

Trotter Review

Volume 18
Issue 1 *Niagara, NAACP, and Now*

Article 15

January 2009

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Recommended Citation

Pinderhughes, Dianne M. (2009) "The NAACP in the Twenty-first Century," *Trotter Review*. Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 15.

Available at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol18/iss1/15

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Cover Page Footnote

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“The leadership was overly concerned with recognition from whites, a concern that helped prevent the organization from taking a confrontational stance. The program overly oriented to a middle-class agenda and not nearly strong enough to the kinds of economic issues that mean most to working-class black people. [And] the organization [was] too centralized.”

These views of the problems of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People are not those of a present-day critic, reflecting on the Association’s recent woes. They were formed by Ella Baker during her years as the NAACP’s assistant field secretary in 1941 and as National Director of Branches from 1943 to 1946, as summarized in Charles Payne’s book *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, published in 1995. Yet Baker’s assessment fits extraordinarily well with some of the issues that have called into question the viability and continued relevance of the NAACP as it faces its centennial in 2009.

During its first six decades, the NAACP pursued a program that focused on an anti-lynching campaign, school desegregation, and voting rights. Often working in coalition with other groups, the Association achieved many of its civil rights objectives. But from the 1970s, the Association seemed to have stagnated and lost its vision.

In his short tenure as executive director of the NAACP, Ben Chavis attempted to revitalize the Association by reaching out to a broader constituency. He argued that class is a polarizing factor in the Association,

because it is dominated by the middle-aged and “upper-class” sector of the black community, which he saw as uninterested in the problems of gang members and low-income blacks. Chavis was criticized when he met in March 1994 with black nationalists and representatives from the Pan-African groups such as Angela Davis, Lenora Fulani, Cornell West, and Louis Farrakhan. At that meeting, they discussed how they might make common cause with the NAACP.

Projecting into the future, the NAACP can do a great deal if its leadership can reshape the Association to enable it to address the concerns of a broader segment of black America.

In the last 30 years, the NAACP’s influence as a national pressure group has declined. It has been eclipsed by a growing number of black elected officials and their increasing political clout. And the influence of the NAACP has been diluted by a welter of newer organizations that have joined the civil rights coalition. The organization’s internal programs have also taken their toll. In the mid-1990s, the Association was rocked by scandal and an internal power struggle revolving around charges of sexual harassment and financial mismanagement against former executive director Ben Chavis, leading to his removal from office. There also was a very public and successful challenge against William Gibson by Myrlie Evers-Williams for the board chairmanship.

Few disagree that the Association is facing serious and complex problems, but options for restoring the organization to its former prominence vary widely. Some view the Association’s problems as so monumental that they recommend starting over from scratch. Others see the organization’s condition as serious but manageable with direct attention. Even if the Association succeeds in addressing its philosophical dilemmas, it must overcome serious organizational and financial management difficulties.

The Association is often described as hierarchical, bureaucratic, and slow to respond to new problems. It is. The size of the organization, its multiple levels of leadership, and the breadth and complexity of its mandate make swift response to changing events difficult.

The NAACP’s goals include keeping the public aware of the adverse effects of racial discrimination, and taking lawful action to secure its elimination while improving the political, educational, social, and

economic status of minority groups. The organization has also developed several educational programs for young people and economic development projects.

But the Association's ability to meet its multifaceted missions is impeded by cumbersome organizational and leadership structures. It is governed by a 64-member board of directors, a national chairperson, an executive director, and six vice presidents. National headquarters are in Baltimore. There is a legislative department in the Washington Bureau, a development office in New York City, and other offices around the country. The association divided the nation into seven regions, each headed by a regional director, and regional representatives who serve on the national board. There are conferences of branches within each state, with about 1,700 local branches and 400 college chapters and youth councils. At the end of Rev. Benjamin Hooks's term as executive director in 1992, the Association employed approximately 100 staff members, but financial problems led to cuts and layoffs.

The Association's size and its many layers of organization frustrate efficient policymaking. Policy is formulated by the national board and national office and at the NAACP's annual convention. Once adopted, a policy is passed down a chain of command that extends from the national office to state conferences, and then to local branches. Local branches are not expected to challenge policies handed down by the convention, board, or national office.

On the other hand, the NAACP's bureaucratic structure also ensures a collective institutional memory, an understanding of what strategies have already been employed in a particular policy area, or in a state or city over a relatively long period of time. The organization's size and structure also mean that it operates in most locations regardless of the size of the black population. This provides opportunities for information flow: upward to the states and the regions and to the national office about problems, issues and conflicts, as well as about the innovative and successful efforts at the grassroots; across states and regions and through the national office and back to the other states; or downward from the national office to the regions, states, and local branches.

This complex bureaucratic structure means the NAACP has the potential to influence public policy formation as it occurs in most

governmental bodies at any level—national, state, or local. These entities, which communicate with each other and with the national office, constitute a structure compatible with the “federal government” and with the capacity to address problems of the NAACP’s constituency at all levels. The Milwaukee branch, for example, won a major lawsuit with national implications in the area of housing discrimination.

The Association receives financial support from corporate contributions, its annual conventions, dues and donations from members, and foundation grants. After revelations in 1994 that Executive Director Chavis committed over \$300,000 of NAACP funds to settle a lawsuit in which he was charged with sexual harassment of a female employee, the Association’s income from individual supports and foundations fell off dramatically. Then-Chairman Gibson’s possible involvement in Chavis’s financial problems, as well as his resistance to reporting on the financial status of the Association, raised questions about his accountability and competence to handle the organization’s affairs. Late that year, the NAACP had insufficient funds to pay its staff, and employees were furloughed for eight weeks.

The Ford Foundation withheld nearly \$500,000 in funds until the leadership crisis was resolved. Other corporate and foundation donors, as well as individuals, also suspended financial support in response to the Chavis scandal and questions over Chairman Gibson’s leadership.

The Association’s financial problems had been developing for some time. In the early 1980s, when the Association could no longer afford to maintain its national offices in Manhattan, it was forced to move to Brooklyn. That proved a temporary solution, however, and in 1986 the Association moved its national offices again, to Baltimore, with help from the state of Maryland and that city’s government.

In addition to its organizational and financial problems, the NAACP faces a far more complex environment than it once did. During the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the NAACP and other organizations, including the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith; the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the black union founded by A. Phillip Randolph; and other groups that did not necessarily have the civil rights agenda as their first priority, formed the Leadership Conference for Civil Rights to work for racial reform. The NAACP was founded by blacks and whites, evolved with the support of black communities over several

decades, and has become one of only a few black-led national organizations focused on public policymaking.

In the “struggle” years of protest and demonstration in the 1960s, the focus of the movement was clearly racial discrimination. In more recent years, that focus has expanded to include race, gender, physical disability, age, and sexual preference. Some of these concerns are multiple-jeopardy issues that have complicated what seemed originally to have been a single focus. For example, sexual harassment proved an explosive issue for African-American organizations when Judge Clarence Thomas was nominated to the Supreme Court. Anita Hill’s allegations about Thomas’s inappropriate behavior when he chaired the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission split African-American organizations and diverted the focus of his Senate confirmation hearing away from civil rights concerns as traditionally defined.

Since the peak of the civil rights protest era, a large number of new, progressive racial-ethnic organizations modeled on the NAACP have been formed that focus on the rights of women, homosexuals, people with physical impairments, and non-black racial minorities. These include the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the National Organization for Women, and the Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund, to name a few. Most of these groups are part of an expanded civil rights coalition. But, although they may share the same general civil rights philosophy, they each have their own agenda. The growth in the number of such organizations has diffused the influence of the NAACP.

In order to operate on a common front in the policy arena, the NAACP must negotiate with its coalition partners on which issues should have the highest priority and what strategy would be most effective.

Simultaneously, a number of conservative public interest law firms, foundations and other interest groups have been created like the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the Institute for Justice, the Free Congress Foundation, and the Washington Legal Foundation (which represented a Latino plaintiff’s successful court challenge to the University of Maryland’s Banneker Scholarship program for black students). The missions of many of these groups is to attack and dilute the policies of affirmative action, voting rights, and equal educational opportunity that the NAACP and its allies have struggled to put in place.

These conservative groups have waged a powerful campaign to roll back the gains in equality secured by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Executive Order 11246, which codified federal affirmative action policy, and the other statutes and executive orders for which the NAACP and sister civil rights organizations had fought.

Through litigation, conservative groups have convinced the U.S. Supreme Court to hand down rulings that restrict the implementation of minority business set-aside programs by state and local governments as in the *City of Richmond v. J.A. Croson Co.* of 1989. The U.S. Supreme Court's *Adarand v. Peña* decision in 1995 went even further to restrict federal set-asides and also places affirmative action programs at a higher level of judicial scrutiny. And the high court's *Shaw v. Reno* ruling in 1993 imperiled several majority-black congressional districts in Southern states, with restrictions requiring that they be "narrowly tailored to further a compelling government interest."

Now that Julian Bond has become chair of the NAACP board, he and the Association face a number of important choices. The organization must plan carefully for the short and long term in all of these areas:

1. If the Association is to succeed in its second century, its policies must address the interests of a broader constituency. The policy arenas in which the NAACP has been active may be too numerous; the Association may have to select fewer on which to focus.
2. Benjamin Todd Jealous and whoever succeeds him as president and CEO should exhibit a variety of strengths, including considerable ability in financial management, and be a person who can listen to a complex array of voices within the Association and within black America.
3. The Association must develop short- and long-range plans to implement a more manageable governance structure.
4. Julian Bond and the board should begin with the president and CEO to map out plans for an endowment and revamp the organization's fundraising program. The national fundraising campaign should be coordinated with the fundraising campaigns of larger local chapters.

5. The jurisdiction and financial support of the Washington Bureau should be enhanced to expand the NAACP's influence on national policy.

The NAACP has an impressive legacy and must be credited as a major force in the struggle to secure major civil rights gains in the 1950s and 1960s. Despite its weaknesses and internal problems, the Association has the potential to once again stand as a preeminent advocate for civil rights. For that to happen, however, the organization has to be radically restructured and find a way to achieve financial stability. But perhaps most important, the NAACP must recast itself so that its mission addresses the issues of the day and the concerns of a broader spectrum of black America. Whether the NAACP's new leadership is up to this task is what many are asking.