

**James H. Buford**

**December 2007 Column**

The ousting of former Fire Chief Sherman George will go down in history as being one of the most racially divisive events ever to occur in the City of St. Louis. This saga began with former Chief George refusing to promote from a racially uneven list of firefighters that included 24 whites and 4 blacks. Seeing the inequity in the list, George chose not to do the promotions based on the inherent flaws in the examinations. Mayor Slay, who had extensive ties to Local 73, the white firefighters union, threatened to fire George if he did not comply with his wishes. Later on in the story, Slay appointed Charles Bryson as Public Safety Director and demoted George for seeking to promote racial harmony in the St. Louis Fire Department. In November, a new white Fire Chief was promoted over an African-American battalion chief with more qualifications. As you all know, the rest is history.

From a concerted recall effort to legal action, Slay has faced much opposition. However, I don't think he is ready to face the opposition which is inherent in the sleeping giant which is the St. Louis African American community and others who dislike racial unfairness and inequities inherent in his mayoral administration. Prior to the appointment of Chief Dennis Jenkerson, Mayor Slay convened a meeting of me and a group of community leaders to discuss remedies to this Fire Department debacle. Armed with many recommendations for resolutions, the mayor desired to go with his own predetermined plans. Racially, the St. Louis community has been mortally wounded by the turn of events.

Now the time has come for St. Louis to attempt to mend the broken fences that have resulted from this situation. Prominent leaders of the African American community need to resolve to come together in unity to fight our common enemy: Racism. In addition, I challenge leaders of the mainstream community who believe in the ideals of equality and fairness, with the exclusion the Slay administration, to join in with African American leaders to bring healing to our region. It is imperative that community leaders of all races come together to denounce the old racial themes that have divided the St. Louis metropolitan area for decades. In order for the St. Louis area to grow and prosper to become the great American city that it is meant to be, racial discrimination should be put to rest and an atmosphere of true diversity and fairness must prevail.