

Class-Action Lawsuit Settlement Should Be an Insult to Black Women International Travelers

March 22, 2006

By Cathy Harris

On February 3, 2006, the federal government agreed to pay close to \$2 million to 87 African-American women who were searched getting off airplanes at O'Hare International Airport. The Customs and Border Protection (CBP) admitted no wrongdoing. Class-Action lawsuits do change policies and procedures and this is what has happened according to former whistleblower and now retired Customs Inspector Cathy Harris.

Cathy Harris gained national attention when she blew the whistle on her co-workers in 1998, but said the single settlement of \$21,000 is nothing short of an outrage. The women had endured years of being afraid to board airplanes again and some suffered other types of anxiety brought on by the illegal strip-searches.

The lawsuit was officially filed in 1997 and initially included 1300 African American women. But because of the three year statute of limitations many of the women were not allowed to join the lawsuit. These women who were judges, doctors, lawyer, teachers and other professional women had their lives turned upside down when they tried to enter back into the United States after traveling internationally.

Harris stated that since the U.S. Customs Service falls under the Department of Homeland Security, and is now called the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) (www.cbp.gov), that Customs and Immigration Inspectors/Officers have gone back to their own ways of subjecting African American travelers particularly women to abusive pat-downs, intrusive strip-searches, cavity searches, x-ray examinations, monitored bowel movements, and prolonged detentions, despite many new reforms which were implemented in 1999 (www.ceada.com/reforms.html).

Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the oldest federal agency in existence today had allowed aggressive acts against Black travelers to flourish over the years. Though CBP has denied that profiling is being used at these international ports, there was ample proof to the contrary.

A March 2000 General Accounting Office (GAO) report confirmed that even though black women travelers were the smallest group of international travelers, they were the largest group that was targeted by the U.S. Customs Service. A June 2000 Independent Panel Report found that Customs had major flaws and needed outside help.

When you go out of the country, the airlines provide Customs with a list of the travelers. Customs specialized teams—Passenger Enforcement Rover Teams (P.E.R.T.), Passenger Analysis Units (P.A.U.), Passenger Analytical Team (P.A.T.), or Analytical Units (A.U.) typically scan this list. They search for certain characteristics then a background investigation is performed on passengers meeting a certain criteria. If you are African American and match just one of these profiles, an "illegal computer record" is inputted and remains in the computer forever.

These travelers would then be automatically flagged for secondary inspection by the specialized teams of Customs Inspectors upon their return into the United States. These same teams watch you as you are exiting the country. If they do not like something about you, or if you are wearing an Afro centric hairstyle or attire, again they obtain your name from the list, with your birth date and seat number, and again make an illegal record in the computer.

Listed below are some of the other reasons why Customs and Border Protection Officers will target you for an inspection or examination if you are African American: *Having Afro centric Names, Hairstyles and Attire, Bulky/Baggy Clothing, Wearing a Wig, Hat or Scarf, Thick-Soled Shoes, Live in Low-Income Areas, Live in High Narcotic Areas, Employed in Low Paying Jobs, Unemployed, Ticket Purchased in Cash, Ticket Purchased One or Two Days Prior to Trip, A Short Trip, Frequent Traveler, Traveling Alone, Carrying Only One Piece of Luggage, Unusual or Inconsistent Itinerary, Traveling from a "Source Country (Africa or Jamaica), Acts Nervous, Act Too Polite or Too Argumentative, Acting Ill, etc.*

Harris believes the reason the racial profiling is taking place is because more than 90% of the managers in the Customs and Border Protection were placed in their jobs and positions because of nepotism, cronyism, and favoritism, not because of their education, experience, or backgrounds. She also believes unless Citizen Review Boards are put into place to monitor the new department, many more travelers will continue to be violated.

Cathy Harris is an available for Lectures, Seminars and Workshops. She is the author of recently released "**How to Take Control of Your Own Life: A Self-Help Guide to Moving Forward**" (www.HowToTakeControl.com), and upcoming "**The Failure of Homeland In-Security: The Government's Dirty Little Secrets from An Insider**" (www.HomelandIn-Security.com) and "**The Cathy Harris Story: Learn How She Stood Up to Workplace Bullying**" (www.TheCathyHarrisStory.com) You can buy the book off website, at Amazon.com or in Atlanta at Medu bookstore, Oasis bookstore, Nubian bookstore, or Wisdom Hut bookstore.