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Address to the NJ Black Issues Convention
Leadership Brunch
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I commend you for your activities of this day--not because you do honor to Martin Luther King. I am old enough to recall George Wallace who Dr. King described as having "...lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification," honoring him after his death; I remember Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley who vowed to run him out of town, and I might add successfully, honoring him after his death; I saw politicians in the state house of Tennessee standing next to the statue of the founder of the Ku Klux Klan honoring Dr. King after his death. I have come to believe that we often write the story of our past so as to allow us comfort with our present.

It never ceases to amaze me how our historians can describe continental expansion of this nation which, as a matter of public policy, proscribed the systematic military conquest and genocidal extermination of the indigenous population, with the polite and sanitized phrase "manifest destiny." The audacious notion that somehow God Himself had commissioned the righteous to purify the land, led by His most famous minister whose message was, "The only good Indian is a dead Indian."

So I hope you will, therefore, excuse my cynicism when I don't get very excited by the simple act of honoring Dr. King. We correctly celebrate Dr. King as in the words of Nina Simone, as a prince of love and peace. We accurately recall his compassion, his kindness, his devotion to the brotherhood of all mankind. We remember and celebrate his dreams, but forget about his agenda. So I applaud you because you seek to do him and us honor in the only meaningful way, and that's a rededication to the completion of his work.

To do so, however, it is first necessary to understand that the objective of the civil rights movement was not simply the acquisition of civil rights. Achieving the full rights of citizenship was a necessary prerequisite to political and economic self determination. Self determination, the power to determine one's circumstances, one assumes would be exercised so as to achieve the real and ultimate goal of the civil rights movements: social justice for Black Americans, social justice for all Americans. This is an agenda that gives power to the powerless, empowers the impotent, demands accountability for its use, and establishes the criteria by which we shall judge our achievement or lack thereof. You see, this was the agenda of Martin Luther King. This is why his house was bombed. This is why he was murdered; and it is for this he was martyred.

Martin Luther King didn't have a Civil Rights agenda; he had a liberation agenda. He said "Remember me as 'a drum major for freedom.'"

Well, in the words of the song: "That was then; this is now." Twenty years later, Black America sits in its greatest peril since 1619. We are witnessing the greatest dislocation and disintegration of social institutions and social values in our history. If something is not done to redirect our course, we face catastrophic consequences as a people and as a nation.

The majority of Black children in America are in single-parent households, headed by women, where there was never the presence of a father. Over 70% of all Black children are receiving some form of government assistance. Everyday 40 teenage girls have their third baby. We are over-represented in poverty; under-represented in educational achievement; and over-represented in crime, both as victims and as perpetrators.

For the first time since the Civil War, the number and percentage of Black Americans participating in higher education is declining--and the decline is at all levels: the open admission community colleges, four-year public and private colleges, universities, medical schools, law schools, and professional schools.

The Black family teeters on the brink of extinction, and while we still have physical concentrations of Black people, areas of Black community are rare indeed. The social infrastructure of Black America is in an unprecedented state of disarray and weakness.

Yet, I must suggest to you that the Civil Rights movement has been and is enormously successful. When you look at the great population centers of our nation, you see Black mayors, Black school boards, Black superintendents, politicians, lawyers, judges, doctors, teachers, and social workers. Black leadership is significant and in broad based positions of authority and influence. Shall we blame them, us? Not really, not yet anyway. But please understand, in these persons the success of the Civil Rights agenda is obvious, visible, and apparent. It's the Black liberation agenda that's in serious trouble.

For the first time in our history, the Black community is bifurcating. It is splitting along the continuum psychologists refer to as "external versus internal locus of control." Individuals and groups with an internal locus of control believe that the ability to influence and determine one's circumstances resides internal to oneself. These people believe that the good and bad in one's life is greatly determined by the decisions one makes, and the actions one takes, people who believe in accountability--the belief that correct and courageous action can achieve great results, and that rewards should be withheld from unrewarding behavior. Dr. King's entreatment to be "judged by the content of our character and not the color of our skin," was a declaration of accountability, and a redefinition of the standard.

Access to the political system, voting rights, public accommodations, integration of the political and economic power of this nation, are all directed at achieving a circumstance by which we could ensure social justice for Black Americans by assuring that we are in positions to exercise decision-making, authority, or influence for our collective good. The entire Civil Rights agenda had as its objective the empowerment of Black Americans with the ability to exercise an internal locus of control. What we missed and misunderstood along the way is that there exists within our community a significant number of Black Americans, indeed the majority of Black Americans, who have had their sense of internal control destroyed and obliterated. These individuals and groups, psychologists describe as having an external locus of control. These people believe that those actions, decisions, and phenomena that determine circumstances and control, reside external to themselves. While others feel in control, these people feel helpless. While others do, these are done to. While others act, these people react. People who perceive that they generally can control their lives behave very differently from people who perceive they cannot.

People with an external locus of control neither understand nor internalize the concept of accountability. Accountability assumes control. You cannot understand accountability if you cannot understand control. These are the characteristics of what our sociologists have come to call the underclass in America. And while I can tell you that this phenomena is not unique or peculiar to Black America, as in most examples of social pathology, we are significantly over-represented in the underclass of this country. For the first time in the history of Black Americans, we are witnessing the evolution of two classes. The distinguishing determinants of this class demarcation are not economic, but rather a dichotomy of fundamental values which historically have been shared by all races and economic classes. Those Black Americans regardless of economic circumstances, but with an internal locus of control, have behaved and will continue to behave in ways envisioned by the Civil Rights agenda of two decades ago: going to school; going to college; running for political offices; achieving positions of influence in all aspects of the public and private sector.

People are maintaining their families, moving to the suburbs, and exercising all those prerogatives the Civil Rights movement achieved. For the majority of Black Americans, however, this condition and the value required to follow this path is radically different. For most Black Americans, applications to open enrollment community colleges are declining because values of higher education as an aspiration are declining. The family has disintegrated because the value of family has been undermined, and for 20 years the significant pathology of our community has escaped the appropriate analysis and problem definition this crisis requires.

The problems of 1987 are not the problems of 1967. The crisis of this decade is not a Civil Rights problem and will not yield to Civil Rights solutions. The problems of the Black underclass are complicated and difficult and will not respond to simplistic solutions.

Before I go on, I think I should stop and tell you some things I'm not saying. I am not saying racism has been conquered in America. It has not; it is alive, well, and prosperous. I am not saying that racial discrimination has been exiled from America. It has not; it is alive, well, and prosperous. And I am certainly not suggesting that Civil Rights gains of past generations don't need defending and protection, for certainly they do. I am suggesting that we regroup. That we sort out means from ends, develop new strategies for new issues, and that we confront new problems with a new agenda. Martin Luther King challenged the existing orthodoxy, and my friends, that's what I am suggesting that you do this afternoon.

I'd like to suggest, advise, and illustrate how we might approach this recommitment. First, we must redefine the model. Before we can hope to find the right answers, we must ask the right questions.

Welfare Reform

I was extremely distressed over the welfare reform debate that took place in the last presidential election. You may recall reading about an incident in New York some months ago where a student went off "and shot up the financial aid office" of a technical institute in that city with fatalities resulting. A young lady saved herself by hiding in the office where she was working on her "work study" job. She appeared on television being interviewed by news reporters for the nightly news. Several days later, there appeared in the newspaper a brief story that the same young woman had been seen on TV by her social worker and was now being threatened with disciplinary action by the welfare department. You see, the woman was a single parent on welfare and as such was in violation of the welfare rules by going to school. In most states, welfare recipients are prohibited from going to school. So you see, the woman, attempting to exercise some control over her life, to prepare herself for an independent career off welfare, attempting to secure a better life for herself and her child, was not only not encouraged and supported by the system, she was, in fact, punished and entrapped by it. The welfare reform agenda needs to be a liberation agenda. One national party wants to declare welfare recipients as surplus and expendable, while the other national party wants to refinance and reinforce the very system that has supported the social pathology of our most desperate communities--a system that has bankrolled the destruction of the Black family and is paying children to have babies. Both national parties are debating the right answer to the wrong questions--a debate whose outcomes by its very nature is preordained.

Our welfare reform agenda must have as its object the emancipation of welfare recipients from the welfare system. We must lead the direction away from the pacification and dependency strategies of a system long out of touch with its legitimate mission. Again, the welfare reform agenda must be a liberation agenda.

Crime, Punishment, and Justice

I shall not debate anyone who contends that the legal system of this country is uneven, unfair, and often unjust. I applaud those advocates of equality, fairness, and justice who would seek to make the system the paragon of equity a free people deserve and require. However, there is no more fundamental freedom than the right to the safety of one's person and property: the freedom from crime. By this standard, Black Americans, particularly urban Black young Americans, are the most freedomless people in the United States. We are the victims of more criminal activity than any other group of people in America.

Our criminal justice agenda must be a liberation agenda. We must restore our communities and remove those from our midst who would prey on our people. The person who victimizes his own community forfeits any rights to the support of that community. While I believe in rehabilitation to its capacity for success, we must insist also on accountability to our communities by those who are a part of our community. I totally and categorically reject the notion that poverty, personal hardship, or some generalized sense of social injustice can legitimize or give license for criminal acts against Black people by anybody including, and especially, other Blacks. Freedom from crime requires the accountability of criminals. Our criminal justice agenda must be a liberation agenda.

And, finally:

Education

College test scores peaked in 1964 and, with the exception of the last several years, have been in decline ever since. During the 23 year interval between then and now, we have made significant progress in securing leadership at all levels for Black educators in the nation's system responsible for the education of Black youth. We would be hard pressed, however, to demonstrate that the education of Black children has improved at all. To the contrary, there is much to suggest that the educational assets of Black youth are at their lowest point in a generation.

The leadership gains we have made with Black professionals in public education become completely and totally irrelevant if there are not correspondent gains in the learning and education of Black students. The Civil Rights agenda gave access to the controls of public education, particularly in urban areas, to Black professionals. The liberation agenda must be about the intellectual empowerment of Black children. There is absolutely no data to suggest that the achievement of Black children should be any less than the achievement of other children. The failure is not the failure of our youth, but rather the failure of our educational systems and our community's reluctance to demand educational commitment and accountability for, and to the teaching of, our youth.

Recently, Commissioner Cooperman promulgated an initiative to intervene in public school systems that demonstrated an inability to educate its children. The initiative stated in its intent that the public interest could not tolerate the school system's inability to provide a quality and effective education to its citizens. It is an agenda that has as its focus the education of children. When this initiative was announced, I heard words of protest which to this day trouble me greatly as to why the issues have been joined. I have heard observations that this initiative intrudes on the political concept of home rule. I have heard observations as to the threats raised against the job security of school officials and board members, but I have heard no agenda as to initiatives for the effective education of Black children.

Indeed the first and only substantive objections which logically relate to appropriate issues have been raised by Ted Reid and his associates. Ted's concerns are reasonable, and in my view, ought to be supported. But the bottom line is that the status of urban education in New Jersey for Black children is unacceptable, intolerable, and must be changed. To my friends in public education in this state, I beg for a liberation agenda. One that the energies of the Black community of this state can rally around to uplift the educational achievement of Black children. Our communities must demand that our school systems be accountable for the education of our children.

Assembled in this room is represented important leadership of our communities in this state. The obligation and responsibility of leadership is to point the way and to set the agenda. What all of my comments have been about is the creation of an agenda that goes beyond Civil Rights and speaks to liberation: to set a welfare reform agenda that restores community, supports the family, and liberates our people from the poverty and hopelessness of the current system; a criminal justice agenda that liberates our people from crime in their homes, on their streets, and in their neighborhoods; and an educational agenda that liberates our youth from the bondage of ignorance and prepares the next generation to be architects of its own manifest destiny.

In closing, I would like to tell you about a campaign commercial that I saw for Marion Berry in Washington, DC, and a poem I remember from my earliest days in the Civil Rights movement. I turned on the television and saw a Black woman praising Mayor Berry for finding housing for her and her eight children. She said that she was impoverished, helpless, and she did not know where to turn or where to go until Mayor Berry, through one of his housing programs, located a place of residence for her and her eight children. I saw on that screen a portrait of despair--a woman absolutely miserable, but who had no idea how she got that way, where these eight kids came from, and didn't have the slightest notion as to how she might change and improve her circumstances. She was like a twig cast adrift in a river, awaiting a fate and future uncertain in its nature. I thought about her eight children, and I knew that this lady's plight would be multiplied eight times through generations to come unless we radically change our environment.

When I turned off the television, I remembered the words of a poem my Black eighth grade teacher made me memorize, and out of all the schooling that I have had, it is the only poem that has been important enough to me for me to still remember. I thought about how important it would have been for this woman's eighth grade teacher to have shared with her the words of Invictus. I thought, wouldn't it be nice if teachers of her eight children could get them to understand the sense of purpose of this important poem. My friends, I hope the agenda of the New Jersey Black Issues Convention will be a liberation agenda, and I hope it will have as its preamble:

"Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul."

William Ernest Henley