

commentary

Vantage Point

Life After Mfume At the NAACP

By Ron Daniels

The shocking news that Kweisi Mfume, President/CEO of black America's oldest and largest civil rights organization, has resigned has settled in now and the NAACP is setting about the task of finding a new leader. Mfume is someone who I have always held in high regard. I thought he was one of the most effective Chairpersons in the history of the Congressional Black Caucus. Hence, there were high expectations as he assumed the mantle of leadership of a scandal and debt ridden organization nearly a decade ago. The Association was in desperate need of repair if it was to retain its place as black America's pre-eminent civil rights organization.

One thing is certain, Mfume restored the credibility of the NAACP, and he not only leaves it debt free, the organization has a healthy surplus. This is no small achievement. Moreover, working with the NAACP Voter Fund in 2000, Mfume spearheaded one of the most successful voter registration drives in recent history. Consequently, it was not surprising that he helped lead the demand for a recount of the vote in Florida when multitudes of blacks were disenfranchised in the presidential election. The NAACP's hearings and investigation helped to provide the pressure to compel Florida to revamp the machinery and methods of administering elections. During his tenure Mfume also called on the motion picture industry to include more blacks in featured roles in movies, and he responded to allegations of discrimination against blacks in certain hotel and restaurant chains and successfully signed covenants to redress the grievances. He also placed the full weight of the national organization behind the campaign to have the Confederate Battle Flag removed from the perch of the Capital building in South Carolina.

Though these are important contributions, I must confess that Mfume's tenure fell short of my expectations. While a great deal of the Association's work is done in local communities by its more than 2,000 branches, I still believe that the national organization should visibly lead and support campaigns to address the major systemic racial, social, economic injustices that plague the masses of black poor and working people in this country. In that sense, I feel Mfume never quite found his voice as President/CEO of the NAACP. Perhaps he did not see this kind of leadership as a priority given the circumstances he inherited when he took office. On critical issues like the assault on civil rights, the erosion of civil liberties and the impact of the war in Iraq on blacks, people of color and the poor, more often than not it has been Julian Bond, the Chairman of the Board, who has been the most vocal. But even Bond's protestations have not been backed by sustained action to lead or support movements addressing these issues.

Whether expressing the views of the Board or his own, Bond often sounded more militant and aggressive in promoting and defending civil rights, civil liberties and a social justice agenda than Mfume. Indeed, rumors abound that there were tensions between these two giants. Though insiders with whom I have spoken deny that there was a conflict between them, it did often appear that there were two leaders of the NAACP rather than one. This could pose a problem as the Association begins to search for a new President/CEO. Whoever replaces Mfume will be asked to lead the Association at one of the most dangerous moments in American history as it relates to the undermining of civil rights, civil liberties and the shredding of the social/economic safety net for working people. The struggling middle class and the poor. In the first decade of the 21st century, our oldest and largest civil rights organizations must retool itself to face these enormous new challenges or risk being rendered irrelevant.

As a Lifetime Member of the Association and one who earned my early stripes as an organizer in the NAACP youth division, I am concerned about and committed to working with the organization to deepen and broaden its engagement in the struggle for African and human liberation in the 21st century. In my view, there is an urgent need for a debate/dialogue within the one, which is devoted to the uplift of Africans in America as its primary though not exclusive focus. I would submit that, now more than ever, there is a need for what Dr. Ramona Edelin calls a "cultural offensive" to define the nature of the African freedom struggle in America and the world. With the "black agenda" either being ignored or under assault and in the face of other racial minorities/people of color who may not be particularly sympathetic to our interests and aspirations, there is a crucial need for internal consolidation and an emphasis on capacity-building - the ability to more effectively articulate, promote and defend black interests.

A major component of this internal empowerment imperative is to reach out to every branch of the African family now represented in a dramatically changing black community. The NAACP must make a conscious effort to include, involve and represent Africans from the continent who are now a growing segment of the new African community in the U.S., Caribbean Americans including Haitians and Afro-Latinos from Cuba, Puerto Rico, Central and South America. The re-creation of a united front structure like the National African American Leadership Summit is another critical priority. The Association must be in the forefront of the effort to build greater operational unity in the National Black Community.

Finally, the focus on internal empowerment/capacity-building must include harnessing our human and material resources to strengthen the cultural-educational, social, economic and political (voter mobilization) infrastructure in black communities across the country. At this critical juncture in history, we need an NAACP that is not only the oldest and largest civil rights organization; we need the Association to retool to become a vital force for the liberation of African people in this century!

Celebrating Kwanzaa, Celebrating Community

By Marian Wright Edelman

During the last week of December, many black families and communities observed Kwanzaa. Kwanzaa is a unique celebration because it's not a religious or national holiday, but a cultural one. And it doesn't celebrate a person or an event but a set of ideas. In a year when Americans have heard a lot about "values," values are what Kwanzaa is all about. As Dr. Maulana Karenga, the originator of Kwanzaa, explains, "There is no way to understand and appreciate the meaning and message of Kwanzaa without understanding and appreciating its profound and pervasive concern with values. In fact, Kwanzaa's reason for existence, its length of seven days, its core focus and its foundation are all rooted in its concern with values." And the values Kwanzaa celebrates and asks people to live up to aren't about individual private behavior, but the values a community needs to be strong and thrive.

The Nguzo Saba, or seven principles, are the framework of a Kwanzaa celebration. In fact, Dr. Karenga explains, they are the key building

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Witness for Justice

The Female Face Of HIV/AIDS

By Bernice Powell Jackson

AIDS, thy face now is female. That's right. Half of those infected with HIV/AIDS worldwide are now women - and girls. Over the past decade there has been an increasing feminization of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, so much so that the 2004 focus of World AIDS Day, December 1, is women and girls. It is now estimated that 20 million women and girls are HIV positive worldwide.

AIDS, thy face now is female. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable. They are biologically, culturally, economically and socially vulnerable. This vulnerability is due to inadequate knowledge, insufficient access to HIV prevention services, inability to negotiate safer sex, a lack of female-controlled HIV prevention methods and the reality of sexual violence in their lives, in some cases by their intimate partners. Moreover, in many places women face a hostile judicial system and lack access to reproductive services.

AIDS, thy face is now female. Girls are being infected at a frightening rate. The rate of HIV infection among young people worldwide is growing rapidly - they are 67% of the newly infected and in the developing world young women make up almost 2/3 of those newly infected. In many places in the world marriage at a young age can also make for increased vulnerability to infection.

AIDS, thy face is now female. With the explosion of sex trafficking of women in the world over the past decade, it should be no surprise that HIV infection is on the rise among women and girls. It is estimated that at least two million women and girls are trafficked each year. Many of these are young girls sold by their families to brothels in Asia, but they also include women in the U.S., Mexico, Africa and Europe.

AIDS, thy face is now female. Many of the HIV infected women are married. A recent study in South Africa, for instance, found that 10.5% of married couples in that nation were HIV infected. It found that married women actually are at somewhat greater risk of infection because they did not practice safe sex and did not know their husbands were infected. There is no reason not to assume that this is true in the U.S. as well.

AIDS, thy face is now female. Women in war zones are particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS infection as rape is increasingly being used as a tactic against women caught in war zones. But women in other places

also are susceptible to infection by rape. Moreover, many women find it difficult to negotiate safer sex with their partners who have recently returned from war, prison or other highly susceptible places.

AIDS, thy face is now female. Many women don't know their HIV status until they become violently ill. That's why it's critically important for everyone to be tested for HIV infection.

AIDS, thy face is now female. More and more in the U.S., the face of the pandemic is that of black women. In the U.S., where African Americans make up about 12% of the population, more than 1/3 of the HIV/AIDS cases are African Americans and more than half of these are women.

Indeed, the HIV/AIDS rate for African American women is 20 times that of white American women.

AIDS, thy face is now female - and both young and old. One of the fastest growing infected populations in the U.S. are black teens, ages 13-19. They make up 60% of the infected youth population. Likewise, black senior citizens make up half of the HIV cases in their age group. And two thirds of the pediatric AIDS cases in this country are black children.

AIDS, thy face is now female and we've got to stop pretending that HIV/AIDS is not "our" disease, both in this nation and in the world. We've got to support those women living with HIV and organizations which work with them and networks which they create to survive. We've got to make HIV/AIDS funds work for women - we've got to demand that these funds target women. We've got to ensure that women learn about HIV/AIDS prevention and how to negotiate for their own sexual safety. We've got to ensure that women get equal access to treatment. We've got to promote literacy for girls. We've got to promote zero tolerance of violence against women.

This World AIDS Day, December 1, let us pray for women and girls. Let us pray for an end to this horrible and growing pandemic. Then let us get busy on working at ending it by naming it, owning it, educating about it, advocating for those living with it. Only if we name it and claim it can we end it.

Where the world ceases to be the scene of our personal hopes and wishes, where we face it as free beings admiring, asking and observing, there we enter the realm of Art and Science.

—Albert Einstein

Business Exchange

Does Mixing Politics and Business Work For You?

Disinvestment in Sudan Is an

Issue about Growing Your Money

By William Reed

Black activists and religious groups are pressing public pension funds to divest \$91 billion in holdings of companies operating in oil-rich Sudan. In a campaign modeled after the movement against apartheid in South Africa 20 years ago, activists associated with the Sudan Campaign are asking public employees to protest their retirement dollars going to businesses dealing with the regime in Khartoum. "We're asking the people whose money is being invested to say that blood business is bad business," states the Rev. Walter Fauntroy, a Washington, D.C., minister and former delegate to Congress.

He leads the Sudan Campaign, which wants teachers, police officers, firefighters and other public employees to know that some of their retirement money may be invested in companies that do business in the African country of Sudan. Their brand of "shareholder activism," is to ask those people to write to pension fund managers and state legislators and demand their funds be redirected. But, before public service workers and retirees allow money for their "golden years" to be guided by Fauntroy's brands of politics, stock market activism and international business relations they should review a few facts that seems to have passed the good reverend by.

First of all, although the Anti-Apartheid activists can take credit for a few hundred blacks now being in top-levels of the government in South Africa, there is absolutely no reality that their efforts resulted in changes for the masses of blacks in that country. Twenty years ago, as Anti-

Apartheid activists pressed for sanctions against that government, black unemployment was at 50 percent - today black unemployment in South Africa is still at 50 percent and whites still control 80 percent of all economic production there.

"This issue has captured the moral center of the vast majority of the people in this country," said Rev. Walter Fauntroy said. Not to impugn Rev. Fauntroy's record of activism and seeking change through action. He has been extensively and vigorously involved in community and political activity, in and outside the governmental system. But, that's no reason to trust his financial advice. Plus, according to events on the ground in Africa's largest country, Fauntroy's campaign may be dollars shorts and days late.

Sudan is set to introduce a new currency under efforts to restore unity. The new money will replace the Sudanese dinar and will be introduced after a peace deal is signed, ending more than two decades of civil war in the south. The rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), the group the Sudan Campaign is supporting has agreed to the idea. Under the peace deal, due to be finalized by the end of 2004, the SPLM is due

to take up a role in the government as well as a major share of responsibilities in the south. As part of the peace deal, revenues from the oil industry, which produces about 320,000 barrels a day, will be split equally between the north and south of the country.

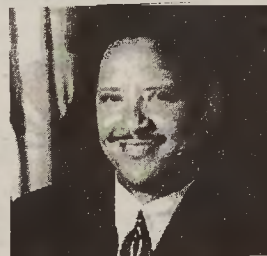
In spite of its troubles and its isolation from the international community, Sudan has a surprisingly sound and liberalized macro economy. There are no exchange controls, inflation is in single digits and growth in 2003 was 5.9 percent. The engine for the economy is the oil industry which is expected to double in production in the next several years as the 15 known oil fields are exploited and the internal oil pipeline system is upgraded. Sudan's principal imports are foodstuffs, beverages, chemicals, manufactured goods, machinery and transport equipment. Its main exports are crude oil, cotton, gum arabic, sesame seed, livestock and gold.

Will public service workers follow Fauntroy's lead or follow the advice of their pension fund officials, who've shown a propensity to chafe at political demands to change investment portfolios? Pension fund officials

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To Be Equal Ideas That Are Never Out of Season

By Marc H. Morial
President and CEO
National Urban League



"This season, as they say, when the rhetoric about kindness and goodwill toward all rings out across the landscape.

It shines through even the commercials which accompany the televised reruns of those traditional holiday-season movies that have warmed the hearts of Americans for generations.

Unfortunately, this year, as every year, there is considerable grim evidence that all too often life does not imitate art.

2004 and 2005 mark the fortieth anniversary of two of the greatest monuments to American ideals of democracy, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Yet, in recent weeks several policy studies and news stories have underscored how far from the promised land of equal opportunity American society remains.

That sad fact tolls in a lower register than the usual peals of festive cheer, almost like a perverse echo reminding us that prejudice and heartlessness never take a holiday.

For example, statistics compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation indicate that racial bigotry was the cause of more than half of the nearly 7,500 hate crimes reported to the agency in 2003 and that the 2,500 acts of bigotry against African Americans were far greater than the number against any other racial group.

The year's totals, which were slightly above 2002 figures, are largely comprised of acts of intimidation, vandalism and destruction of property. But they also include a total of 14 murders, more than 2,700 assaults and 400 robberies, burglaries and thefts, and 34 incidents of arson.

The Federal documents shows that crimes categorized as anti-Islamic remained at about the same level as in 2002: 149, although some ques-

tion whether these crimes are significantly under-reported. By far, most of the hate crimes motivated by religious bias were against Jews: the 927 incidents were about the same as in 2002.

Spokesmen for civil rights groups said the figures show a need for stronger federal laws against hate crimes as well as increased Justice Dept assistance to local law enforcement agencies to prosecute such crimes.

Such legislation passed both Houses of Congress this year but was tabled when differences in the House and Senate versions couldn't be reconciled.

The need for a stronger federal tools takes on an even greater urgency when one considers that the Southern Poverty Law Center, a respected monitor of acts of bigotry and extremist groups and individuals, contends the federal statistics substantially under-report the reality.

Noting that that because several states have weak hate-crime laws (some don't recognize bias against sexual orientation as a basis for a hate crime) and the reporting done to the FBI by local law enforcement agencies is entirely voluntary (less than 20 percent of the nation's 11,900 law enforcement agencies do so), the Center estimates the real annual number of hate crimes is about 50,000-nearly 7 times the federal estimate.

Thus, it's even more alarming to read that a recent study by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse at Syracuse University concluded from its review of Justice Department data that federal criminal and civil court actions against violations of civil rights laws have fallen significantly since 1999-to less than 100 in the former, and about 1,900 in the latter-even as the total number of complaints has held steady at about 12,000 a year.

But it's not only government inaction that causes concern: Whether it be an ill-considered comment by NBC's new network anchor, Brian Williams, that seemed to suggest diversity at the top of the network's news division needn't be a matter of great concern. Williams later expressed his commitment to diversity at NBC as well as elsewhere after a protest by the National Association of Black Journalists;

Or the bizarre behavior of a Louisiana judge who wore blackface makeup, handcuffs and a jail jumpsuit to a Halloween party (his wife went as a policewoman), yet contended he meant no insult to blacks.

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