

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE REPUBLICAN PARTY: POSITIONING FOR 2008

By Sophia A. Nelson, Esq. *

The 2004 campaign is over and the second term of the Bush Administration has begun. It is clear that Christian conservatives, the “red states,” Hispanics, big business, and other key constituencies are the big winners of election 2004, but what about African Americans? African Americans have once again locked themselves out of the majority political party and the ramifications could be serious. Democrats came out in full force to mobilize black voters. Using their typical mantra, they blasted the black community with messages such as: “Get out and vote!” “Don't let the Florida voter fiasco deter you!” “Don't be intimidated!” The Democrats made advance allegations about voter intimidation, voter suppression, and any other violation one can imagine to mobilize and fire up their much needed African American base of voters into action. Yet, when the final numbers were counted, the Democrats and black voters came up short, again. This divisive election day pandering needs to stop. It is time African Americans learned to play the game much more effectively and make both parties court us for our votes come 2008.

As an African American woman raised in southern New Jersey (near Camden and the Philadelphia suburbs), I am quite familiar with the last minute “get out the black vote” efforts including: “walking” around senior citizen breakfast rallies on election morning; buses taking blacks to the polls; door knockers who literally get people out of their homes to vote; wild and unsubstantiated allegations of voter suppression and intimidation; and last minute flyers sent to people's homes warning them of racist GOP tactics and allegations. I remember New Jersey's Governor Christie Whitman's 1993 upset election victory over Democrat incumbent Jim Florio being tainted by allegations of black voter suppression. We are told that if we vote Republican, we threaten the reversal of our civil rights. The tactics of the Democratic party in the 2004 election were no different than those employed in 2000 and were just as effective.

The Democrats have a serious message problem based on inflammatory and false rhetoric and that is why they keep coming up short. On the other hand, the Republican party has basically written off black voters and focused instead on Hispanics, who are the fastest growing minority group in America. In this respect, the Hispanics actually delivered George W. Bush's reelection and, in return, he rewarded them with the appointment of a Hispanic Attorney General, Alberto Gonzalez, and Secretary of Commerce, Carlos M. Gutierrez, two positions that wield significant power in the federal government. The question I have for the Democratic Party is: Why are blacks consistently singled out

in the final weeks of the election as “crucial” to a victory for the Democrats, yet the issues that uniquely affect African Americans are never discussed in presidential campaigns by the party that supposedly represents them. Despite having three Presidential debates in the 2004 elections, only one question concerned affirmative action. In the Vice Presidential debate, PBS commentator Gwen Ifill asked one question about AIDS/HIV and its disproportionate effect on black women in the United States. In addition to neither side providing an adequate response to those questions, there was no discussion of the high unemployment rate in the black community or of the clear breakdown of the black family in America. Bill Cosby was 100% correct when he took black parents and black leaders to task for the way in which we are allowing our young people to speak, dress, and dumb down in school. But, those of us who are black know that the problems run far deeper and wider than what Mr. Cosby pointed out.

Here are just a handful of troubling statistics to ponder: two out of three black children are born out of wedlock.¹

A large segment of the black male population cannot exercise their right to vote in elections due to prior felony convictions on their record.² In a new policy brief, “Education and Incarceration,” the Justice Policy Institute (JPI) showed that by 1999, 1 in 10 white male dropouts, and an astonishing 52 % of black male high school dropouts had prison records by their early thirties.³ The JPI brief also showed that African American men in their early 30s are nearly twice as likely to have prison records (22 %) than college degrees (12 %).⁴ Blacks are less likely than whites to have health care insurance.⁵ Black men and more specifically black women are at an alarmingly disproportionate risk for contracting the AIDS/HIV virus in America.⁶ In 2000, the black-to-white ratio in infant mortality was 2.5.⁷ Finally, blacks are more likely to get cancer than other ethnic groups, due in part to greater exposure of black men to carcinogens on the job.⁸

With all of this, President Bush and the Democratic leadership should speak with our black leaders in order to come up with real tangible solutions to address these spiraling social problems. While President Bush and his administration have taken steps to address specific issues that plague the black American community, the Democrats continue to spew the same rhetorical scare tactics. Isn't the Republican approach more constructive than confusing black voters and scaring them into voting for the Democratic presidential candidate every four years but then neglecting these voters otherwise?

The Democrats have been offering the same old prescription for the problems of the unemployed, homeless, and poorly edu-

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cated since I was a child in the 1970s and even further back to the presidency of John Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. A feckless debate is once again thrust upon us as to which party best represents our community. This debate never moves this nation any closer to dealing with the real issues that affect the lives of everyday African Americans. In fact, it only serves to further alienate African Americans from fully participating in a two-party, democratic process of governance.

It is time for black Americans to become full participants in our government like every other racial minority group in America. We need to hold the President as well as the Democrats accountable. It is up to us to demand equal access and equal representation. Power concedes nothing without demand. What really offends me as a black American is the assumption that all black people should blindly vote Democrat and that the Republicans don't even deserve my consideration. Many African Americans assume that if and when a Democrat becomes President, all of black America's problems will somehow be resolved. They will not. They did not end under Bill Clinton or Jimmy Carter or under any term of a Democratic president.

In order to seize our political power and to use it for our best interests, blacks should at least consider the President and the Republican party as a viable option for building political alliances and improving political access over the next four years. I also want to implore African Americans, regardless of your economic, social, or political bent to call on our black leaders to find new solutions to some very real problems going on in our community at large. A white colleague asked me the other day, "Why is it such a big deal if President Bush courts the black vote or not?" It is a big deal because he is the President of the United States. He is the President of *all* Americans. In fact, the President's record reflects his commitment to addressing the needs of the black community.

Immediately upon taking office, the President established the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, which rests on a basic principle: when it sees social needs, the federal government will look to faith-based programs and community groups as partners to help those in need.⁹ The President signed an Executive Order to end discrimination against faith-based groups, helping to bring down barriers that had prevented faith-based organizations from being considered in the federal grants process.¹⁰ As a result of the President's efforts, billions of dollars in competitive grants administered by the federal government were awarded to faith-based groups in 2003.¹¹ Whose lives will be more affected and touched by faith based programs than African Americans, particularly with drug interdiction programs which assist recovering addicts in a positive and meaningful

way?¹² The President also made a commitment to mentoring children of prisoners by calling for grants for faith-based and community organizations that provide mentors for these children.¹³ This three-year \$150 million initiative focuses on providing 100,000 new mentors for some of the two million at-risk children with one or more parents in prison.¹⁴

Also noteworthy, President Bush and his administration hosted the first White House Conference on Minority Home Ownership. As a result, more blacks and minorities owned single family homes in 2004 than ever before in American history.¹⁵ In addition, the President's tax cut assisted middle class and working American families of all backgrounds. Black Americans, in particular, benefited from the child tax credits and tax cuts that the President ushered through Congress early in his term.

In the final analysis, the black vote is important because it accounts for a large portion of the votes that are cast each November. African Americans account for 13% of the U.S. population.¹⁶ The success of President Bush's re-election campaign turned on this ability to speak to black voters. We as black citizens need to understand that we are in a position of power and strength and not one of weakness and powerlessness. We must learn to be shrewd and stop basing our votes on emotion. Our vote must be based on sound policies and issues, not on who the Reverend Al Sharpton, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, or the NAACP sanction as "worthy" of our vote.

Like all Americans, I too care about high taxes, the military, high health care costs, the national security of this nation, poverty, education, my retirement, and my future. I want someone to talk to me about how we can solve our problems-how we can build strong, healthy black families again. I deeply resent commercials on TV that show dragging chains, or at-

tempt to tell me that my right to vote will be taken away. Black Americans, like it or not, have a unique set of challenges here in America. These challenges are born out of our past when we came on hundreds of slave ships crossing the Atlantic Ocean hundreds of years ago. Our legacy of slavery, legalized segregation, Jim Crow, and the 1960s Civil Rights Movement cannot and must not be ignored; but it is time that we demand change in our community and take responsibility for ourselves to make that change come to pass. Many of the ills that face us as black Americans must be addressed within our own homes and within our own communities. Period. However, in order to enact widespread initiatives to help our community, we must feel empowered by our political strength and seize control for our best interests.

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ENDNOTES

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¹ US CENSUS BUREAU, CENSUS 2001-2002

² Fox Butterfield, *Freed from Prison, but Still Paying a Penalty*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 29, 2002, at 18.

³ Bruce Western, Vincent Schiraldi, Jason Ziedenberg, *Education and Incarceration*, Justice Policy Institute, Aug. 28, 2003, at p. 6 available at http://www.soros.org/initiatives/justice/articles_publications/publications/education_incarceration_20030828/EducationIncarceration1.pdf.

⁴ *Id.* at 8.

⁵ MMWR Weekly, *Quick Stats: Percentage of Persons who lacked Health Insurance for more than 1 Year, by Race/Ethnicity --- United States, January--June 2004*, available at <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5403a6.htm>.

⁶ Fact Sheet, Eliminating Racial & Ethnic Health Disparities Center for Disease Control Office of Minority Health, available at <http://www.cdc.gov/omh/AMH/factsheets/hiv.htm#6>.

⁷ *Eliminating Racial & Ethnic Health Disparities*, Center for Disease Control Office of Minority Health, available at <http://www.cdc.gov/omh/AboutUs/disparities.htm#1>.

⁸ See Nathaniel C. Briggs, M.D., M.Sc., Robert S. Levine, M.D., H. Irene Hall,

Ph.D., et. al, *Occupational Risk Factors for Selected Cancers Among African American and White Men in the United States*, AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HEALTH, vol. 93(10), pp. 1748-1752, available at <http://www.ahcpr.gov/research/jan04/0104RA14.htm#head3>; Press Release, Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Unique study aims at why blacks get, die from cancer more often (Oct. 17, 2001) available at http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2001-10/vumc-usa101601.php.

⁹ See generally, Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/government/fbci/>.

¹⁰ Exec. Order No. 13279, 67 Fed. Reg. 76819 (Dec. 16, 2002).

¹¹ Fact Sheet, Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives, Progress in Helping Americans most in need through Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (Jan. 15, 2004), available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/01/20040115-1.html>.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ See Fact Sheet, Building the American Dream and Strengthening Communities, U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, available at <http://www.hud.gov/about/secretary/accomplishments/factsheet/index.cfm#homeownership>.

¹⁶ US CENSUS BUREAU, CENSUS 2000.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATES

By Michelle Woolley and Lydia Edwards

Over the next few months, Congress will be working on several major legislative areas that could significantly impact minority and underrepresented communities. Listed below are a selection of important initiatives, many of which are relevant to the minority community, anticipated to be on the Congressional calendar over the spring and summer.

Privatization of Social Security

President Bush is making privatization of Social Security a top legislative priority in his second term. The President proposes allowing workers to invest a portion of their payroll taxes in private bonds and stock mutual funds that the Administration predicts will have higher yields than traditional Social Security benefits. Critics point out that the expenses incurred by the estimated 100 million new private accounts would substantially impact the forecasted investment returns. Opponents are particularly concerned that changing the safety-net program will cut the incomes of women and African Americans. These groups disproportionately rely on retirement, disability, and survivor benefits from the government, and a reduction in this significant part of their income could result in increased economic hardship.

Other bills, acts and resolutions that have been introduced this term or are pending include:

S. 450 Count Every Vote Act

Introduced by the Senators Clinton (D-NY), Boxer (D-CA), Kerry (D-MA), Lautenberg (D-NJ) Tubbs Jones (D-OH)

This act will make several new voting requirements including: all voting systems to produce a voter-verified paper record for use in manual recounts; at least one machine per precinct must provide for paper, audio, pictorial verification, and be ac-

cessible to language minorities; and a mandatory recount of voter-verified paper records in 2 percent of all polling places or precincts in each state.

H.R. 663 Ex-Offenders Voting Rights Act of 2005

Introduced by Representative Rangel

This bill is introduced to override state laws that currently bar ex-felons from voting in federal elections. Currently, 3,900,000 individuals in the United States, or 1 in 50 adults, cannot vote as a result of a felony conviction. Women represent about 500,000 of those 3,900,000 and thirteen percent of the African-American adult male population, or 1,400,000 African-American men, are disenfranchised.

Joint Resolution to Protect the Boy Scouts

S. Con. Res. 4 and H. Con. Res. 6

Senator Nelson (R-FL) introduced in the Senate and Representative Hefley (R-Colo.) introduced in the House of Representatives

This resolution, introduced in the Senate and the House, asserts that Congress should continue to exercise its statutory authority to support the activities of the Boy Scouts of America, in particular the national and world Boy Scout Jamborees, despite the Boy Scouts policy of excluding gay scout masters and members.

H. R. 1259 Gold Medal for Tuskegee Airmen

Introduced by Representative Rangel (D-NY)

This bill will authorize the President to award a gold medal on behalf of the Congress, collectively, to the Tuskegee Airmen in recognition of their unique military record, which inspired revolutionary reform in the Armed Forces.