

# EDITORIAL

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## A Call To Duty

By HUGH B. PRICE  
PRESIDENT  
NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE

"I haven't heard a word of what's been said up there, and I don't care." Emma Wilkes, of Trenton, N.J., standing in the vast throng of African-American women present at the Million Woman March in Philadelphia on October 25, told a reporter. "The point isn't what one person has to say. The point is all of us coming together."

It was a sentiment obviously shared by most there, who refused to let the glitches in the sound system that kept them from clearly hearing many of the speakers, distract them from the purpose of the gathering.

These women didn't need anyone to tell them what to do.

Rather, they had come to Philadelphia to tell America what they intended to do. "We want to take back our streets, our homes, and take back our children," said another participant, Joyce Mosby, of Richmond, VA. "We want to rid our neighborhoods of the drugs and crime and other bad elements. We know that education is the key to achieving our goals."

The event was the idea of two Philadelphia community activists, Asia Coney and Phile Chionesu, and its twelve-point program reflected their determination, to most of all, bolster the confidence and the resources of black women at the bottom of the economic ladder.

They were right to do so. Too often we ignore the burdens poor and working-class black women bear. It is those burdens—which include low levels of education, the difficulties of rearing children alone, and jobs which pay them less than white men, black men, and white women get, living in neighborhoods ridden by crime, unemployment and poor municipal services—which largely define the plight of the black poor.

But, of course, it is not just poor black women who need help. Just this month a report was released documenting that, despite affirmative action, women of color have made little progress moving into management jobs.

The study, done by Catalyst, a New York-based nonprofit research group, found that, among other things, black women make up more than 12 percent of the female workforce, but only 7 percent of the 2.9 million female managers in private businesses. In addition, it found that women of color who are managers earn only 57 cents for every \$1 that white male managers earn.

In other words, one cannot ignore the difficulties black women as a group face, no matter where they are on the socio-economic spectrum. It is a matter of economic power and, as Aretha Franklin sang so famously, r-e-s-p-e-c-t.

Nor should we overlook the even larger meaning of the Million Woman March.

This was another manifestation of Black Americans' determination to face the tumultuous present and the challenging future with the faith that they will, not merely survive, but thrive.

This extraordinary event marked the second time in three years that hundreds of thousands—at the least—of African Americans came together to improve their lives and make their communities better places to live.

In 1995 the Million Man March brought, most likely, more than a million African Americans to Washington. For all the misgivings and controversy which attended the preparations for it, there can be no doubt that it was a positive event. Reports of a greater involvement of black men in community life around the country following that march are too widespread to dismiss as coincidental.

## peerspectives



BY PROF.  
MCKINLEY  
BURT

For ease of reference we will designate this N.E. 19th and Alberta institutional food supply business as the "Alberta Food Project." In fact, as I retrieve my files for 1982-83, most are found to have some variation of that title.

And speaking of files related to my research on the feasibility of acquiring this operation for a corporation owned within the community, I see that they range a full spectrum: "Agri-Business Council of Oregon, U.S. Army Supply Bulletins, Oregon-Washington Small Food Processors, New York National Food and Confection Show," and a collection of menu models "from schools, airlines, correctional institutions, you-name it."

There were also exploratory presentations I had made to what I thought would be interested (if not enthusiastic) members of the commu-

## The North Will Rise Again (Cont.)

nity. Realizing, of course, that one cannot always make assessments on the basis of the 'noises' a person makes. It is to be understood that I was not describing or offering tours through some "Elysian Fields" of an imaginary enterprise, but presenting a thoroughly-researched evaluation of an ongoing business-reality seems to cool ardor.

Already, several readers have asked if this series is reinforcement of my essay suggesting it is the case that in the Northeast community, "Opportunity will often knock until its knuckles are raw" Before I am through, I believe most will have drawn their own very firm conclusions. But "The North Must Rise Again."

It was very good to hear from a successful black business person in the community, a most enthusiastic young woman in the attempt to launch the "Alberta Food Project." I recall her expertise, dedication and that, along with the one other female in a group of

eight, she possessed a "can do" attitude which, if universal, would have made the whole project work.

I'm especially wishful as I look at a file containing some well-structured projections she made in respect to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service. And always open to new ideas and opportunities, there is her commentary on the model suggested by an article in the Sept. 28, 1983 Oregonian, "Concern Over Idle Plant led to Development of French Fries."

A concept of mine which I was quite sure would persuade the other six in the group to move forward on the incorporation and financing was to integrate a retail grocery into the complex; food supplies were already flowing through the firm at a lower wholesale cost than that enjoyed by any small stand-alone store. The entrance would have been on the Alberta Street side. And parking could have been

negotiated with the owner of the vacant lot next door (a good cash flow).

Too often there seems to be the same limiting factors at work in these situations, and this is the same whether we speak of an "Alberta Food Project" in Portland, Oregon or the aborted "Real Estate Investment Trust" I described as stillborn in Washington, D.C. For many minorities there is usually an unvoiced fear of transferring high level and proved skills from a performance "for-the-man" (on the job) to performing the same tasks for the public as an entrepreneur.

This situation, of course, is a different stage entirely, one where the actors soon realize that in addition to good skills, a high level of discipline and responsibility is required. As said earlier, there soon is a time when "reality seems to cool ardor." It will not help to cite and document all the successes ever achieved. The will must be there. (Continued next week.)

## To Be Equal The Welfare Reform Mismatch

By HUGH B. PRICE  
PRESIDENT  
NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE

In the first months of welfare reform, there's been a wave of euphoria about the sharp decline in the number of welfare recipients. Fueled by a strong national economy, caseloads across the country have fallen by about 14 percent in the 14 months since Congress passed and President Clinton signed the law overhauling the welfare system.

But now the welfare reform law "mismatch" is becoming more and more evident. That mismatch is the gap between the rhetoric about what the law would accomplish and the reality of what is happening.

It involves the difference between the strength of the national economy as whole and the various strengths—and weaknesses—of state and local economies. It involves the difference between the requirements of the national law and the laws of the various states, which in most cases are tougher. And it involves whether the level of education and the job skills of the welfare recipients can easily match the needs of the local job market.

The fact is we're now learning

that the mismatch is a great deal wider than the ballyhoo acknowledged.

We all knew that the early going would be easy, because the go-getters among those on welfare would go get jobs, especially in communities where unemployment was low.

It's true—and good—that all the talk about drastic changes in welfare assistance has pushed some welfare recipients to discover within themselves that ambition, ability and a sense of responsibility that the necessity to work can stimulate. We're heartened that thousands of folk on welfare have managed to find work, because that's the way it ought to be.

But we also knew all along—and joined others in warning—that the flaws of the welfare reform act would quickly surface, and that the day would come when the strict welfare time limits would endanger children on welfare whose parents would not be able to find jobs.

Well, the stories are just beginning to trickle in that this is exactly what's happening.

That was illuminated by a recent New York Times report on the welfare situation in the Mississippi Delta region: the poorest region in the poorest state in the country, where the unemployment rate is about ten percent, dependable child-care arrange-

ments are scarce, education levels low, distances great, and public transportation non-existent.

One study of job prospects in the region indicated that there would be one new job for every 254 families leaving the welfare rolls.

Only about half of the people who found jobs when the state instituted its welfare reform program two years ago were working as little as fifteen months later. That was largely due, on the one hand, to a mismatch between the level of education and job skills the jobs required, and, on the other, the fact that many single mothers gave up their jobs rather than continue roundtrip commutes of three to five hours away from their children.

In recent months, for every welfare recipient placed in a job, two were dropped, at least temporarily, from the welfare rolls for failing to meet the state's work rules.

Mississippi is far from the only state that has high rates of poverty and low governmental spending. But even states with strong economies are having difficulty matching welfare recipients and work.

For example, the Wall Street Journal reported that in New Jersey adults in just one quarter of the 80,000 families in which adults and children receive welfare benefits have found

some kind of job.

In addition, a recent national survey showed that just six states were operating computer systems capable of tracking how long a recipient has been on welfare to enforce the new national five-year limit. And many states have no way of determining whether all the people who've left the welfare rolls have actually gotten jobs. The Journal report suggest that "a year of nationwide hype about welfare overhaul may have had more impact than new welfare rules themselves."

None of these difficulties are surprising. Last year, before the law passed, one national study warned that fewer than half of those pushed off welfare would find work.

Yes, every able-bodied person should earn his or her keep.

But one must have a job to earn one's keep. It is neither compassionate nor pragmatic to pretend that just moving people off the welfare rolls will solve the problem of people on welfare.

To prevent welfare reform from becoming a calamity for children and parents, the Clinton Administration, congress, and the states must respond positively to the question that has always loomed over any plan to reform welfare for the better: Where are the jobs?

## The Million Woman March: A Message From The Grassroots

On October 25, 1997 the improbable happened. Hundreds of thousands of African women converged on Philadelphia for the largest gathering of Black women in the history of this country, the Million Woman March (MWM). This necessary gathering of sisters was improbable because even more than the Million Man March and Day of Absence (MMM/DOA) in 1995 this magnificent event defied conventional wisdom about what was possible in terms of turn out given scarce resources, scant organization, limited time and no highly recognizable/prominent national organizations or "leaders" to serve as an attraction.

Taking inspiration from the MMM/DOA but adopting a radically different organizational approach, a group of local grassroots activists led by

businesswoman Phile Chionesu and public housing advocate Coney Asia conceived the idea of the MWM and worked diligently against great odds to make it happen. From the very beginning there was a conscious decision that the MWM emanate from and be substantially led by grassroots women; sisters who often provide serious leadership in their neighborhoods whose voices are often unnoticed or drowned out by the more prominent mainstream leaders who have little interest or inclination to share the stage with grassroots leaders. Their good intentions notwithstanding, ordinarily this approach was not likely to produce the massive turn out the organizers hoped for.

How did a small core of local women leaders from Philadelphia mobilize/organize the largest gathering of Black women in the history

of this country? The success of the MWM is a testimony to the sheer will, dedication and tireless work of a group of grassroots women who had faith that if you can "conceive it you can achieve it." And, as is occasionally the case in history, the power of the idea in and of itself became the magnet that attracted the masses of Black women who streamed into Philadelphia. There was something about the very idea of those who had historically carried the burden of the survival of the Black Nation on their shoulders gathering to share their pain and joy, interests and aspirations, vision and values and determination to be full partners in the process of reconstructing the Black Nation into the 21st century. It was time for the sisters to have their say and take the lead!

Miraculously, the power of the

idea spread like wildfire via the grapevine, the African drumbeat, Black talk radio, the Black press and the skillful use of the internet. Sisters began to hear about it and spread the word—there's going to be a Million Woman March in Philadelphia. In most instances people did not know who the leaders were, the nature of the platform/program or the ultimate goal. What mattered most was the power of the idea that Black women, sisters, were going to get together to make a powerful statement by their mere presence in massive numbers in Philadelphia. Miraculously, spontaneously they came. By some estimates more than a million African women poured into the "city of brotherly love" for the MWM. The organizers achieved their objective of sending a message from the grassroots!