

EDITORIAL

The Rise And Fall Of Ben Chavis

BY WILLIAM REED, NNPA
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Will The Ex-NAACP Head Resurrect With A New group?

The end of Benjamin Chavis' tenure as executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored people (NAACP) was greeted with sadness by some, relief from other and defiance by the self-proclaimed "freedom fighter."

Many African Americans contend that the allegations of sexual harassment and mishandling of

NAACP funds are part of a plot by "certain factions" to get rid of Chavis because they opposed his "progressive stance." "It's pretty clear that there is a plot to stop Ben Chavis from putting his hand out to more progressive people," said Gabriel Kenyetta, vice president of the New Marcus Garvey in Detroit. Others said Chavis ignored the ones from whom the 85-year-old civil rights organization traditionally gets its hand out. Mariam Blanks-Smart, president of the Southern Oakland branch, said she supported the national board's decision and hopes it will end public discussion of the

matter, which damaged the organization's reputation and ability to raise funds. "The continued discussion of it was taking attention away from the very positive and good things that this great organization is doing in the black community, she said. Others, such as Barry Murray, editor Washington, D.C.'s News Dimensions newspaper, point out that whites, and particularly Jews, have been policy formers and sources of revenues since the NAACP's founding. "If he wants to pursue his 'progressive posture' he should form his own organization and we will help him," Murray says. Chavis has said, "I intend to live the rest of my life fighting for freedom. Never again will we allow forces outside the African American com-

munity to dictate who we can meet with and what we can meet about. I intend to rise from this moment," Chavis said on the day of his firing.

Such internal bickering is not new to the nation's largest and oldest civil rights organization. During the early 1980s, a feud developed between then-board Chair Margaret Bush-Wilson, a St. Louis lawyer, and executive director Benjamin Hooks. Hooks prevailed after five years of conflict, and William Gibson - a longtime NAACP activist and Greenville, S.C. dentist - became the new chair. From April 1993 to August 1994, Chavis was embroiled in controversy and had a confrontation with the board comprised of three whites and 61 blacks, six months after his appointment when they tried

to strip him of certain powers. His public criticism started when he defended gangsta rap and pledged NAACP support for a truce among street gangs. In April 1994, it was revealed that Chavis met secretly in Detroit with so-called militant and leftist black leaders. Elizabeth Wright, editor of Issues & Views, calls Chavis a "self-avowed Marxist" and unexpected downfall of Chavis is stunning. Although the flap about Louis Farrakhan and Chavis' handling of accusations of his alleged sexual harassment prove that he finally misread white liberal support, he had every reason to believe he was invincible in their eyes." Former Detroit chapter President Arthur Johnson said that several group leaders invited to the Unity

meeting in Detroit and Summit I in Baltimore were black nationalists, and that is not the NAACP philosophy. Bridge-building in the NAACP includes working with white people, Johnson said. "We are a minority in this country, so the fight has been to compel the majority to recognize the rights and interests of its minority citizens," Johnson said.

Chavis, 46, was chosen from a field of five finalists in April 1993 to succeed Hooks, who retired after 15 years. Earlier, Chavis had spent seven years in Cleveland as head of the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice. He holds bachelor's master's and doctoral degrees in chemistry, divinity and ministry, respectively.

perspectives

Minority Business vs 'American' Business:

Years ago when I first saw that title used to head an article describing the special difficulties of African Americans in the area of 'free' enterprise, I knew the conservatives and racists would advance the same type of hysterical disclaimers provoked by the concept of 'Black' History; "Why, we are all one in this great 'melting pot'".

That was a decade ago, and the article was correct regarding the contemporary scene--not revealed that there has been considerable retrogression (include Portland). I use this particular time frame because it permits me to cite the documented reference, "Evidences Of Progress Among The Colored Peoples", G.F. Richings, 1908.

Several years ago, I quoted here quite extensively from this remarkable text and photo essay compiled by a black man who traveled the length and breadth of the country, pride-fully documenting for posterity the magnificent accomplishments of the race in commerce and the professions (we are as fortunate in this instance as we are that the ancient Africans wrote in stone--denying the racists and hypocrites a safe haven for their revisionism and propaganda).

Many of you wrote to say how amazed you were to find out that 'back then' African Americans across this nation owned and operated factories, mercantile enterprise, public transit, clinics, granaries, produce farms, beauty colleges, trade schools, hospitals; all attained against the greatest of odds. Then, too, there were the many inventions by these men and women, many of which were key to the development of American industry and its competitive position in the world (see my book, "Black Inventors Of America").

Now, this is not the first time I've described this "rushing backwards" economic phenomena. And a few others have voiced their surprise, once being made aware. But,

what is absolutely startling and amazing is that our great leaders and highly-paid directors of our key social and economic agencies have not thoroughly researched this 'economic recidivism' phenomenon--and prescribed a counter-structure (for \$200,000 a year we should be able to get competence and a plan--not arrogant statements like "I am the authority!")

Once again the 'Minority Business' community is hawking the latest figures on "Black Buying Power",

almost 400 billion dollars by the end of the year (U.S. Census figures). And finally we have verification of a fact that 'freedom-fighters and boycotters' have always known: According to the director of economic forecasting at the University of Georgia, "The spending power that African-Americans control can be the margin between success and failure for many businesses". Of course, what he is talking about here is "White" business, and black advertising agencies try not to let them forget the fact.

Now, the foregoing ethnic allocation of business revenue is understandable in terms of the terrible reversal of that "Evidences of Progress Among The Colored People" cited by Richings a hundred years ago. A young student in a class of mine at Portland State University put it to me, "all you say it true, and I am happy to learn the mechanics and structural parameters of our poverty and the ghetto. Perhaps the knowledge will help me to escape. But, who is doing this to us and why? I've always frowned on 'conspiracy theories' and I'm not paranoid-but damn, professor!"

This student was, shall we say, "ready" at the time and I was able to provide a new and enlightening frame of reference; one that has enabled him to 'move-on-down' the line in Atlanta. You can be privy too. Follow my next series, where all discussed here can be understood in terms of "Immigration: Race, Money and Power"



Along The Color Line

Ben Chavis And The Crisis Of Black Leadership

BY DR. MANNING MARABLE

The recent firing of Ben Chavis as executive director of the NAACP culminated a campaign of vilification which had lasted for nearly nine months.

The NAACP's board voter overwhelmingly to dismiss Chavis, stating that he had failed adequately to explain the use of the organization's funds to settle a threatened lawsuit by former employee, Mary E. Stansel. Abandoned by his principal supporter, NAACP president William Gibson, Chavis felt bitterly betrayed. Within days, he filed a lawsuit in the District of Columbia Superior Court, demanding his reinstatement as executive director. To the media, Chavis angrily blamed outside forces which had manipulated the board's vote and described his ouster as a "crucifixion." Earl Shinhoster, the association's field secretary, was selected by the board to replace Chavis temporarily.

All of us are familiar with the general outline of the political "lynching" of Ben Chavis. But in truth, the ouster of Chavis as leader of the oldest civil rights organization in America had little to do with Mary Stansel, or the fact that Chavis was no wizard at financial management. The real question at issue is whether African American people have the right to select their own leaders and make them accountable to our concerns and demands. Who speaks for

black people in this country? And do we have the right to develop strategies which address our own concerns and advocate programs which advance our interests? The debate over Chavis represents a greater dilemma, the crisis of black leadership in America.

After the 1960s, the NAACP and the civil rights movement were confronted with four basic challenges, which they never fully understood or overcame. First, the economic crisis of America's central cities created profound problems for black leadership. Jobs disappeared in the ghetto, as thousands of plants and factories relocated to the suburbs or the sunbelt. Second, the fiscal crisis of federal, state and local governments reduced funds for social programs. Reaganism represented a war against the cities, and African Americans and Latinos were the chief victims of that war. Civil rights organizations were challenged to shift their energies from cooperating with the federal government to obtain legal and political reforms, to pressuring Congress and the White House to reverse regressive and repressive social programs. As Republican administrations increasingly relied on expanding the prison system as the primary means of social control for the black community, the NAACP and other organizations were pushed by blacks from all social classes to become more militant and aggressive. Yet under the leadership of NAACP executive director

Benjamin Hooks, the organizations drifted without a clear political or ideological compass.

The Third major challenge was the growth of class divisions within the African American community itself. Since the late 1960s, the size of the black middle class increased by over 400 percent. Millions of African Americans moved from the inner cities to the suburbs. Those who were trapped in the worst neighborhoods of the urban ghettos tended to be the poor, the unemployed, the homeless, young women and children. In the 1980s, there was an explosion of gang violence connected with the economics of illegal drugs in urban black communities. The NAACP made few efforts to understand or address the growing social crisis which was experienced by the most oppressed African Americans.

Fourthly, there was the political and social impact of Reaganism within the black community. True, more than 90 percent of all African Americans voted against Reagan; nevertheless, like other Americans, they were affected by the administration's agenda in many more subtle ways. In the 60s, blacks believed overwhelmingly that government was on their side. The federal government was a bulwark against racial segregation, at least in the Johnson administration. But Reaganism undercut blacks' attitudes toward the role of the federal government and also eroded the belief in

multiracial coalitions.

As white American moved right, the political culture of black America became fertile terrain for the reactionary agenda of conservative black nationalism and the resurgence of Louis Farrakhan. Black support for Farrakhan has less to do with his odious anti-Semitism or narrow and dogmatic sexism, than his unique ability to express the rage and frustration of broad sectors of the urban underclass. Thus African Americans may reject the bigotry of the Nation of Islam, but nevertheless feel that Farrakhan expresses some important ideas reflecting the mood of the community.

Ben Chavis implicitly understood all of this. Chavis had been a political prisoner in North Carolina for nearly five years in the 1970s. I became friends with Ben when we both were leaders of the National Black Independent Political Party in the early 1980s. He had been an early critic of what became known as "environmental racism," and won praise as the director of the Commission of Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ. Chavis was an astute observer and participant in social protest politics. He understood that organizations like the NAACP had to radically redefine their mission in order to capture the support of the post-Civil Rights generation. This was the fundamental reason that Chavis inevitably came under attack by the white political establishment.

Vantage Point

Time Out For Nervous Negroes: Black Power Must Confront White Power

BY RON DANIELS

The recent firestorm swirling around Dr. Benjamin F. Chavis and the NAACP is really about power.

The power of forces external to the African community to control and exploit the African community in this country and the world; to keep African people disoriented, disunited and weak. The cold historical fact is that Europe and Europeans have prospered mightily from the underdevelopment of Africa and African people through the holocaust of enslavement, colonialism, neo-colonialism and domestic colonialism. The vast and extraordinary wealth and riches of African and the incredible talent, skill and inventiveness of the African mind and body have been used to nurture Euro-American capitalism and propel Europe and America to a position of supremacy, white supremacy in the world today.

While supremacy developed and has been sustained by some age old, time tested tactics - divide, conquer and exploit. The holocaust of enslavement was carried out because of the superiority of European weaponry (the gun) and the ability to use that weaponry to turn African against African. The objective was clear - to rape, pillage and control Africa in the interest of enriching and developing Europe and Europeans. In the colonial era Africa was simply carved

up by the European powers with disregard for the well established boundaries and borders of African nations and ethnic groups. This reckless splitting up of the African nations and peoples was designed to disrupt the unity of the people and facilitate control. In addition, ethnic differences were exploited e.g. favoring one ethnic group over another as a means of maintaining the profitable control and dominance of white supremacy. Neo-colonialism and domestic colonialism, the indirect control of African nations and communities was/is maintained by the same strategy and tactics - divide and exploit. And, every form of domination has been characterized by cultural aggression and mis-education; the conscious attempt to destroy African history, identity and culture to undermine the capacity of African people to unite and resist domination.

I site these historical references simply to point out that the current controversy engulfing the NAACP and Black America is about power and control; the ability of Europe and America and Europeans to continue to divide and exploit and prosper off the human and material wealth of African people. Nothing is more terrifying to white supremacy/power than the prospect that African people might unite and use our enormous resources for our own development. Nothing is more frightening to white power than the specter of Black

power.

As long as the Hutu and Tutsi are at each others throats in Rwanda and Burundi, white supremacy/power is secure. As long as the tension between the Yoruba and Hausa in Nigeria is perpetuated, then white supremacy is safe. As long as the ideological differences between Booker T. Washington, Dubois, Garvey and Randolph could be accentuated then white supremacy remained comfortably situated. The prospect that Martin Luther King and Malcom X might have combined forces to develop a common agenda for the Black freedom struggle sent shock waves through the white power structure - cointelpro, character assassination and physical assassination followed.

Make no mistake about it, African unity is not in the best interest of white supremacy/power. African self-reliance and self-development is not in the best interest of white supremacy/power. Black power is not in the best interest of white supremacy/power. That's what the fuss is all about. What is the African American Leadership Summer succeeds? What if Black Americans begin to effectively use its \$350-\$400 billion income and consumer power as a tool for self-development and a weapon to punish those corporations who exploit our people with little or no return? What if this unity and self-reliance idea spread like a virus to infect Africans in the Carib-

bean, Central and South America and, heaven forbid, Africa?

As Africans in America must be clear about what is at stake and act accordingly. We have the power in our own hands to liberate ourselves. The burden of a \$3 million debt at the NAACP should not even be an issue. We are 40 million strong with, to repeat, a gross African annual income of \$350-\$400 billion. We should not be on our knees begging anybody for grants or corporate donations as the primary source of income for our civil rights/human rights organization and leaders. We should wipe out the debt and see African/Black dollars as the main source of income for the Black freedom struggle.

White supremacy prefers nervous negroes and wittingly or unwittingly perpetuate the slave/plantation mentality among our people; nervous negroes who cannot conceive and therefore cannot achieve African unity, self-reliance and Black power; nervous negroes who would keep us divided, dependent and powerless. I believe that it's time out for nervous negroes. It's time for African people to do what's necessary to liberate ourselves from white supremacy and domination. It's time for Black Power to confront white power. It's time for African people to finally come off the plantation to become free and self-determining people...again!

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