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The Status of Black Leadership

Charles V. Hamilton

the past, shifted toward the Republican Party. This was true of Mexican-American, Jewish and labor groups. The outcome of the election is understandably disappointing to Blacks and it poses several profound and perplexing questions about Black political participation in the years ahead.

One potential benefit of the outcome of the election is that it may have freed Black voters to think more independently, creatively, and pragmatically about the pattern of their political participation in the future. The Republican Party, led by Reagan, is in a good position to reach out to Blacks, to demonstrate the party's capacity to respond to their interests, and to incorporate them to a significant degree into the structure of the party.

The election results also provide an unprecedented opportunity for Blacks to play a leading part in restructuring the Democratic Party as it seeks to recover from the serious defeat of November.

Another potential benefit of the outcome of the 1980 election is that it challenges Blacks to a new and perhaps more sophisticated style of politics. Undoubtedly, a Reagan Administration will seek different approaches to some of the chronic national problems that Blacks have sought to address for the past several decades. Blacks will need to formulate some of their specific objectives and modify some of the strategies they have advocated in seeking to protect their interests.

Still another likely benefit for Blacks might derive from the need to reemphasize self-help. The tendency to focus on the government for solutions to many of the pressing problems Blacks face, sometimes overshadows the clear and urgent need for a more vigorous effort by Blacks to achieve social and economic advancement for themselves in spite of continuing obstacles to their advancement. There are many areas in which government can only be a partner—and for

Blacks a reluctant partner—in development.

To emphasize the likely benefits of a Reagan presidency is not to ignore or underestimate the actual and potential problems it poses for Blacks and other disadvantaged minorities. Many commentators have hastened to interpret the outcome of the election as representing a fundamental ideological shift by the electorate, one conferring a mandate for sweeping retrenchment and retreat from much of the social progress of recent years. However, the available data on the attitudes and perceptions of the electorate provide no conclusive evidence for such an interpretation. On the contrary, those data suggest that the electorate sought mainly a change in leadership and improvement in the country's economy, military strength, and international standing. An assumption by the Administration that it is mandated to implement sweeping conservative reforms could indeed be devastating for Blacks, other minorities, and all the poor and disadvantaged in the society.

The history of racial discrimination in this society and efforts to combat it indicate that the federal government has been vital to the survival of Blacks. Furthermore, while they are not the only, or even the principal beneficiaries of the major social programs of the past two decades geared to assist the low-income and the otherwise disadvantaged, a large proportion of the Black population is especially dependent on them and thus highly vulnerable to any major cutbacks. Anything but the most cautious moves toward reforming social programs, or further sharing resources and power with state and local governments, could be extremely detrimental to Blacks and require them to struggle relentlessly for their survival. If eternal vigilance is the price of liberty for all Americans, it is considerably more so for Black Americans as they approach the new Administration. □

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The Status of Black Leadership

By Charles V. Hamilton

Historically and currently, Black leadership in this country has had to submit to at least one crucial test of legitimacy. It has had to withstand almost constant attacks from those who would question both its judgments and its motives. And in the process, it has been strengthened and made viable. Historically, for the most part, it has not been an *elected* leadership, in the sense of a represented constituency choosing it at the polls—that has only occurred substantially in the last decade or so—but its claim to speak for a designated group has not been taken for granted, inasmuch as it has not always (some might suggest, ever) been simply taken at its word.
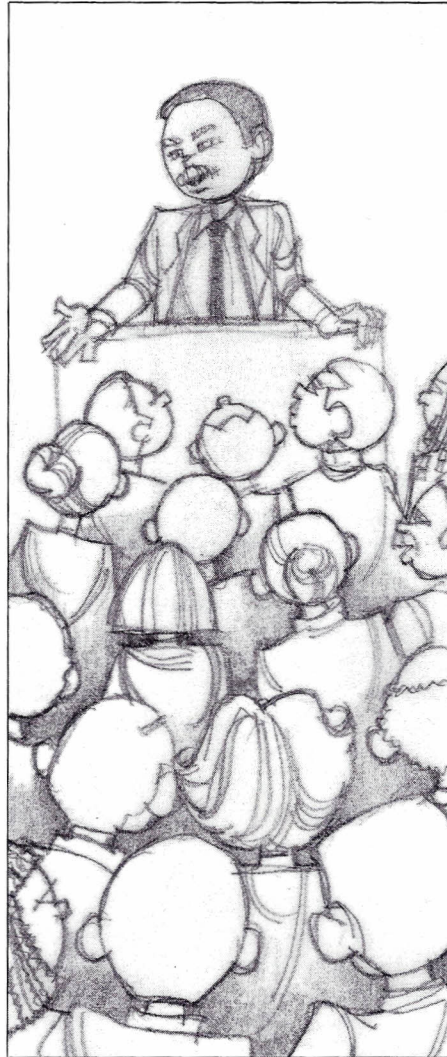
If vast numbers of people continue to pay dues and otherwise support the organization, it is reasonable to conclude that the leadership and its programs and processes are consented to in large measure. This might not be entirely satisfactory to one who requires a more direct periodic electoral mechanism for sanctioning leaders. But neither does it justify the conclusion that "there is no institutional mechanism" to assess a claim of leadership.

Without question, there is a clear ideological preference on the part of most (certainly not all) Black leaders for what can be characterized as a "liberal" approach to public policy. Even where this liberalism is not associated with the Democratic Party or with a political party more liberal (or socialist) in orientation, it usually comes down on the

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8   side of a more forceful and activist role by the government, especially the federal government. In this sense, much of the national Black leadership, then, admittedly is at variance with the ideological stances of its conservative critics (such as Walter Williams and Thomas Sowell).

When one uses the term "Black leader," the reference is to two things. "Black" refers to racial identity; "leader" refers to a role. When used together, the words take on an additional meaning: one who is racially Black in a leadership role *and* who speaks and acts on matters of specific (but not, necessarily, exclusive) concern to Black people as a direct purpose of occupying that role. Thus, "Black leader" refers to racial and role characteristics, but also to issue orientation. Therefore, if one were racially Black and, say, a mayor of an all-white town who never spoke or acted on issues of specific concern to Blacks as such, it would not be proper to designate such a mayor as a "Black leader." That person would be a leader (mayor) who was Black. In this example, the fact that the town was all-white was not the important factor *alone*, but rather that in the leadership role, the person did not speak or act on specific racial issues. This does not imply a lack of interest in certain issues, but rather that such a person should not be defined as a "leader" of Blacks simply because he or she *is* Black and occupies a particular leadership role. All too often, we find that prominent Black people (whom I will call "leading Blacks") are confused with "Black leaders."

The tendency to ascribe the "Black leader" role to prominent Black athletes, entertainers and educators simply because they are prominent and perhaps occasionally address themselves to issues of concern to Blacks should be resisted. This is not to deny them the right or opportunity to speak out, but merely to suggest that when they do so, they should be understood as represent-

ing their own views in their individual capacities as concerned citizens. They should not be burdened with the mantle of being "Black leaders."

When some Black leaders discuss economic issues such as full employment and inflation, they are admonished to stay within the confines of a narrowly understood definition of "civil rights" and racial discrimination. This severely restricts the role, range, and ultimate effectiveness of such people.

Other ethnic leaders have not had the

"policy expansion" problem because their constituents' economic and other needs have not remained so identified with their ethnic identity. This is not the case with Black Americans. If Black leaders, therefore, wish to be relevant to the needs of their Black constituents, of necessity, they will be required to address a range of issues affecting the society as a whole. Their legitimacy with their constituents demands it, and the larger society ought to be prepared for such extension of involvement.

The more influential, powerful, and resourceful the group, the more its leadership is stable and accorded higher recognition, internally and externally. In addition, the more powerful the group, the more likely its leadership is able to deliver benefits to the constituents.

The weaker the group, the more it needs many things, and the more demands it will make on its leaders to produce. But the capacity to produce is constrained precisely by the group's relative weakness—almost a Catch-22 situation. This means that the followers tend to keep their leaders on a "short string." That is, they tend to distrust them more than other groups (usually stronger) distrust their leaders.

Some Black leaders have always been subject to the charge of being "out of touch" with their lower-class Black constituents. Basically, such charges stem from ideological differences—from the Left and the Right. Such leaders have been accused of being more interested in "status" goals than in "welfare" goals, and more concerned about achieving benefits for a Black middle-class than a Black under-class. If one returns to just the turn of the century, it would be difficult to document this allegation with any degree of definitiveness. Without question, one could discern, for instance, a difference of emphasis between leadership groups. But these differences reflected more variance of notions about how to affect change for the masses rather than anything else. It would be

difficult to document a belief that any major Black leadership group purposefully sought to retard the advance of the race as a whole.

If current Black leadership (here the reference is to the more visible and in many ways more organizationally sound leadership) is to be faulted, I would suspect it could be in the area of erring on the side of superficial unity. There has been a tendency in recent years to play down, to minimize the obvious differences that exist among the leadership groups.

There should be more overt recognition on the part of the Black leadership of fundamental differences between them. There should be much more open discussion of those differences, pinpointing precisely the issues of disagreement. This is done more often privately than publicly, and it should be surfaced. This will not likely hurt the Black struggle. On the contrary, it will likely help it and give it a leadership credibility it now seeks to sustain.

Like most of their Black constituents, they (Black leaders) are not too far to the left or right in American politics. To be sure, they are liberal, but they are also political pragmatists. They have every intention of challenging racism in the country, of pushing for more equitable economic policies, and of trying to forge viable coalitions with other groups that share those goals. Some are more comfortable with their corporate connections than others would like them to be or want to be themselves. They have arrived at this place and time with a record of action and achievement about which they need not apologize. They remain vulnerable to attacks from within and without but they need not feel especially apologetic about their failures. Their failure to deliver certain benefits to their constituents has been, as Dorothy Height indicated, a function largely of their circumstantial inabilities—not their leadership ineptness. □

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Economic Status of Black America
By Robert B. Hill

With prime interest rates in December, 1980 surpassing the previous 20 percent record of April, 1980, the economic growth lagging, it is almost a certainty that this nation will be sliding into another recession in 1981.

Over the years, repeated cycles of recessions have consistently eroded many of the economic advances of Blacks. During the past 26 years, this nation has experienced a succession of at least six recessions (1953-54, 1957-58, 1960-61, 1969-71, 1974-75 and 1980). Before Blacks had a chance to recover from one recession, they were subjected to another. Thus, the Black community is still reeling from the cumulative effects of a quarter century of recessions.

The peak unemployment rate of 7.8 percent during the 1980 recession was significantly higher than the 7.3 percent average jobless rate for the peak of the preceding six recessions. In fact, based on the level of unemployment, Blacks were more severely impacted by the seven-month 1980 slump than they were by the 17-month 1974-75 recession— which all analysts agree was the most devastating decline since the Great Depression of the 1930s. While the number of unemployed white workers declined by 562,000 between 1975 and 1980, there were 200,000 *more* Blacks unemployed in 1980 (at 1.7 million) than there were at the peak of the 1974-75 recession (at 1.5 million).

The official jobless rate for Black teen-

agers was 36 percent, while the official number of unemployed Black teenagers was about 364,000. But the National Urban League Hidden Unemployed Index placed the actual jobless rate for Black teenagers at 59 percent in 1980 and the actual number of unemployed Black teenagers at more than double (about 800,000) the official level. It is also important to point out that while 59 percent of Black teenagers may be unemployed as a national average, in specific inner-city areas the actual jobless rates for Black youth may be closer to 80-90 percent.

In every work category, Black youths were more willing to work at lower paying jobs than either Hispanic or white youths. For example, one-third (34 percent) of Black youth were willing to wash dishes at $2.50 an hour, compared to 24 percent of Hispanic and 19 percent of white youth. Similarly, almost half (44 percent) of Black youth were willing to work at a hamburger place at $2.50 an hour, compared to 33 percent of Hispanic and 28 percent of white youth. These findings indicate that it is white, not Black youth who are least willing to accept lower paying jobs.

A more recent analysis of employment patterns by the National Urban League revealed that Blacks, Hispanics and Asians were less likely than whites to secure their proportionate share of new jobs. For example, while Blacks accounted for 15 percent of the increase in the total U. S. working-age population between 1975-80, they obtained only 10 percent of the 12.5 million new jobs over that period. Similarly, while Hispanics made up 15 percent of the growth in the total working-age population between 1975-80, they got only 11 percent of the new jobs. On the other hand, whites obtained three-fourths (74 percent) of the new jobs over the last five years, although they accounted for only 64 percent of the growth in the working-age population. And white women secured over half of the new jobs, while

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