

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

NOW THAT the Cornel West-Harvard dustup has seemingly been resolved, there are a few lessons about contemporary race relations that can perhaps be drawn from it.

To recap: Harvard President Lawrence H. Summers summoned Cornel West, professor of Afro-American Studies, to his office in October, one of several private meetings with faculty to discuss the academic integrity of the Ivy League institution. Summers suggested that West invest his time in more scholarly pursuits than expressing his social philosophy in a rap CD and expressed concern over grade inflation at the school.

West went public with what he saw as a humiliation, insisting that he was disrespected by Summers and threatened to leave for Princeton. His col-

Making race matter — when it didn't

leagues in the Afro-American Studies department rallied to his defense, charging that Summers snubbed them by refusing to pay his respects when he arrived at the university.

They demanded an apology and a public statement of support for the department and affirmative action.

Unfortunately, Summers gave in by apologizing and insisting that he'd do anything to keep West. That wasn't enough for West, who continued to vent his "humiliation" to the press.

West may believe that he has scored a moral victory for black faculty at elite white institutions, but his actions represent nothing more than the manipulation of white guilt to flex black power.

Worse, it makes him appear to be a hypocrite after serving as an important voice of racial reconciliation during the last decade.

In his best seller "Race Matters," West argued that significant pockets of black Americans suffer from a collective insecurity characterized by "horrible meaninglessness, hopelessness and lovelessness."

While he admitted that the attempt by blacks to adapt to a market mind-set has led to low self-esteem because it "attacks black intelligence and character daily in not-so-subtle ways," he did not view self-imposed segregation as the solution.

He argued that a "misguided attempt to define an African identity in a white society per-

ceived to be hostile" not only ignores the "basic humanness and Americanness of each of us," but also the "common good that undergirds the national destiny of both blacks and whites."

But what are West's recent actions if not a "misguided attempt to define an African identity in a white society perceived to be hostile"? Wasn't it faith in the "basic humanness" of blacks and whites that motivated Summers to have the same kind of candid discussion with West that he had with white faculty members? Isn't this the way West would prefer to be treated — as an equal — not as an affirmative-action case?

The real tragedy is that West had gained the respect of scholars, black and white, for his even-

handed approach to race relations. While condemning white racism, he refused to exonerate blacks for their "failures of breaking the cycle of poverty, homicide, and gang-related crime" and called on African-American leaders to set an example for less-advantaged blacks.

But his recent actions reflect a double standard. It's OK for the black intelligentsia to charge whites with racist behavior if they feel oppressed, but not for the poor, less-educated community. West's behavior undermines the virtues he worked so hard to promote for the last 10 years.

A man who once preached the "common good that undergirds the national destiny of both blacks and whites" has now called into question the sincerity of those very same efforts. ★

William Kashatus is a frequent contributor to the op-ed section.