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State of Black America

By John E. Jacob

Today [Jan. 18] the National Urban League releases its seventh annual State of Black America report.

Never in that time has the State of Black America been more vulnerable. Never in that time have Black people so strongly felt themselves under siege. Never in that time have Black economic and civil rights gains been under such powerful attack. Never in that time have so many Black people been so alienated from their government.

This is an unhealthy and dangerous situation. It is something that the government must act to dispel. It is a situation created by this administration's actions, and only this administration can reverse it.

In 1981, the Black community was hit by economic and political disasters of the first magnitude. For Black Americans, 1981 was a year of economic Depression, savage cuts in survival programs for the poor, and the betrayal of basic civil rights protections.

Black unemployment is at record levels — 16 percent by the understated official statistics that don't include discouraged workers or involuntary part-timers. Teenage Black unemployment went through the roof in 1981. We are in the seventh post-war national recession, so those numbers will get worse. After each recession, Black jobless rates stay higher than they were before.

This time around, the social safety net is in shreds. Cuts in federal social programs did not just trim the fat, they slashed deep into the bone. And those cuts were concentrated in programs in which Blacks were a third to a half of all beneficiaries.

What about Black America? What happened in 1981: the rich got tax cuts and the Pentagon got a blank check. But poor people lost jobs, training opportunities, food assistance, health care, and much else.

We didn't go through some sort of abstract budget adjustment process. We went through a series of earthquakes that left disproportionate numbers of Black people with fewer resources and drove them deeper into poverty. Especially, in the context of those economic disasters, the attack on civil rights is downright immoral. This nation did not go through a long and painful process of desegregating society only to have it re-segregated in the 1980s.

In 1981, an administration from which Blacks and minorities are virtually absent, took a number of negative steps on civil rights. From its backtracking on desegregating schools to its de-emphasis of civil rights enforcement to its attacks on affirmative action, the administration created a feeling among many Blacks that they were forgotten people.

Perhaps the most blatant of those anti-civil rights policies was the unconscionable decision to reward racism by granting tax-exempt status to schools that discriminate. The President's later statement that he would ask Congress to pass a law authorizing the Internal Revenue Service to refuse exempt status to such schools does not change the issue. The IRS had the authority. The courts said it had the authority. The administration's claim that this is simply a procedural issue about legal authority does not hold water. Its actions provided aid and comfort to the racists in our midst.

Taken together, these and other steps can only be interpreted as attempts to dismantle the process of desegregating America. They raise the grim prospects of a return to the past that denied basic human rights and tolerated racial discrimination. They account for the bitter feelings of alienation and isolation, not only among many Black Americans, but among all who don't want the clock turned back to a meaner, nastier period.

What about 1982? Past experience indicates Black workers will not recapture their losses in a general economic recovery. The administration, faced with enormous deficits, will try to cut what remains of important programs that help poor people. Attempts to bury affirma-



tive action and civil rights enforcement are likely to accelerate.

But there is also greater hope in 1982 that these calamities can be prevented. The steamroller of the administration's radical approach to national problems has stalled. A year's experience has shown that supply side economics is indeed what David Stockman said it was, nothing more than old-fashioned "trickle down" economy. The fight against inflation used the old, discredited tools of the past—tight money and high unemployment. The promised economic growth turned to deep recession. The New Federalism just dumped problems on to the states: problems they know the states can't handle.

So I sense a new realism today, especially among Congressmen who recognize the political risks involved in policies that put their constituents out of work, increase pressures on local governments in their districts, and outrage the moral sensibilities of Americans who believe in fairness.

Two key tests of that new realism are now shaping up. The first is the framing of the 1983 budget. We call on Congressional leaders of both parties to inform the administration that further cuts in poor people's programs are unacceptable. The budget deficit caused by the administration's tax cuts and defense spending increases can be closed by scaling down the defense budget and by closing tax loopholes for special interests.

A second key test is the Senate battle over extension of the Voting Rights Act. We call on the President to abandon his opposition to the House Bill. The Senate should swiftly pass this vital protection of the right to vote, a right denied so many Black people until 1965.

Civil Rights Update

■ February 1981: The Education Department said it would withdraw proposed bilingual education regulations that would have defined the legal obligation of school districts to assist students whose primary language is not English and who have limited English proficiency.

■ March 1981: The Labor Department announced plans to withdraw a final regulation that would bar employers from paying membership fees in private clubs that have discriminatory policies.

■ June 1981: The Education Department announced acceptance of a North Carolina higher education desegregation plan which emphasizes increasing resources to predominantly Black institutions as a means of dismantling the alleged dual school systems. Terms of the settlement included several provisions which had been repeatedly rejected by the Carter administration.

■ August 1981: The Justice Department accepted the desegregation plan proposed by the Chicago Board of Education which had previously been characterized as inadequate. *United States v. Board of Education of City of Chicago*.

■ August 1981: The Labor Department moved to relax anti-discrimination rules for contractors doing business with the federal government. The proposed rules from the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs would, among other things, exempt employers with fewer than 250 workers and a contract less than \$1 million from the requirement of preparing a written plan for hiring and promoting minorities and women.

■ September 1981: The Justice Department said it would ask the Supreme Court to reverse lower courts, and uphold an anti-busing law adopted by Washington State voters in 1978. At the district and appeals court levels, the law was held to be unconstitutional, partly on the grounds that it had a racially discriminatory purpose.

■ September 1981: The Justice Department sent a letter to the Equal Employ-

ment Opportunity Commission questioning the legal basis for EEOC's advice to federal agencies to adopt goals, timetables and particular underutilization concepts in agency affirmative action planning.

■ September 1981: The Justice Department's assistant attorney general for civil rights told a House subcommittee on employment opportunities that the Justice Department would no longer go to court to seek the use of goals and timetables by employers found guilty of racial and sex discrimination.

■ September 1981: The Education Department proposed to limit the number of colleges and trade schools subject to federal rules barring discrimination on the basis of sex, race and handicap by excluding those schools which get no direct federal aid other than loans and grants to their students. (In recent developments, the Justice Department has recommended against the change.)

■ November 1981: President Reagan said the administration would accept a direct extension of the Voting Rights Act but would prefer a modified bailout provision for states with several years of good behavior. He also said he would prefer that the proof of intent be required to show a violation of the act.

■ November 1981: The Office of Management and Budget told the Federal Communications Commission it could abandon a questionnaire used to determine if broadcasters are treating minorities and women fairly.

■ December 1981: The Justice Department said it is looking for an opportunity to get the Supreme Court to reverse the *Weber* decision that established the legality of voluntary affirmative action plans.

■ January 1982: The Justice and Treasury Departments said they would no longer deny tax-exempt status to private schools that practice discrimination. (President Reagan now says he favors legislation to reverse the above policy.)

We also call on the President to order his Justice Department to call a cease-fire in its war on affirmative action. To equate affirmative action with restrictive quotas is nothing less than a Big Lie. As practiced by both the public and private sectors, and consistently endorsed by the courts, affirmative action is nothing less than fair play—removing race and gender as obstacles to hiring and promoting qualified people. As the National Urban League says in its new national advertising program, "Everybody deserves a chance to make it on their own."

1982 offers major challenges to all Americans. To all who are concerned with the terrible pressures placed on poor people, it is a time to take off the gloves and come out swinging against further attempts to weaken the weak. We must build coalitions to protect the interests of the forgotten and neglected.

To the administration and to political leaders of both parties, 1982 offers the challenge of replacing failed policies and noting the increased political risk attached to staying on the road of recession.

The private sector in 1982 is challenged to make our system work for all Americans, and to reaffirm support for affirmative action and social responsibility.

And Black Americans in 1982 are challenged to marshal community and political strengths. While we build external coalitions, we must also mobilize Black communities to deal with their problems at the neighborhood level. That's a job not only for civil rights and social service agencies, but for every community organization, every community institution and every individual.

1982 then, will be a year of challenge and struggle; a year in which Black people must channel their alienation and bitterness to positive efforts for change. It is a year in which all Americans must strive to recapture the faltering ideals of equal opportunity and equal rights. It is a year in which a nation concerned with the loss of rights in Poland must also become concerned with the threat to civil rights here at home. □

John Jacob, president of the National Urban League, spoke at a press conference held on the campus of Howard University on January 18, 1982. A 322-page report, the Urban League's annual assessment of the status of Black Americans, was released at the press conference.