

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

I recently attended the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) 93rd annual convention, which was held in Houston’s George R. Brown Convention Center. The NAACP’s Houston branch organization’s five thousand local members, led by the convention’s “2002 Blue Ribbon Committee” led by the city’s black mayor Lee P. Brown, contributed toward making the event perhaps the most successful in the Association’s long history. Approximately twenty thousand people attended the convention from July 6-11. The convention’s theme, “Freedom Under Fire,” evoked the image of the terrorist attacks of September 11, as well as the subsequent challenges that undermine civil rights and civil liberties within the U.S.

The Houston convention was also something of a celebration for the venerable civil rights organization, marking a return to the national power it exerted a generation ago. Most Association leaders still blame the decline of the organization on the 1993 selection of the Reverend Benjamin Chavis to replace retiring Executive Secretary Benjamin Hooks. Chavis, who narrowly defeated the Reverend Jesse Jackson for the NAACP’s leadership position, almost immediately pursued a strategy that placed him at odds with prominent leaders inside his organization and with traditional liberal allies in the foundation community and in electoral politics. Chavis reached out to black nationalists and younger constituencies that had long been at odds with the Association’s emphasis on racial integration and political moderation. His

sponsorship of the June 1994 National African American Leadership Summit in Baltimore, that sought to create a black united front including Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, generated widespread condemnation in the media and from white corporate and political interests.

Technically, Chavis was ousted by the board that eighteen months before had hired him, because of his use of \$300,000 in NAACP funds for an out of court settlement in a sexual harassment lawsuit. Powerful NAACP Chairman William Gibson, who led Chavis's dismissal, was subsequently accused by critics of gross mismanagement and profligate spending. For several years the organization fell into disarray, as its national deficit swelled to over \$5 million and its national staff was reduced from 250 in 1992 to barely 50 in 1995. Major foundations pulled their money out of the organization, and corporate sponsorships all but ended.

The NAACP's political status changed in 1995, when Myrlie Evers-Williams, the widow of civil rights martyr Medgar Evers, narrowly defeated Gibson to become the Association's National Chairwoman. Evers-Williams used her extensive contacts and political credibility to reestablish links with the foundations and corporations, and began to retire the group's debt. Congressman Kweisi Mfume, former head of the Congressional Black Caucus, was named to a redefined and expanded leadership post as "president and chief executive officer." Several years later the board chairmanship was passed to veteran civil rights activist Julian Bond, whose progressive political views were distinctly to the left of many in the organization.

The partnership between Mfume and Bond, both of whom having held elective offices for many years, pushed the NAACP aggressively back into national politics in the 2000 election. The NAACP National Voter Fund launched a major offensive to get out the African-American

vote that year, distributing almost seven million pieces of literature and placing more than five million phone calls to likely voters. The National Voter Fund narrowly targeted 17 states and 80 Congressional districts where African-American voter turnout could have a decisive impact on the election. The effectiveness of their campaign was beyond doubt, as more than 10.5 million African Americans cast ballots in 2000, one million more than in 1996. Observers credited the NAACP National Voter Fund as having been largely responsible for Gore's narrow victories in states such as Pennsylvania and Michigan. The results immediately elevated the nominally non-partisan organization as a central force within the Democratic Party's national strategy. As a national formation with one-half million members and 1,700 branch organizations in all fifty states, the NAACP now has the resources and personnel to help determine national elections.

A review of the NAACP Houston convention's policy agenda as reflected by its main resolutions indicates that the organization continues to be clearly left of center, exactly where the overwhelming majority of the African-American electorate is. The convention reaffirmed its earlier 1992 endorsement of a national, single-payer health system, that would provide comprehensive healthcare coverage for all Americans. It rejected the so-called "Racial Privacy Initiative" placed on the 2002 California ballot by black conservative Ward Connelly that would eliminate the collection of racial statistics in state agencies, thus making it virtually impossible to document incidents or patterns of racial discrimination. The NAACP endorsed statehood for the District of Columbia, measures promoting environmental justice, women's equality, and urban economic development. The convention called for the creation of a presidential commission to address the gross racial disparities in sentencing patterns within the criminal justice system, and demanded the abolition of racial profiling by police. The resolutions supported justice and fairness for Haitian undocumented refugees being detained by the U.S. government, and opposed

the eviction of “law abiding citizens” from public housing, under repressive laws that expel families from their homes if a family member has a drug conviction. By any standard, this is a progressive agenda, well within the liberal tradition of the black freedom movement historically.

The Houston convention also achieved two significant breakthroughs addressing strategic weaknesses in its political efforts. For years, the NAACP and many African-American political organizations had done little to cultivate a working relationship with Latino groups around strategic public policy goals and tactical electoral interests. In 2001, NAACP Texas state president Gary Bledsoe and Vincent Ramos, the state leader of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), had forged a statewide coalition to build a bilingual voter education and mobilization effort. This attempt to build Latino-African American unity helped to construct the unprecedented coalition ticket of Ron Kirk, the black mayor of Dallas who won the Democratic Party’s Senate nomination, and Texas gubernatorial Democratic candidate Tony Sanchez, a Mexican American. The NAACP wisely extended an invitation to LULAC president Hector Flores to speak at its Houston convention, making the first time that a LULAC leader had ever addressed the Association. Mfume informed the media that Flores’s appearance went “beyond symbolism. It has everything to do with substance. There are issues that confront Hispanics and African Americans all over the country that are harder to deal with when we’re dealing with them individually.” Another strategic problem that has plagued the NAACP, its weakness among black youth and young adults, was also strongly addressed. Critics have noted that at least 80 percent of the NAACP’s national membership is above 35 years old, and has widely been viewed as outdated by the post-civil rights, hip hop generation born between 1965 and 1984. Under the effective leadership of its 29-year-old national youth director Jeffrey

Johnson, the youth division has recently grown to 60,000 members with more than 600 youth councils and college chapters.

I spoke to a youth workshop of several hundred on issues of racism in the juvenile justice system and the destructive impact of mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex on the black community. After my presentation, the workshop split into five working groups, discussing hypothetical examples of how to respond to criminal justice-related conflicts. What particularly was impressive was the range of practical political experiences and level of analysis apparent among a large number of young delegates. Johnson and other younger NAACP activists, such as 29-year-old education director John Jackson and 36-year-old National Vice Chairwomen Roslyn Brock represent a progressive and promising future leadership for the Association. Other youth-oriented speakers in Houston included rap artist Lil' Zane, who appeared at a Youth Council seminar on creative ways to promote voter registration drives; and hip hop mogul Russell Simmons, who addressed the Youth Freedom Fund Awards Dinner honoring the most outstanding college chapters.

By reaching out to Latinos and the hip hop generation, the NAACP demonstrated the potential for building a new kind of intergenerational, multi-racial political force capable of redefining both the Democratic Party and national politics. Whether that potential is fully realized remains to be seen.

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