



Opinion

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Deep Trouble For Many Black Politicians

BY EARL OFARI HUTCHINSON
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

NAACP leaders turned the tepid issue of the Confederate flag fluttering over the South Carolina statehouse into a life and death battle against racism. Now black politicians in the state have gone from one better and are waging mortal combat against a plan by South Carolina governor Jim Hodges to require elementary school students to say "sir, and ma'am" when addressing teachers and school employees.

Black politicians screamed racism and railed that this is nothing but a sneaky way of forcing blacks to bow and scrape for white folks again. Hodges' plan is a sideshow gesture that does nothing to reverse the deplorable drop out rates and miserably low test scores of black students in South Carolina's public schools. But the black lawmakers didn't attack Hodges' worthless idea because it doesn't improve the state's abominably underfunded and underserved schools. That won't snatch media and public attention and send the troops scurrying to the barricades.

The courtesy title squabble is yet another troubling sign of the penchant of many black elected officials to grab at showy, chic issues rather than pounding on the crucial problems of poverty, violence, poor education, the disastrous disparities in the criminal justice system, and the gut of social programs that have taken a massive toll on poor and working class blacks. Their political ineffectiveness in attacking these issues has caused them to free fall in state and national politics. In the past two years they have lost mayorships to whites in majority black cities of Baltimore and Oakland. The number of black state legislators has plummeted from 12 to 6 in the California legislature since 1994. They have lost seats on dozens of local and municipal offices nationwide.

The Congressional Black Caucus has been unable to get any substantial legislation through Congress. When the Republican-controlled Congress eliminated key committees such as the Post Office and Civil Service and the District of Columbia Committees, CBC members were displaced, and hundreds of committee staff jobs were eliminated many of which were held by blacks. Their blind subservience to Clinton's policies have rendered them little more than malleable foot soldiers for the Democratic party.

Black politicians blame their political slide on voter apathy, alienation, inner city population drops, suburban integration, and displacement by Latinos and increasingly Asians who some claim have far more cohesion and political savvy than blacks. These factors have

contributed to the evaporation in the number, power and influence of black elected officials. But the biggest culprit to blame for their slippage is themselves. Many black politicians make little or no effort to inform and involve the black public on vital legislation and political actions that directly impact on black communities. Their all-consuming obsession is to elect more black Democrats to office and making sure that those in office stay there.

Many black politicians are accustomed to the unchallenged and unquestioned brandishing of power. They jealously hoard what they view as their sacred right to make all final decisions on proposing laws and supporting public policy they deem important for blacks. Yet those laws and policies more often than not boost middle-class blacks and corporate special interests rather than poor and working-class blacks. Black politicians are also crippled by their near total dependence on the Democratic Party for patronage, support, and assorted party favors. Few would dare break ranks with the party and attempt to pressure the Republican party to take black issues seriously. Many Latino and Asian leaders and elected officials are not straight-jacketed by mind-numbing obedience to the Democrats. They have pushed the Democrats and Republicans to cease immigrant bashing, increase funding for bi-lingual education programs, champion Latino political representation and implement outreach programs to Latino voters. They are leaving blacks in the political dust.

The downward shift in black politics should be a wake-up call for black elected officials that guilt tainted appeals for black solidarity and voter registration caravans and buses into black neighborhoods are not going to make blacks dash to the polls to vote for politicians they feel have, or will, fail them. The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a black think tank, found that the frustration and disgust of many black voters with black politicians has soared so high that less than 20 percent of eligible black voters bothered to cast a ballot in many municipal and statewide elections in 1998.

The cruel truth is that with a pivotal presidential election only months away the power and influence of black politicians has badly eroded. And they only make things worse by waging symbolic fights over issues such as flags and how students address teachers while refusing to craft an agenda that confronts the dire problems of the poor and working class blacks.

This virtually guarantees that the Democrats will continue to take them for granted, the Republicans will continue to ignore them, and more and black voters will turn away from them.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the author of the forthcoming *The Disappearance of Black Leadership*.

Letter to the editor

A year after a Texas police chief defended the use of racially charged terms, Gov. George W. Bush appointed him to oversee the state's law enforcement training.

The appointee, Charles W. Williams, testifying in a discrimination lawsuit filed by one of his officers, said that terms such as "porch monkey" were not racial slurs. He also said that blacks didn't mind being called "nigger's" 50 year ago. "It wasn't any big deal back then," he said in an October 1998 sworn deposition.

Asked about his comments Thursday, Williams said in an interview. "It just depends on how it's used and who it's used toward." "I've been around race with blacks and browns all my life, added Williams, who is white. "I'm the farthest thing from a racist."

Mike Jones, a spokesman for Bush, the likely Republican presidential nominee, said the governor was not aware of Williams comment at the time of the appointment. Bush's gubernatorial staff will look into the matter, he said.

"Governor Bush has zero tolerance for racism," Jones said. The state's standard background check would not cover a civil lawsuit, he said. Jones added that Bush has appointed nearly 3,000 people to more than 200 boards and commission.

In November 1999, Bush named Williams to head the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement other law enforcement officers.

The commission works to "improve professionalism" and assure that "highly trained and ethical law enforcement and corrections personnel" serve Texans.

Williams, the police chief in Marshall, Texas, was first appointed to the nine member Commission by Bush in 1997. The governor elevated him to chairman in November 1999. Between those two appointments, in June 1998, Officer Ricky Mitchell sued the city of Marshall and Williams in federal court alleging discrimination. Mitchell charged that he was punished because he was black and because he complained about a discriminatory atmosphere in the department.

The case was dismissed by a federal court last year and is now on appeal. Before it was dismissed, Williams gave a sworn deposition in which he was asked about a variety of comments allegedly made by Marshall officers. In one case, an officer was said to have joked about someone being a "porch monkey." In another, an officer allegedly called a "black bastard." Williams said, "If it's in a general statement, no I don't consider it a racial slur." He added that he does not consider the term "white honky" to be racial slur, either.

Later in the deposition, Williams was asked if he uses the word "nigger." He said he only uses the word now while advising others to avoid it. But when he was growing up in south-central Oklahoma 50 years ago, he said, the word was common and inoffensive.

"I was born and raised with blacks, and back then we had Nigger Charlie and Nigger Sam, Nigger Joe, and we regarded those people with all the respect in the world. That was their name,"

Said Williams, who is now 57.

"They didn't mind. It wasn't any big deal then," he added. "It graduated from that to Negro, then me calling him an African-American today."

The case was dismissed by a judge who found there was insufficient evidence that Mitchell's treatment was related to his race or to his complaints.

On Thursday, Williams did not retract any statements. He attributed the lawsuit to "one disgruntled employee," who recently left the department. He added that the case was the only time he had been accused of racism or sued in federal court.

I suppose that Governor Bush can appoint who ever he wants to appoint," Castetter said. "I don't think that's who I would have chosen."

[George & Bush]

By Laura Meckler

Associated press writer

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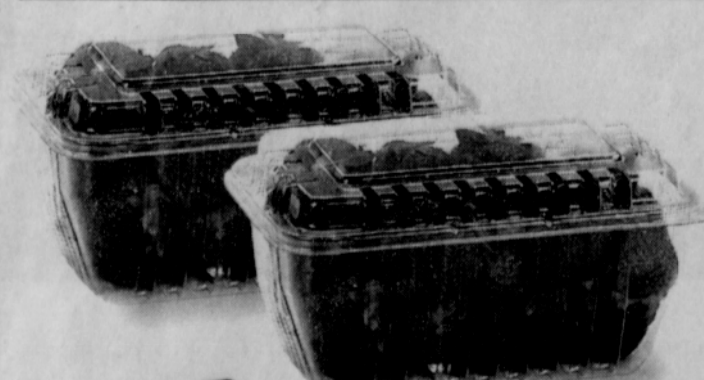
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