

“THE CRISIS OF BLACK LEADERSHIP: BUILDING AFRICAN-AMERICAN  
POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE”

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I would like to thank the Reverend Abraham L. Funchess, the Chief Administrator of the Iowa Commission on the Status of African Americans, the Department of Human Rights, for his generous invitation to me to present this keynote address at the "Second Annual Ongoing Covenant with Black Iowa Summit."

The title of my keynote address this morning is "The Crisis of Black Leadership: Building African-American Political Empowerment – Past, Present and Future." Our challenge is to understand how, and why, black political activism has been transformed and subverted over the past half century. We are confronted with a New Racial Domain of "color-blind racism" in the twenty-first century, and we must comprehend how mass unemployment, mass incarceration, and mass disenfranchisement have all greatly complicated how we should approach the task of building a new black leadership. We will need to examine the "paradox of integration" by blacks with the U.S. electoral political system – how it came to pass that as thousands of African Americans successfully were elected to public office, and that as blacks increased their collective clout within the national Democratic Party, that African Americans' pressing problems, especially involving mass joblessness, criminal justice, and the loss of voting rights, went largely unnoticed. In order to answer these questions, our inquiry must start back in the 1950s.

A new, black organic leadership must draw upon the representatives of the most oppressed and marginalized social strata: former prisoners, women

activists in community-based civic organizations, youth groups, homeless coalitions, and the like. The growing class stratification within African-American communities has produced a middle class leadership elite that in many ways is out of touch with problems generated by poverty and mass incarceration. We need to reconnect the construction of leadership with addressing and solving real-world problems that challenge people's daily lives.

Finally, we need to cultivate a new leadership that is firmly anchored to the political traditions of struggle that characterize the best of the Black Freedom Movement. We need a leadership with historical memory, which recognizes the terrain we have fought on, and understands the new developments confronting us.

Modern African-American political leadership really began with two fundamental events a half century ago. The first was a legal victory. In May 1954, in a unanimous decision, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the legality of racially segregated schools in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The high court declared in its ruling "that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place." The following year, the Supreme Court urged the adoption of desegregation plans by public schools "with all deliberate speed." The *Brown* victory was the culmination of decades of legal and political efforts by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and other civil rights groups. Finally, over ninety years after the Emancipation Proclamation, African Americans could demand of the federal government their

Constitutional right to a quality education for their children, without the barriers and material inequities of "Jim Crow," the U.S. version of racial apartheid.

The second political event occurred in Montgomery, Alabama, on 1 December 1955, when Rosa Parks, a respected seamstress and a NAACP local activist, refused to relinquish her seat to a white man, while riding on a segregated public bus. Local black labor union leader E.D. Nixon, outraged by Parks's arrest, urged the African-American community to stage a one-day boycott of Montgomery's buses. A black professional women's group, the Women's Political Council led by educator Jo Ann Robinson, was largely responsible for the successful city-wide mobilization to protest Jim Crow regulations in public transportation. On Monday, 5 December, over 95 percent of all blacks refused to ride the buses. Six thousand black people gathered that night at Montgomery's Holt Street Baptist Church, and reached a consensus to continue the non-violent protest indefinitely. A black coalition, the Montgomery Improvement Association, was created, which selected a young, little-known Baptist minister as its chief spokesperson – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. For nearly one year, the boycott continued, despite hundreds of blacks being fired from their jobs for supporting civil protest. The homes of King and other African Americans were firebombed; local police harassed and jailed boycott organizers. On 13 November 1956, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the boycott, and struck down the city's segregation ordinance for public transportation. The modern black freedom

movement had achieved a decisive victory, and the struggle had found a new spokesperson in the powerful and charismatic Dr. King.

Historians who study and document the lives of political leaders frequently make the mistake of telling a story from the vantage point of “great” people’s (usually men’s) lives. To be sure, an unusual number of talented and extraordinary black women and men came into the public arena to push forward measures to outlaw American apartheid: Dr. King; the Reverend David Abernathy, King’s closest friend and confidante; the brilliant tactician Bayard Rustin; Medgar Evers, the leader of Mississippi’s NAACP branch who was brutally assassinated in front of his home and family in 1963; Septima Poinsette Clark, who created the Citizenship Education program which taught thousands of poor and illiterate blacks to read, write, and to register to vote; Robert Moses, a young mathematics teacher, who went into Mississippi to organize voter education and registration campaigns; the Vanderbilt Divinity student, James Lawson, who trained civil rights activists in civil disobedience techniques and taught them the philosophy of nonviolence of Mohandas Gandhi; the courageous Ella Baker, veteran of civil rights organizations, who inspired the creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1960; the legendary Fannie Lou Hamer, a former cotton field laborer, who co-founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and challenged the whites-only state delegation at the 1964 Democratic National Convention; John Lewis, who in his early twenties participated in “freedom rides” to desegregate interstate bus routes, and led

nonviolent "sit-in" demonstrations at whites-only lunch counters; Thurgood Marshall, lead attorney of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and later the first black Supreme Court Justice; and Gloria Hayes Richardson, who led the desegregation campaign in Cambridge, Maryland.

Many of the veterans of the black freedom movement of 1950s and 1960s would later successfully move into electoral politics, such as King lieutenant Andrew Young, who was elected to Congress in 1972, subsequently appointed U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations in 1977, and then was elected mayor of Atlanta, Georgia, in 1981. Another prominent example of public leadership is that of civil rights attorney Marian Wright Edelman. Born in South Carolina in 1939, Edelman earned her law degree at Yale University, and worked with various civil rights groups. In 1968, Edelman was the Congressional liaison for King's Poor People's Campaign. Five years later, she founded the Children's Defense Fund, a nonprofit agency that today is the most prominent advocate group advancing the interests of American's children, regardless of their race or ethnicity.

Creative, charismatic and talented individuals may help to define a moment in history, yet the struggles to improve the substance of daily life are fundamentally waged by ordinary people, who work every day, who silently sacrifice for their children, and find social meaning through their quiet contributions to their communities, voluntary organizations, and religious institutions. The struggle for freedom was always expressed in collective terms for the African-American people. The spirit of freedom was embodied in our

celebrations of what was first termed "Negro History Month" held every February, through celebrations such as "Juneteenth," honoring the date of 19 June 1865, when blacks in Texas first learned of their emancipation from slavery; to the popular national liberation flag of the Negro masses inspired by Marcus Garvey, a flowing colorful banner of red, black and green.

The fierce and unrelenting character of white racism, and the structural barriers that inhibited the flourishing of full democratic life, constructed a national consciousness and political culture that expressed itself through a myriad of personalities who assumed leadership roles, as well as within institutional and organizational forms. Black people regardless of their social class deeply felt a sense of what political scientist Michael Dawson describes as "linked fates," which bound them to each other, as well as to their collective history of resistance. The successes of any one member of a disadvantaged community are, in many ways, shared and experienced by all. When boxers such as Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali dominated their opponents and were acclaimed heavyweight champions of the world, blacks throughout the nation to some degree found common pride in and through their accomplishments in the ring. When tennis star Althea Gibson broke the color barrier by winning the women's singles titles at Forest Hills, New York, in both 1957 and 1958, she symbolically represented the aspirations of thousands of other black athletes who were denied the right to play tennis on whites-only courts and country clubs. The brilliance of provocative novelist/essayist James Baldwin spoke to the reservoir of

anger against discrimination that millions of black people felt and lived with every day.

How has the challenge of black leadership changed over the past half century? African-American politics in the twenty-first century is defined by what I call the "paradox of integration." At no previous time in American history have there been more influential and powerful black elected officials and government administrators serving in the nation's capital. Back in 1964, the year that the Civil Rights Act was signed, which outlawed racial segregation in public accommodations, the total number of blacks in Congress was five; the total number of African-American mayors of major U.S. cities, towns and even villages was zero; the combined total of all black officials throughout the United States in 1964 was a paltry 104.

This meant, in practical terms, that the voice of black political leadership largely emanated from two sources: the African-American Christian religious community, such as the Progressive Baptist Convention, and its representatives, including leading Civil Rights clergy like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph David Abernathy, Wyatt T. Walker, Fred Shuttlesworth and others. Secondly, there was the mainstream Civil Rights community, represented by NAACP national secretary Roy Wilkins, NAACP Legal Defense Fund director Thurgood Marshall, the Congress of Racial Equality leader James Farmer, and Urban League director Whitney Young. These individuals possessed radically different approaches and tactics in their efforts to challenge Jim Crow segregation. But what they all had in

common was a strategic understanding about what the fight was about. Few of them entertained any illusions about trying to get themselves elected to Congress. Their goal was the vigorous advocacy of what they perceived to be blacks' interests, and to use a variety of means – nonviolent demonstrations, economic boycotts, lobbying Congress to pass legislation, etc. – to pressure white leaders and institutions to make meaningful concessions.

The passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the widespread exodus of white racist "Dixiecrats" into the Republican Party, led to the rise of the African-American electorate as a central component within the national Democratic Party. The number of African-American officials soared: from about 1,100 in 1970 to 3,600 by 1983. The Congressional Black Caucus was formed in 1971 to bring greater leverage within Congress for African-American demands. In March 1972, thousands of blacks met in Gary, Indiana, to form a "National Black Political Assembly," with the explicit idea of constructing a comprehensive "Black Agenda" of public policy issues that would guide the actions of newly-elected black officials across the country. Some of us involved in the Assembly even anticipated the establishment of an all-Black Independent Political Party, where blacks could exercise the greatest possible freedom in negotiating deals between white parties and institutions.

During the 1980's and early 1990's, political events triggered a fundamental transformation in the internal dynamics of black leadership nationally and in the agendas it pursued. First, the rise of a powerful, assertive Congressional Black

Caucus largely superseded the political influence of the NAACP and other Civil Rights organizations as the chief formulators of national black public policy. Second, the dramatic electoral campaigns of Harold Washington, running successfully for Chicago's mayor in 1983 and 1987, combined with the Reverend Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition presidential campaigns of 1984 and 1988, illustrated that black social protests (aimed chiefly against President Ronald Reagan's conservative agenda) could use electoral politics as a vehicle for mobilizing masses of people of different races and classes behind a black progressive agenda. Jackson did not win the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, but his dramatic success in garnering over seven million popular votes in 1988, and in winning numerous primary elections and caucus states proved that a black or Latino presidential candidate could, under the right set of circumstances, win the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. Although Jackson was himself a Christian minister, his electoral campaigns shifted the focus of black politics away from the black church and Civil Rights groups firmly into the secular electoral arena. In the quarter century following the civil rights marches of Birmingham, Selma and Memphis, "black politics" had been redefined from economic boycotts, street demonstrations, the establishment of "Freedom Schools," Septima Clark's "Citizenship Academies," and from Black Power-inspired automobile workers creating their own revolutionary union movements in Detroit, to electoral participation within the system.

But the third, and most unexpected political development, was the striking emergence of what can be termed “post-black politics” or “race-neutral politics.” Prior to the late 1980s, the vast majority of white American voters, regardless of their party affiliation or ideology, simply would not vote for a black candidate for public office. There existed an “invisible glass ceiling” limiting black upward mobility within the system, where African-Americans could be elected to Congress, but only so long as their districts contained at least strong pluralities of minorities. Dozens of blacks won election as mayors with cities containing white majorities, but these were nearly always cities containing substantial and highly mobilized black and brown electorates, and traditional allies like liberal unions, Latinos, and women’s organizations.

In the multicultural nineties, as “hip-hop” began to define urban youth culture, and as President William Jefferson Clinton proudly jogged donning a Malcolm “X Cap,” this racial barrier eroded. A new generation of African-American politicians – most of whom were lawyers, corporate executives, city administrators and foundation officers – began to emerge, first in municipal politics and then at the national level. With few exceptions, they had no alternative except to advocate the interests of their constituencies – who happened to be white and Latino as well as African-American, middle-class as well as working class, unemployed and poor, those without high school diplomas as well as those with professional and graduate degrees. Michael White, the mayor of Cleveland, Ohio, in the 1990s was in many ways the archetype for

post-black politics; an African-American mayor who was far more comfortable discussing tax abatements and incentives to attract corporate investment to the inner city, than leading a public protest.

Today, the two most “successful” practitioners of post-black leadership are Illinois Senator Barack Obama, and Newark, New Jersey Mayor Corey Booker. Both men are proudly, assertively self-identified as “black,” as an ethnic identity. But both pursue strategies for public policy change that are not “race-based.” They consciously cater to audiences that are broadly multiracial, and draw the majority of their financial support well outside of the black community. Despite their prominence, they do not play organic roles of interest group advocacy for all-black groups, partially because their perceived electoral mandate is “color-blind.” The reality of their electoral successes paradoxically limits their ability to advocate on behalf of the specific problems of structural racism that continue to devastate and destroy blacks’ lives.

Within the United States today, a “New Racial Domain” of structural racism has emerged. This New Racial Domain is different from other earlier forms of racial domination, such as slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and ghettoization, or strict residential segregation, in several critical aspects. These earlier racial formations or domains were grounded or based primarily, if not exclusively, in the political economy of U.S. capitalism. Anti-racist or oppositional movements that blacks, other people of color and white anti-racists built were largely predicated upon the confines or realities of domestic markets and the

policies of the U.S. nation-state. Meaningful social reforms such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were debated almost entirely within the context of America's expanding, domestic economy, and influenced by Keynesian, welfare state public policies.

The political economy of America's "New Racial Domain," by contrast, is driven and large determined by the forces of transnational capitalism, and the public policies of state Neoliberalism. From the vantage point of the most oppressed U.S. populations, the New Racial Domain rests on an unholy trinity, or deadly triad, of structural barriers to a decent life. These oppressive structures are mass unemployment, mass incarceration, and mass disfranchisement. Each factor directly feeds and accelerates the others, creating an ever-widening circle of social disadvantage, poverty, and civil death, touching the lives of tens of millions of U.S. people.

The process begins at the point of production. A recent study of Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies establishes that in 2002, one of every four African-American adult males was unemployed throughout the entire year of 2002. The black male jobless rate was over twice that for white and Latino males. Even these statistics seriously underestimate the real problem, because they don't factor in the huge number of African-American males in prison or those who are homeless.

For black males without a high school level education, their job prospects are even worse. The Center's study notes that among black male high school

dropouts, 44 percent were unemployed for the entire year of 2002. For black men between the ages of 55 and 64, jobless rates for 2002 were almost 42 percent. *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert has described these dire statistics as evidence of “an emerging catastrophe – levels of male joblessness that mock the very idea of stable, viable communities. This slow death of the hopes, pride, and well-being of huge numbers of African Americans is going unnoticed by most other Americans and by political leaders of both parties.”

So long as African Americans were the chief casualties in the ranks of those who were permanently unemployed, white elected officials could afford to ignore the crisis. But now, increasingly, millions of white workers who have considered themselves “middle class” are being pushed into the ranks of the jobless. In late July 2004, the Labor Department’s Bureau of Labor Statistics noted that between 2001 and 2003, 8.7 percent of all jobholders in the U.S. were permanently dismissed from their jobs. This figure amounts to 11.4 million men and women aged 20 or older. This was, according to the Bureau, the “second fastest rate” of layoffs “on record since 1980.” Among laid-off workers who found new jobs, 56.9 percent were earning less money than from their former employment.

Mass unemployment inevitably feeds mass incarceration. About one-third of all prisoners were unemployed at the time of their arrests, and others averaged less than \$20,000 annual incomes in the year prior to their incarceration. When the Attica prison insurrection occurred in upstate New York

in 1971, there were only 12,500 prisoners in New York State's correctional facilities, and about 300,000 prisoners nationwide. By 2001, New York State held over 71,000 women and men in its prisons; nationally, 2.3 million were imprisoned. Today, about six million Americans are in prison or jail, on probation, parole or awaiting trial, and roughly one in six Americans now possesses a criminal record.

Mandatory-minimum sentencing laws adopted in the 1980s and 1990s in many states stripped judges of their discretionary powers in sentencing, imposing Draconian terms on first-time and non-violent offenders. Parole has been made more restrictive as well, and in 1995 Pell grant subsidies supporting educational programs for prisoners were ended. For those prisoners who are fortunate enough to successfully navigate the criminal justice bureaucracy and emerge from incarceration, they discover that both the federal law and state governments explicitly prohibit the employment of convicted ex-felons in hundreds of vocations. The cycle of unemployment usually starts all over again.

Mass incarceration, of course, breeds mass political disfranchisement. Nearly six million Americans today cannot vote. In six states, former prisoners convicted of a felony *lose their voting rights for life*. In the majority of states, individuals on parole and probation cannot vote. About 15 percent of all African-American males nationally are either permanently or currently disfranchised. In Mississippi, one-third of all black men are unable to vote for the remainder of their lives.

Even temporary disfranchisement fosters a disruption of civil engagement and involvement in public affairs. This can lead to “civil death,” the destruction of the capacity for collective agency and resistance. This process of depolitization undermines even grassroots, non-electoral-oriented organizing. The deadly triangle of the New Racial Domain constantly and continuously grows unchecked and most black elected officials seem powerless to challenge it.

Not too far in the distance lies the social consequence of these policies inside the United States: an unequal, two-tiered, uncivil society, characterized by a governing hierarchy of middle- to upper-class “citizens” who own nearly all private property and financial assets, and a vast subaltern of quasi- or sub-citizens encumbered beneath the cruel weight of permanent unemployment, discriminatory courts and sentencing procedures, dehumanized prisons, voting disfranchisement, residential segregation, and the elimination of most public services for the poor. The latter group is virtually excluded from any influence in a national public policy. Institutions that once provided space for upward mobility and resistance for working people such as unions have been large dismantled. Integral to all of this is racism, sometimes openly vicious and unambiguous, but much more frequently presented in race neutral, color-blind language. This is the New Racial Domain of domestic apartheid in America.

What is required is the construction of a new, dedicated, organic black leadership of advocacy, that is linked to institutions and non-profit organizations that are intimately engaged in struggles attacking the New Racial Domain of

mass unemployment, mass incarceration and mass political disenfranchisement. This is in no way to minimize the significance of electoral politics, voting, and using all the tools of electoralism. But it is to suggest that when we abandoned “protest” for “politics,” we lost our way; it is to suggest that effective leadership that interrogates systemic racial inequality must isolate problems of racial disparities within employment patterns, within sentencing and parole patterns that highlight the continuing reality of white supremacy in American life. Only a mass protest movement dedicated to black empowerment and human equality can produce the principled leadership necessary to “speak truth to power.”

A new, black organic leadership must draw upon the representatives of the most oppressed and marginalized social strata: former prisoners, women activists in community-based, civic organizations, youth groups, homeless coalitions, and the like. The growing class stratification within African-American communities has produced a middle class leadership elite that in many ways is out of touch with problems generated by poverty and mass incarceration. We need to reconnect the construction of leadership with addressing and solving real-world problems that challenge people’s daily lives.

Finally, we need to cultivate a new leadership that is firmly anchored to the political traditions of struggle that characterize the best of the Black Freedom Movement. We need a leadership with historical memory, which recognizes the terrain we have fought on, and understands the new developments confronting us.

We need leaders who understand that justice arrives slowly for oppressed people. If the dominant institutions of society attribute little value to their lives, families and communities, "justice" can be delayed for a very long time. But inevitably, a day of reckoning occurs.

For many years, the NAACP and other civil rights groups lobbied the U.S. Congress and a series of presidents to make lynching a federal crime. Southern Democrats in the U.S. Senate for decades had the power to block or filibuster all legislative remedies that civil rights organizations had sought. Meanwhile, thousands of African Americans across the South, as well as other sections of the country, were lynched, burned alive, or executed, often with crowds of whites participating in, or witnessing, these gory events. In June 2005, the U.S. Senate finally voted to issue a formal "apology for lynching." This represented the first time in U.S. history that Congress had acknowledged, in a formal resolution, the historic crimes committed against people of African descent in the United States. However, when the resolution came to the floor of the Senate for a final voice vote, only 85 U.S. Senators had co-signed as sponsors. Fifteen senators, all Republicans, had not. After the actual vote, seven of those Republican senators agreed to sign a large copy of the Senate's "anti-lynching resolution," for the purposes of public display. Eight Republicans steadfastly refused to endorse an apology for lynching: Trent Lott (R-Mississippi), Thad Cochran (R-Mississippi), John Cornyn (R-Texas), Lamar Alexander (R-Tennessee), Michael Enzi (R-

Wyoming), Judd Gregg (R-New Hampshire), John Sununu (R-New Hampshire), and Craig Thomas (R-Wyoming).

As a historian, I fully understood their dilemma. An admission that widespread human atrocities based on the color of a victim's skin, were widely condoned and accepted, is an admission that America's democratic institutions had failed for years to protect the lives and property of its own citizens. The New Racial Domain of the twenty-first century for most black Americans – mass unemployment, mass incarceration and mass disfranchisement – is, in every respect, a far greater challenge to democracy than the horrific epidemic of lynchings had been in the early twentieth century. An apology for past crimes, however, opened the dialogue leading toward a new understanding about the historically-constructed, accumulated disadvantages that most blacks still endured. That new, democratic conversation that must be pursued by a new generation of African-American leaders has not arrived. But it shall come. It is only a question of power.