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National Black Law Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8sr91012>

Journal

National Black Law Journal, 8(3)

Author

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Publication Date

1983

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SPEECH

BLACK AMERICANS IN REAGAN'S AMERICA*

John E. Jacob**

In recent years, the conditions of black Americans have deteriorated. After a decade of advances and a decade of marking time, we appear to be in a decade of retreat. Our gains are being eroded. The dream of black equality is receding before the more immediate pressures of simple survival.

Black people are in trouble today.

America is in trouble today.

Look at what has happened to America in the past three years: five million more people are poor. A third of all blacks are poor. Half of all black children are growing up in poverty. The black infant mortality rate in the United States is worse than the national rate of Bulgaria—that's right, Bulgaria!

This is an America in which a black child born today has a fifty percent chance of growing up underprivileged, undereducated, and underemployed.

We read about an economic recovery in the newspapers, where is it? It's the best-kept secret in history for black people. In this so-called economic recovery the official black unemployment rate is frozen at more than twenty percent. A third of blacks who want work can't find it. Two out of three black teenagers who want to work are unemployed.

Hunger and want stalk this land. Hundreds of thousands of homeless people search for shelter and for a scrap of food. Here in New Orleans the number of people in need of emergency food aid doubled last year. In Detroit, 50,000 people a month exist on surplus cheese handouts.

A lot of very nice people are upset about famine in Ethiopia, about refugees in Afghanistan, about suppression of workers in Poland. They're worried about the arms race. They're concerned about war in San Salvador.

But where is the concern about suffering right here in the U.S.A.? What about the millions of Americans, black and white, who go to bed hungry and thank the Lord for having a roof over their heads, knowing full well how many don't even have that. Where is the concern for the millions of poor children, who face a bleak future, condemned to lives of desperation?

Where is the concern about the dangerous drift toward a divided nation, one part largely white and employed, the other largely minority and poor?

We ask these questions to wake the sleeping conscience of a nation that

* This speech was the keynote address at the National Urban League's Annual Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana on July 31, 1983.

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was once proud of its commitment to equality and to racial progress. And we ask these questions because the future of black Americans is at stake.

Black people are being driven to the margins of our economy by their worst depression in fifty years. They are being driven to the margins of despair by the most hostile Administration in fifty years.

Black people looked to Washington for fair play and for protection of our civil rights. Instead, we got Pac Man social policies and cave man civil rights' policies.

As black people view this Administration, we are reminded of the grim words of *Isaiah*: "None calleth for justice, nor any pleadeth for truth; they trust in vanity and speak lies; they conceive mischief and bring forth iniquity."¹

This Administration knows it is feared and mistrusted by the overwhelming majority of black Americans. It knows it has alienated black and brown people. But it claims they've got it all wrong. The Administration says it just has a "perception" problem.

But the perceptions of black and poor people conform to reality. When people lose their jobs—that's reality. When hungry people lose food stamps and poor children lose school lunches—that's reality. When the Administration tries to override the Constitution and the will of Congress to give tax exemptions to segregated private schools—that's reality.

This Administration demonstrates a startling ability to refuse to admit facts. It's a fact that its policies have widened racial and class divisions in our torn society. It's a fact that it has slashed the safety net and violated the unwritten social contract that mandates decency and fairness. It's a fact that those policies have dealt permanent blows to black and poor people.

The legacy of this Administration's policies is a bitter one: closed day care centers, less help for pregnant women and their infants, fewer legal and health services for the poor. The only thing we have more of is poverty, unemployment, and hopelessness.

So if there is a perception problem it lies with the perceptions of an Administration out of touch with reality.

This Administration has a perception problem when it releases a report that says our educational system is mediocre and then proposes prayer in the schools as a solution. This Administration has a perception problem when it says it is all for civil rights and then refuses to enforce those rights. This Administration has a perception problem when it calls for voluntary social action and then cuts the resources available to the non-profit voluntary sector.

This Administration has a perception problem when it thinks it can purge the Civil Rights Commission and get away with it. We call on the Senate to refuse to become a co-conspirator in this attack on the Commission's independence. We call on the Senate to refuse to confirm the new appointees, to extend the life of the Commission, and to protect its members from arbitrary removal without cause.

An independent Commission is a threat only to an Administration that's not doing its job in civil rights. It's reports call public attention to

1. *Isaiah* 59:4.

some embarrassing facts, such as the virtual exclusion of minorities from high level federal jobs. The Commission recently reported that only four percent of this Administration's full-time appointees have been black. Only two percent of its judicial appointees have been black.

That's a sorry record. And it is no excuse to say there aren't enough black Republicans to go around. There are—if Nixon and Ford found them, why can't Reagan? And if there aren't—then the way to attract blacks to the Republican party is by reaching out to recruit black appointees regardless of their party affiliation.

That means affirmative action. And affirmative action is a dirty word in this Administration. The Honorable William Bradford Reynolds, the head of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, has called it "morally wrong" and condemned what he calls a "racial spoils system."

Now I am not prepared to believe that Mr. Reynolds is hopelessly uneducable. After all, he did go to Mississippi to see first hand how blacks are still being denied equal voting rights despite the Voting Rights Act his Administration tried to weaken. And he did sing "We Shall Overcome" in a black church in the Delta.

So perhaps he is now better prepared to understand that civil rights are still withheld from blacks in voting, in housing, in education, in jobs. And if he comes to understand that, perhaps he will understand too that we look to his Department for strict enforcement of our rights, not for singing.

I'm not overly impressed by the sudden flurry of civil rights actions by the Administration. An election year is coming up, so it has to do something. We have to ask if the Administration's housing proposals—weak as they are—and its desegregation law suits indicate a "born-again" enthusiasm for civil rights. Or whether they are a short pause between its constant attacks on busing and affirmative action.

I want to talk a little about affirmative action. It is an issue of primary importance. Too many people, including many of our friends, have been brainwashed into thinking it amounts to harmful reverse discrimination. Too many agree with the Administration when it says it wants color blind policies that are racially neutral.

Well, black people too, want a society that is color blind and racially neutral. Our four hundred year history of protest and struggle has tried to move society to treat the races equally. If there were parity in the distribution of society's rewards and responsibilities there would be no need for affirmative action; for numerical goals, for compliance timetables.

But there is no parity. We have a racial spoils system, but it is a spoils system that favors white males and excludes blacks, other minorities and women. We face not only the results of historic discrimination, but the effects of persistent present discrimination. This discrimination exists despite the laws forbidding it—laws the Justice Department is not enforcing.

We are a nation still gripped by racial and group prejudices. It is a fantasy to suppose we can act as if race were not a factor. The only way we can create a truly color blind society in the long run is by positive, race-conscious affirmative action policies in the short run.

Affirmative action is not a preference system or a reparations system. It is a sensible tool to bring into the mainstream groups that have always been

excluded from it and who are today relegated to the margins of our society. As Justice Blackmun wrote in the *Bakke*² decision: "In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way."³

Affirmative action programs go beyond racism to create opportunities for those who would otherwise be denied them. Companies with affirmative action programs hire far more blacks and women and have far more black and women managers than other companies.

I didn't make that up. The Labor Department itself admits it in a study leaked to the press last month. And what was the Administration's reaction to the facts revealed by that study? Typically, it proposed new regulations that weaken affirmative action requirements.

How much of the Administration's opposition to affirmative action is based on its mistaken theories about individual versus group rights? And how much is based on the simple fact that affirmative action works—that it creates opportunities for society's neglected minorities; that it upsets the racial spoils system that favors white males?

This Administration must face the fact that its policies help fan the flames of racial and class divisions. They have harmed the people most in need of help—the poor, the sick, the elderly, the hungry. They have shut the doors of progress in the face of blacks and other minorities. They have been grossly unfair and socially divisive.

According to news reports, the President will soon decide whether he will run again for a second term. On this decision, as on all others during his Presidency, no blacks are being consulted. But if a poll were taken among black people there would be a near-unanimous verdict.

Their advice to the President would be: "Don't run."

Some would say he's done enough damage in one term to last a lifetime. Others would say that if the President does not run, the campaign could deal with the substantive issues facing the country instead of being an autopsy on his failed policies.

And still others would say "Don't run because we are unhappy with the Democrats and want a Republican we can support, a Republican who can help revive the two-party system among blacks."

For blacks are a people without a political party. I know we vote 90 percent Democrat. But that is because it is a little better to be taken for granted than it is to be a hostile target. The Democrats get the black vote by default. The Democrats cannot count on black loyalty unless they produce a candidate and a program that speaks to the needs of America's blacks, minorities, and poor people.

It's not enough for the Democrats to blame Reagan. They control the House. They have enough votes in the Senate to limit the damage of the Reagan program. But those congressmen—many elected with the votes of blacks and of poor whites—just rolled over and played dead while the Great Society programs were being torn apart. They voted for tax giveaways and MX missiles while cutting aid to the cities and programs for poor people.

So black people in their time of trouble look at the remains of the Dem-

2. *Regents of the Univ. of Cal. v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 (1978).

3. *Id.* at 407 (Blackmun, J., concurring).

ocratic Party and say with *Job*: "Miserable comforters are ye all."⁴

Black politics in 1983 is a politics of frustration, caught between the attractions of symbolic gestures and the need to build the coalitions that will put America back on the track of fairness and decency.

But frustration can be a positive tool. Anger can be liberating. Black people know that if we just sit on the sideline we'll get nowhere. We know we have to have political clout if we want economic empowerment. And we have that clout if we mobilize the black vote.

The single most important mission for the black community in the coming months is to get every eligible person registered to vote. There are 17 million blacks of voting age; but only ten million are registered and only seven million vote.

Massive black voter registration can make both parties more responsive to our needs. And coalitions of blacks, Hispanics and poor whites, who share our suffering, can move America toward justice and fairness.

In 1984, black and brown votes will elect the President of the United States. There are over five million potential black votes in the six most populous northern industrial states. There are some nine million potential black votes in the South.

So we do have power—the power of the ballot. But it is up to us to use it. It's up to us to accept our responsibilities and get out the black vote.

The Urban League movement will live up to that responsibility. We have registered 200,000 people over the past two years. We have identified voter registration and non-partisan citizenship education as a top priority. Along with other community organizations we will continue our registration efforts.

But we also recognize the need to have an informed citizenry; the need to educate our constituents to the issues of governance. So we will be out there on two fronts—registration and citizenship education. Each is important; each is dependent on the other, and each contributes to putting black people into the American mainstream.

There is another dimension to the realities of decisionmaking. And it is a dimension that transcends the purely political. The election of 1984 will be one of the most important in our history—and for reasons that have little to do with Democrats and Republicans, with Reaganism or anti-Reaganism.

Our economy has been undergoing vast structural changes. The Steel Belt has become the "Rust Belt." The Cotton Belt has become the "Growth Belt." There's a massive shift of jobs and more important, a massive shift in the kind of jobs our economy creates.

We are entering a High Tech Era. The good news is that entire new industries are emerging; industries that will create new opportunities for people with skills in computers, advanced electronics, and financial services. The bad news is that there won't be very many of those jobs. Most of the new jobs will be in low-paying service areas. The middle is dropping out. Well-paid, unioned manufacturing jobs are shrinking. The labor market is polarizing. There will be a few good jobs at the top, many bad jobs at the bottom, and fewer decent jobs in the middle.

4. *Job* 16:2.

The trend is accelerating. No matter how strongly the economy recovers, most laid-off steel and auto workers won't get their jobs back. More goods are being produced with fewer workers. The Japanese already have a factory staffed by robots. The only humans there are tour guides, and now even they are being replaced by robots.

What happens to displaced workers and to new entrants in the labor force? Service jobs are growing, but most are menial, dead-end, minimum wage and part-time. There will be jobs processing information and manufacturing high tech products. But those are low skill, low pay jobs that are moving offshore fast.

That is why I say the election of 1984 will be so crucial. We only have a few years to design policies that adequately deal with the structural changes taking place in our economy. By the 1990s it may be too late. And that is why the election of 1984 ought to be a great national debate concerning the future of our economy and the social order that is its foundation.

The black stake in that debate is enormous. We are concentrated in the industries where jobs are hemorrhaging. And we are concentrated in the service jobs where we face two threats. First, those jobs may be automated out of existence. Second, blacks may be squeezed out by displaced white workers or by arbitrary higher qualifications. It's happened before in our history. It may happen again.

So High Tech is no salvation for blacks. And it is no salvation for whites, either. If America loses its industrial base, many of those high tech, information jobs must ultimately go down the drain. Our economy is based on mass consumerism; on the premise that most people work, earn and spend. But if they are not working or if they aren't earning enough, who will buy those goods? Robots don't buy autos and the producers of imported goods spend their money at home, not in the U.S.A.

No one is really dealing with those issues today. Some politicians jump on the High Tech bandwagon without addressing the real problems. Others say the market will adjust. But the market is an inefficient and often destructive force in social and human matters.

There is no "great debate," just empty slogans. But now is the time to focus on shaping the changes in our economy before those changes shape us in ways we won't like.

Sooner or later, America must develop policies for a new era. Black people have to be at the table when those policies are negotiated. We have to insist on a balanced economy, with opportunities for all. We have to insist on black parity in employment—with our fair share of the good jobs as well as the bad ones. And we have to insist on policies that ensure that every American who wants to work has a decent job at a liveable wage.

Black Americans cannot afford to have crucial economic policies made without us. We cannot afford to have a small elite shape the future of our economy. And we cannot afford to allow our jobs and our opportunities to go down the drain in the name of efficiency or world competitiveness.

The National Urban League has long stood for a national full employment policy, for a universal employment and training program, and for an industrial policy that creates jobs instead of destroying them.

We need to build coalitions around those policies. We need to work

with other minorities, with women's groups, and with labor. We need to build coalitions with government and with business to ensure that the needs of the American people are met in the future economy. We need to build coalitions to ensure that the choices America makes are democratically arrived at and the benefits of technology democratically distributed.

One place to begin building those coalitions is around the issue of public education. High tech means high skills and higher educational levels. Even service jobs will demand basic skills levels, and some will demand computer literacy. Black economic survival is directly linked to quality education.

The public is beginning to wake up to the need for better schools. Business is beginning to realize its dependence on a better-educated work force. We just saw the release of a number of reports, all critical of the way the schools are doing their job, American education has been described as "a rising tide of mediocrity."

Unfortunately, many of the proposed solutions are as mediocre as the worst of our schools. Besides school prayer, the President is pushing for merit pay and tuition tax credits. Merit pay is a non-issue; anyone who thinks that tinkering with administrative details will improve education is fooling himself. Tuition tax credits boil down to one thing—undermining public education by subsidizing private education. Again, they do nothing to improve education. They just improve the after-tax incomes of those affluent enough to benefit from the credit.

Many people who want better public schools aren't facing the core problem. They want the schools to turn out more engineers and more physicists. Fine, so do we. But they aren't talking about the lack of resources in ghetto schools. They aren't addressing dropout rates as high as fifty percent in some inner cities. They aren't dealing with high school students that can barely read and write.

Excellence in education cannot be confined to grooming the children of the affluent to become the elite of the future. We must demand excellent, quality education for the poor as well as the rich; for ghetto schools as well as for prep schools. Excellence and equity have to go hand-in-hand. That means more resources. It means constructive community involvement. It means enforcing constitutional mandates against discrimination.

Some very important people don't understand this. The President has said the schools declined because of federal aid and desegregation. He wasn't joking, either. And what he said is no joke—it implies slashing school budgets and returning to segregated schools. I believe America has progressed to a high enough stage of civilization that those possibilities will not be considered. But have we progressed to the point where we will invest the resources to bring excellence to public education?

Even small amounts of federal aid to poverty area schools have raised achievement levels among inner city youngsters. More resources are needed to attract better teachers and to provide more specialized and personalized help for schoolchildren. More resources are needed so poverty area schools have the computer terminals the rich schools are getting. We want our kids to help run the computerized society of the future, not to sweep up after it.

The schools need better human resources too—teachers and adminis-

trators capable of teaching our children, who believe they can learn, and who insist that they learn. We must demand that the highest standards apply to our children's schools—not only to the children themselves, but also to the teachers and managers responsible for their education.

There is no short-cut to improving our schools. The black community itself must take the lead in insisting on quality education. It is self-destructive to get hung up on wanting "jive" courses, lower standards, and no tests. Our children have to function in a fast-changing society. They have enough cards stacked against them without further handicapping them.

Black parents have to become involved with their kids' schooling. We've got to help with the homework. We've got to make sure our kids turn off the tube or the boom box and take care of the business of studying. If they don't have homework, we ought to be in the principal's office the next morning demanding to know why they don't.

I'm talking about responsibility—accepting responsibility for our own fate. We have to make demands on a society that wants to ignore us and our needs. We have to keep up the pressure to get the resources and the programs we need. But at the same time we have to do on our own what *we can* do on our own.

That's what the Urban League Movement has always been about and that's what we are about today. We have less staff. We have less money. Federal funds are drying up. Private funds aren't filling the gap. Demand for our services mounts as the suffering in the black community grows.

I want to report tonight that we are responding to that challenge. Shrinking resources do not deter us from our goals. We believe we can replace many lost dollars with programmatic innovation. We believe we can tap into the institutions of the black community—the churches, the fraternities and sororities, the social clubs, the press, and the other community-based groups to generate the ideas, the volunteers and the programs to help our constituents.

Over the past eighteen months the Urban League has launched or expanded programs of crime prevention, health outreach, low cost housing development, job opportunities for senior citizens, and many more. We have developed, with corporate assistance, computer and word processing training centers in sixteen affiliates. We will open eight more in the coming twelve months.

Of special importance is our effort to stimulate economic development through our Urban Enterprise Institute. The Institute cooperates with the private sector in delivering economic education, in fostering black business development, and in attracting private sector jobs to the inner city. Our Urban Enterprise Institute will utilize the free enterprise system to address long-term social and economic needs in black communities.

We are making progress too, in implementing our Blueprint for Action that targets four priority areas—teenage pregnancy, crime, citizenship education, and single, female-headed households. Phase one of our Blueprint is completed. Urban League affiliates have held Youth Speakouts, where the most vulnerable of our constituents—our young people—expressed their needs, their concerns, and their ideas for shaping our agenda.

Based on that experience, we are formulating programmatic action; not

for the short term, but for the long haul. We have prepared a six-year plan—with goals and timetables—to make an impact on bettering our communities and improving the lives of our young people.

Our long-range program approach is attracting support from foundations and from national black organizations. We hope this is just the beginning of a new era of responsibility on the part of private donors.

Foundations, individuals and corporations can no longer be content with deploring the social service cuts made by the Reagan Counterrevolution. Just as we insist that government live up to its responsibilities, and that black people take on added responsibilities for the future of the black community, we also insist that the private sector live up to its responsibilities.

The private sector must understand that social responsibility is also economic responsibility; that bringing equal opportunities to the disadvantaged preserves the free enterprise system.

The private sector's self-interest is not served by crumbling cities, alienating youth, and an angry army of the poor. Corporate America has to look beyond the short-term balance sheet to understand its long-term prospects depend on educating, inspiring and employing our young people.

Responsibility is my theme tonight—responsibility of all the major sectors of an interdependent society to make that society whole again. Responsibility to advance the cause of equality and to make ours a society we can be proud of. Responsibility to build an America that lives up to the Declaration of Independence that says all men are created equal and the Constitution that says "we the people" act "to promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty upon ourselves and our posterity."⁵

We call America to a sense of responsibility expressed in *Galatians*: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."⁶

We call on America to sow the seeds of social justice and racial equality that it may reap a harvest of righteousness and freedom for all.

We call on Americans to work together to cast out racism and injustice and to raise up fairness and equality; to root out the effects of discrimination and nurture the blessings of justice.

We call on this nation that has prospered with the blood and sweat of its black people to share the bounties of this land we worked so hard for; to act right and do right to all of its children.

As we do so, let black people work together to make our communities strong, to defend our rights, and to persevere in the face of adversity. For we are the children of Nat Turner and Frederick Douglass, of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Whitney Young.

We look to our past for the strength to fight our way into the future. We look to our survival of the horrors of history to summon forth the will to write new, brighter chapters in the future.

Above all, we know that Reaganism is a passing sickness in America's long, slow journey to justice. We know that the evils of the present are noth-

5. U.S. CONST. preamble.

6. *Galatians* 6:7.

ing beside those of the past; and will be as nothing beside the promise of the future.

We draw strength from the ties that bind us; the warmth of our comradeship, and the power of our skills of survival, we draw sustenance from the words of the Bible, words that describe our America of 1983: "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cut down, but not destroyed."⁷

Let us then go forth; armed with our faith, nourished by the waters of justice, strengthened by our righteous cause; let us go forth to change this America, and make it the fortress of decency, fairness and prosperity for all.

7. 2 *Corinthians* 4:8.