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5-30-1981

### Afro-American Women: Linking Leadership and Service

J. Clay Smith Jr.

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#### Recommended Citation

Smith, J. Clay Jr., "Afro-American Women: Linking Leadership and Service" (1981). *Selected Speeches*. 36. [https://dh.howard.edu/jcs\\_speeches/36](https://dh.howard.edu/jcs_speeches/36)

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DR. J. CLAY SMITH, JR.  
ACTING CHAIRMAN OF THE EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION  
before the  
EASTERN AREA CONFERENCE OF THE  
LINKS, Inc.  
(Niagara Falls, Host Chapter)  
Niagara Falls, N.Y.

May 30, 1981

God bless all women, all o'er the world  
Stand beside them and guide them  
Thru the night from the light up above  
From the mountain, to the prairie  
To the ocean, white with foam  
God bless all women all o'er the world  
God bless all women all o'er the world\*

AFRO-AMERICAN WOMEN: LINKING LEADERSHIP AND SERVICE

The Afro-American woman has made a significant contribution to American life. She accompanied the Afro-American male to a nation only later to be separated from him and from her children. Everything was done to break her spirit and to reduce her womanhood to commonality. Her body was used to produce human beings for use as machines to build a nation, to feed the world, to wipe the sweat from the brow of the slaveholder. She was marked by the branding iron and her men died attempting to rescue her from torture and humiliation. And yet, throughout it all, the Afro-American woman quietly taught her family patience, to be strong, to be fearless, to be god-fearing--and to be prepared for a better day.

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\*This poem was written in Omaha, Nebraska in 1960 by DORIS WILLIAMS SMITH--a woman with whom I am linked and from whom I came to understand leadership and service--my mother.

I am delighted to be your guest at this the Eastern Regional meeting of the LINKS in Niagara Falls, New York. The LINKS is an example of the kind of womens' organization that keeps the beauty, the dignity and the culture of Afro-American life in the shutter of the photography of the American Dream. Your organization stretches like a chain across virtually every continent of the world; the deeds of your organization are global.

Since 1946, when Margaret Hawkins and Sarah Scott founded the LINKS in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, you have been true to the motto of "improving the quality of life by linking leadership and service to meet the challenge of community and national needs." The theme of this conference--"Towards Tomorrow in Friendship"-- supplements the national motto, as does the motto of the host chapter--"Linking together in love, hope and unity." I have chosen as the title of the paper: Afro-American Woman: Linking Leadership and Service.

Today, I want to share with you a bit of the history of what is often referred to as the Negro Women's Club Movement. By doing so, I believe you will better understand the importance of the LINKS as an organization. I am indebted to the early writings of Ms. Booker T. Washington for some of the history that follows.

After the emancipation of the slaves in America, the Afro-American woman was initially without an organized body to articulate her needs. Although white feminists Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and some others encouraged black women to join the struggle against sexism during the nineteenth century, antebellum reformers who were involved with women's abolitionist groups as well as women's rights organizations actively discriminated

against blacks. The nineteenth-century woman's club movement and the woman suffrage movement of the early twentieth century were also characterized by discriminatory policies and had as its members individuals who discriminated against black women. In 1920 Ms. Booker T. Washington reported:

Until woman made up her mind that her efforts to help in the development of the world's work were not taken into account, there was nothing among them that could be rightly called organization.

Questions relating to the home, the church, the school and the State were all of vital interest to woman. She wanted her home pure and secure. She held the church as a bulwark against indecent living, immoral dishonesty, in favor of moral and spiritual growth and development. She wanted the schools built upon high ground, including in their curriculum lessons in manners, morals and living, as well as those of the three R's. She wanted a citizenship built upon freedom, not license, upon manly courage, and not brute force.

Woman was interested in the world and its general policies and growth, but how to bring about the thing most desired was the question with her. She finally realized that if she were to be of real service to the country of which she is a part, she must organize her energies, her interests, and her powers, and almost immediately the National Suffrage Association, the National Temperance Association, the National Congress of Mothers, the National Council of Women, the National Federation of Women's Clubs, and other societies of more or less importance were thrown on the screen, and the world began to take notice.

The colored woman was drifting on in a more or less indifferent way. She had not realized until then that her opportunities had been as great as those of other women: that in the struggle which women were making for recognition in the affairs of the world and men, that she was often not thought of at all. Her home was insecure, her hearthstone held lightly, except by her own immediate family. Her church held standards which she could not tolerate. Schools for her children were too often neglected. Teachers, with little or no

education with little fitness in certain other directions, were employed, and she came to know and to feel that in the citizenship of her State and country she counted little.

The colored woman is conservative, and was slow to believe that she was not counted in; slow to realize that she could not hope to be taken into account, and to keep up with the pace that other women had set for themselves, unless she organized her efforts for social, moral, religious and educational growth, and so forced the world to become acquainted with her, and to see that she is at least interested in her own welfare, which carries with it an interest in the welfare of all other women.

The first national meeting--In 1895, in the city of Boston, Mass., was called the first National Body of Colored Women. The call was made by Mrs. Josephine Saint Pierre Ruffin, who had for many years been associated with Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cody Stanton, and other forward moving women, and from whom she had received the inspiration which led her to know and to feel that what one group of organized women could do another with equal chance could also do. For this equal chance Mrs. Ruffin knew all too well that the colored women would have to fight, not separately, but together.

The colored women in 1894 were suddenly awakened by the wholesale charges of the lack of virtue and character made by a Missouri editor in an open letter to an English lady who had manifested great interest in the colored race and in the colored women particularly. Although apparently heretofore quite willing to leave her fate in the hands of others, when they heard of it, instantly woke up to the situation and answered the call which Mrs. Ruffin made to her to come to Boston to appear in public, to plead her own cause, and to prove to all who wanted to know, to all who were willing to learn, to all who had not already made up their minds against her, and there were hundreds of these, not only in the South, but everywhere in the North, who up to date had not had the chance to know anything whatsoever as to the aspirations of the Afro-American women who were their next door neighbors.

Present membership is 300,000--So began the American colored women to organize, so came into shape the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs.

Mrs. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin will live always in the hearts of her women as the pioneer who pointed the way for independent self-development through organization....

Mrs. Booker T. Washington was elected the first president and the association under the leadership of Mrs. Mary Church Terrell, Miss Elizabeth Carter, Mrs. J. Siloam Yates, Mrs. Mary B. Talbert (emphasis added), Miss Lucy B. Thurman, and a host of other strong, fine women, such as Mrs. Josephine Bruce, Mrs. Nettie Langston Napier, Miss Cornelia Bowen, Miss Nannie Burroughs, Miss Mary Jackson, Mrs. Charlotte Hawkins Brown. These Afro-American women were not only able to change public opinion in favor of the colored women, but to change the colored woman's opinion of herself, her ability to do things, and her strength to fortify herself against difficulties.

Hence, since 1895 Afro-American women have charted their own course in the formulation of their own sense of self-determination. Even the motto of the National Association of Colored Women "Lifting As We Climb"--which was the name chosen for this historic group--bears philosophical resemblance to the national motto of the Links.

One of the great women of the 19th century--Mary Burnett Talbert--made her mark next door in Buffalo, New York. It is fitting that this leader of the Afro-American women's club movement be remembered today. Mary Burnett Talbert moved to Buffalo, New York in 1891.

Mrs. Talbert actively participated in numerous church and club activities. She served in a variety of official capacities at the Michigan Avenue Baptist Church, and was founder of the Christian Culture Congress. Mrs. Talbert received the degree granted to students of the literary course in 1894, and was a member of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae, being the only Afro-American woman in the city of Buffalo eligible. Achieving fame for her work with the black women's club movement, Mrs. Talbert served as President of the Empire State Federation of Women's Clubs and the Phyllis Wheatley Club of Buffalo and was Chairman of the Executive Board of the National Association of Colored Women. In 1916 she was elected President of the NACW, a position she held until 1920. During this period she also held a national office in the NAACP.

Traveling across the United States and to Europe, Mrs. Talbert lectured on contemporary issues and organized black women to solve persisting social problems. She campaigned against the erection of a "Mammy Monument" in the nation's capital, argued for prison reform, visited France to support black soldiers and raised thousands of dollars to support the United States World War I efforts. She served as Director of the Anti-lynching Crusaders, a group which opposed the wanton lynching of blacks in the U.S. She directed lobbying, instigated investigations, publicized the anti-lynching issue and raised funds to further the efforts of the NAACP's legal battle against lynchings. During her tenure as President of the NACW, she carried out a program to preserve the former home of Frederick Douglass. In 1922 the NAACP awarded her the Spingarn Medal in

recognition of her service.

Mary Burnett Talbert should not be forgotten by the women of Buffalo and Niagara Falls, New York, nor forgotten by Afro-American women generally. Mary Burnett Talbert, like each of you, was committed to improving the quality of life by linking leadership and service.

What is it then that you face today as an organization? This question must be placed upon your conference agenda. Do you face a time when Afro-American women are free from discrimination in the workplace? Do you live in a time when your men are free from physical harm when they speak out against injustices in the society? Do you live in a time when you can afford not to be concerned about safety of your children from dope pushers, pimps? Do you live in a time when you can plan to educate your family without mortgaging your house, selling your car and working two jobs?

I say to you that the agenda for the years that remain in this century require strict attention to the survival of the family and to the quest for excellence in education. It is time for all of us to carefully evaluate the theme of the LINKS--to improve the quality of life for Afro-Americans. Your motto is carefully drafted, for it recognizes the need for "leadership and service." Where are our leaders today--be they male or female?



Do they have the backbone of the women who met in Boston in 1895 to chart the course for the Afro-American woman? Who is providing the "service" to the community today? Is the level of commitment as intense as it was in 1946 when the LINKS was founded?

It should be clear to all of us that there is a need to build our communities with role models which lead the young to the ivory towers of learning as opposed to the ivory fields of drugs; to the halls of Congress as opposed to the shallow halls of prison; to help the aged and the handicapped as opposed to ignorance of their plight. We must be willing to distinguish between the necessity for "designer jeans" and the necessity to design a tomorrow. We've got to be willing to get our hands dirty so we can understand what it feels like not to have soap; to bend over and help somebody so that we understand the obligation of leadership when we stand tall; we've got to learn how to follow before we demand how to lead.

These are not the times to forget who we are, what we are and what and who we want to become. These are not the times to confuse who you are for who you are not. These are times to know who you are, what you are and what you want to become.

This is the time to review the historic motto of women's club movement: "Lift As You Climb" and to give strict scrutiny to the motto of the LINKS--"to improve the quality of life by linking leadership and service..." For you know that Afro-Americans will never meet the challenge of community and national needs, un-

less we link leadership and service. In order to achieve the objectives of your motto, you may be required to educate young women and men about persons such as Mary Talbert and the history of the Afro-American feminist club movement so that the women of today do not go around with the mistaken belief that they created the wheel.

Afro-American men stand as much on the shoulders of the Afro-American woman as any one else. The Black male benefits by the work you do because the LINKS serves the global community not solely a gender within a community. Hence it is with no wonder why the Afro-American woman has been exalted by Andrea Razafkeriefo--an Afro-American male from the District of Columbia in his poem, "The Negro Woman."

In view of the historical perspective of this paper, let me close with this poem written circa 1920 as it captures the courageous efforts of many of you:

Were it mine to select a woman  
As queen of the hall of fame;  
One who has fought the gamest fight  
And climbed from the depths of shame;  
I would have to give the sceptre  
To the lowliest of them all;  
She, who has struggled through the years,  
With her back against the wall.

Wronged by the men of an alien race,  
Deserted by those of her own;  
With prayer in her heart, a song on her lips  
She has carried the fight alone.

In spite of the snares all around her;  
Her marvelous pluck has prevailed  
And kept her home together--  
When even her men have failed.

What of her sweet, simple nature?  
What of her natural grace?  
Her richness and fullness of color,  
That adds to the charm of her face?  
Is there a woman more shapely?  
More vigorous, loving and true?  
Yea, wonderful Negro woman  
The honor I'd give to you.

Today, I give honor to the LINKS for its recognition of the worth of every individual in this nation, and particularly the Afro-American woman whose full equality waits in the wings of the theater but whose stardom is already on the stage.

Thank you

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