

By Junette A. Pinkney

Dick Gregory, just back from Iran, his spare frame down to 106 pounds, is beginning to get settled into his room at the Harambee House Hotel. It is Thursday, the night before he will officially walk into Washington, ending the seven-day trek that began in New York. "What's wrong," he recently asked an interviewer, "with a publicity stunt to get people to pray?" He has the thin-but-healthy look that is not uncommon among vegetarians. His voice is animated as he discusses his experiences in Iran.

Gregory went to Iran, planning to stay three days. He had agreed to spend that amount of time only, he said, after persistent requests from D.C. delegate Walter Fauntroy, who was in Iran at the time.

Back From Iran

Dick Gregory's Odyssey From Comic to Activist

He stayed at a hotel about 50 yards from the embassy where the hostages were being held. The next day, a government official sent a car to take the

Americans to the cemetery.

"They explained that all these people were killed in one day during the revolution," Gregory recalls. "[We] started praying, thanking God that the violence ceased, praying for the families of the people who had been killed, and Iranians who were at the cemetery just started crying. They couldn't understand [what was being said], but they just started crying. It was the most incredible thing.

"Life went on as usual there. They had the worst traffic jams of any place in the world. They drive motorcycles on the sidewalks. And the cops don't carry guns there.

"Another thing that caught me by surprise—and that's just my own ignorance—I was safer in an alley there at 3

See GREGORY, F3, Col. 1

GREGORY, From F1

o'clock in the morning than in my living room at noon. I have a God-force that makes me not afraid, but as I walked around the city I was not afraid because there, nobody was going to do anything to me. When I walked by the American Embassy the first time I was almost afraid to look across the street, but after a while I would walk on the street right past the embassy."

Gregory didn't eat or drink anything during his first eight days in Iran. Then he started alternating a couple days of taking juice and water with three days on nothing. He was trying to get his weight down quickly so that the Iranian government could use him as a symbol if they wanted to; he hoped they might move to settle the hostage situation out of concern for his health.

He says he had been led to believe that might be the case by a government official who asked him to stay in the country beyond the planned three days and conduct a prayer vigil. The same official arranged for Gregory to see the ayatollah during the early part of his visit.

"One day we were riding around and he said, 'Let's go by Khomeini's house.' I said, 'No, I don't want to.' Then the next day he said, 'Let's go by Khomeini's house' again. So I said, 'Okay.' When we got there they made an appointment for me to see him at 10 o'clock the next morning."

Gregory will not discuss what was said during the 15 minutes he spent with the ayatollah, except to say that Khomeini was "very weak and quite pale" and that it was "a ceremonial visit." The ayatollah was recovering from a heart attack, and Gregory was the only foreigner he agreed to see.

As Gregory's fast progressed, he became so weak that he got out of bed only to pray, rising at 4 a.m. and praying until 1 p.m. He began hallucinating, seeing "hot dogs march and Pepsi-Cola float around. One morning I felt mustard on my mouth. I still believe I

saw it on my hand when I wiped my mouth," he says, only half-jokingly. He says he became paranoid, but overcame it by sleeping with the door wide open one night.

Gregory strongly feels that the Iranian government wants the whole matter settled as quickly as possible. "Over there, whatever glamor it had, it doesn't have anymore. At first, the

political stock went up for Jimmy Carter and it went up for Khomeini. Then it peaked, and now it's going down. Whatever trip they were on, it's over."

But his 2½-hour meeting with the revolutionary students inside the embassy left him "with the impression that they'd never give [the hostages] up because they believe the U.S. would bomb them off the planet if they don't."

Gregory believes the revolutionary students are willing to be bombed "off the planet Earth" because "that will be the downfall of America."

While he doesn't agree with the taking of hostages—"No decent human being could feel that is the right thing to do"—he says that he can understand why it happened. Gregory echoes the line of the Khomeini government concerning the role of the U.S. government in Iran's woes. But he stops short of endorsing it completely.

While Gregory was having physical difficulties in Iran, his family was experiencing financial ones back home in in Plymouth, Mass. With the cash flow that had always been generated by his appearances, he had never needed to worry about money in the bank.

But missing \$200,000 worth of appearances while in Iran changed all that. The phone and lights were cut off at his house. The mortgage and car note came due. And due. "By the third month, people started saying [to his wife Lillian], 'Hey, wait a minute. Do you know when he's coming back?'"

"You know, the amazing thing was, people that I normally can pick up the phone and say, 'I need such-and-such' and it's there—people who love Dick Gregory—they went to left field they were so afraid of this Iranian thing. They got shaky because they got scared because of what the government might do to their business."

Gregory, 48, has gotten progressively less funny in his metamorphosis from comedian to political activist. "I started off paying a debt to black folks," he says. "I realize that it was the

little bitty black people who made Dick Gregory. They went to the little clubs and paid 25 cents for a bottle of beer and tolerated me when I wasn't even funny. They got me to where I could work in the clubs that they couldn't even afford to go to."

Gregory, wearing an orange running suit, props his feet up on the bed as he sits in an armchair. He looks relaxed and fit. He is still fasting, but he offers refreshments to visitors. The tennis shoes were removed just moments after checking into his room at the Harambee House Hotel. (Gregory chose the number of his room by numerology—"I live by it"—but had to move down the hall in order to have the steambath he had requested.)

That God-force that guides him, he continues, "is about feeding hungry people, moving in and relieving situations. So the debt is really to all suffering people."

This, he says, includes the Iranians. "This country has to understand their suspicions, their frights, their fears. Violence between us and the shah ran rampant for so long that the first thing they would suspect [if there was upheaval in Iran] is the U.S. government."

He draws parallels between the oppression of Iranians and the oppression of American blacks: "Had this government listened to Malcolm X, they would have heard Khomeini. Had they listened to Stokely and Rap and the SNCC youngsters, they would have heard the revolutionary students. They were saying the same thing."

There are more parallels, he says: "Most Iranians feel about black Americans the way black Americans feel about Indians. They realize that we've been oppressed, and if there's any chance that they might give anybody a break, we're the ones they'd give it to. They look at Americans—now, I'm not talking about black folks—the way we look at the Klan. Blacks never were afraid of all white folks or hated all white folks or said they all were bad. It was only the Klan we felt that way about. So Iranians feel about Americans the way we feel about white folks, and they feel about the CIA and the U.S. government the way we feel about the Klan."

Gregory suggests that the U.S. government make use of this sentiment in solving the hostage crisis. "The way I would go about solving this problem," he says, "is understanding that both sides have political tightropes to walk. The fact that Carter has an election coming up makes it hard for him to say, 'I'm sorry.' So what he should do is

to pick a group of ministers, heavily weighted with blacks, and other people that the world respects even if they don't like them and let them go to Iran, if Iran will let them, and then come back and tell Carter do we owe an apology. And no way they could say anything else."

Gregory would like to see the hostages released to their families and flown straight home via Paris, rather than spending three weeks being debriefed and examined in Germany. He says the Iranians were upset about the fact that Richard Queen, the hostage who was recently released to be treated for multiple sclerosis, "walked on his own when he left Iran but was on a stretcher when he came off the plane in the U.S."

How does Dick Gregory account for the various layers which have peeled off over the years to reveal the person who currently bears his name? "If you could feel your hair growing, it would probably drive you crazy. But it grows so slow, so steady, so unnoticeably that you're not even aware of it. Now, if I had gone through all these changes all at once, it probably would have drove me crazy. But it all happened real slow, the way your hair grows."

The comic is gone—or at least tucked away beneath the surface. "I can still be funny when I want to," Gregory says. But world hunger and nuclear reactors and homesick hostages aren't laughing matters.

How would this man who has mastered the art of calling attention to his causes, who understands the impact of the media and trades on it, how would he word his own press release?

"What I would like to write would be, 'one of the most moral, ethical, decent, compassionate human beings on the planet.' I'm leading to that. I want to be that."