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*CBC Monitor Report
When Being Silent Speaks Loudly – Part I
by Leutisha Stills*

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There are times when silence is considered golden, and there are times when being silent on the things that matter becomes a matter of life and death. As African-Americans, there are issues we simply cannot afford to be silent on, especially when it comes to the effectiveness of those who seek to be our representatives in Black Leadership.

Our ancestors knew the price of silence was too high to pay, and therefore, they spoke loudly; whether protesting the virulent racism they faced on a daily basis, or whether they spoke poetic verses that showcased and highlighted either pain or anguish, joy and triumph, or by simply keeping the faith and hope that our time was going to come. So, in 1969, Black America rejoiced, because it appeared that despite the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968, his much vaunted Dream for African-Americans was going to be realized through the 13 African-American members of Congress who became the vanguard of the Congressional Black Caucus.

From 1970 until 1994, when the Republicans ushered in their odious "Contract with America" in the mid-year elections, the Congressional Black Caucus for the most part did their job in advancing the issues and concerns relevant to Black America, and they also were very effective at raising their voices in protest of social injustice, while living up to their advertisement as "the conscience of the Congress."

As mentioned, 1994 was the year that the fractures in Black Leadership within the Congressional Black Caucus began to appear when Queens, New York representative, the Rev. Floyd Flake, decided he liked what Newt Gingrich was offering better than his own Caucus, and let it be known that he could be bought with corporate money. Others, such as Reps. Al Wynn, William Jefferson, David Scott and even the younger ones, such as Artur Davis, soon followed, without nary a peep in reprimand from CBC Leadership.

The Black Commentator – CBC Monitor Report: When Being Silent Speaks Loudly – Part I

It has been downhill for the Congressional Black Caucus ever since.

The current Chair of the CBC, Rep. Mel Watt (D–North Carolina), as well as several CBC members, use the excuse that because they are in the minority party in the House of Representatives and the U. S. Senate, they can't do any more than make their positions known to the opposition and Congressional leadership. They don't take a position on any legislation unless there is 100% unanimity. With 20% of the CBC politically sleeping with the enemy in terms of their voting records, how does Watt achieve the unanimity the CBC needs to function as a *Caucus*?

We African–Americans are literally being killed by ineffective Black Leadership in the body of Congress that advertises itself as the "conscience" of the Congress. And when I say "killed" I am talking about the egregious legislation that has passed through Congress in the past five years (the Bankruptcy Bill, CAFTA, Estate Tax Repeal, No Child Left Behind, authorization of billions of dollars to fight the Iraq War) that has the most devastating effect on Black communities. And they passed with assistance from those in the CBC who broke their pledge to represent our best interests!

The CBC does us no favor when they engage in circular firing squads of those within the Caucus that believe they have an obligation, a duty, to provide the most effective representation of the constituency that elected them. Which leads me to the point of discussion in this column.

Rep. Cynthia McKinney (D–Georgia) is one member of the CBC who has managed to shine like the brightly lit star that she is. She has remembered the oath she took to uphold the Constitution in providing representation not only to the constituency she represents, but on a national scale as well. For her commitment to truth, to justice, and to the American Way insofar as it relates to the poor, the disenfranchised, and the downtrodden, who are often African–Americans, she is subjected to ridicule, scorn, verbal abuse, and being shunned by members of her own Congressional Black Caucus.

We have seen McKinney subjected to being called a "bitch" on the Floor of the House by former Representative Cass Ballenger (R–North Carolina) who was part of the North Carolinian caucus that includes Rep. Watt. As far as what is on the written record, nothing could be found to indicate that any of the male members of the CBC made any attempt to defend McKinney from such a scurrilous attack by a White supposed colleague, even if they were in different political parties. In fact, Watt is on the record excusing Rep. Ballenger's outburst, and as far as we could research, there is no record Ballenger was ever censured for his outburst, which Roberts' Rules of Order, as well as Congressional House Rules, require.

Being called a "bitch" probably would have taken down any female member of the House of Representatives other than Cynthia McKinney. The fact that she returned to Congress in 2004, may have surprised many, but not those of us who know her. Even after the offense by Rep. Ballenger, McKinney continued to often call for Congressional hearings on issues that are of relevance to the African–American community, such as the 2002 hearings she convened relating to the assassination of Dr. King. As my resourceful colleague, Dr. Jared Ball, pointed out to me, NO ONE in Congress wanted to have *any kind* of discussion regarding Dr. King's assassination. Dr. Ball also pointed out the mass absence of CBC members from the hearing. It is ironic that in 2002, McKinney, facing a tough re–election challenge from former Rep. Denise Majette, would continue to engage in facilitating panels, hearings and discussions on subjects most of her CBC colleagues will not go near with a ten–foot pole.

When my colleagues and I decided we would do this column as a way to honor Ms. McKinney for her hard work and personal sacrifice, the word got out, and we received many, many emails in support of her, and many that urged us to write about everything McKinney suffered while she served in Congress and during the two years she was out of office. We at CBC Monitor believe that the DVD, "American Blackout" is a documentary that provides a powerful snapshot of just who Cynthia McKinney really is.

The CBC Monitor wants *BC* readers to know just what Ms. McKinney faces in her CBC caucus-imposed isolation, with few CBC members willing to stand with her.

Since McKinney's triumphant return to Congress in January 2005, she has lobbied House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi for restoration of her seniority she is due as a fifth, and now, sixth-term member of the House of Representatives. To date, McKinney has been denied, while three White members of Congress (two House members and one Senator, Democrat Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey) who were absent from Congress for from five to fifteen years, returned to Congress in 2004 and their seniority was restored with minimum fuss. So why is McKinney being denied restoration of her seniority?

Now, you might want to play the race card, and there may be an element of truth to playing it. However, there is something more sinister at work in this situation, and it bears highlighting. As reported in the February 16, 2006 issue of *BC*, radio commentator Jeff Blankfort of station KPOO, interviewed McKinney on July 12, 2005, when she stated:

"I was not successful in convincing Nancy Pelosi that my seniority was worth restoring.

"I was not involved alone in that effort. I am quite confident that there were hundreds, maybe thousands of emails sent from literally every point across this country, from the large urban areas of New York City, Chicago and San Francisco to the still urban but less populated areas like down here in Georgia and throughout the South. I know that there were people all over this country who were interested and who supported the reinstatement of my seniority.

"After all, it is exactly what happened with returning Republicans who came back in the class of 2005, who were sworn in with me. There was Dan Lungren of California, who had been out of Congress 15 years or so, and he returned to Congress as if he had not missed one day. That's because the Republican leadership saw fit to restore his seniority because they valued his experience.

"There was also Bob English from South Carolina, a Republican, who returned after one term out of Congress, just like me. He also was restored his seniority by the Republican leadership. That was not accorded to me and to the legions of people that supported me by Nancy Pelosi."

The *BC* article, which was first published in San Francisco's SFBayView.com, also indicated that because McKinney's seniority hasn't been restored, she has limited staff and resources with which to do her job. Now, if the Republican Party saw Dan Lungren's return as being so valuable that his seniority was restored after a 15 year absence from the House, why doesn't Pelosi view McKinney's contributions to the Democratic Party as being equally valuable?

Blankfort didn't stop at interviewing McKinney. He managed to catch up with House Minority Leader Pelosi at a town hall meeting in San Francisco on July 14, 2005, and asked her about the restoration of McKinney's seniority. That was obviously a question Pelosi didn't see coming:

"...Pelosi was in San Francisco two days later speaking at a packed town hall meeting at the Marina Middle School in the wealthy Marina district, as far away from Bay View Hunters Point as you can get without stepping in the Bay. At what turned out to be an abbreviated press conference, I told her what McKinney had said and asked her why she hadn't given her seniority back when she was re-elected to Congress. It was not a question she was anticipating.

"As a matter of course,' she responded, 'seniority is not given back when members come back to Congress.'

"I informed her that other members of Congress who had been re-elected after leaving office had been given their seniority and asked her who made the decision in McKinney's case: 'It's a decision of the steering committee of the leadership,' Pelosi coolly replied. "And so, I said, it was decided not to give Cynthia McKinney back her seniority, and that's when Pelosi became a bit flustered.

"Cynthia got ... uh ... Cynthia chose to leave the.... She chose, she left Congress ... uh ... she was voted out,' Pelosi stammered, 'But there's nothing, nothing there that says, when members come back, that other members should be disrupted in terms of their seniority.'

"Before I could ask her a follow-up question, she thanked the members of the press and left the room..."

Someone needs to ask Pelosi why she became flustered when confronted with the facts about restoring McKinney's seniority? Someone's also going to have to ask the *CBC Leadership* about its position on the restoration of their colleagues' seniority.

Now, remember, Congressman Watt told my colleague and founder of CBC Monitor, Niyi Shomade-Amusu, and me at CBC Legislative Weekend in September 2005, that where there's no unanimity, the Caucus takes no position on an issue. Does that extend to the restoration of the seniority status of a fellow CBC member like Cynthia McKinney? It has been mentioned earlier in this article that Mel Watt didn't come to McKinney's defense when she was called a "bitch" by a White colleague, so it would stand to reason that if he didn't bother to defend McKinney when she was being verbally slandered and attacked, he wouldn't have lifted a finger towards initiating any process that would restore McKinney's seniority.

The treatment of McKinney regarding this most important issue, the restoration of her seniority, should also sound a clarion call to the other female members of the CBC as well; that you are pretty much "ass out" should you lose your seat, then regain your seat in the House, if the current CBC leadership is any indication, not to mention that you are not going to have your honor defended by male CBC members if they do not believe your honor is worth defending, when you're attacked by other House or Senate colleagues on the Congressional floor.

Additionally, if this is what is passing as "Black Leadership" on the part of our elected officials, we need to question ourselves as to when did we start settling for such ineffective leadership and a reluctance, if not outright *arrogance*, on the part of CBC members, when groups like CBC Monitor begin to demand accountability, since the CBC states they are ensuring that the issues relevant to Black America are heard in Congress?

The greatest unanimity has come through struggle, after discussion and debate. While there may have been internal disagreement, people looked for common ground upon which to stand *together, and that is what they found*. Since we always choose to invoke the memory of Dr. King, we need to be reminded that his greatest triumphs came after his greatest struggle to get others to see, and agree with, his vision. In fact, my equally esteemed colleague, Rhone Fraser, points out in his article of March 16, 2006, that the greatest danger we face is being silent as a means of keeping order and peace while keeping white "pseudo" liberals or moderates, within their comfort zone.

Today, there is a reluctance – no, an outright fear – on the part of current Black leadership to engage in the process of struggle, like our forefathers did. There is no way that the founders of the Congressional Black

The Black Commentator – CBC Monitor Report: When Being Silent Speaks Loudly – Part I

Caucus would be silent on the important issue of restoration of a fellow colleague's seniority, because they would have realized that they needed their colleague, fully equipped and ready for battle. Therefore, a battle to restore a colleague's seniority would have been fought and won. Yet, the current leadership is so fearful of engaging in the process of achieving true unanimity – based on principles – they are paralyzed in terms of taking action, and have acquiesced to the directives of House Democratic Leader Pelosi, often to the detriment of CBC members like Cynthia McKinney. Pelosi has her own agenda, which does not include Black America, or even the progressive communities of America, as shown by her reluctance or failure to support brave members of Congress such as Jack Murtha, the CBC "Dean" John Conyers, Louise Slaughter, Lynn Woolsey as well as Cynthia McKinney, when they introduce resolutions on the House floor calling for the following:

- Iraq withdrawal,
- a hearing on the Downing Street Memos,
- hearings on the slow response to aiding Katrina victims,
- or a comprehensive report detailing and highlighting how Congress has become America's biggest brothel and her pimps are K Street lobbyists.

Pelosi is not only Minority Leader, she is a member of the *progressive* wing of the Democratic House Caucus, but given her current behavior, we might want to verify if she's still a member in good standing.

The process towards achieving true unanimity on the part of the CBC must begin with taking a position on the issue of McKinney's restoration of her seniority. We must ask the right questions – and not only groups like CBC Monitor. Here are the questions that other Black Leadership in the vanguard need to be asked:

Let's start with Dorothy Height, the venerable leader of National Council of Negro Women. Sister Height, what is your position on the restoration of McKinney's seniority? Are you willing to take a public stand and call someone in the CBC Leadership and light a fire under their behind to get them to address this issue?

What about the other sisters in the CBC, apart from Barbara Lee, Maxine Waters and Stephanie Tubbs–Jones (because these sisters stand with and support McKinney); what is *your* position on the restoration of McKinney's seniority? What have you done to address this? Have you formed a "Band of Sisters" and demanded McKinney have her seniority restored, because the next time this happens, it could be one of *you*?

Have you brothers in the CBC even *apologized* for failing to defend McKinney against the scurrilous attack of Cass Ballenger? It's too late to call for censure; the old bigot retired before you blinked, but an apology would be nice. A call for the restoration of her seniority would be even *nicer*.

Black America cannot afford your silence on this issue, or any other issue of relevance to us, for not only is your silence poisonous, but it is very deadly. Put aside your fear and become willing to engage in the process of discussion, debate, and the struggle to agree. Rise to the occasion; if you are victorious in what you may consider a small issue (restoration of McKinney's seniority), that is the foundation upon which to build to fortify and engage in battles in Congress on the issues that matter most to African–Americans. Your voices need to drown out the silence that threatens to be the downfall of what remains of the democratic process.

In the next Issue: "When Being Silent Speaks Loudly," Part II: How CBC leadership is complacent in following House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi's orders while disregarding their obligations to their own districts. Leutisha Stills can be reached at leutishastills@hotmail.com.

