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# Black Church Politics and the Million Man March

by William E. Nelson, Jr.

October 16, 1995 will be recorded as one of the most important days in the political history of African Americans in the United States. This day witnessed the largest mass political demonstration in the history of this nation—the assemblage of more than 1.2 million African-American men in Washington, D.C. under the banner of the Million Man March.<sup>1</sup> Both the size and the overt political objectives of the march set it firmly apart from the pallid, feeble demonstrations in Washington led by the NAACP in the 1980s; in its size and character, the march echoed the focus on power and system level change that emerged as the hallmark of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and the national mobilization against the war in Vietnam.

One key political objective of the march was to place the issue of Black suffering back on the national policy agenda.<sup>2</sup> Since the Republican triumph in the November 1994 midterm elections and the publicizing of the party's "Contract With America," the continuing and expanding social and economic crisis of the Black community had virtually disappeared as an arena of public policy debate. Republican political rhetoric papered over the most vital dimensions of the crisis in international capitalism and blamed Black inner city victims for domestic economic woes that threatened to produce record deficits, massive unemployment, and uncontrolled inflation.<sup>3</sup> Absent from the analysis was a realistic appraisal of Black social and economic decline: a poverty rate of over 40 percent; unemployment rates that averaged two times that of whites; health and housing standards matching those of city dwellers in some of the world's poorest countries; median family incomes averaging 58 percent of white median family incomes. Statistics regarding the social and economic status of Black men suggested that they were the special victims of American racial oppression. Environmental circumstances rendered the lives of young Black men extremely perilous; homicide had become one of the leading causes of death among young Black men, with 72 Black men per 100,000 falling victim to homicide compared to 9.3 white men per 100,000.<sup>4</sup> Aggressive law enforcement and prison building policies meant the incarceration of young Black men in unprecedented numbers, leaving a vacuum of political and family leadership that had a devastating impact on the sustained growth potential of the Black community.<sup>5</sup>

The Million Man March was, in part, Black America's response to these developments. Black men descended on Washington determined to bring the spiral of social and economic erosion in the Black community to a halt. Expressing extreme concern for increasing racism in

America and the deterioration of the social, cultural, and moral fabric of the Black community, Black men came to Washington, in the words of the march's mission statement, "Committed to the ongoing struggle for a free and empowered community, a just society and a better world."<sup>6</sup> Defining ingredients of the march's political agenda included challenges to the government to stop the brutal assault against affirmative action, establish programs to provide affordable health care and housing, and pass legislation creating an economic bill of rights and a plan to rebuild America's declining cities.<sup>7</sup> One aspect of this political agenda also sought to repair the negative, stereotypical image of Black men manufactured by the American media. Worldwide publicity surrounding the lives of Black men like Willie Horton, Mike Tyson, and O.J. Simpson stamped all Black men in America with a demonized personality, and placed Black men on a war-like footing with white America:

The emancipation of black men has been abandoned. The communications with black men have been cut off, which is what happens when you're on a war footing with the enemy. Talks break down and hostility begins. Their books are seldom used in college courses anymore. A variety of viewpoints from black men are ignored by the white male-run media who prefer athletes and criminals, and other dopey people and use black and white feminists to blame all the social evils of society on black men, while theirs go unchecked.<sup>8</sup>

To combat these negative stereotypes, and establish an enduring base of functional power for the entire Black community, the leaders of the march realized that the march must be well organized and coordinated, extraordinarily peaceful, and sufficiently inclusive to embrace the entire panoply of political interests in the Black community. In this regard it should be noted that the march was successful in drawing representation from virtually every sector of the Black community. One study conducted by a research team from Central State University found that the occupations of the marchers ranged from business owners to a wide variety of unskilled workers, paraprofessionals, professionals and skilled tradesmen.<sup>9</sup> The heavy representation of middle-class Black men at the march suggests that a broad reservoir of racial consciousness continues to exist among this important segment of the Black population.<sup>10</sup>

The policy goals of the march contained a pronounced political slant. Organizers of the march expressed the desire to see the mass mobilization in Washington result in highly successful voter education, registration, and turnout campaigns in cities, towns, and hamlets across America. Relying heavily on the concepts of Black nationalism and self-determination, march leaders sought to establish grassroots networks in local communities capable of creating permanent bases of functional power for the Black community in local, state, and national

political and governmental arenas. Thus, the Million Man March was viewed as more than a one-day demonstration, but the pivotal foundation for a wider movement that would substantially transform the distribution of societal benefits and the workings of the governmental order.<sup>11</sup>

### **Strategic Mobilization**

No project of the magnitude and ambition of the Million Man March could possibly succeed without effective strategic plans for large scale mobilization. Formal planning for the march began to unfold with the recognition of Minister Louis Farrakhan, head of the Nation of Islam, as the leader and guiding spirit of the march. Minister Farrakhan's assumption of this role, while controversial, was a logical extension of a political career that has seen him emerge as one of the best known and most popular political figures in Black America. Minister Farrakhan is not a newcomer to the American political scene. He first rose to prominence as a devout follower of Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammed, who took the lead in denouncing Malcolm X as a traitor "worthy of death" when Malcolm broke from the ranks of the Nation of Islam to form a new organization, the Muslim Mosque, Inc.<sup>12</sup> Upon the death of Elijah Muhammed, Farrakhan emerged as a major victor in a battle waged with Elijah Muhammed's son, Wallace Deen Muhammed, over the resources and the political image of the Nation of Islam. Clinging tightly to the mantle of Elijah Muhammed, Farrakhan rose to the summit of leadership within the Nation of Islam and ultimately within Black America as a whole. A critical step in this journey was the highly visible role he played in the 1984 Jesse Jackson presidential campaign. This opened the door of criticism for association with someone accused of anti-semitism.<sup>13</sup>

Despite persistent attacks on Minister Farrakhan by outside forces, including the white media, his popularity in the Black community has continued to rise. Minister Farrakhan's genius has been to recognize, like Marcus Garvey, the existence of an enduring commitment to Black nationalism among key sectors of the Black population, especially the Black poor. Minister Farrakhan speaks to the hope for deliverance that rests in the souls of millions of Black people who possess a strong sense of racial pride and consciousness. In the 1990s, Minister Farrakhan has emerged as a popular and formidable force because he evokes in his speeches symbols of defiance and liberation. Further, he evinces a fighting spirit that harkens back to the militant politics of Black leaders such as William Monroe Trotter, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Fannie Lou Hamer. Clearly, masses of Blacks are looking for leaders who are willing to stand up and defend the interest of the race against the unvarnished attacks emanating out of Washington.<sup>14</sup> Minister Farrakhan has demonstrated an uncommon willingness to talk in fighting terms—to tell it like it is. In doing so, he has appealed to a broad array of Black citizens across class lines.

The idea of a massive demonstration by Black men in Washington did not originate with Minister Farrakhan but was first broached in a speech in Chicago by Reverend

Hycel Taylor of Evanston, Illinois and later reinforced by conversations between Minister Farrakhan and Reverend James Bevel, a protege of Dr. Martin Luther King during the heyday of Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Eventually this idea crystallized into the concept of the Million Man March. Minister Farrakhan teamed with Dr. Benjamin Chavis, former executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and director of the National African American Leadership Committee, to transform plans for the march into a program of action. A formal call for the march was made at a summit meeting of Black leaders in Washington, D.C. in November 1994. Under the guidance of Minister Farrakhan, a massive mobilization campaign was launched by the Nation of Islam. Across the country Minister Farrakhan began holding huge rallies for Black men only. The enthusiastic response to the meetings by a cross-section of the Black male population convinced Minister Farrakhan that the Million Man March in the nation's capital was very much within the realm of possibility.

Minister Farrakhan's efforts alone would not, of course, be enough to assure the success of the march. The pivotal key to the march's success would be the generation of enthusiastic support for the march by masses of Black men across the country. The process of grassroots mobilization was promoted at two levels. First, a National Million Man March Organizing Committee was formed, composed of representatives of a wide assortment of national organizations, as well as community activists and scholars. The heart of the grassroots mobilization effort was at the local level where local organizing committees were established in more than 400 cities.<sup>15</sup>

In local communities the drum beat for the march was carried forth by a host of institutions including newspapers, radio stations, fraternities and sororities, professional organizations, colleges and universities, factories, banks, and hospitals.<sup>16</sup> Although displaying in its early stages signs of organizational disunity and ineffectiveness, the grassroots effort was eventually successful in transforming the campaign for the march into an emotional crusade. In this regard Reverend Willie F. Wilson, pastor of the Union Temple Baptist Church of Washington, D.C. recalled:

I personally felt that there was a need for less discussion and more doing. Therefore, I re-organized the men of Union Temple Baptist Church along with a few men from other churches, to get out in the streets and sign up men for the March.

To my utter amazement, there was an electrifying enthusiasm out in the streets. We didn't have to prompt, cajole or beg anybody to sign up. Wives signed up their husbands, mothers signed up their sons and men joyfully signed up on their own. We went into barber

shops, went to street corners, and stood in malls. Everywhere we went the response was overwhelming. We signed up over 100,000 men in the Washington metropolitan area!<sup>17</sup>

Two programmatic decisions made by the National Organizing Committee helped to stir enthusiasm for the march at the local level. First, the project would be billed not only as a march, but a “Holy Day of Atonement.” This decision meant that the project would move beyond the articulation of Black grievances to embrace the concept of spiritual renewal and regeneration. Seeking to create higher levels of political consciousness in the Black community, project leaders would ask Black men to recognize past wrongs and to make amends by making a new vow of social responsibility and community uplift.<sup>18</sup> Second, the project would become not only a march, but a “Day of Absence.” The objective of this strategy was to formally incorporate Black women into the project at the grassroots level by asking them to support the march by staying away, on the day of the march, from a host of routine activities including work, school, and the patronizing of businesses and places of entertainment.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the strategic plan anticipated the building of an inclusive united front in the Black community in support of the march. Given the array of diverse political interests in the Black community, the call for an united front, while emotionally appealing, was probably unrealistic.

### **Response of the Black Church**

The most potentially damaging Black resistance to the march took the form of divisions by leaders of important Black church organizations to express open opposition to the march. The specter of opposition to the march by the institutional Black Church constituted a serious threat to the success of the national mobilization campaign. Historically, much of the organizational capacity of the Black community has resided in the influence and resources of the Black Church. March leaders were compelled to confront and come to grips with the reality that “no successful movement for improving the conditions of life for the African-American people has been mounted without the support of the church.”<sup>20</sup> The church’s control over the emotions, behavior, preferences, and resources of its members provides it with a formidable advantage over its political rivals in the Black community.

In this regard, it should be noted that Black churches played central roles in the organization and implementation of programmatic objectives during the civil rights campaigns of the 1960s.<sup>21</sup> Black churches have engaged in a range of activities designed to strengthen the position of the Black community in the political process, including the organization of ministerial alliances, the publication and distribution of election documents, and the selection and grooming of candidates for public office, the establishment of political action committees, the coordination and management of voter registration, and

public lobbying on a variety of social, economic, and cultural issues.<sup>22</sup> Collectively, Black churches represent an unrivaled structure of power in the Black community. Candidates for public office clearly recognize that any effort to mobilize mass support in the Black community must begin with the cultivation of strong support from individual Black ministers and religious institutions, both separately and collectively.

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The religious foundations of the march were broad and deep, representing incredible support from the Muslim community and strong support from a mosaic of Black Christian organizations. Opposition from within the ranks of the Black Church, however, was also significant. Several nationally prominent Black ministers publicly refused to endorse the march. Local organizers reported stiff opposition from a rich variety of influential Black ministers. Many ministers argued that they were compelled to oppose the march because of irreconcilable theological differences with Minister Farrakhan. They believed that they could not, as Christian ministers, endorse a march led by a minister of the Islamic faith.<sup>23</sup>

Many ministers also agreed with the statements of Black politicians who said they could not support Minister Farrakhan because he preached a gospel of racial hatred and social conflict. They were especially disturbed by this minister’s support for Khallid Abdul Muhammed, a Nation of Islam national spokesman, who persistently denounced Jews in strident terms, as well as by reports that Minister Farrakhan had referred to Judaism as a dirty religion and Jews as bloodsuckers.

Some ministers opposed the march on political rather than theological grounds. Storm clouds have prevailed for more than a decade around the alleged invasion of Muslims into arenas formerly dominated and controlled exclusively by Black churches. Government contracts to Muslims to wage war on drugs or to provide security for housing projects have been met with resentment and protests from Black Christian ministers and their followers. Traditionally, Black churches have been the recipients of government largess as well as patronage from local political organizations.<sup>24</sup> The emergence of the Muslims as a strong political force threatened to weaken the stream of government benefits to Black churches and to shatter relations with external forces forged through years of strategic political interaction. Organizing activities around the Million Man March was viewed by some as an extension of the Muslim program of invasion and political dilution. If the grassroots goals of the march were realized, control over community resources would become more decentralized, further undermining the effective control over such resources by Black churches.

Opposition by some Black ministers was spawned principally by their view that support for the march would be interpreted as support for a militant campaign antithetical to the interests of their white allies. This was the prevailing view among conservative Black ministers who took great pride in the roles they played as racial diplomats. One respondent explained the opposition to the march by this element of Black ministerial leadership in the following manner:

After 500 years of Negroness it is hard for them to stand on their own feet. They want to make Farrakhan a devil because the white man says he's a devil. If I start to upset the white man, he is going to upset me. They did not want to upset Newt Gingrich and his boys. Too many are Negroes; they did what they believed their white benefactors wanted them to do. We must expose them for what they are. They are not representing the Black community. They are preaching their own form of self-hate. They practice a form of feel good religion. It is all about preaching and having a good time. They are afraid of white people so they won't tell their members that our liberation can't be from the top down but must come from the bottom up.<sup>25</sup>

Reverend Willie Wilson's efforts to garner cooperation from Black ministers in Washington, D.C. revealed, in dramatic terms, the political and emotional insecurity of Black ministers who consider themselves trapped in the racial divide:

I made a request to the largest Christian ministers' conference in Washington, D.C. to allow Minister Louis Farrakhan to speak to the several hundred pastors affiliated with that body to share the vision of the Million Man March.

Needless to say, the ministers were so impressed with Minister Farrakhan's grip on Christian scriptures that they overwhelmingly voted to support the march. However, two weeks later, the Conference President explained their backpedaling this way: "Y'all don't want to say it, but we are scared!! I'm from down deep South and I know what white people will do to you. White people will kill you!! We are afraid of white folks! That's why we don't want to march."<sup>26</sup>

There is evidence to support the proposition that opposition to the march by some Black church forces emanated, in some measure, from the internal politics of national Black church organizations. The refusal on the part of Dr. Henry Lyons, President of the National Baptist Convention, USA, with 8.7 million members, to endorse

the march was a product of the bruising battle he had to endure to win the presidency of this massive and powerful religious organization. Lyons came to power in 1994 on the heels of a major controversy surrounding the retirement from the presidency of Reverend T. J. Jemison. Jemison had threatened to run for another term despite provisions in the Convention by-laws that limited the presidency to a maximum of 10 years—the number of years he had already served. Jemison reluctantly stepped aside, naming as his heir apparent F. W. Richardson of New York. The election for the presidency, held in New Orleans in 1993, was hotly contested. Lyons announced his opposition to Richardson along with William Shaw from Pennsylvania and C.A. Clark from Texas. A major dispute emerged over whether or not voting would be by secret ballot. Additional wrangling surfaced over the issue of the supervision of the election by New Orleans election officials. When these issues were resolved, the balloting was held; the final results showed Lyons winning by 1,000 votes. The Jemison and Richardson forces refused to accept the outcome, charging in a legal suit that the election was rigged. Although the suit was resolved in Lyons' favor, the legal action delayed his formal installation as president by several months.

Lyons moved into the presidency in December 1993 determined to extricate himself from the shadow of controversy and to establish his position as a strong independent leader. It was in this context that he announced his position on a number of issues, including the Million Man March, and set forward a new operational agenda. One of his first actions at the 1994 Convention in Birmingham was to announce his opposition to the Million Man March. This decision was made principally on the basis of Lyons' need to demonstrate leadership and establish a functional power base within his organization. In retrospect, some of Lyons' supporters believed that his failure to endorse the march was a tactical blunder: "He probably should have said nothing. It is difficult to become president of 8 million people. He exercised poor judgment on this issue and damaged his relations with the progressive wing of the Convention."<sup>27</sup>

Lyons has sought to overcome the controversy surrounding his decision on the march by moving aggressively to implement his own community action agenda. As an answer to the Million Man March, he organized a march in Atlanta, Georgia. The march was held in November 1995. Approximately 5,000 people are reported to have attended.<sup>28</sup> Lyons' most important community outreach initiative has been the Trusted Partners Program. This was an idea originally included in the campaign literature of Cleo McConnell running for president of the National Laymen's Movement of the National Baptist Convention, USA. Essentially, Trusted Partners is a program designed to get Black Christian men involved in the process of bringing young Black boys to manhood. Through a series of seminars, one-on-one counseling sessions, and planned activities such as field trips, Baptist laymen are given an opportunity to establish

close personal relations with young Black men at a crucial turning point in their lives. The central objective is to provide alternatives for young Black men to the urban street culture, alternatives that will motivate them to stay in school and build for themselves stable, productive patterns of development in the broader society.<sup>29</sup> Although Lyons is aware that this program may overlap with some of the youth programs in the Black community already in place, he is convinced that the Black Church is in a better position to accomplish the goals of Trusted Partners than any other community institution.

### Conclusion

The Million Man March was, in many ways, a watershed event in the political history of African Americans. Its crowning accomplishment was the bringing together of more than one million Black men in a spirit of peace, unity, reconciliation, atonement and renewal. The symbolism of one million Black Men massed in Washington conveyed to the world a number of critical messages:

*That in 1995 Black America would not allow white America to choose and sanction its leaders.*

*That Black people had sufficient leadership skill and logistical capability to pull off a march of unprecedented size and complexity.*

*That millions of Black men are politically conscious and politically astute.*

*That all Black men are not thugs, hoodlums, and criminals.*

*That Black people are capable of financing their own liberation struggles.*

*That special bonds of fellowships existed between Black men across class and ideological lines.*

*That Black people are not prepared to accept the consequences of the Republican Revolution or the Democratic Party's abandonment to social justice, without a militant response.*

The negative response of some elements of Black church leadership to the march sheds penetrating light on the continuing existence of decisive tendencies in the internal political environment of the Black community. These tendencies serve notice that much work remains to be done if the spirit of the Million Man March is to be transformed into an effective program of action in the service of African liberation.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Within twenty-four hours after the conclusion of the march, the issue of the actual number of persons in attendance surfaced as a matter of major controversy. Initially, the National Park Service provided an official estimate of 400,000. After leaders of the march complained about an undercount the official estimate was raised to 850,000. The Million Man March Organizing Committee held to an estimate of well over 1 million. For those of us in attendance, there was no doubt that the goal of 1 million was easily surpassed. For the estimate of 1.2 million see Michael H. Cottman, *Million Man March* (New York: Crown Trade Paperbacks, 1995), 9.

<sup>2</sup>Cornel West, "Historical Event," in Haki R. Madhubuti and Maulana Karenga (Eds.) *Million Man March/Day of Absence: A Commemorative Anthology* (Chicago: Third World Press; Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 1996), 98.

<sup>3</sup>The adoption of this line of political argument was not an overnight development; but the product of strategies crafted by both major political parties to use the issues of race, rights and taxes as mechanisms for producing electoral majorities in key political contests. For an exceptionally insightful analysis of Democratic and Republican racial strategies see Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights and Taxes on American Politics* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991).

<sup>4</sup>Lucius J. Barker and Mack H. Jones, *African Americans and the American Political System*, 3rd Edition (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1994), 32-43.

<sup>5</sup>Charshee McIntyre, "Why Focus on the Men?" in *Million Man March/Day of Absence*, 114-115.

<sup>6</sup>National Million Man March/Day of Absence Organizing Committee, *Mission Statement: The Million Man March/Day of Absence* (Washington, D.C.: National Million Man March/Day of Absence Organizing Committee, 1995), 1.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>8</sup>Ishmael Reed, "Buck Passing: The Media, Black Men, O.J. and the Million Man March," in *Million Man March/Day of Absence*, 133.

<sup>9</sup>Gerald S. Norde, 1996. A Sociological Study of the Million Man March. Working paper, Central State University, Xenia, Ohio.

<sup>10</sup>See Ellis Cose, *The Rage of the Privileged Class* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993); Lawrence Otis Graham, *Member of the Club: Reflections on Life in a Racially Polarized World* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995).

<sup>11</sup>Maulana Karenga, "The March, Day of Absence and the Movement," in *Million Man March/Day of Absence*, 5-7.

<sup>12</sup>Arthur J. Magida, *Prophet of Rage: A Life of Louis Farrakhan and His Nation* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 80-83.

<sup>13</sup>Some organizations and their representatives accused Reverend Farrakhan of calling Judaism a dirty religion and referring to Hitler as a man who was "wickedly" great. See Magida, *Prophet of Rage*, 143-148.

<sup>14</sup>Ron Daniels, "The Meaning of the Million Man March and Day of Absence," in *Million Man March/Day of Absence*, 83-84.

<sup>15</sup>Conrad W. Worrill, "Beyond the Million Man March," in *Million Man March/Day of Absence*, 81.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>17</sup>Willie F. Wilson, "The Miracle of the Million Man March," in *Million Man March/Day of Absence*, 57-58.

<sup>18</sup>National Million Man March/Day of Absence Organizing Committee, *Mission Statement*, 56.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 15-17.

<sup>20</sup>Andrew Billingsley, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Enduring Legacy of African American Families* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 350.

<sup>21</sup>See William E. Nelson, Jr., *The Role of the Black Church in Politics* (Washington, D.C.: National Research Council, 1987), 20-26.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 20-26.

<sup>23</sup>Conversation with a Black Baptist minister in Columbus, Ohio (April 1996).

<sup>24</sup>Nelson, *The Role of the Black Church in Politics*, 34-35.

<sup>25</sup>Conversation with a Black Baptist minister in Columbus, Ohio (April 1996).

<sup>26</sup>Wilson, *The Miracle of the Million Man March*, 58.

<sup>27</sup>Conversation with a Black Baptist minister in Lincoln, Nebraska (May 1996).

<sup>28</sup>Conversation with a Black Baptist layman in Los Angeles, California (May 1996).

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*

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