

“The NAACP’s 93rd Convention: An Assessment”*Part Two of a Two-Part Series*

Although the NAACP is now clearly a resurgent organization, with perhaps the greatest access to political and institutional resources since the Civil Rights Movement, the real question of how this formation utilizes its newfound leverage and political clout remains unanswered. There were plainly visible at the Houston convention at least three significant political tendencies, reflecting in my judgment divergent ideological perspectives.

The most progressive or democratic left tendency was reflected in the opening address by NAACP Chairman Julian Bond. Bond delivered a blistering condemnation of the Bush administration’s entire public record. President Bush “promised to enforce the civil rights laws,” Bond declared. “We knew he was in the oil business—we just didn’t know it was snake oil.” Bond condemned the appointment of “racially hostile, conservative Republicans” to key civil rights posts and throughout the Department of Justice. Bond ridiculed Bush’s Attorney General John Ashcroft, as “a cross between” former F.B.I. director J. Edgar Hoover and conservative fundamentalist preacher Jerry Falwell. Bond rejected the Bush administration’s endorsement of school vouchers, calling upon “all freedom loving people and the NAACP” to fight “against transferring tax dollars to private schools.” Bond declared, “There’s a right wing conspiracy [against African Americans], and its operating out of the United States Department of Justice.” Bond reminded his audience that thousands of African Americans were disenfranchised in Florida and other states in the 2000 election. Bush’s “Justice Department whittled 11,000

election complaints down to five potential lawsuits, including a mere three in Florida The margin of the Justice Department's cynicism is surpassed only by its hostility to civil rights." Bond observed that while many African-American leaders had muted their criticisms of the Bush administration, that it would be wrong to do so. When democracy is challenged by external threats, "the first causality is usually democracy. So both because of and in spite of the war against terrorism," the NAACP chairman declared, "we will insist on our right to dissent, to petition our government for a redress of our grievances. We do so as patriots, not as partisans." The following day after Bond's remarks were reported, Bush reacted with racist condescension. Asked to respond to his refusal to engage in a dialogue with civil rights leaders, Bush commented: "There I was, sitting around the table with foreign leaders, looking at Colin Powell and Condi Rice. Yeah." Bush's hasty attempt to present Powell and Rice as "civil rights trophies," in the words of the Reverend Al Sharpton, was "the epitome of insensitivity."

Bond had effectively used the Houston convention's theme, "Freedom Under Fire," to underscore the danger of freedom being "undermined in the name of fighting terrorism," in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. He reminded African Americans and other racial minorities that their "freedom is always under fire," due to "constant attempts to limit [our] mobility in voting, economic development, education, access to health care, and in other fields. . . . In the wake of September 11, 2001 attacks, racial profiling has gained a false legitimacy."

In striking contrast, Mfume's language was markedly more conciliatory and centrist. In his welcoming letter to the convention, Mfume declared: "Now, the freedom of innocents in America and throughout the world is under fire from hatemongers who would use terror to

achieve their ends. We, who have fought for freedom for nearly a century, decry the methods of those who would destroy civilization. . . . We stand proud, in fierce opposition to hatred espoused from any quarter, knowing that freedom will prevail.” Nothing in Mfume’s welcoming letter condemned the Bush administration’s extremist record, or addressed the enormous dangers presented by the undermining of civil liberties and voting rights under Ashcroft.

This same thesis formed the basic framework for Mfume’s major address at the convention. Mfume declared that while he liked Bush personally, “I don’t like his presidential practice of divide and conquer when it comes to black organizations and black people and black thinking.” However, Mfume also attacked Democrats for “taking our votes for granted,” stating that every Republican was “not an enemy” and that every Democrat was “not a friend.” The NAACP president condemned “black bigotry” and urged the organization to oppose injustices from the “far, far left” as well as the “far, far right.” Since the “far, far left” is not in power anywhere in the United States, it was difficult to know who Mfume was condemning. The only logical explanation was that Mfume was attempting to give a more centrist image to the NAACP. This may explain the NAACP’s decision to invite Texas Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, a conservative Republican with a long record of hostility to blacks’ interests, as a convention speaker.

The third, and perhaps the most prominent tendency at the NAACP 2002 Convention was the almost overwhelming presence of corporate America, in every aspect of the gathering. Major conventions are, after all, big business. Houston’s Convention and Visitors Bureau predicted that the NAACP conference would generate \$6.8 million in profits. Seven of the eight major

vendor contracts controlled by the NAACP went to minority-owned businesses. The NAACP also persuaded the Brown Convention Center to employ minority-owned subcontractors for food services, audiovisual services, electrical needs and other services, instead of larger white-owned contractors that normally control convention business. Far exceeding the presence of black small business, however, was the predominance of major corporations. On the NAACP Convention's "2002 Blue Ribbon Committee," chaired by Houston mayor Lee P. Brown, were: the owners of the Houston Rockets and Houston Astros and the presidents and/or chief executive officers of Shell Oil, Bank One-Houston region, Wells Fargo Bank of Texas, ExxonMobil Production Company, and Reliant Energy. Donating "benefactors" listed in conference literature prominently included Enron, Bank of America, JP Morgan Chase Bank of Texas, Continental Airlines, and Sysco Corporation. In its convention advertisement, ExxonMobil identified its corporate goals with those of the NAACP: "For over ninety years, the NAACP has been a champion for the civil rights of all Americans. Its struggle is our struggle; its success is our success. . . . Diversity is the key to business success and fosters a highly productive work environment in which all employees are treated with respect. ExxonMobil is dedicated to being a partner with our employees and the communities in which they live and work toward a future that leaves no one behind."

Microsoft Corporation announced at the convention a \$670,000 donation of cash and software to the NAACP to upgrade its information technology capacity at its national and regional offices. Mfume stated that "our constructive relationship with Microsoft has given the NAACP the ability to do more in helping to reduce the gap in technology so evident in poor communities across America." Microsoft and its employees had previously given more than

\$1.5 million to assist the NAACP. The BellSouth Corporation used the convention to announce its continuing association with the NAACP by providing live Internet broadcasts of plenaries, major speeches, and other events on the organization's website. BellSouth's diversity chief, Ronald E. Frieson declared, "BellSouth's strategic imperative of inclusion is closely aligned with that of the NAACP's. . . ." The Microsoft and BellSouth alliances are only a small part of the NAACP's growing network of corporate sponsorships. Companies as diverse as McDonald's, Wal-Mart, Texaco, GTE, Ford, BMW, 7-Eleven, and AT&T have given funds through grants, gifts, or advertisements in NAACP publications and convention brochures. The growing influence of these large multinational corporations on the daily functioning of the Association—from the information technology needed to run its offices to the resources essential to finance its expanded service and educational programs—will inevitably influence its public policy agenda to the right.

That pressure toward accommodation may already be happening. At the February 23, 2002 NAACP "Image Awards," honoring people of color primarily in the entertainment industry, the organization stunned members and critics alike by selecting as one its awardees Bush's National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice. At the televised black tie event, sponsored by Nationwide Insurance, Mfume praised Rice as a "role model." Rice accepted the honor, stating that America "still struggles with the true meaning of multi-ethnic democracy, that still struggles with how to accommodate and indeed, how to celebrate diversity." Nevertheless, Rice declared, "it does struggle to become better. It is not perfect but it is a long, long way from where we were."

Rice's award from the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization represents the continuing dilemma of the liberal integrationist philosophy. The black middle class overwhelmingly rejects Condoleezza Rice's politically conservative ideology, but it admires the personal accomplishments and achievements that her academic and public career represents. Rice is the perfect "symbolic representative" of black upward mobility and career advancement. But advancement toward what goals, and for what ends? What does it mean when blacks uncritically celebrate a key representative of an administration that works overtime to reverse the historic gains of the black freedom movement, simply because she shares the color of our skin? The powerful dependency on corporate and philanthropic support may make it increasingly difficult for the NAACP to offer a clear, consistent voice against both the far right and globalization.

Despite these constraints and contradictions, the NAACP remains the most important mass organization that has the capacity to mobilize millions of African Americans, with the exception of the Black Church. There are significant variations in political orientation between national leadership and grassroots activists in local branch organizations. In cities like Detroit, for example, the NAACP has a militant, black nationalist membership and an experienced, progressive local leadership. On many white college campuses, black student unions have evolved into apolitical social clubs; the campus NAACP chapters are frequently the only site where activist black youth can become directly involved in anti-racist issues. A number of younger NAACP leaders not only share Bond's radical democratic views, but would move the organization further toward broad popular coalitions with other black groups, even including the Nation of Islam, who do not share all of their views. Consequently, it is unclear which direction

the NAACP will move; what is absolutely clear, however, is the NAACP will remain central to any future project in the reconstruction of black politics.

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