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January 13, 1997

Contact: Bob Aaron, 309/556-3181

Author of "Race Matters"**Acclaimed Harvard Philosopher Cornel West to Speak at Illinois Wesleyan, Feb. 1, Kicking Off Black History Month**

"Cornel West is a radical and a preacher, an intellectual heavy and a brother . . .
He wants us to think differently about race."
--*Washington Post Magazine*

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--One of America's leading African-American philosophers and a best-selling author will kick off Black History Month festivities at Illinois Wesleyan University with a public address on Saturday, Feb. 1.

Cornel West, a Harvard University professor of religion and Afro-American Studies and author of the best-seller, "Race Matters," will speak at 7:30 p.m. in the Shirk Center, 302 E. Emerson, Bloomington.

West's speech is open to public. Tickets for West's speech and the annual Soul Food Dinner, which will start at 6 p.m. in the Shirk Center, are \$5 for students and \$10 for general admission. Tickets will go on sale Jan. 15 at the Main Desk, IWU Memorial Student Center, 104 E. University Ave., Bloomington. Tickets also will be sold at the door, Feb. 1.

West is a philosopher who shuns abstraction. For West, philosophy is "a polemical weapon that attempts to transform . . . social, cultural, and political tradition to increase the scope of individual development and democratic actions."

In his lecture, "Race Matters," West confronts "the monumental eclipse of hope, the unprecedented collapse of meaning, and the incredible disregard for human (especially Black) life." For example, commenting on the Los Angeles riots that were triggered in connection with the Rodney King police-beating case, West said the disorders were more than an economic or moral problem.

"They are the consequence of a lethal linkage of economic decline, cultural decay, and political lethargy in American life," according to West.

His current academic interests include problems facing urban African-Americans and creating and maintaining an ongoing dialogue between Blacks and Jews.

In a 1995 interview with *Tikkun*, a bimonthly Jewish critique of politics, culture, and society, West said: "It's fairly clear that the gulf is quite deep between Black and white worlds and Black and Jewish worlds. Blacks and whites, Blacks and Jews, live in such different worlds and look at the world through such different lenses. This poses a huge challenge. We have to cultivate a much deeper understanding of the various perceptions from different worlds."

West has spoken out on many other public policy issues. For example:

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- **On race relations:** "There is no escape from our interracial interdependence." ("Race Matters")

- **On economics:** "... the economy is based on a vast disparity between the well-to-do and working poor people. For me, then, the flaws in American society can be spoken of in terms of a twofold problem: poverty on the one hand, paranoia on the other." (*The Christian Century*, Aug. 11-18, 1993)

"You can't talk about race without talking about poverty. You can't talk about poverty without talking about wealth and power." (*The Christian Century*, Aug. 11-18, 1993)

- **On diversity in the workplace:** It is "not just a matter of generating a more diverse workforce, but maybe in the work that is done in the workplace it becomes, if not a model, then at least an inspiration for other spaces in American society in which the issue of race is hit head on." (*New Orleans Time-Picayune*, Oct. 24, 1994)

"Race is a problem that relates to your profit margin if your workforce is at each other's throats. They [employees] can't do the work they were hired to do." (*New Orleans Tribune*, November, 1994)

- **On Black conservatives:** "To Black conservatives I come back and say, well, the majority of Black people are working people who embody the Protestant work ethic, but they're still on the edge of poverty. The husband is working, the wife is working and still they can hardly make ends meet. That serves, I would think, as a significant counterexample to what the conservatives are talking about. Clearly, Black people's social position is not a matter of laziness or an inability to defer gratification. These people are locked into a particular level of the labor force. They don't have access to schools that provide the skills necessary to get out, and on and on and on." (*The Christian Century*, Aug. 11-18, 1993)

- **On 20th Century history:** "We have to admit that we are coming to the end of a ghastly century. We have seen that this century has produced unprecedented levels of barbarity, bestiality, and brutality." (*The Daily Targum*, Rutgers University, Feb. 29, 1996)

- **On American democracy:** "For me the fundamental message is to understand the depths of the crisis in American democracy in the ways of which the legacy of white supremacy still constitutes a formidable impediment for the renewing of democracy. That and to try to convey a sense of urgency that we are in deep trouble." (*Advance*, University of Connecticut, March 1, 1996)

A Sept. 24, 1995 *Boston Globe Magazine* article on West by Chris Bohjalian provides key insights into West's personality and how people react to this scholar-philosopher. Bohjalian writes of a walk through Harvard Square with West: "West is constantly recognized and stopped, and what should be a three-minute walk takes closer to 30 minutes.

"'You're Cornel West!' exclaims a man with enough gray in his hair to suggest that he should be decades beyond hero worship. 'I love your writing!'

"The well-wishers," Bohjalian adds, "are young and old, Black and white. They're dressed in blue jeans as well as business suits. And West, the newest faculty member at the Harvard Divinity School and Harvard College's department of Afro-American studies, takes the time to take to each of them . . .

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"It is rare for a university professor to become the sort of media celebrity who is stopped on the street, and probably rarer still for one who is likely to quote Hegel or Erasmus in casual conversation," Bohjalian concludes.

West, according to Bohjalian, is surprised by his popularity, crediting it to the "fluke" success of "Race Matters." One African-American Boston University professor cited in article credits the success of "Race Matters" to its "vision of decency and reconciliation in that book for which we're hungry."

West, born in Tulsa, Okla., in 1953, is the son of a civilian U.S. Air Force administrator and an elementary school teacher who became a school principal. As a youngster in Sacramento, Calif., West had his first brush with social protest, when he refused to salute the U.S. flag because of the second-class status of African-Americans in the country.

A 1991 *New York Times* article chronicles several of West's early influences:

- As a youngster, West was inspired by the Baptist Church (his grandfather was a preacher). He was touched by stories of parishioners--only two generations from slavery--who maintained their religious faith during trying times.
- He also was moved by the commitment of the Black Panthers--who maintained an office nearby his boyhood church--to community-based political action.
- A biography of President Theodore Roosevelt, borrowed from a neighborhood bookmobile, inspired West since he and TR shared a common affliction: Asthma. West read how TR overcame Asthma, went on to Harvard University, and became a great speaker. So, at age 8, West decided he would go to Harvard, although as his biography points out, "he wasn't exactly sure what it was."

West earned a bachelor's degree Magna Cum Laude from Harvard in 1973, completing his work in only three years. One of his professors recalled West was "the most intellectually aggressive and highly cerebral student I have taught in my 30 years here."

He received two graduate degrees from Princeton University: a master of arts degree in 1975 and a doctorate in 1980.

West joined the Harvard faculty in 1994.

From 1988 -94, he was a professor of religion and director of the Afro-American Studies Program at Princeton University.

As a visiting professor at the University of Paris in 1987, West taught courses on Contemporary American Philosophy and Afro-American Critical Thought.

From 1984-87, West was an associate professor, Philosophy of Religion, at Yale University's Divinity School. He also has been an associate professor at the Union Theological Seminary. Other teaching assignments have taken West to the City College of New York, Haverford College, Princeton Theological Seminary, Williams College, and Barnard College.

Since 1982, he has written, edited, or co-authored 11 books, including: "The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought" (1991), "Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism" (1993),
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"Race Matters" (1993), "Keeping the Faith: Philosophy and Race in America" (1993), "Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin" (1995), and "The Future of the Race" (1996) with Harvard colleague Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

In a review of "The Future of the Race," which assesses challenges facing middle-class African-Americans, *Chicago Tribune* columnist and author Clarence Page wrote:

"West, an ordained minister and professor of Afro-American studies and of the philosophy of religion, offers a provocative combination of sermon and intellectual rap as a sort of survival guide to what he calls a apocalyptically 'Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization.'

"He ominously predicts," Page adds, "that America's present conservative course will increase class envy and hatred between the Black poor (working and non-working) and the Black elites in the midst of a more isolated and insulated Black America. . . "

West lives in the Boston area with his wife, Elleni, an Ethiopian-born social worker, and his son, Clifton.

West's appearance at Illinois Wesleyan is sponsored by the Multicultural Events Committee of IWU's Student Senate.

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 1,900 students in a College of Liberal Arts, College of Fine Arts, and a four-year professional School of Nursing. A \$15 million athletics and recreation center opened in the fall of 1994; and a \$25 million science building opened in the fall of 1995. The \$4.6 million Center for Liberal Arts--a facility housing 60 faculty offices, six classrooms, and other facilities for social science, humanities business and economics, and interdisciplinary studies' faculty--is slated to open next fall, as well as a \$6.5 million residence hall, accommodating about 118 students. The Carnegie Commission for the Advancement of Teaching promoted Illinois Wesleyan to a "Baccalaureate I" institution in 1994, a classification that places it among 161 highly selective National Liberal Arts Colleges in the annual *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*, another respected college guide, rated IWU "highly competitive (+)" in its latest edition.

<p>Editor's Note: To arrange for interviews with Cornel West, his schedule permitting, call IWU Public Relations-News Services at 309/556-3181.</p>
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