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Cover Story
What Use Are Black Mayors?
An Open Letter to the National Conference of Black Political Scientists
by Jerry G. Watts

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According to some in the national media, the televised images of New Orleans following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina may serve as catalysts to reintroduce into the consciousness of Americans (read white Americans) the continuing significance of race and class subjugation in America. Though the awakening of the American public to the existence of horrible inequalities may have been an unintended benefit of Hurricane Katrina, it does not outweigh the naked realization that there was simply no evacuation plan for poor black residents of New Orleans. Within the planning offices of city, state and federal bureaucracies, decisions had been made to ignore the plight and needs of these people. It was as if there was a coordinated "fuck–em" issued from those very agencies that supposedly existed to protect American citizens, including poor black ones. Impoverished black survivors of the New Orleans travesty can never doubt their insignificance in the eyes of the broader American social order. Who can accurately forecast the impact of this stunting realization on their future lives?

Though the events in New Orleans might have brought American racialized poverty into the national spotlight, we know that these images will not endure. After all, Americans suffer from a society–wide case of historical amnesia. Though images of New Orleans will be commercialized by those requisite television mini–series that will undoubtedly emerge from various entertainment outlets, the memories of those actual horrific scenes in New Orleans and the underlying realities that they gave visibility to will quickly fade into oblivion. Besides, even if the media coverage of Katrina's aftermath forced large numbers of Americans to confront a racially and economically marginalized population in New Orleans, this does not necessarily guarantee that this suffering engaged their moral consciences. White Americans have a long and rich history of recognizing black suffering but excluding it from their universe of moral concern. A less widespread but equally disgusting moral evasion (concerning the black poor) takes place daily among a growing number of blacks, particularly affluent ones.

As a political scientist who studies the political experiences of blacks in the United States, I think that the situation in New Orleans offers scholars of Afro–American politics a unique vessel for reflection. It is high time that we begin to question the analytical premises that have governed a great deal of the scholarship

produced in the past few decades by black and white scholars of urban politics. First and foremost, we need to bring under scrutiny all of those analytical paradigms that presume that blacks (always imagined as a collective horde) collectively gain political inclusion or incorporation when black elites enter the ranks of a city's governing elite. After all, black elites have been part of the governing coalition of New Orleans for almost twenty−five years. During that same period, the black poor of New Orleans have become increasingly entrenched in poverty. Simply put, scholars of black politics need to begin asking questions concerning the viability of urban electoral politics as a mechanism for generating upward mobility of impoverished populations. We may discover that electing black mayors has had a minute impact, if any impact at all, on the upward mobility of the poor.

When I began graduate study in political science during the mid−1970s, I naively assumed that most black politicians were committed to bettering the lives of the least fortunate among us. Certainly I was aware that blacks had historically produced our share of political opportunists and hustlers but I thought that the ethos of the times had generated a widespread political commitment to "race advancement" particularly among those blacks who now sought political office. Having come through the fires of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power era, blacks were creating a "new black politics." Similarly, those of us who were newly emerging in the scholarly world believed that we would create novel ways of discussing and analyzing this new black politics. Black euphoria had greeted the elections of Carl Stokes in Cleveland, Richard Hatcher in Gary and Kenneth Gibson in Newark. When I entered graduate school in 1975, the inability of these mayors to reverse the declining economic fortunes of their cities had not yet become well known. By the late 1970s, there was sufficient evidence to document the inability of these newly elected black mayors to substantively improve the plight of the poor in their cities.

Our scholarly response to black mayoral failure generally assumed four different types of arguments. One group of scholars assumed that the failure on the part of these black mayors to improve the economic plight of the black poor was due to their weak commitment to these goals. Simply put, we had elected the wrong people. The right persons in office would solve the problem. Another group of scholars argued that these black mayors were utterly powerless to help the black poor. To the extent that the economic elites in these cities remained white, black political figures had limited, if any, true power. In order to gain authentic political control over a city, blacks had to enter the ranks of that city's economic elite.

The third analytical tendency was a structural one. This framework assumed that the racial identities of a city's political and economic elites were less significant than the ways in which national and international economic trends influenced a city's economic fortunes. For instance, the international market for steel would impact the economic fortunes of the American company US Steel which in turn would impact US Steel's home city of Gary, Indiana. Gary's mayor, Richard Hatcher could do nothing to head off the decline of US Steel. Yet Hatcher, as mayor, presided over the disastrous social costs of US Steel's decline.

The final and most dominant tendency among students of black urban politics was to sidestep any type of critical discussion of black elected officials. Instead, black mayors became objects of celebration. They were indicators of the progress of the race. "There were no black mayors in 1950, now there are...." These scholars of black urban politics spent far more energy explaining how a certain black candidate was elected mayor as opposed to explaining whether his election meant anything substantive to the residents of the city.

Many of us did not ask simple but crucial questions. For instance, did black mayors govern in ways that differed from their white predecessors? Were black mayors good for the urban poor? Did black mayors expand housing opportunities for the impoverished? Did they commit more resources to schools in poor and black neighborhoods? Such questions should have been routinely asked and investigated but too often, scholars of black urban politics were so enthralled by the emergence of winning black mayoral candidates that they celebrated their mere elections at the expense of analytically dissecting the impact of these politicians on the broader community. Let me explain:

Before the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, elected black officials in the South were virtually non−existent. Beginning in the mid−1960s with the growth of black majorities in numerous northern big cities, black mayors began to emerge. In most instances the emergence of black mayors in big cities was but an indication of the changing racial demographics. (Tom Bradley in Los Angeles was the major exception to this rule). When the elections of black big city mayors were coupled with the growing number of black elected officials in the South, some scholars of black politics became swept−up in a tide of optimism. But decades later, we can no longer continue to embrace a naive optimism. What has been the impact of these black elected officials on the living conditions of their poor constituents?

What could be a better case study of the failure of black mayors and black elected officials than the situation in New Orleans? How has the election of black mayors in New Orleans (from Morial to Bartholemey to Morial's son to Ray Nagin, the current mayor, advanced or protected the interests of the black poor in New Orleans? How have these mayoralties protected the interests of the stable black working classes? It is highly possible that black mayors have initiated minor benefits to the black poor but even this has to be investigated and documented.

For instance, we may discover that under black mayors police brutality against the poor is reduced. But maybe even this is an overstatement. Certainly some black mayors have tried to initiate policies that benefit the least fortunate but most black mayors have governed cities with eroding tax bases. In the hopes of improving the tax revenues, we know that many black mayors have championed a Chamber of Commerce agenda. Marion Barry, for all of his claims to be a man of the people, actually was a staunch advocate of the Washington DC Chamber of Commerce. The same can be said for the current mayor of Washington D.C., Anthony Williams.

Why do we scholars of black politics spend so much time explaining how a black became mayor if becoming mayor has so little substantive political importance? Such analyses are utterly technocratic and ultimately establishmentarian. Too often, black political figures are not held accountable by the general public and scholars. But then, this is the norm for American politics in the age of Bill Clinton and George Bush. In the case of blacks, one might wonder just what it was that the younger Morial accomplished as mayor in New Orleans that made him so qualified to chair the National Urban League. Isn't he and his mayoralty implicated in the New Orleans fiasco? To the extent that students of black politics refuse to raise questions that go against the grain of the premises championed by elected black mayors, the substantive failures of these mayors become our scholarly failures as well.

On one occasion after listening to my criticism, a black mayor of a relatively large city asked me to give him some readings concerning contemporary urban politics/governance that might shed light on new policy/political directions that he might try to take in governing his city. I had to admit to him that much of the literature on black mayors was void of such visions because the analyses were too immersed in legitimating the political existences of black mayors and too little concerned with constructing critiques of their policies.

Part of the problem is that too many black political scientists continue to treat black elected officials as if they are part of an insurgent political formation. This is nonsense. Regardless of their rhetoric, black elected officials are, in varying degrees, part of the political establishment. I remember when Andy Young used to claim that black elected mayors were the vanguard of the continuing civil rights movement. Young's utter BS should have been seen for the self−serving nonsense that it was. A black mayor of a city today is no more insurgent than I am as a bourgeois black academic in a predominantly white academic setting. Both of us may try to claim to that our personal advancement is a brick hurled against an entrenched racism. Both of us would be guilty of manipulating race to mask our self−interested actions.

Undoubtedly someone will raise the issue of the fiscal constraints placed on black mayors. Certainly, it has been true that many black mayors inherited cities that were fiscally incapable of supporting a decent level of social services for its residents. With the flight of the white middle classes and later, the black middle classes to suburbs, tax bases in majority black cities have severely eroded. No one can expect a black mayor to perform miracles with an underfunded city. In the face of these fiscal realities, it would only make sense for big city mayors to redefine their position. Instead of efficiently managing a budget, the primary task before contemporary big city mayors is to increase the funds coming into their cities. State and federal budgets are the likely sources but they will only relinquish in funding that which is politically necessary. Unless the cities actively put pressure on state and federal political figures, cities will continue to be underfunded. Instead, most big city mayors do everything in their power to give tax breaks, etc. to any and every corporation in the hopes of enticing them to remain in the city or relocate there.

One can wonder why mayors of impoverished cities do not transform themselves into advocates for their impoverished constituents. Instead, they repeatedly campaign as if the mayor's job was akin to a CEO's position in a private corporation. Nothing could be more misguided.

One will look in vain for a mayoral candidate who runs for office and tells his potential constituents that there is not enough money in the city's budget to provided adequate services. Instead mayors lie and campaign for office as if they can "turn–around" impoverished cities.

I once tried to convince a black mayoral candidate of Hartford to relinquish campaign rhetoric about being a more efficient manager of resources than his opponent. I told the candidate that regardless of his or his opponent's managerial talents, there was not enough money in Hartford to address Hartford's needs. I suggested that if he won, he should become the leader of protests directed at the Connecticut state legislature and the Connecticut governor. Instead of managing the budget of Hartford, the mayor of Hartford should become a protest leader in behalf of increasing the size of Hartford's economic pie. Perhaps Hartford's mayor could join forces with other Connecticut mayors who should have also understood that they were sitting on unsolvable financial bases. In Connecticut this could have meant joining forces with the mayors of New Haven, Bridgeport and Danbury. This Hartford mayoral candidate understood that I was asking him to engage in political activities that would alienate him from the state Democratic Party leaders who were quite content to treat Hartford residents as if they were extraneous citizens of Connecticut.

William O'Neil, the Connecticut Democratic governor at the time, was a rather visionless party hack who had no intention of doing anything innovative or non–innovative in behalf of Connecticut's poor cities. Why, I wondered, would this Hartford mayoral candidate worry about alienating a governor who was no friend of Hartford? What I did not sufficiently grasp is that those blacks who aspire to be mayors of impoverished cities like Hartford still like to be included in all of the symbolic trappings of power including supposed access to the Governor, etc. In my naiveté, I underestimated the status desires of this black political figure.

At the time, Connecticut was one of the two most affluent states in the nation. Moreover, Hartford, New Haven and Bridgeport had poverty rates that placed them among the twenty poorest cities in the nation. It seemed only obvious that a mayor of one of these cities had to find ways to get more resources out of the state. It is important to note that Connecticut abolished counties in the 1950s. Counties exist only in name in Connecticut. As such, Bridgeport, one of Connecticut's poorest cities, is located in Fairfield County; one of the nation's richest counties, yet, Bridgeport has no access to any of Fairfield County's resources.

One of the crucial issues in the Hartford mayor's race was the decline of the city's downtown business district. Stores were abandoned and the downtown mall was almost empty. A similar situation existed in New Haven. The gutting of downtown Hartford, Bridgeport and New Haven was the result, in large measure, of the building of expansive malls on the outskirts of these cities. Downtown commercial districts in cities with populations smaller than Washington D.C. generally cannot absorb the economic hit caused by the

proliferation of suburban malls. Hartford, New Haven and Bridgeport were cities with populations hovering between 100,000 to 130,000 thousand residents. Though they were considered cities in relation to other municipalities in Connecticut, they were in population smaller than neighborhoods in Brooklyn. Nevertheless, when the state of Connecticut decided to approve the building of two large suburban malls on the outskirts of Hartford, the state ensured that downtown Hartford would be destroyed. Ditto for downtowns in New Haven and Bridgeport. The decision to build suburban malls was a decision that lay outside the authority of the mayor of Hartford and yet, it was a policy decision that economically devastated the city. In the face of such circumstances, it was ridiculous for mayors to continue to treat their cities as if they were discrete, self–contained entities. The mayors of Hartford could do little to restore downtown. Why, one wonders, did the mayors of these cities not force the general public and the Connecticut state legislature to consider the fact that regional economic decisions made at the state level overwhelmed their ability to financially revitalize the city?

In the case of Hartford, black and white mayors have failed to comprehend the changes that should have occurred in the definition of the job of mayor. The traditional job definition of mayor is no longer functional. Mayors should have taken it as their duty to mobilize their constituents in behalf of greater state funding. Similarly, in cities with poor populations as large as New Orleans, mayors should also have become protest leaders, provided that is, that they wanted to alleviate the suffering of their residents. If it was true that New Orleans was historically financially strapped, the mayors of New Orleans should have used whatever means at their disposal to publicize the plight of their poor constituents. By silently managing their cities, these mayors helped to institutionalize the marginalization of their city's impoverished population.

Conservatism has been the dominant ideology of American national politics since the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976. For almost thirty years, the White House has been occupied by men who had no commitment to the revitalization of poor urban areas. Poverty is no longer viewed as an issue that can be or even should be addressed. Yet, during this ascendancy of conservatism, little protest activity has emanated from impoverished urban areas. It is as if a black face in the mayor's office conveyed to city residents a feeling of mayoral concern. If we are ever to begin a movement to attack poverty in America, it will necessitate confronting and challenging black elected officials, particularly black mayors. If we scholars of black politics are ever to contribute to the alleviation of urban poverty, we will have to jettison our long running romance with black elected officials.

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