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Visions of homes for all Americans

Bernice Powell Jackson



The deaths of I.D. Robbins and his cousin Lester Robbins this month reminded me once again of how often in history we have turned away from the opportunity to be a nation of real economic justice. Even when we have been given the vision, we have backed away in favor of the status quo and our poor have suffered as a result.

I.D. Robbins was a New York City builder whose vision of a single-family home for all Americans became a reality for some 2,800 poor families in Brooklyn and the South Bronx. The tragedy is that the political, financial and contracting worlds kept that dream from becoming a reality for many thousands of poor Americans across the nation.

The Robbins cousins were successful builders who were convinced that simple row houses were the key to the vitality of the cities and to the nurturing of families. I.D. Robbins figured that a family earning \$20,000 a year could own a \$40,000 home, which he believed he could build.

When the Industrial Areas Foundation learned of Mr. Robbins' dream, they brought together 36 congregations in one of Brooklyn's poorest neighborhoods, East New York. These churches put up \$8 million for a revolving fund for construction and without federal assistance began to build homes in Brownsville.

Called the Nehemiah housing plan after the biblical prophet sent to rebuild Jerusalem, these three-bedroom, brick houses sold for \$39,000. They were built on large tracts of cleared, city-owned land, with foundations for whole blocks being poured at one time. They were 18 feet wide and 32 feet deep, with front and back yards and full basements. Mr. Robbins believed these were the answers to many of the city's problems, which he blamed on high density, high-rise government-subsidized housing projects.

Mr. Robbins persuaded city officials to allow him to link sewer connections for the homes and was able to keep legal, architectural and financing charges to 6 percent instead of the usual 35 percent. Nearly half of the original 1,000 buyers came from nearby public housing projects.

Shortly before his death, Mr. Robbins wrote an article asking why public officials favored market-cost housing over the same housing at half the cost. It was probably clear to him that once again business interests had won over the interests of the poor.

The Nehemiah plan was a vision of a better America, where everyone has the opportunity to achieve the American dream, a home. It was an opportunity for churches and community organizations to come together to make that dream a reality for poor people. It would be a real tribute to I.D. Robbins' vision if his dream did not die with him. There should be Nehemiah projects in every city in America. We can make that a reality.

For information on the Nehemiah housing plan, contact Nehemiah Housing Development Fund Company, 124 Sackman Street, Brooklyn, N.Y., 11233.

BERNICE POWELL JACKSON is executive director of the Commission for Racial Justice in Cleveland.

What did my parents know then...?

Remarks by Harvey Gantt at the NAACP National Convention in Charlotte

In the drive to overcome the evils of segregation, racism and discrimination, sometimes the focus has too often wandered from the family and the community.

I think we must make the renewal of basic values – the renewal of families – our most important priority, this nation's most important priority.

They should have been discouraged with what America offered them – segregation, dragging their children to the back of the bus, of taking them up to the third level of the movie house to watch a Saturday afternoon movie, of drinking from the colored fountain, segregation, second class citizenship, denial of vot-

ing rights and so forth and so on. That's the environment that my parents raised us in the 40s and 50s. And yet, they were optimistic about what they could do and how they could overcome. And they did – my folks did, a whole lot of folks did. They did change their lives. They did cause the

demise of de jure segregation. They did change the life of this South and this nation. Well, what did these folks have back then that we lack today? What did these folks understand back then?

HARVEY GANTT of Charlotte is the Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate.

Some campaign advice Bob Dole would do very well to heed

DG
Martin



Is the Bob Dole for President Campaign paying me for political advice?

I am not going to tell you the answer to that question until the end of this column. In the meantime I want you to answer another question as you read along – Is my advice worth paying for?

Before I start my advising, here is a little background.

Dole's campaign seems to be in big trouble.

He is behind in the polls – big time. A recent survey for the new MSNBC cable network shows Clinton leading Dole 54 percent to 30. Some political

wise men are saying that "barring a miracle," Dole is a sure loser.

There is no momentum. He is having trouble getting attention. Every time the campaign picks an issue to highlight, Clinton uses the presidential platform to preempt it – or the news media ignores it.

Each day brings a different challenge in dealing with threats from the fringe groups and special interests who should give core support to his campaign. "We can't expect our people to help," these groups say, "unless Dole shows that he is more in tune with our agenda."

The strongly held and different views about abortion threaten to fragment his party's ability to conduct an enthusiastic and unified campaign.

He hears nothing but complaints from the experts and insiders who are leaking word

to the public about all the problems of the campaign. The big egos and big mouths that often take over political campaigns become the worst demoralizers when things are not going well.

With all that background, what is my wise counsel to Dole?

Here it is: Don't panic! In the words of Rudyard Kipling, "keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you." Remember. Your assignment is to win the election – not to lead the polls now. Keep your mind on building strength for November, not winning polls or pleasing the political insiders.

Be careful not to let people push you to take actions that will make it impossible for you to broaden your support later on this fall. You will have plenty of opportunities to make these missteps. You will be tempted to

give too much of your loyalties to the energetic, powerful and vocal forces of the right wing of your party. But if you get too closely associated with them, you will lose the chance to reach voters in the moderate mainstream – the ones you will need to win.

You will be tempted to hit home runs – to win the election with one big gimmicky operation. Don't give in. Instead, concentrate on the hundreds of small, positive things that need to happen along the way. Organize.

Raise money. Work tirelessly to visit all sections of the country. And pick a strong vice-presidential candidate whom you like and respect rather than one who will supposedly "win the election for you."

As long as you are running behind, people will encourage you to shake up your organiza-

tion. Every day, some "friend" will push you to "fire everybody and start all over." Stay the course. Avoid dramatic changes. Make the ones that are required with little fanfare.

A political campaign is by nature chaotic and disorganized. You probably can't change that. But, if you stay calm and confident about your program, you will project strength and give your campaign organization a rock of assurance.

Same thing with campaign strategy. Some people will want to overhaul it every day. Don't let them do it. Develop the strategy around your strengths – and show them off to the public. And don't let them try to make you over. Show your genuine self – not one made up by your handlers.

If Dole and his campaign follow my advice, I promise that

the poll numbers will close up soon. (They will, of course – whatever is done with my advice.) Then, during September and October, they will close some more.

Dole will start to look like a vibrant, viable challenger – with momentum.

By election day, he could be "in a position to win," and the unpleasantness of today will seem far away.

Now, to answer the question I asked at the beginning, the Dole campaign is not paying for my advice. But, don't you think they should?

No?

Well, maybe I will call the Clinton campaign to see if they could use my help.
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Consolidation good for growth

GERALD JOHNSON

As I
See It



The issue of city-county consolidation has the potential of splitting this area apart at the seams. Like many issues facing this growing metropolis there are very good arguments on both sides. But when the smoke clears, we need to be on the side of consolidation.

Forget about the smoke that's being blown about the dollar savings. There will be none. In fact, a good argument could be made about consolidation costing more money.

Forget about the smoke that is

being blown about more efficiency in government. Efficient government is an oxymoron.

Even the smoke being blown about less representation for some groups and areas needs to be put on the back burner.

The only real reason we need consolidation is to allow this community currently known as Charlotte-Mecklenburg to have one voice to help direct the continued growth of this region. We need one group who helps set the priorities for this community, and who can speak to those priorities to other governing bodies, other communities, and even to us as it relates to moving this area forward.

It becomes a community drag to have multiple dissenting governing bodies trying to move a dynamic area forward.

There are those who would counter this viewpoint by say-

ing government is supposed to move slowly. The checks and balances were deliberately put in place to prevent hasty decisions. Only politicians would make such a statement. The truth is, democracy is a compromise form of government. To get things done requires a Monty Hall mentality. Thus the fewer people you have to make deals with, the more probable good legislation can be developed. We do not need several governing bodies, nor do we need a cast of thousands on one governing body to manage this area.

Having said all of this, the under-representation smoke is not so easily cleared. Blacks feel cheated because the total number of black representatives has the potential to decrease from 6 to 3. Anytime black representation gets threatened in Charlotte, it's like the "fiddler on the roof" – it conjures up tra-

dition. A lot of blood, sweat, and tears have been shed to get Charlotte to this point of racial harmony. Both blacks and whites who have lived here for more than 20 years tend to tremble at the thought of upsetting the apple cart. I am a strong proponent of using history to help direct our future. However, we can't use that history to make the city hostage to progress.

Probably equally disrupting will be those surrounding areas who feel consolidation will erode their representation as well. It is conceivable that a coalition of surrounding towns, traditionally black neighborhoods, and just downright pessimists could unite to oppose consolidation for their own individual benefits. If this happens, it will be to the detriment of the area. Peace.

GERALD JOHNSON is publisher of The Post.

THE SUMMER GAMES...

