

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

BOMB THREATS SHAKE HBCUS DURING BLACK HISTORY MONTH

LAURA FLANDERS: The FBI is calling it a high priority investigation involving more than 20 offices across the country and seeking racially motivated violent extremists who are targeting Historically Black Colleges and Universities in an ongoing way. The news broke in early February that nearly 20 so-called HBCUs had received bomb threats in just the first two days of Black History Month. But it didn't stop there. Howard University was threatened again on Valentine's Day, February 14th, and that university has endured at least four threats in just the past two months. As the second gentleman discovered when he visited a school in Washington DC, the threats are now spreading, it seems, to high schools. It's a high priority investigation, but it has not been getting high priority commercial media attention, at least not in comparison to some other stories we could mention. It is yet another assault on civil rights and education. For more, we turn, as we do every month, to our colleagues at URL Media to fill out the story. Mitra Kalita can't join us today because of a loss in her family. We send our condolences. Sara Lomax-Reese is joining me now. Sara and Mitra are the co-founders of URL Media, a network of Black and Brown owned and operated media platforms across the country. Sara Lomax-Reese heads up WURD FM talk radio in Philadelphia and they've been covering this story very closely.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Thanks, Laura, it's so great to be with you and your audience for our monthly URL round table, Meet the BIPOC Press. This story is incredibly important and we're looking forward to diving in with two incredible guests. Today, we have Brother Shomari who is a host on WURD in Philadelphia. He hosts a weekly show called Groundings Evolutions and Elevations. And we also have Krista Johnson who is a professor at Howard University, one of those HBCUs who's been affected by the bomb threats. She is also the Director of the Center for African Studies at Howard. So welcome Brother Shomari and Krista Johnson. Thanks for being with us.

KRISTA JOHNSON: Thank you for having us.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Though Krista I wanna start with you because you're right there on the ground at Howard interfacing with students, faculty, staff that have experienced these bomb threats. Tell us what the environment is like. What is the mood, how are people coping with these threats?

KRISTA JOHNSON: We made real strong efforts this academic year to try and return the campus to normal, to have in-person classes and to try and have a campus environment which was as normal as possible given the times in which we're living. And so this has been a real

serious disruption 'cause it seems like almost every week, but certainly very frequently, we have an app that we all use called Bison Safe which gives us real-time alerts in terms of what's going on on campus, and it seems as though every week there's a bomb threat or a shelter in place alert that comes up over that. So I think speaking to my students in my class and then colleagues, it's unsettling. It's very unsettling. I know our university and our administration has taken steps to really try and not normalize this. I think there's not a great amount of fear around campus. I don't think people are now walking around campus so much more fearful, but it takes I think more of a mental toll in many ways because people recognize that we feel like we're under attack or that something could happen at any time.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: And I wanna go to you, Shomari, because I know that you're a graduate of Morehouse College in Atlanta and we're situated here in the Philadelphia area and we have several HBCUs in this region, Lincoln, Cheyney, Delaware State. To my knowledge, Lincoln and Cheyney haven't been affected by the bomb threats, but Delaware State has. And I just wanna get your sense on having gone to an HBCU and observing this and being someone who hosts a show, what are you seeing, what are you feeling, how are you processing this?

BROTHER SHOMARI: Well, again, yeah, I'm a graduate of Morehouse and I also did a year at Howard for grad school. I was at Howard actually with the student admin takeover back in '89. So having been on that campus seeing National Guard troops and helicopters circling, this is not a lightweight thing, this idea of a bomb threat. We know of the bombing of the four little girls in Alabama, recent church shootings. So this idea of the perpetuation of fear is a big deal. And so that's one lens of looking at it. But then also I'm just intrigued by the way that the idea of youthfulness and juveniles gets perpetuated as a cloak of potential innocence or buffering culpability for white youth. And at the same time being in Philly watching how Black youths are villainized for some of the exploits that they do. And so how this juvenile youths narrative gets employed or deployed depending on which color you are is probably one of the most intriguing aspects of this for me. As well as, I don't think until now we've appreciated what HBCUs are, how unique they are as a phenomena, as an institution in and of themselves and what their contribution to Black history has been. And I think that this gives us an opportunity to really delve deep into that, why something like an HBCU would be a particular target in these, kind of whether you wanna call it white backlash or whatever you wanna call it. So that's what's on my mind regarding this based on where I'm positioned.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Yeah, I think that's so powerful, the juxtaposition between how white youth and Black youth are portrayed in the media and viewed in society. And one of the phrases, 'cause I think language is so powerful particularly as we report and consume media, this idea that these young people or whoever are making these terroristic threats are being described as tech savvy juveniles.

REPORTER: Now, police tell us that they have some tech savvy juveniles as persons of interest.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: So it's almost like a backhanded compliment where it's like these are these smart savvy people who are terrorizing Black people. And so I'm thinking about this notion of how Black people are portrayed in the media in such disparate ways from white people. And I don't know if either one of you, Krista or Shomari, wanna speak to how this whole issue is being covered and is it getting enough attention, not just because the way it's being framed, but just in general.

KRISTA JOHNSON: This is not a one-off event. As I think we'll probably get on, there's an entire history behind bomb threats, behind arson attacks and even state-sponsored and state violence on HBCU campuses. So it's a larger societal thing. And so it's as you said, throw this off as being just these tech savvy youth is really I think missing the larger underlying issues which have persisted for quite a while.

BROTHER SHOMARI: Yeah, I know across my news feed just I guess about a day ago, there were three more campuses in North Carolina and South Carolina, I think Fayetteville State, Claflin and Winston-Salem. So this is not something that went away with this targeting or identification of the six tech savvy juveniles. And I'm amazed at how Black youths never get these qualifiers. I think for me that's a very interesting phenomenon that we really need to pay attention to, particularly as the Olympics are going on that somehow the 15-year-old Russian skater is exonerated from culpability because she's 15 at the same time that we just endured the Kyle Rittenhouse trial and somehow his youthfulness exonerated him from some egregious actions. And yet again, I can't speak for the rest of the country, but I'm in Philadelphia, I'm watching this narrative about the four girls who attacked the young people on the subway, I'm watching how young people who are Black are villainized in their youthfulness in a very particular way. And that to me is really one of the aspects of this that I think we need to pay attention to. And no, it's not being covered at the level that it warrants. I mean, you're talking about close to 20 and evolving institutions that have received bomb threats. And we can recall bomb threats shutting down major places. Bomb threats open up a response from the FBI, from the police from different ways. And I think we need to be careful about that as well. I think that that's a thing we need to talk about. What are the potentialities of this if it's handled incorrectly for the Black people that are supposed to be protected? Because we also pay a price when the forces of protection come into our spaces, somehow we also become victims in our own protection as well.

KRISTA JOHNSON: It's not unconnected that in the past several years where many universities have seen a significant decline in their enrollment, HBCUs across the board have seen a significant increase in their enrollments. And I think that's not simply, and we can talk

about the ways in which that reflects I don't know if it's an awakening but more recognition on the part of the African American community that we can do as better and in fact we can probably do better at HBCUs because they're more nurturing et cetera, et cetera than at these other institutions. But it also I think goes very much to the heart of higher education and I think the future of higher education. I mean, I'll just give Howard as an example. I mean, I think people have a wrong impression of HBCUs as being the kind of HBCUs of old. Howard is one of the most extremely diverse campuses in the country. You would think, I think most people probably think it's 95% black. No, in fact, our student body is comprised of it's about 67% Black and non-Hispanic. But we also have 16% whites, we have 11% Asian and 6 1/2% Hispanic and then 4 1/2% multiple races. I say that to say I think HBCUs are really leading the way in terms of what a truly democratic multiracial multicultural society looks like. And I think that's very frightening and very intimidating for what has historically been a white world order that has embraced racial hierarchy.

BROTHER SHOMARI: If we understand our history, we can easily fit this into a recurring theme of the white backlash. It always happens in the face of some perceived moment of Black progress. So it challenges me to be surprised given that everybody should understand that after Barack Obama, it was predicted that there was going to be a significant white backlash to that perceived accomplishment. That's part of the historical and Langston Hughes talks about it in poetry. So I think we should have been more proactive about preparing as Black people for the backlash we knew was coming.

LAURA FLANDERS: We wish we had been better prepared for this kind of retrenchment that was totally predictable. My obviously predictable question is what would we as a nation of people or as a group of people committed to a multiracial project in this country, what would we have done? And what are the people that you know calling for in this moment because I think I detected a little concern about leaving this in the hands of police and FBI, Krista?

KRISTA JOHNSON: I would say, yeah, look at HBCU campuses now. The kinds of programming that we're doing, the kinds of bridge-building that we're creating. I mean, I can just give you one example. We're creating a new Social Justice Certificate Program at Howard University, which is again really I think changing the perceptions and the understandings of what higher education is about. That certificate program is going to not only be catered towards obviously college students, but also community members, even prisoners and whatnot, and is actually gonna rely on those constituencies and communities to develop the curriculum around that as well. And that's just one example, but I can think of a number of other examples where there's really innovative I think and very new and dynamic ways of reorganizing our societies. We have in the medical school as well. We have the professor actually who himself was incarcerated as a young youth and has now gone on to become a faculty member. But he too is now initiating a program which is specifically for the prison population, so really rethinking. It

requires a significant rethinking of really I think the basis of a lot of what we're taught, what we teach and what we think as a society.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Both you, Shomari, and you, Krista, have scholarship in the African diaspora. You're looking at this world not just within the United States Black experience, but really looking at a pan-African context. And I wanted to see if each of you could give us a sense of where this issue, the bomb threats and the terroristic approaches that are happening against HBCUs and other Black institutions in this moment, where does the African diaspora and other countries, Black countries, where does it fit into this conversation and how do we make those connections so that there is more fortification across the world as opposed to us just dealing with this in an American context?

BROTHER SHOMARI: And it's interesting I think that prior to 2020 and COVID, back in 2019 and around that time, HBCUs sponsored a major conversation about Africa, the diaspora and what they were calling the Sixth Region, I mean, Delaware State locally. But many Black HBCUs were the places again where significant conversation, interaction around us as the African diaspora and how we're mutually supportive, how you bring the Sixth Region, which would be Africans living outside of the continent into a unified economic social political ideation. That was happening on HBCUs. And HBCUs in many ways are probably one of the most still existing significant conduits for this diasporic connection. Howard has a program in African Studies, African American Studies. Howard is a very diasporic campus. But again as I said earlier, HBCUs, you can go back historically with Kwame Nkrumah being educated at Lincoln University, Nnamdi Azikiwe who became the first president of Nigeria at Lincoln University. Many other African illuminaries exchanging educational space to build the diaspora, to build what we call a global pan-Africanism. And so I don't think that that's a lightweight consideration again in these dynamics because you're disrupting the peace, you're disrupting the security in spaces that have been producing a lot of the either local domestic civil rights energy that we have, even up through now when you could go back to the Trayvon Martin reactions, Black Lives Matter, HBCUs have been seminal places for that energy to come from. When you talk about critical race theory, again you're talking about not just HBCUs as a space that controls a significant amount of land in a city, many cities that are under the duress of gentrification, I don't know how much that plays into the matter as well. But then you also have these ideological spaces that are creating local pushes for autonomy, but then also linking it to the African diaspora. I don't know that it's accidental and I don't know that that's what the six tech savvy white youths were thinking about, but I think in the larger narrative of the other dynamics that are going on in these United States and the globe, I think that that plays a factor.

KRISTA JOHNSON: Yeah, I would just add that historically HBCUs as Brother Shomari said had those connections with Africa. And I think that it's important to recognize that again I talk about the diversity of Howard's campus now, but if you go back to the 1930s, '40s, '50s, Howard

had one of the most international campuses in the country as well. And there were concerted efforts to ensure that those kinds of ties that were being established on HBCU campuses did not continue. And so we were given for example, there was a bit of a trade-off. We were given for example Afro-American Studies departments all over the place, but the quid pro quo was but you only focus on your own issues. Don't link those to struggles and causes that go beyond that. And so I think you had a moment certainly after the civil rights movement where there was I think maybe more of an inward-looking turn. But what I'm seeing now again is this, HBCUs are embracing the international. They are global institutions and they are recognizing that. As Brother Shomari said, at Howard, just to toot our own horn, in the Center for African Studies, we teach seven African languages and we lead the country in the student enrollment in African languages. Over 800 Howard students last year studied an African language. But it also reflects the diversity and the different makeup of our student body and in fact, the African American demographics. So I think what you're seeing is a lot more first and second generation Africans who have much closer ties and links to the continent. And they're bringing those in and saying, hey, we can build on these. So I think there's lots of real opportunity there.

BROTHER SHOMARI: And I would just also wanna add that that dynamic, it's historical to HBCUs. When you think about Booker T. Washington, we think about what he was represented as locally, but he was a large proponent against colonialism that was happening all across the African continent, and actually engaged in many ways with the training around agriculture and science and other things in particular places. Marcus Garvey from Jamaica came to America because he was inspired by the teachings at Tuskegee and Booker T. Washington. So this idea of Black educational spaces always having a diasporic connection, it's historical as well as contemporary.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Well, this is such a powerful conversation and we covered so much territory in this short snapshot. And I hope that we can revisit this at some point because obviously we started talking about the bomb threats against HBCUs, but there's a much bigger conversation about the power and the centering of Black intelligentsia at historically black colleges and universities. So thank you so much, Brother Shomari and Krista Johnson, for this riveting conversation. And hopefully, we can do it again.

BROTHER SHOMARI: Thank you.

KRISTA JOHNSON: Thank you.

LAURA FLANDERS: Thank you both. Sara, thank you for this rich conversation. As you said, HBCUs clearly deserve more attention in our media especially under attack, but it seems to me all the time. What are you seeing in the Black press and the BIPOC press, that

is different about how this story's being covered? And are you seeing more complexity around this question of what should be done?

SARA LOMAX-REESE: I think all of these issues are critical. I think that like the press writ large, we are trying to stay on top of, the Black press in particular, is trying to stay on top of an ongoing onslaught of racist threats and just an elevated level of all of these, whether it's police brutality or criminal justice inequities, healthcare disparities. So this bomb threat issue is, it's one of a long line of urgent topics that we are all trying to prioritize. And so it's almost like whack-a-mole and I think that there's a real issue of fatigue for our reporters, for our hosts, for the folks on the frontlines in the Black press who are covering these issues day in and day out because a lot of times, it's very personal. We might have children at these HBCUs. We are graduates of these HBCUs. We might be teaching at these HBCUs. So it's very, very close and personal. And so we're balancing a lot of different things. I think, short answer, I think we need to do more. We need to... I know at WURD, we're about to convene a round table of HBCU presidents to really dig into what this is all about. But at the end of the day, we have to also find an answer. We've gotta have law enforcement, we've gotta have the legislature, we've gotta have a lot of different answers to address this because it's very real, it's very disruptive, it's a drain on our mental and emotional well-being, but it's very, very serious and I think that it needs to be bumped up in terms of priorities.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, we're gonna do everything we can to bump it up in our community and with the audience that we can reach. And I can only hope that we're gonna see some action at the government level, state and federal taking action. But I will say that the future of the HBCUs seems bright to me in this moment given what we're hearing about increased enrollment and new funding and new visibility. So maybe this time this story can be treated differently, but we have to work at it. Thank you both I should say, you and Mitra 'cause Mitra's here in spirit. But thank you, Sara and everybody that you brought to Meet the BIPOC Media round table today. I appreciate it

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Thank you, Laura.

LAURA FLANDERS: For more on this episode and other forward-thinking content and to tune into our podcast, visit our website at LauraFlanders.org and follow us on social media @TheLFshow.