale University, where he earned his law degree.

To some African-Americans, Thomas's "pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps" philosophy suggests that he believes the government has no responsibility to help out those who have suffered from social discrimination, Brother Rowe observed. On the other hand, he said, that philosophy and "other so-called conservative stances" Thomas holds have been traditional African-American positions.

Thomas left seminary after comment on King

WASHINGTON (CNS)— When a classmate at Conception Seminary in Missouri made a cruel remark about the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Clarence Thomas decided he was not going to become a priest.

In a candid discussion of his college years, the 43-year-old Supreme Court nominee told the Senate Judiciary Committee Sept. 13 what influenced his decision to leave the seminary. He also discussed his later protest activities while attending Holy Cross College in Worcester, Mass.

Thomas told the committee about an incident that took place during his first year

at Conception. He was climbing a staircase behind a classmate when someone downstairs shouted that Dr. King had been shot.

Not realizing Thomas was behind him, the student ahead remarked, "That's good. I hope the SOB dies."

"It was at that moment when I decided to leave the seminary," said Thomas, who is black. Shortly thereafter, he joined various civil-rights protest marches and participated in other events that clarified his decision to leave the seminary, he explained.

Thomas said the incident was one of many factors leading to his departure from the seminary.

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