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**Obama at the NAACP
African American Leadership
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Well, despite what we hear to be something of a struggle within his administration about how close President Barack Obama should be to the African American community, he showed up at the 100th Anniversary of the NAACP and shouted out. At some points in his speech, I couldn't tell who Obama was and who Ben Jealous, the new CEO was, as Obama turned country preacher and got busy giving the organization its marching orders.

He said that Blacks had made extraordinary progress, but there are still the barriers of HIV/AIDS, disproportionate imprisonment, unemployment and health care. He seemed to understand that in eliminating those structural inequalities, there was a balance between what he could do and what the black community might do. So, he talked about fixing the economy and health care reform, but featured his initiatives on education. He gave the impression that "No child left behind" was left behind, not mentioning it once, and changed the inference that the state of our schools "is an African American problem" to an American problem that is the responsibility of our leaders.

In that vein, he wants to strengthen community colleges to bear more of the challenge of job training, institute a "race to the top" fund to give learning incentive to children in public schools and pilot programs that feature innovative college preparation. I liked his urging for us to elevate more examples of professional excellence in fields other than athletics and entertainment as the basis for educational achievement.

True to form, he returned to the familiar theme of personal responsibility, but this time I noticed that the audience seemed somewhat weary. Perhaps it is because most blacks have climbed up the rough side of the mountain and have mostly been very responsible, considering the tremendous odds they have faced. They therefore, may be growing tired of the preaching and expect that someone with a large White House megaphone would also remind America this fact.

Nevertheless, while he presented both halves of the balance of responsibility to energize black progress, both government and the black community, the private sector seldom gets included (except by those who discuss Reparations) while it has the largest responsibility as providers of critical resources such as housing, employment and wealth. He could have said more about this in reforming the economy, by sending some of that TARP money to community banks to expand credit for depressed neighborhoods.

The opportunity to have said more about the private sector responsibility was missed, even though Obama's NAACP speech was given on the very day the Senate was discussing his nomination of Judge Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court and the major highlight of those hearings was the Ricci case, featuring Affirmative Action. Although Obama may have been advised to take a pass because his advisers believed that an errant comment by him could have been damaging to the judge, an NAACP audience still needed to hear that Affirmative Action was not dead, that it is still needed and that his Administration was committed to it.

I liked the strategy that Obama laid out which gave the NAACP the role of making the White House do what is right, in other words, being the legitimate protagonist for an agenda of civil and human rights. It strikes me that is the right posture, not just for a black president but for any president, as was discussed during the campaign about his fidelity to the Black Agenda. But being a protagonist at a time when there is a history-making event, such as a popular black man sitting in the White House, takes courage and thus far, little courage has been in evidence by any of the black leadership. Maybe that is because when you attempt to broach the issue of accountability, even by accident, you are disbarred from the black community – ask Rev. Jesse Jackson, Tavis Smiley, and others.

Will the NAACP be up to the role of the legitimate protagonist? I don't know because historically, it has also depended upon access to the White House as a currency of its leadership, and that currency could be eroded by the alienation that naturally comes from strong opposition. So, maybe it is not just a role for the NAACP, but for all of our organizations, to take seriously the task of "tough love" toward the administration, a role that gives strong support when it is right on our issues and strong opposition when the need is clearly there, but nothing happens. What more can anyone ask?

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