

THE WOLVERINE *Reynald Altéma, MD*

[Version française.](#)

Jean-Michel Beauvais simply stood out in every environment he became part of. The debate club, the spelling bee team, the chess club, the math club, the school he dared to attend and flourish at, Stuyvesant High School, and even the reputation he garnered as a wolverine. It was a most appropriate compliment, anointed in appreciation for his persistence, laser-focused despite all odds and his resilience, just like the vaunted predator.

If ever one needed to remind oneself not to judge a book by its cover, Jean-Michel would be the poster boy for that. To begin with, he was of lean body size, but lithe and deceptively strong like an ant. His average height of 5'9" poked holes through the observation that "he stood tall among giants." He however impressed with his gaze, sharp from deep-seated orbits, regal like the eagle's, his oversize hands and a long neck, variably described as "the stilt of the head of a lurking cobra ready to strike" or the "peninsula leading to an ocean of a brain." So, who exactly was Jean-Michel Beauvais?

He was a sixteen-year-old high school student living on the upper west side of Manhattan in the mid-seventies, the son of factory-working Haitian immigrants. The family hailed originally from Croix-des-Bouquets, east of Port-au-Prince, and belonged to a long lineage of brilliant folks. The father was a teacher, but the mother had barely finished her tenth year of school when she became pregnant and had to stop and became a stay-at-home mom. Nonetheless she also was a school whiz. The family left their home country because of sudden economic hardship brought about by a personal feud with a local militia man who was eyeing his mom. As a retribution for her pushback against his advances, his father couldn't any longer teach at the local state-sponsored high school or offer private tutoring lest he be arrested and imprisoned. Jean-Michel's lot was not easy.

He had to slay quite a few dragons to maintain his sanity. They existed in the hallways and rooms of this hallowed establishment as well as outside of it. Stuyvesant High has always held a prestigious reputation, a magnet for the gifted and talented. That was the crux of the issue at that venerable institution. Jean-Michel, without his knowledge, was at a crossroads of liberal policy-advocating stalwarts and conservative die-hards. The former camps included previous hippies or simply liberal-minded individuals who strongly believed in the public sector lending a helping hand to the not so fortunate in society. A policy that far from being a giveaway reflected an investment into human resources. The other camp saw people of the mindset that "benign neglect" of hard-to-solve problems offered a better use of financial resources. Of course, this proxy battle was being fought by students whose performances were always monitored. In a statistics-craze society, such data were meticulously collected, analyzed, interpreted by any and all and especially by think tanks and a nascent class of neoconservatives, nicknamed neocons. They hardly had any ideologic difference with the straight-up conservatives except maybe in the more sophisticated way they would finesse their arguments.

The battle between stalwart liberals and die-hard conservatives had a special cachet in the temples of education. The country has a very checkered history on this count, having bequeathed a whole class of citizens with a heritage of centuries of neglect of educational opportunities. Yet the ensuing statistics of uneven outcomes among the different groups was seen not as a bellwether of such unjust policies, but as proof of their inherent aptitudes. Affirmative action, a method to redress such past misdeeds by past policymakers was still in its infancy but was a sulfurous issue.

Some folks just didn't feel comfortable with the idea of losing a piece of the pie. As they saw it, the pie belonged to their tribe and the neglected tribe didn't have any right to even an equitable parcel of it.

To make matters worse, other immigrants who benefited from a barely decade-old liberal policy of opening the borders of this country to other ethnic groups and doing away with the previous preferential treatment of immigrants from Northern Europe were joining the clan of the neocons. Starting right in the classrooms. A very curious situation was developing. A skewed population of overachievers, brave enough to uproot themselves from their own societies to face a new one had their progeny excel in scholastic achievements. This trend was no different from that of preceding years. The difference was the ethnicity of the pupils. The narrative of Blacks underachieving due to some inherent mental inferiority had propagated and quite a few members of these new ethnic groups were espousing rabid antiblack animus.

Jean-Michel needed to slay that first dragon and wasted no time to do so. In a classic example of brawn and brain mastery, he slapped a burly Korean student in the hallway with a thud heard 'round the world, as it were. That looney student, in between classes told him, "What are you doing here? Your kind is too stupid to make it among smart people." "Out of control, dangerous, savage, riffraff" were some of the epithets branded at Jean-Michel before anyone cared to hear his side of the story. Of course, both students had to go in front of the principal.

"I stated the obvious and this savage hit me," blurted the student not willing to concede any intentional slur.

"My grades speak for themselves. My intelligence is second class to none," proudly and loudly Jean-Michel replied. Truth be told, he did excel in his entrance exam, a fact known to all the staff.

"I can't condone physical violence, neither can I sanction racial insult. Since this is an institution encouraging intellectual pursuit, the two of you need to join the debate club and make a case for your position. You have 48 hours to prepare for this." The principal in his youth had joined students marching in the South for the end of segregation. He wasn't about to unduly punish a student defending his honor. Along the way, he offered Jean-Michel an appropriate forum to make his case. A thoroughbred enjoys the sight of a racetrack. The dénouement of this whole episode belongs to the school's lore. Jean-Michel, son of a proud lineage of highbrows, had no choice but to uphold the reputation. He wanted to submit a corker for the ages. Hence, he went to the library to do some research on the subject, and he found quite a few pearls. The one about the [debate](#) between W.E.B. Dubois and a Harvard professor Lothrop Stoddard fascinated him. That racist professor was espousing the toxic ideas of Gobineau repackaged by the likes of [Madison Grant](#) under the toxic pseudo-science of eugenics. That ideology classified Asians and Blacks as inferior races.

To the obvious canard of the Korean reciting the disproportionate success of his ethnic group against black students, a haughty presentation made with a gruff voice and a condescending demeanor, Jean-Michel delivered this lecture:

"The nincompoops of history and fans of rote memorization are the real '[nattering nabobs of negativism](#).' To begin with, your country is free today because millions of Blacks exposed their lives to fight for its existence when it was invaded by China in the early fifties. It is also independent today when earlier these same black folks fought against the Japanese that had occupied it and enslaved their women as forced prostitutes. They considered your race inferior. South Koreans owe their freedom to black soldiers. Asians' academic success in the US schools reflects their greater emphasis on it, which is commendable but in no way implies evidence of

superiority. This matter was dealt with at the Berlin Olympics in 1936 when Hitler's Aryan supremacy ran into a roadblock named Jessie Owens. How would Koreans feel if a Black person stated that our disproportionate success on the playing field mirrors our superiority? An ignoramus who sees a half-empty glass will ignore the reason for this paradigm. An intellectually curious mind will inquire about the whys and the hows. Any cursory review of centuries of practice in America will see that access to educational opportunities at every level of education at schools has been systematically denied to its black populace. Even when academically gifted, the likes of Washington Carver had doors slammed to their faces at institutions that didn't care to accept members of the Negro race among the student body. I wonder how Koreans would have done if Japanese instituted the same policy for decades and decades."

A funny thing happened. A lot of the white students in the audience applauded this disquisition. Once the Brahman class gave its imprimatur, the neocon wannabes felt uncomfortable and out of sorts. The legend of Jean-Michel thus started.

That first dragon was easy to slay. A second and more dangerous one had its lair in the streets, near the subway station he used for commuting. A gang of youngsters who dismissed the idea of educational uplifting wanted nothing less than a recruitment of Jean-Michel among its rank. No was not an acceptable answer. Desperate and not willing to give up, one day he carried a baseball bat under his coat and when the senior member approached him on his way home, he decided to go for broke. In a rapid maneuver, he removed the hidden weapon and, "I will teach you guys not to mess with me." He broke both of his kneecaps. To a stunned group, he went further, "All of you knuckleheads, I can send a voodoo curse on you, and you will become blind and lose your manhood. Stay the hell out of my way."

Another funny development took place. The chief of the gang who was cruising by observed, "Any Negro crazy enough to do this, deserves some respect. Leave him alone." Jean-Michel found all this energy because at home, there was a *rigwaz* (whip) ready for use on his hide in case of any deviation from the consign of "going to school and bring back great grades." Strange as it may seem, his dad even in America still believed in "sparing the rod and ending up spoiling the child."

Once free of the dragons that could have easily wrapped around his neck and by dint of hard work, Jean-Michel became known as a history buff, a geography nut, a wordsmith, a policy wonk, a wunderkind in math. Yet he had his head on his shoulders, yearning for harmony but ready for a fight. In a classroom, the instruction in his presence became a two-way endeavor. Not a bit shy, he would relish any opportunity to give an exegesis on a topic, pet peeve or cherished alike. He was exhibit A of the natural distribution of talent, a pattern gender, nationality neutral. Without any doubt, he demonstrated the wondrous, contagious catnip side of the thirst of knowledge. He was the first one to challenge a teacher's flawed analysis of historical events.

The first such challenge took place over the true meaning of Lincoln's emancipation edict. He would point out that far from being a universal enfranchisement of slaves, it was a limited act that covered the rebel states and not the ones that remained in the Union. The second one occurred around the time of Argentine's first World Cup win. A student from that country said in a matter of fact and proudly, "My country never had any black residents." He spontaneously engaged in a history lesson unknown to all present about the best exemplar of the "final solution" in ridding a society of undesirables. He chronicled the brisk and prosperous [slave trade](#) and the story of Antonio Ruiz, "[El Negro Falucho](#)", a national hero who paid with his life his loyalty to the Argentines revolting against Spain for their independence.

In History or Geography classes, he would be not uncommonly one of the few if not the only one to point out on the globe the location of such countries like Vanuatu in the Pacific Ocean, or Andorra, a principality between France and Spain. Or for that matter other unheard-of places like Lesotho, Liechtenstein and so on.

In literature class as his whim went, he would sometime carry on a pedantic mode to the delight of his peers and teacher, and his writing would reflect that fancy. For example, his composition would be awash with highfalutin terms. Hence, he would nitpick over the choice of epithets such as classy-sounding jocund or jocular over pedestrian status of jolly, or patrician-evoking verboten over utilitarian reeking forbidden or the regal bent flair of ersatz over plain connotation of artificial. Not to mention he would prefer the cachet of the locution *word maven* over staid *wordsmith*. To the oft-said remark that use of such a sophisticated lexicon was pretentious and bougie, he would answer in a tongue-in-cheek manner, "The dictionary is full of words. They are there for a reason, so we need to use them." Suffice it to say that with Jean-Pierre around, a dull moment couldn't exist.

In the school cafeteria, word had quickly spread among students that he had a legendary appetite. It wasn't long before some of the female students would prepare him home-made plates. In a true illustration of humans' behavior spun by our social thirst, on any given day, he could receive Korean *beef bulgogi* or *kimchi*, Indian *Rogan josh* or *makki ki roti*, Nigerian *jollof rice* served with *suya*, Italian *eggplant parmigiana*, Jamaican *festival* or *jerk pork* or a spicy southern recipe, *potlikker soup with cornbread*. These treats by the female students thrived despite some of the jealous males' displeasure or some disgruntled parents at the fact that the beneficiary of such kindness held a dark skin hue. Treating begat a trend of one-upmanship as the students were vying for his approval of the best tasting dish. He would respond with this diplomatic remark, "This will be my best-tasting plate for the day." A good fella, he was.

The most important phenomenon about Jean-Michel remained his position along the stretch from stalwart liberals to die-hard conservatives. He wholeheartedly embraced the stalwart liberals' proactive and socially progressive perspective but added the spice of accountability to chip away at abuse that becomes counterproductive and good fodder for neocons. In his own words, "Don't take if you are not willing to give back and don't accept aid if you are not willing to stay the course and see it through with great success."

Jean-Michel was living proof of the positive vibes when humans pay attention to our similarities instead of our differences or better yet of the harmony that can coexist in diversity.