Out to Get Them

In a 1976 article titled “Is There a Conspiracy against Black Leaders,” journalist Carl Rowan posed

torical writing that connects politics and culture to explain the persistence of racism.

Using news reports, published studies, trial transcripts, interviews with more than 40 sources -- including 25 sitting and former African American members of Congress -- and his own in-depth case study of Congressional investigations, indictments, audits, and surveillance, Musgrove examines the case for a systemized campaign of harassment against black elected officials from 1965 through 1992.

What he finds isn’t pretty. Beginning with Nixon’s scrutiny of his administration’s “enemies,” through the government’s use of the FBI and the IRS as tools of harassment, Musgrove paints a disturbing picture of white politicians only too eager to cast stones at black opponents and a media only too eager to chase negative innuendos—especially within the black community.

Musgrove steers clear of judging the guilt or innocence of black politicians accused of wrongdoing (although he does note that the behavior of DC’s own Marion Barry served to undermine allegations of harassment). Instead, his purpose is to define harassment as “an ideology developed to understand the repression and disproportionate state scrutiny black elected officials experienced as they entered and rose through the ranks of U.S. electoral politics during the post-civil rights period.”

He hopes that “by placing black elected officials’ allegations of such harassment in context, [he has] demonstrated their significance to the larger body politic.” “Black elected officials operate in this narrative as a metaphorical ‘miner’s canary,’” he contends, “warning us of the toxicity of modern U.S. politics.”

Given the blood sport that politics have become, his book is a powerful reminder of how the state can be used to repress opposition. In the end, he reminds us that Carl Rowan’s dilemma of more than 35 years ago is far from outdated and is, in fact, one “that now faces the entire U.S. electorate.”

An assistant professor at the University of the District of Columbia, Musgrove comes by his interest naturally. “My father’s campus organizing rallies. “My father’s campus organizing

Local historian George Derek Musgrove considers this issue in a timely new book, “Rumor, Repression, and Racial Politics: How the Harassment of Black Officials Shaped Post-Civil Rights America.” The book is already being hailed as “a real gem... that provides fresh insight[s]” and “a fine example of a new breed of historiographical writing that connects politics and culture to explain the persistence of racism.”

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Local Literary News

* Cathy Travis, author of “Constitution Translated for Kids,” has published a new e-novel that she calls “the perfect book for the political season we are now in.” “Elected,” which follows the fortunes of a president elected after a bitter recount in Florida in 2000 (sound familiar?), is available electronically at www.amazon.com/dp/B00719CBH8.

* If you couldn’t squeeze in to one of the recent standing-room-only talks to hear Mary Z. Gray discuss her enchanting new memoir, “301 East Capitol: Tales From the Heart of the City,” don’t despair. The Overbeck History Lectures plans to schedule a repeat performance. Visit www.capitolhillhistory.org for details.


* What if Shakespeare had a talented sister whose work remained unpublished because of her gender? The Folger Shakespeare Library mounts a challenge to Virginia Woolf’s famous question by showcasing the work of Renaissance women who were actually writing a storm. A new exhibition, “Shakespeare’s Sisters: Voices of English and European Women Writers, 1500–1700,” will be on view through May 14. Details at www.folger.edu.

2012 Literary Hill BookFest

Can you blow up a balloon? Post a notice on a bulletin board? Consider volunteering for the 2012 Literary Hill BookFest, either before or at the event on Sunday, May 6, 11 a.m.–3 p.m., in the North Hall of Eastern Market. Join the dozens of volunteers who helped to make last year’s BookFest a reality and enabled nearly a thousand visitors to meet local authors, hear book talks, learn about local libraries and other organizations, buy books, and participate in children’s activities. Visit www.literaryhillbookfest.org or e-mail volunteer@literaryhillbookfest.org.