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Vernon E. Jordan Jr.

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The State of Black America

By Vernon E. Jordan, Jr.

Editor's note:

Howard University was the setting on January 14 for the release of the National Urban League's annual status report on the condition of Black Americans and other disadvantaged minorities in the United States.

Coming barely a week before a new chief executive moved into the White House, the report paints a gloomy picture of 1980 and forecasts the same for 1981.

At the January 14 press conference, Vernon E. Jordan, Jr., president of the National Urban League, while seeing "no progress in 1980" and predicting conditions to be even "worse" in 1981, called on the incoming Administration to act with sincerity.

"We don't intend to let the Administration, the Congress, or the private sector off the hook. We insist that the assumption of power demands the assumption of responsibility. And the prime responsibility must be to improve the conditions of America's disadvantaged millions. . . . I hope (the President) understands that racial disadvantage and renewed racism are among the most serious of those problems."

Excerpts from Jordan's statement at the press conference appear in the following pages, along with eight summaries of key papers in the 322-page State of Black America report.

The contributors are:

GERALD R. GILL, formerly research fellow with the Institute for the Study of Educational Policy at Howard University and author of "The Meanness Mania: The Changed Mood." He is currently

assistant instructor in the Department of History at Tufts University and a candidate for the Ph.D.

EDDIE N. WILLIAMS, president of the Joint Center for Political Studies in Washington, D. C.

MILTON D. MORRIS, director of research at the Joint Center for Political Studies.

CHARLES V. HAMILTON, Wallace S. Sayre Professor of Government, Department of Political Science, Columbia University.

ROBERT B. HILL, Research Department director, National Urban League, Inc.

HAYNES RICE, Howard University Hospital director.

LARAH D. PAYNE, assistant director for planning, Howard University Hospital.

PHILLIP L. CLAY, assistant professor of Urban Studies and Planning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

BERNARD C. WATSON, vice president for Academic Affairs, Temple University.

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN, president of Children's Defense Fund, Washington, D. C.

4 The National Urban League's State of Black America report includes major studies by prominent Black scholars that deal with the economy, politics, leadership, health, housing, education, the plight of Black children, and the rightward drift in the nation. And it includes a set of recommendations for the [Reagan] Administration and the private sector.

As the report documents, 1980 was a year of continued erosion in the Black condition, and it was a year in which racial tensions increased alarmingly. I see nothing on the horizon to suggest that this situation will improve in 1981. Rather, there is evidence that it will intensify.

We expect 1981 to be a recession year, with all that implies for record high Black unemployment and an already devastated Black economy. Inflation is expected to remain high, squeezing the family budgets of the majority of Black people who are of poor or moderate income even harder. Murderous attacks on Black people in many cities continue to make headlines. The Klan and similar extremist groups flourish in an atmosphere of revived anti-Black feeling.

This is the national context in which the report is released, with the hope that it will bring some rationality to the debate on major public policy questions. The report is badly needed because many of the statements coming from the new Congress indicate that knives are being sharpened to slash vital programs desperately needed by poor people and by minorities.

There are senators who are calling for repeal of the Voting Rights Act, for eliminating public service jobs, for cutting food stamps, Medicaid, urban development programs, and others. Also, there are calls to lower the minimum wage, and efforts to prevent the Justice Department from taking part in school desegregation cases. Plans are being made to turn welfare and other social support programs over to the states, with the

inevitable result that the poorest Americans will be driven further into deprivation. Even a presidential commission is suggesting that the way to deal with the problems of older industrial cities is to turn them into ghost towns.

All this would be just an example of a typical Washington silly season if it were not for a national mood that is turning mean. Americans appear to be vulnerable to scapegoating, and Blacks have been the traditional scapegoats in American society. The search for simple solutions combines with old fashioned racism to produce a climate in which Blacks are being blamed for national and local problems of which we are the main victims.

It is important to devise strategies to defend the core interests of Blacks, minorities, and the poor. There can be no compromise on those basic issues. There must be an all-out effort to preserve voting rights, affirmative action, school desegregation, strict enforcement of civil rights laws, and important job and social welfare programs.

We must continue to press for new steps, such as effective fair housing legislation.

There must be an educational campaign to counter the effects of the Big Lie that federal social programs don't work. In fact, they do work. Food stamps have just about wiped out hunger in America. Studies of Head Start programs prove that participating children do better in school. Job Corps graduates get better jobs than those without training in that program. Other programs have effectively helped millions of people to get productive jobs, decent housing, health care and education.

And those are not, as the Big Lie has it, entirely Black programs. The majority of welfare recipients are whites. So are half of food stamp recipients. Four out of five people getting Medicaid and special programs for the aged are whites. White people are in the majority in housing subsidy programs, in CETA jobs, and in

most other programs bearing the "Black" label.

While the vein of racism is tapped to generate opposition to social programs, the vast majority of those who would be hurt by cutting or eliminating those programs would be whites. In defending the needs of the Black poor, we are also defending the forgotten white poor.

But if we stress defending vital programs, we also refuse to assume that no progress can be made in 1981. If the Administration fulfills its promises of economic growth, Black and poor people will share in that growth.

There are feasible conservative alternatives we want to explore with the Administration—urban enterprise zones, an income maintenance system based on the refundable income tax to replace welfare, incentives for low income housing development and housing counseling programs, and others.

A conservative Administration has the obligation to devise creative conservative solutions to national problems and to the hardships faced by poor people. A philosophy that stresses the market system implies programs that make the market system work for everybody. An enlarged role for the private sector implies a greater responsibility for creatively dealing with society's problems on the part of the private sector.

We don't intend to let the Administration, the Congress, or the private sector off the hook. We insist that the assumption of power demands the assumption of responsibility. And the prime responsibility must be to improve the condition of America's disadvantaged millions.

Black people will be looking for some sign that the new President [Ronald Reagan] understands their special problems, that he recognizes the need to take constructive steps to protect their rights and remove their disadvantages, and that his Administration will give no aid or comfort to the enemies of justice. □