

TURNING INWARD

Black Organizations Regain Importance

Black America finds itself looking down a cold and poorly lit road toward an uncertain political and economic future as the early months of 1996 focus attention on this fall's presidential and congressional elections. Black America is now in the midst of at least four major transformations, two of which are widely acknowledged and two that are appreciated only dimly.

First, and most starkly, the mainstream white political support for affirmative action and minority business enterprise programs that have played a central role in the growth of both the black middle class and an upper-class professional elite over the last generation has shrunk noticeably. Second, the ongoing legal and political battles over minority-sensitive legislative districting—which in the past dramatically increased the numbers of black elected officials at local, state, and congressional levels—have also taken a downward turn. With states such as Georgia and Louisiana facing congressional elections under judicially revised districting plans that have eliminated some black-majority districts, this next Congress may well have *fewer* African-American members—the first such decline in almost a century.

Both of these well-known developments are seen by some political observers as leading to one stark lesson: namely, that for perhaps the next generation, Black America ought to focus more of its energies and aspirations inward, rather than outward toward electoral and legislative arenas. Indeed, the decisions of two of the most influential and well-respected black members of Congress to leave the House and take up other top-line posts—first Bill Gray at the United Negro College Fund and now Kweisi Mfume at the

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—suggest that even savvy insiders now believe that the best arena for helping build the future of Black America is organizational rather than electoral.

But there is little doubt that in many ways, most of which are ignored by the mainstream mass media, Black America for at least several years has already been turning inward—and arguably to a degree that has not been witnessed since the years prior to 1954. This shift is potentially momentous, but it does not come with any particular, or any necessarily regrettable ideological loading, for it is a shift that in some ways has characterized people from many different points on the ideological spectrum.

This inward turn is accelerating at the very same time that a second underappreciated development continues to intensify—namely, the increasing economic bifurcation between poverty and wealth that exists within Black America. Millions of African Americans nowadays live in more strikingly divergent economic circumstances than was the case thirty or thirty-five years ago, and although a decline in affirmative action programs may well halt some of the ongoing upward movement, any measurable retrenchment in government social welfare programs is all but certain to intensify the downward pressures being experienced by far larger numbers of citizens.

All four of these transformations are likely to outweigh in long-term importance both of the 1995 events that just a few months ago seemed to be milestones in black political life: the re-

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markable nationwide fascination with and enthusiasm for the public persona of Colin Powell and the unprecedented mass participation that marked the Million Man March.

Powell's appearance on the national political stage heralded something never before seen: the eminently realistic possibility that an African-American could become president of the United States. The self-confidence with which Powell announced his decision not to seek the presidency only stirred further interest in his persona, but his announcement that he was indeed a Republican established narrower parameters for any future Powell political candidacy. Had Powell sought the presidency, even as a Republican, black politics would have been turned upside down, more so than at any time since the death of Booker T. Washington.

But the Powell question, at least in the minds of many hopeful Republicans, including some close to presidential front-runner Bob Dole, is not a closed one. If Dole, as the Republican nominee, were to try to persuade Powell—for American's greater good—to join him on the ticket, Powell would certainly have to reconsider his repeated insistence that he will not be a candidate for any office in 1996. Should Powell end up as the Republican vice-presidential candidate, a realignment of black voting behavior unmatched by anything since the mid-1930s would very likely be the result. And, should Powell become vice president in January of 1997, Americans would likely be looking toward an African-American Republican nominee for president in November of the year 2000.

The longer term import of the other major milestone of 1995, the Million Man March, remains difficult to measure. Outspoken critics of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan notwithstanding, the overwhelming success of the march seems to have done little to move Farrakhan toward any more of a mainstream role in black public life than he held prior to the march. Most thoughtful observers of the remarkable gathering were quick to credit the dedication and commitment of the hundreds of thousands of participants, rather than Farrakhan's small and secretive band of supporters, with the march's triumph, but dependable ways of measuring the

after-the-fact transformative and motivational impact of the event on both marchers and supportive observers are difficult at best. The past history of Farrakhan associate Benjamin Chavis makes it unlikely that any Chavis-directed leadership organization could draw widespread support from African-American civic activists, and the Million Man March, like its illustrious 1963 predecessor, may make its way directly into the history books.

Far more significant than any Farrakhan and/or Chavis organizational initiative is the decision of Baltimore Representative Kweisi Mfume to give up his safe seat and his influential role in the House of Representatives to become executive director of the NAACP. The national news media failed to note how Philadelphia's Bill Gray had made a parallel shift several years earlier—in the hope of sustaining black colleges. Mfume's decision will breathe new life into what at the national level has been a badly damaged and almost moribund organization.

But Mfume's NAACP faces very stark challenges that range well beyond a return to financial and administrative health. Nowhere has local-level evidence of Black America's turning its aspirations inward been more dramatically visible than in the school integration disputes that have strained the links between several NAACP branches and their organizational superiors. A growing number of black communities seem more focused on ensuring the pedagogical quality of their children's education than upon assuring a racially integrated student population. For the NAACP to become a more energetically representative organization within Black America, the organization's tradition of national staffers standing above the aspirations of local chapters will have to change radically.

For almost two decades, students of black civic activism have watched as the tremendous growth in black electoral success—a success especially dramatic in the South since the 1982 strengthening of the Voting Rights Act—has more and more placed black elected officials, rather than protesters or organization executives, in the most prominent roles in black public life. As that trend strengthened, it became increasingly frequent for commentators to suggest that just about all of the "old-time" civil rights

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groups—SCLC, CORE, and the NAACP—had become superfluous in a political context where the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), or the black caucus within one or another state legislature, could wield far more policy clout than any black interest group.

Now, however, events since the Republican capture of Congress in November 1994 suggest that the pendulum may be swinging back in the opposite direction—toward the traditional “old-line” black organizations to which former Representatives Gray and Mfume have moved. Prospects for any Democratic recapturing of a majority in either the House or the Senate seem dim at present, and any numerical shrinkage in the size of the CBC would make painfully visible how the Republican ascendancy has shriveled the caucus’s influence.

Clinton administration errors and electoral missteps have cost America the public services of several of Black America’s most promising young figures—Lani Guinier, Mike Espy, and Alan Wheat—but Kweisi Mfume’s decision symbolizes a far greater potential shift. No, Mfume’s considerable strengths and talents notwithstanding, the NAACP will not be reborn in a day—or a year. Most strikingly, in early January the *New York Times*’s Steven Holmes asked a cross-section of African-Americans in New Orleans their impressions of the nation’s oldest and largest civil rights group. One local black journalist volunteered that for many people “It’s not a relevant organization,” but most unforgettable was the response of one twenty-year-old woman, who

told Holmes, “I’ve never heard of them.”

That comment frames the challenges and dangers that lie ahead in the best of all possible futures, one where black legislative representation does not shrink and a dramatic increase in local-level community organization is not primarily tied to campaigns for elective office. Such a trend might go hand in hand with a new growth era for NAACP branches, but it would most likely herald a new age of increased activism on the part of African-American churches, a community mainstay whose overall role has been somewhat in eclipse over the past two decades.

However, in a less-than-ideal and far more dangerous future, one with no increase in local organizing, a shrinkage in the African-American electoral presence will go hand in hand with yet further increases in self-destructive behaviors among young people and an ongoing acceleration in community decline. Only energetic participation by black adults—as when parents step in and loudly decry schools that tolerate lax security and poor learning standards—could turn such situations around, and the years to come may well offer far too many high-stakes challenges for black communities all across the land.

In a Black America where some young adults have never heard of the NAACP, the road ahead will almost certainly be long and cold. However, ideologies and partisan preferences aside, Black America may be moving into a new era where private organizations rather than public officials will once again play the most central roles and have the most to offer to their communities. □

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