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**President Obama, Rep. Maxine Waters and Targeted Public Policy
African American Leadership
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BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board**

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In this column, I have been promoting the need for targeted policies that are directed to the deep recesses that afflict the African American community in so many areas, especially now that the financial resources appear to be at hand to make a difference. Well, right on cue a question was directed to President Barack Obama at his Press Conference on April 29, by BET journalist Andre' Showell, who asked him, "...given this unique situation [where blacks face double-digit unemployment and communities of color experience a deep recession] what specific policies can you point to that will target these communities and what's the timetable for us to see tangible results?"

The president replied, "Well, keep in mind that every step we're taking is designed to help all people. But folks who are most vulnerable are most likely to be helped because they need the most help." He used the examples of unemployment insurance and health insurance and alluded to his general approach: "...if the economy is strong, that will lift all the boats as long as it is also supported by, for example, strategies around college affordability and job training, tax cuts for working families as opposed to the wealthiest that level the playing field and ensure bottom-up economic growth. And I'm confident that will help the African American community live out the American dream at the same time that it's helping communities all across the country."

However, President Obama does not seem to understand two vital things. First, because these vulnerable communities were suffering before the current set of crises, if they are to be made viable (and not go back to a "normal" state of disadvantage), it will take double the effort. Second, his theory seems to presuppose that African Americans and others have now - or will have - equal access to the resources that he has made possible, without state and local politics that favor whites and other groups. So, where are the supportive tools? Without them, no targeted strategies can be successful.

Perhaps the corrective tools exist in the Congress where Rep. Maxine Waters has long believed in targeted public policy as a most effective way to serve vulnerable

communities. Most recently, for example, in the debate over fixing the Home Foreclosure crisis in the House Financial Services Committee, she attached an Amendment to a bill (HR 1728) that directed 15% of the \$180 million set aside for mortgage and housing counseling would go to organizations that target such services to minorities and low-income homeowners.

In fact, in the recent legislative actions addressed to the financial and housing sector she has had an influence on several such measures. Two of the most important relate, first to Fannie Mae and Freddie Mack, the major housing agencies which now have a mandate in law to include minorities and women in responsible positions in the Agencies work forces. Second, a recent law also directs the Troubled Asset Recovery Program (TARP) to include minorities and women in the letting of contracts as: asset managers, servicers, property managers, expert consultants and other servicers.

So, it may be that Obama as President doesn't want to do the targeting, but instead, to appear race-neutral and let members of Congress direct the resources to the specific constituencies they believe need them. Well, that's ok, but I am still concerned about his theory of governance where minorities are concerned. The black community was the only one not to come back from the 2001 Bush recession to its pre-recession strength, so a rising tide certainly does not lift all the boats. This flawed theory emerged recently because during the last two years of the Clinton administration (1998-2000) when black economic growth briefly grew faster than the rest of the nation. This slogan however, has not held up as a general rule of economic growth.


For the Obama theory to work, the Justice Department and the Civil Rights offices in the cabinet agencies will have to level the playing field by enforcing a version of affirmative action that conservatives stifled during the Bush years. Even for Congressional targeting to work, Justice will have to enforce recent laws that intend for blacks and other vulnerable groups to have access to the resources flowing from the massive financial windfall that is underway. Otherwise, Obama's theory is just a slogan that covers up a multitude of sins.


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