

An Open Letter to Julian Bond and John Lewis

Dear Julian and John:

Black America rejoiced with glee when the two of you announced your candidacy for the Congressional seat in the district encompassing Atlanta, Georgia. The thought of representation by a candidate whose popularity is overshadowed only by his humanitarian efforts seemed God-sent. And for the first time in the history of this country, the deep South was showcasing for all of America a new direction birthed by the Civil Rights movement: the two of you helped launch.

We were inspired by your bravery and courage when confronted by the Bull Connors, George Wallaces, Lester Maddoxs, the cattle prods, the dogs, the water hoses, and every single obstacle the racists and bigots could muster in their attempts to defeat Black America's quest for equality.

We were inspired by your leadership in advocating voting rights for our people during a period when the mere mention of such words created chaos and turmoil.

We were inspired by your articulation during public appearances in denouncing attempts by some to desecrate the Constitutional rights of the poor.

Yes, indeed, you helped create an environment within this society, heightening an image for Black youth, making it possible for some of today's highly visible success stories in education, employment and family lifestyle. You were heroes then—and remain so today.

But, then, the both of you had an excellent teacher: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Embracing the world as his classroom, Dr. King taught us that though we may differ philosophically, all people, especially Blacks, must share one common goal: peaceful co-existence.

Dr. King, embarking on his theme of non-violence and racial equality, make it possible for your recent candidacy, and, were he alive today, undoubtedly he would have been proud of your accomplishments in the political arena. As mentor, he had graduated two students—both capable of continuing his captivating philo-

sophy of world-wide human decency. Instead, given recent publicity, one can probably envision him tiring over in his grave—heartbroken, disillusioned, and, like most Blacks, confused.

The same media, which publicized your trail-blazing exploits as respected Black leaders and followed your rise to prominence, now writes of your bitter differences towards each other, the strained relations between your families, the inuendoes hurled during the campaign, and the possible ineffectiveness of Congressman John Lewis (the eventual winner) due to the split among political allies in the Atlanta Democratic Party.

This could not have happened at a more inopportune time. For example, the Democratic Party, staggering from massive political blunders committed during the '84 campaign, is attempting to restructure its political ideology.

They hope to accomplish this through an appearance of party cohesiveness while down-playing Rev. Jesse Jackson as a serious candidate for President in 1988. This restructuring of political ideologies proposes drastic changes in Democratic platform strategy, which would not only "dilute" the Black agenda for '88, but would also tie any candidate running as a Presidential hopeful in the Democratic Party to its (the Party's) own agenda. Jesse, of course, will have nothing to do with it. Neither will the Congressional Black Caucus.

So, John and Julian, Jesse needs you—Blacks need you—all of America needs you. The surfacing of your personal differences was both untimely and unwise. One can only assume that most people in Atlanta, Georgia, had they been able to crystal ball the fall-out as a result of the campaign, would have sponsored other candidates.

Subsequently, on behalf of Black America, on behalf of Jesse Jackson, on behalf of the Democratic party, and, last but not least, on behalf of Dr. Martin Luther King, we beg of you to resolve your differences and bring us together.

Human Rights In Africa

by Norman Hill

In general, discussions in this country on human rights have focused mainly on Central America, Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and other areas deemed to be of particular strategic or political importance to the United States. For a number of reasons, rights abuses (or advances) in Africa, with the possible exception of Ethiopia and South Africa, have been largely ignored.

Some have argued that this indifference is tied to the perception that most of Africa is of little economic or strategic value to the United States. A more cynical (and innately racist) view is that democracy and civil liberties are alien to the continent, and that the proliferation of totalitarian regimes is an indication that Africans are "not ready" for democracy.

For black leaders in America, the issue of human rights in Africa presents something of a conundrum. Their relative inattention to serious rights abuses in a number of nations is partly rooted in a reluctance to acknowledge the political, social and economic repressiveness of some black African countries, even if many of these conditions are the direct by-product of colonial oppression and the arbitrary drawing of boundaries without regard to tribal and linguistic realities.

When discussing human rights in Africa, several major historical factors must be taken into account. First, the slave trade and colonialism disrupted African's independent evolution. Economic progress, education and individual rights were made subservient to the needs of the colonial powers. Second, many of Africa's leaders spent the colonial period in exile or jail, where they embraced anti-democratic notions and Marxist ideologies irrelevant to African conditions. And third, many newly independent nations were defined by arbitrary borders, drawn in Europe without regard to tribal and language considerations.

These factors, coupled with desperate economic conditions, often led to the development of systems of government that put a premium on strident state control of all facets of social and economic development at the expense of civil liberties and individual rights.

Of late, a number of African nations have been experimenting with economic decentralization and other reforms that may contribute to greater freedoms in politics and social life. Zaire, Zambia, Somalia, Mali, Guinea, Senegal, Kenya and others have adopted changes that take market forces into greater account, and the resulting economic growth is encouraging.

Increased sensitivity to the issue of human rights and political freedoms has been demonstrated lately in Nigeria, the Sudan, Uganda, and Liberia, although


there is certainly more room for improvement. Botswana is a country with a record of democracy and human rights that is unrivaled in Africa. Gambia and Senegal have vigorous parliamentary systems and Kenya is committed to democratic principles and economic reform.

Yet, continued progress in human rights and economic growth depends on continued Western involvement and assistance that help alleviate the causes of abuse. Western funds have been used to assist in law codification, to promote fair elections, to upgrade legal facilities, to educate people about civil and political rights. Economic aid has also been used to combat hunger and disease, and to help refugees.

But financial assistance must be offered in conjunction with diplomatic efforts to promote human rights. Unfortunately, the Reagan administration has sharply curtailed our economic involvement in Africa and our ability to help African countries make the difficult economic and political transitions they are attempting. Congressional cuts in foreign aid and other factors will dramatically reduce our economic assistance for Africa to \$705 million this fiscal year. That is 35 percent less than in 1985 and 18 percent less than in 1986. As a senior State Department official recently observed, these cuts will seriously damage our interests in Africa and could lead to a reversal of recent African efforts to undertake the critical economic reforms that are so vital as underpinning to human rights reform.

For those of us concerned with democracy and the fundamental issues of human dignity, individual rights and civil liberties, this country's growing indifference to developments in Africa is a disturbing development. Freedom of the press, religious tolerance and free elections are not exclusively Western rights; they are vital human rights. But the impoverished nations of Africa will be unable to foster these rights without resources to meet the basic needs of existence. America cannot ignore Africa, and then point accusing fingers at human rights abuses or the rise of Marxist regimes. If our human rights policies are to have moral consistency, then we must be ready to aid the aspirations of Africans the way we help those in Haiti, the Philippines and Latin America. And black leaders in America must help send this message with the same urgency and force as calls for punitive measures to press for the abolition of apartheid in South Africa.

Norman Hill is President of the A. Philip Randolph Institute.



Along the Color Line

by Dr. Manning Marable

Dr. Manning Marable is professor of sociology and political science at Purdue University. "Along the Color Line" appears in over 140 newspapers internationally.

Economic Outlook For 1987: Trouble Ahead

Conventional economists are predicting slower but still steady economic growth this new year. Most observers point out that the combination of factors which produced the 400-point boost in the Dow Jones industrial average last year—the low inflation rate, low oil prices, an expansive monetary policy—should help stocks move even higher. But beyond the financial markets' euphoria, it would be wise to notice several signs of trouble ahead. Beneath the calm investment waters, sharks are lurking just below the surface.

One especially threatening economic shark is the sharp decline of real wages for most American workers, which will continue to retard consumption and thus stall the rate of economic growth. According to the Census Bureau, the income levels of 40 year old males between 1973 and 1983, adjusted for inflation, declined by 14 percent from \$29,131 to \$24,957. In the past 15 years, overall real wages have fallen.

Reaganite economists might respond, "how do you then explain this unprecedented rise in consumer spending throughout the 1983-1987 period, which has helped to push the stock market higher?" True enough, statistics from the Commerce Department show that inflation-adjusted consumer spending rates have increased by 15 percent between 1973 and 1984. Last November, retail sales rose by 0.5 percent during the month, totalling \$122 billion. But this jump in consumer spending doesn't mean that wages are getting higher. The basic explanation is that most people have become heavily addicted to credit, and they are forced to spend money they don't have.

The personal savings rate (as a proportion of the gross national product) dropped from 5.2 percent in 1973 to 3.4 percent in 1986. In Puerto Rico, for instance, there is actually a negative savings rate. As people save less, they rely more and more on plastic money—credit cards. Seventy percent of credit card users pay only a small portion of their regular monthly bills, and there was over \$150 billion outstanding debt on all credit cards at the end of last month. More than half of all American adults, 105 million people, own credit cards; the typical card user has about seven cards.

As families rely heavily on credit to cover day-to-day expenses, they can easily fall behind. Until last year, at least the interest payments for consumer loans were de-

ductible on income tax returns. Since the recent tax reform bill, however, consumer interest will not be deductible. Home equity loan interest is still deductible, and millions of people will soon start to use these loans to cover their credit card debts and other purchases. Consequently, the overall amount of household debt could soar out of control, making thousands of additional bankruptcies inevitable.

The fear of bankruptcies is also behind the Reagan administration's recent proposal to require larger down-payments and higher mortgage fees from people seeking loans from the Federal Housing Administration and Veterans Administration. Despite the opposition of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Reagan administration has suggested that home mortgages should be more difficult and more costly to obtain.

Another potential shark in the economic waters is the rising failure rate of American businesses. Despite the highly publicized successes of entrepreneurs in the 1980s, the current rate of business bankruptcies is higher today than at any time since the Great Depression. Back in 1980, the failure rate annually was 12 firms per 10,000. Three years later, the rate reached 32 per 10,000; today, over 55 per 10,000. Last year, about 57,000 businesses failed; 16,600 of them had liabilities in excess of one million dollars, and most were under five years old. Several key sectors were hardest hit by failures. Manufacturing firms recorded more than 110 bankruptcies per 10,000, and the business services sector had 210 failures per 10,000.

Another shark which continues to devour millions is unemployment and "underemployment", or the inability of workers to obtain full-time employment, or jobs at levels equal to their education or skills. Throughout this year, projected jobless rates will be 7 percent for whites, 14 percent for Blacks. Despite Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, there will be no major legislation to revive CETA or other necessary employment initiatives. More families will slide deeper into the abyss of poverty; others will have to accept lower wages in service sector, MacDonald's type jobs. So the general economic climate for 1987 may not culminate in a severe recession. But it is surely more pessimistic than either the Reagan administration or Wall Street claims.

Bill of Rights Key to Progress

by Stephen Ponder

The emergence of the Bill of Rights, especially the First Amendment, as a bulwark of constitutional liberty in modern America illustrates how the Constitution has been adapted, as a living document, to meet the needs of a nation fundamentally different from that of 1787.

Important as the Bill of Rights may seem 200 years later, its affirmations of individual liberties were not part of the original Constitution. The first 10 amendments were somewhat of an afterthought. Even after their ratification in 1791, these guarantees, including key First Amendment freedoms of individual speech and of the press, were not widely applied by the United States Supreme Court until well into the twentieth century, nearly 130 years after they were approved by Congress and ratified by the states.

The story of how the First Amendment became central to modern American free expression is particularly interesting in view of suggestions in 1986 by United States Attorney General Edwin Meese II that interpreters of the Constitution should try to follow the intent of its framers. From a distance of 200 years, the intentions of the delegates at the Constitutional Convention of 1787—and the congressional authors of the Bill of Rights in 1789—remain a subject of disagreement among historians and constitutional scholars.

Historian Catherine Drinker Bowen, author of *Miracle at Philadelphia*, writes that the question of a bill of rights did not come up at the Constitutional Convention until three days before the end of its four-month deliberations. The issue was briefly considered and quickly dropped. Eight states had already adopted their own bills of rights, and the federal government to be created by the Constitution was one of limited powers. The delegates couldn't see how the new Congress would have sufficient authority to limit the press, because most governing power would remain with the states and the citizens.

It was only after the Constitutional Convention adjourned that the absence of a bill of rights became a rallying cry of opponents of the new Constitution. Historian Robert Rutland, author of *The Birth of the Bill of Rights*, suggests this may have been more of a political ploy than a demand for stronger constitutional support of individual freedoms. In order to be elected for the first Congress from Virginia, for example, James Madison had to promise that he would sponsor the legislation that became the Bill of Rights. Rutland notes that once the Constitution itself was ratified, the clamor

for a bill of rights diminished, and congressional debate on the amendments in 1789 lacked urgency.

The package of proposed constitutional amendments Congress eventually sent to the states contained 12 amendments, rather than the 10 eventually ratified. What is known in 1987 as the "First" Amendment, which contains guarantee of speech, religion and the press, was actually the third adopted by Congress. The first two, which failed to win ratification by the states, deal with congressional elections and pay.

The 10 amendments of the Bill of Rights were ratified within four years of the Constitutional Convention, but their application by interpretation of the United States Supreme Court came slowly. Seven years after ratification of the Bill of Rights, the ruling Federalists in Congress passed the repressive Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. Jeffersonian opponents complained that these wide restrictions on speech and the press violated the First Amendment. But the Supreme Court had not begun to assume the power of judicial review over congressional actions, and none of the prosecutions under the Alien and Sedition Acts reached the court.

It was not until World War I, following widespread arrests of political dissenters under the Espionage Act of 1918, that the Supreme Court applied the First Amendment in evaluating the constitutionality of federal restrictions on free expression. In 1925, in the case of Socialist Party member Benjamin Gitlow, the Supreme Court ruled that the Bill of Rights could be applied to state restraints on free speech as well. It was not until decisions in these cases, as well as the 1932 ruling that declared unconstitutional a Minnesota statute aimed at suppressing local newspapers, that the Supreme Court began to interpret the Bill of Rights in ways familiar to Americans in 1987.

Constitutional freedom of expression in 1987, then, is much a creation of the Supreme Court in the twentieth century as that of the framers of the basic document in 1787 or the Bill of Rights in 1789. This should not be considered a reflection on the inability of the framers to foresee the size and complexity of the nation formed around their constitutional structure 200 years later. Instead, it illustrates their remarkable vision in establishing a set of principles that each generation can interpret as a living document.

Ponder is an assistant professor of Journalism at the University of Oregon.

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