

# THE JOINT CENTER

**PORTRAIT OF A BLACK THINK TANK**

**BY JUAN WILLIAMS**

**JOINT CENTER FOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STUDIES  
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies is a national nonprofit institution that conducts research on public policy issues of special concern to black Americans and promotes informed and effective involvement of blacks in the governmental process. Founded in 1970, the Joint Center provides independent and nonpartisan analyses through research, publication, and outreach programs.

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## Foreword

To commemorate the 25th Anniversary of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, we decided to ask award-winning journalist and political analyst Juan Williams to write an historical essay that would tell the story of this institution. *Portrait of a Black Think Tank* is the result.

Williams has succeeded in capturing the spirit of the Joint Center and presenting it in a way that enlightens without burdening the reader with technical details. He has chosen to talk about the people, events, and programs that he believes best describe the role and importance of the institution over the course of its history. Williams underscores the uniqueness of the Joint Center, the quality of its work, and its historical significance in the lives of African Americans and of the nation as a whole. We are indebted to him for his keen insights and assessments.

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## Politics As Power

**T**he Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies is twenty-five years old—and older.

By the calendar, it was created in 1970 to lend a hand to black leaders as they traveled an uncharted road from civil rights activism to mainstream American politics. At ten years old, the Joint Center had grown strong enough to begin work as one of the nation's leading think tanks—targeting its research and public policy analysis on life in black America. And now, at age twenty-five, the Joint Center has begun to spread out, extending its wings to Africa, where its political know-how and research offer a welcome hand to black nations beginning to find their own way on the road to democracy.

To grasp the Joint Center's significance in America and the world, however, it is necessary to go beyond the calendar and tap into the centuries-old idea of equality and the years of toil and hope that are the story of the black American freedom struggle. In this context the Joint Center takes on a sharper identity: It is part of something much older, an arc of justice that spans our nation's history. It is the heir to a rich legacy of activists and scholars—from the early abolitionists to the civil rights leaders of the Sixties—who have fought against racial injustice and for equal opportunity and inclusiveness. In the light of the arc of justice, the Joint Center looks much older



than a mere 25 years, much more like the continuation of a long tradition that began when Africans were first brought to America.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, W.E.B. DuBois had a political theory for black American progress: Pressure the federal government to honor its constitutional promise of citizenship for all its people. Booker T. Washington's emphasis was on economic development and education for black Americans. By the Thirties, Charles Houston and Thurgood Marshall were pursuing a legal strategy for black advancement. At mid-century, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., espoused a nonviolent movement clothed in the appeal of the Gospel.

Through this long, complex history involving many different strategies, tactics, and leaders, one consistent thrust has been evident: an emphasis on attaining equal rights that led to a focus on legal rights and increasing participation in citizenship. As we approach the end of the twentieth century, it is beyond argument that the presence of black politicians in city halls, state legislatures, and Congress has fundamentally changed the political imbalance between America's two major racial groups. Glaring economic and educational imbalances remain. But with voting rights in place, blacks now lay claim to leverage over politicians—Southern sheriffs as well as congressional reactionaries—and they seek and win offices and the reins of power in all areas of the country.

Exerting leverage, seeking and winning office, and gathering the reins of power did not come with an instruction book, however. The means had to be invented. In 1970, the Joint Center for Political Studies\* stepped into the breach as a guide.

\* When it opened its offices in 1970, the organization was called the Joint Center for Political Studies. It changed its name to the Joint Center for Political and *Economic* Studies in 1990.

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The Joint Center for Political Studies came into the world under pressure. Its singular focus on political empowerment



President Lyndon Johnson with Louis Martin, a founder and the first chair of the Joint Center's board of governors (1970-1981).

made it a target for critics. Coming in the wake of the political and social turmoil of the late Sixties, it was different from every other group trying to advance black America's cause. Here was an apostle for the nation's political system, heralding it as the right way, the sure way for black people to achieve racial equality. It differed from other organizations in another respect: It was not well known to the public and no one involved with it seemed to mind. The Joint Center did not compete with civil rights organizations for attention. It had no favorite among civil rights groups and no pick among people clamoring to be the top civil rights leader. The Joint Center was solely interested in maximizing the use of political power by black Americans by whatever legitimate means neces-

sary. And in focusing on political power, the Joint Center was happy to work with any and all groups and leaders, joining together the strands of disparate personalities and strategies.

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The Joint Center's initial entry into the struggle over race in America came just five years after passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and two years after King's assassination. The smoke was still clearing from riots that were consuming urban America. Richard Hatcher and Carl Stokes had been elected the first black mayors of major American cities in 1967,



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cutting a path for black politicians winning “first-ever” seats on school boards, city councils, and in state legislatures around the nation. The Joint Center’s aim was to strengthen the capacity of those newly elected politicians. It began by offering them information to increase their effectiveness and power, adding to their ability to serve their constituents. The idea was to move black politicians away from the distractions of police sirens and headlines that kept them dangling like puppets, pulled this way and that way by daily events, and put them in position to create lasting improvements for black Americans.

The Joint Center sponsored seminars to teach the administrative fundamentals to black political newcomers; it offered them a chance to get to know each other and share war stories. Where white politicians relied on the clubhouse wisdom of their political parties, or the research of universities and venerable think tanks,

black politicians found themselves adrift. These resources were not available to them and their communities. In the beginning, these new officials had neither the power to fight for what they needed nor a strong network of insiders to cover their flanks during political storms.

When the Joint Center was born in April 1970, most black officials were political street fighters, grabbing for power and a place in the two parties. In the aftermath of the chaotic 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, they had to force their way into both parties, making



Creating the Joint Center. Kenneth Clark, Frank Reeves, and Vernon Jordan at the 1969 Institute for Black Elected Officials.

enemies among the old white guard. There were few black party elders who could serve as role models, and black officeholders rarely knew each other from one state to another. White think tanks offered little to black politicians in the way of ideas specifically crafted to help them cope with a history of disadvantages.



President Richard Nixon with 1969 Institute Co-chairs: Nevada State Senator Woodrow Wilson, Alderwoman Louise Reynolds of Louisville, Kentucky, and California State Senator Mervyn Dymally. Kenneth Clark is in the middle.

The Joint Center met these needs, taking on the challenge of promoting black political participation, getting people to register and vote by showing them the power of that vote, and offering black politicians technical support and information. To the Joint Center, black political power amounted to a new epoch in the civil rights movement, and the black politician was the latest incarnation of the freedom fighter.

No one had addressed race as that kind of political problem before. Previously, the debate over race in American politics had been a conversation between white segregationists and white integrationists. With a burgeoning black vote, the demand for equality emerged as a new factor in the nation's political dynamic. How could politicians best use this new vote to promote that equality in America? There was no guiding light on the subject; the idea was too new. And then the Joint Center came on the scene.



The Joint Center clearly advocates black and white Americans working together. It is an integrationist vehicle. At its creation,



the Center was funded by the Ford Foundation, a largely white institution. It was intentionally attached to Howard University, a historically black institution, to achieve a solid academic footing.

The Center also speaks to an undying faith in American politics as an arena where black people, as citizens of the Republic, can make themselves heard and get fair treatment. To black politicians, the idea of the Joint Center spoke in lofty terms of brotherhood with white America, of a trust that a once-racist political system was capable of righting itself and becoming a guardian of equal rights.

Dr. Kenneth Clark, the renowned social psychologist, had a clear vision of the role black politicians could play in the future and used his voice and credibility to point the way to politics as the pathway to black progress. In discussions leading up to the Center's founding, Clark predicted that in the aftermath of the Sixties' tumult the political arena was where key decisions would be made to help or hurt the advancement of black Americans.

At a 1967 conference to discuss the civil rights movement's future, Clark said, "Elected Negro officials are now the only civil rights leaders who are representative of the aspirations, the desires, and the quest for answers posed by their constituents, and who are elected by their people to speak for them."

One person who personified Clark's instinct to invest in the American political system was Louis Martin. A newspaper editor at the *Michigan Chronicle* and later the *Chicago Defender* (from the Thirties through the Sixties), Martin dealt with powerful white and black politicians and businessmen.

Martin's network of high-flying contacts made him the choice of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Jimmy Carter as

their main White House adviser on issues affecting black America. One of the many hats he wore, as early as 1961, was that of deputy chairman of the Democratic National Committee.

Black and white politicians who wanted black votes and influence had to see Louis Martin. He had a national power base of political insiders. These were friends who called him "Louie," and usually said his name in one breath, as if it were a brand-name product: "Louie-Martin."

When the time came to create a new organization to bring black politicians and their supporters into the mainstream of American politics, Martin was the obvious choice to help create and develop such an entity. He was the unanimous choice to become the first chairman of the Joint Center's board of governors, a role he played until 1980 when President Carter brought him into the White House.



Vice President Eleanor Farrar and Eddie Williams in 1979.

In 1970, however, not everyone in the black community agreed with Martin or, indeed, with the idea of progress within the established system. At that historic moment, some black militant activists saw the idea of the Joint Center in outright negative terms. It did not appease their angry demands for black separatism or the fury of people prepar-

ing to hold off the police with guns. To these militants the Joint Center was merely a sop. It seemed to them that the institution would merely become a midwife for white efforts to increase the number of moderate accommodationist black politicians.



The fact is that the Joint Center's creation in 1970 was a bold statement by a corps of leading, older black Americans against more militant, often younger skeptics who were asking black Americans to separate themselves from white America. It was a rebuff to those who distrusted the political establishment, as well as those who agitated for change through mass protest movements intended to disrupt the democratic process. Essentially, the Joint Center's creation was confirmation by nationally prominent black leaders of the inherent potential of the American political system.

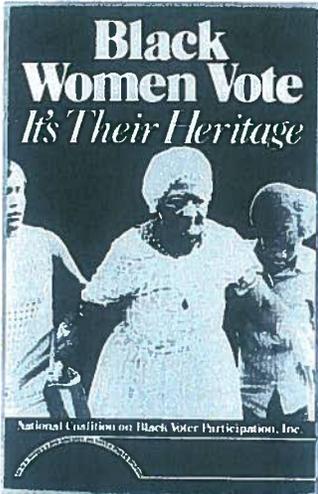
In a 1967 Ford Foundation press release heralding one of the first conferences of black elected officials, Percy Sutton, Manhattan's borough president and the highest ranking black municipal official in the nation, was quoted as saying, "The Negro official today faces a unique problem that we have to discuss. He wants to be forceful so he won't be billed as an 'Uncle Tom' and driven out of office by militants. But if he's forceful enough to attract his own people, he faces alienation in the white political structure as a firebrand; the Negro official has to work in that structure to accomplish anything for his people."

Frank Reeves, the Howard University Law School professor and political activist who would become the Joint Center's first executive director, contended that the reason to focus on black politics was to improve "the conditions of the ghettos against which we rebel." To Sutton and Reeves, increasing the number of black elected officials was a legitimate goal primarily because it also supported a better life for America's black population.

While the Joint Center was understandably important in the eyes of its founders and the newly elected black officials who were its first clients, the organization also received a ringing

endorsement from influential whites who opposed segregationist attempts to exclude black people from the political process.

From the white perspective (that is, of officials of government, foundations, and corporations), the Joint Center was a rebuke to black radicals. Here was the cream of white America, notably the Ford Foundation, giving an institutional badge of permanence, importance, and money to those black people who rejected alienation, violence, and separatism.



One of the posters produced by the National Coalition on Black Voter Participation advertising "Operation Big Vote."

There was little doubt about the sympathies of the top people at the foundation. President McGeorge Bundy had no love for black radicals; he was a former Harvard professor who served in key posts in both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Mitchell Sviridoff, who ran the foundation's National Affairs programs that funded the Joint Center, had led the United Auto Workers in New England and the AFL-CIO in Connecticut. Christopher Edley, a black lawyer trained at Harvard who had been an attorney at the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, was the officer in charge of the foundation's Government and Law program. Edley was the foundation's main contact with Kenneth Clark, Howard University, and the Joint Center.

These were no rabble rousers. They were mainstream leaders looking to do business with other thoughtful, successful leaders.

Consequently, from the moment it was born the Joint Center has never embraced controversial movement tactics. It has never been front and center at civil rights marches, although it

has provided behind-the-scenes support to all major black movements since 1970. Joint Center leaders do not delight in inflammatory rhetoric. The best known names on its board have been low-key power players—like Democrat Louis Martin and Republican Samuel Jackson—not TV personalities. And much to the discomfort of some of its liberal supporters, the nonpartisan Joint Center has never turned away from Republicans, not even conservative Republicans. In truth, the Center went out of its way to foster ties with both Republicans and Democrats as it sought connection to the power and resources of the white establishment, power and resources that could help black Americans.



*Jack Watson, President Jimmy Carter's assistant for intergovernmental affairs, Pauline Schneider, staff assistant, and Percy Sutton, a founder of the Joint Center, at the 1979 Annual Dinner.*

### *The Joint Center Emerges*

The Joint Center's strategy, whether considered conciliatory or shrewd, is rooted in history. Black Americans have always had to find friends in a variety of places, and the Center's founders knew it needed allies, whether they be liberals or conservatives, Republicans or Democrats.

In a 1969 draft proposal to create an Institute for Black Political Education (later to become the Joint Center), Sutton, Clark, and Martin, together with California State Senator Mervyn Dymally, who had organized the California Conference of Black Elected Officials, and Vernon Jordan, then

director of the Voter Education Project, and other black leaders wrote what sounds like a manifesto: “Two centuries of isolation and virtual exclusion from meaningful participation in the political process have resulted in a lack of interest, background, and training in practical politics on the part of the black community. Thus there is frustration and disenchantment among Negroes which has led to the advocacy of separatism, confrontation, and violence rather than participatory democracy as the more effective means of achieving the Negro’s legitimate goals in our society.”

The founders were also concerned about the crushing pressure on individual blacks who dared to say publicly that they favored using politics to advance the race. The pressure came not only from black militants, but from others, including journalists, who assumed that black politicians were trying to segregate themselves and become a separate political force. Clark and Sutton had to repeatedly emphasize to white reporters that a meeting of black politicians did not signal the start of a breakaway, racially separate third political party. The black politicians were simply coming together to work on improving their status and power as public officials, Democrats and Republicans.

There was one other major player whose concerns had to be taken into account before the new institution could become a reality: the Ford Foundation.

For the foundation, the idea of creating an organization for black politicians presented difficulties. At the time it funded the 1967 meeting of blacks in politics, the foundation openly admitted to concerns about creating “a guild of Negro elected officials—a trend precisely opposite to an integrated leadership community, which men of reason continue to seek.”



At the same time, however, the Ford Foundation—like the nation—was confronted by the reality of what Sutton described as American cities “convulsed with violence” and with the Black Power movement advocating that blacks not strive for a place at the table of American politics. The foundation realized it would have to live with its anxieties and would have to join hands with black political leaders.

Commenting on these times, Clark spoke about the conflicting “demands of ghetto constituents and the expectations of the white community,” seeking a quick end to riots and boycotts without a massive delivery of resources to the black parts of the city.

The challenge, Clark said, was to act “without either pandering to the latent racism of whites or being intimidated by impractical racial emotionalism of Negroes...” And on top of all that, black politicians had to worry about getting enough votes to win elections so they could have the privilege of being surrounded by critics, black and white.

The 1967 Chicago meeting of black officials, in spite of flamboyant rhetoric from some militants, had stood firmly in opposition to any suggestion of separatism. The participants confirmed support for an institution dedicated to black officials seeking mainstream political power. Two years later, 250 black elected officials met in Washington, D.C., to move that idea a step closer to fulfillment.

By the time the 1969 institute met, endorsements for creating an institution for black elected officials had also come from frontline groups in American politics, including the Republican National Committee, the Democratic National Committee, the National Urban League, the Voter Education Project, and the California Urban Affairs Institute, as well as Clark’s Metropolitan Applied Research Center (MARC).

The highlight of the 1969 meeting was an invitation to all participants to a White House reception hosted by President Richard Nixon. That the President took time to pose for pictures with the group in the Rose Garden gave the occasion additional importance in the eyes of the press and major donors, including the Ford Foundation.

In a report to the founders at the end of the 1969 meeting, Dr.

Eleanor Farrar, then director of the Washington office of MARC, wrote that one group, a small clique of angry black participants, had held closed meetings and began to build pressure on the larger group to be less moderate and “more political.” The report concluded with the following observation: “It seems to me that those of us who participated in this venture now have the responsibility to find permanent means to assist this group of over twelve hundred



John Hope Franklin, chair of the Committee on Policy for Racial Justice, with members Lisle C. Carter, former president of the University of the District of Columbia, and Mary Frances Berry of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

black elected officials to become more effective within their communities and more powerful as the representatives of their people.”

### The Early Years

The Ford Foundation shared Farrar’s perception and gave the Joint Center a two-year grant of \$820,000 to put it into operation. Howard University law professor Reeves was appointed its first executive director. Reeves was a long-time black political activist who had served as the Washington

representative of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund and had worked for a time as an assistant to President Kennedy and later with Clark at MARC. The board's first chair was Louis Martin. In addition to Clark and Farrar, the founding board included the president of Howard University, Dr. James Cheek; and Howard's vice president for academic affairs, Dr. Andrew Billingsley. Two Republicans, Massachusetts Senator Edward W. Brooke and attorney Samuel Jackson (who later became assistant secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development), were added to the original board to highlight the organization's bipartisanship.

The Joint Center's first board described the mission of the organization as follows: to increase the participation and effectiveness of blacks in American politics and government. This mission was to be achieved by three divisions:

**Research and Information**—To collect and distribute information on the names and positions held by black elected officials nationwide and on black political behavior and interests. It would also conduct issues research and produce a newsletter and other publications with data on black American politics.

**Education Services**—To develop and conduct training sessions and workshops for black elected officials.

**Internships and Fellowships**—To assign young Americans interested in government to public and private agencies and the offices of black elected officials for hands-on experience.

At the Center's first conference, an August 1970 meeting for black local elected officials in Virginia, William P. Robinson, a Norfolk State University political scientist and a representative to the state's General Assembly, declared: "This is a historic occasion, because for the first time in the history of our great

Commonwealth, black people will put aside rhetoric and sit down to discuss hard facts, the nuts and bolts of Virginia local government.”

Thomas I. Atkins, the first black member of the Boston City Council and a keynote speaker at the Virginia conference, urged black elected officials to master the “dynamics and mechanics of municipal government” so they could become inside players on the political scene.



The emphasis on the basics of politics was in keeping with the agenda set by Executive Director Frank Reeves. A loquacious, back-slapping man, Reeves was frequently

described as a traditional “race” politician who believed in racial solidarity as a strategy for mobilizing blacks. He spent most of his time reaching out to politicians around the nation and creating a network of black elected officials who saw the Joint Center as their common home. He sought to create a national network of political support that could be of help to any politician facing a problem.

Reeves’ formula for the politicians he advised was simple: He wanted them to mobilize black voters, encouraging them to take an active part in the political parties and take “control of politics at the grassroots level.” Speaking to the First Annual New York State Black and Puerto Rican State Legislators Dinner in Albany in 1972, Reeves went public with his game plan. He urged his listeners to “flood the precinct and ward



Jesse Jackson and Eddie Williams talk with Joint Center staff about the 1984 election results.



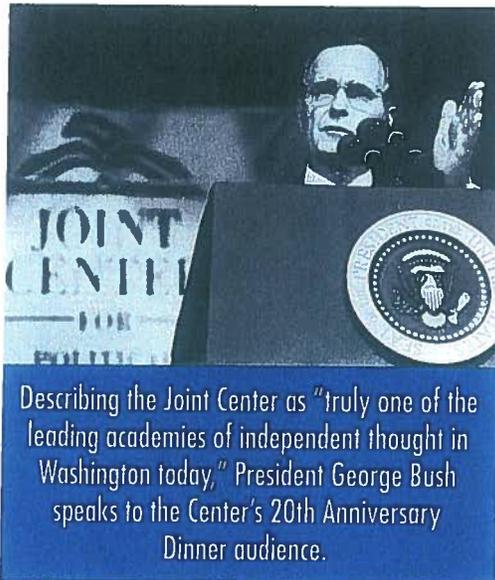
meetings with persons loyal to our cause—we must become the new precinct captains and ward leaders.”

As for the existing civil rights groups, church meetings, and social clubs in the black community, Reeves told the black and Puerto Rican politicians to help those organizations “recognize that their existence... makes them a potential political force.”

Endorsing traditional American politics for black people, Reeves said: “There is nothing wrong with the old politics when it is serving our interests.”

At the suggestion of Martin and other members of the board, Reeves started two publications that have since come to be closely identified with the Joint Center: *A National Roster of Black Elected Officials*, published annually; and the guidebooks to black politics, published quadrennially for use by the black delegates to the Democratic and Republican national conventions. Reeves also began another tradition that has lasted to this day: analyzing election results with a focus on contests of particular interest to blacks.

In spite of Reeves' success in getting the Joint Center off to a good start, initiating a much appreciated internship program and developing a far-flung network among black elected officials, he made little headway into research on



policy issues. The Ford Foundation and other funders became concerned about Reeves' almost total focus on politics and political issues. There was also worry over his lack of effort to cultivate relationships with corporations and newspaper and television reporters, who were considered key links to public and financial support.

By the spring of 1972, Reeves' emphasis on black political affairs to the detriment of other needs of the organization, combined with his intermittent poor health, led the board of governors, together with the Ford Foundation, to look for new leadership. Reeves resigned as executive director in June 1972.



In spite of doubts and criticism, Louis Martin and the other founders remained convinced of the continuing need for the Joint Center. While others pointed to the Democratic Party or to universities as sources to help black people acquire political skills, Martin stuck by his argument that the Joint Center's singular attention to black politics made it the only institution in American life that could be relied on to get that important job done.

The search for a new chief executive was on.

There was general agreement among all those involved that the new chief would have to inspire new confidence among funders and politicians and be able to attract new top-quality staff. They found their man in Eddie Williams, a former journalist with the *Atlanta Daily World* and *Chicago Sun Times*, who at the time was vice president for public affairs at the University of Chicago and director of the university's Center for Policy Study. Williams' ability to work with the press, to be a leader among blacks and whites, and to relate to both government officials and corporate executives made



him the choice of Martin, Clark, and the Ford Foundation as the best man to succeed Reeves in July 1972.

Williams knew the world of research, ideas, and debate. He had hosted the University of Chicago's television roundtable, where some of the institution's most esteemed professors discussed their work. Williams also knew Washington, D.C. He had been a staff assistant to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a foreign service reserve officer in the U.S. Department of State.

"When I made the decision to come here I thought about what it meant to get a black institution in place," Williams said in a recent interview. "As a young man I had a good education at the University of Illinois—white—served as an officer in the U.S. Army—white—got a fellowship from the American Political Science Association—white—worked for Congressman James Roosevelt and later for Senator Hubert Humphrey—white—the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the U.S. Department of State, and then the University of Chicago—all white. I said to myself, 'The Joint Center seeks to help blacks; maybe there is something I learned from white America that could be used to pursue this goal.'"

Williams' background in media and academia suggested that he would turn the Joint Center into an institution with a wider base of support among funders, politicians, and the public. With greater stability, the Joint Center could withstand changes in the political wind as well as criticism from followers of any year's radical chic.

### New Leadership

From the start, Williams spoke precisely and clearly about who he was and what the Joint Center would be like during his time as its leader. "Our aim," he wrote in the first issue of

*Focus*, the Joint Center magazine that he founded, “is to identify public policy issues that have implications for [black Americans]... to be both a center for intellectual discovery and a wellspring of practical political knowledge.”



Pandelani Nefolovhodwe, a leader of the Black Consciousness Movement and former South African political prisoner, speaks to Joint Center staff at a 1992 session of the Leadership Discussion Series. Milton Morris, vice president of research (left), served as moderator.

Elaborating on his vision for the Joint Center in a 1974 speech to the Public Affairs Council in Washington, D.C., Williams said this: “The civil rights movement of yesterday was built around and led by brilliant, charismatic personalities—Martin Luther King, Malcolm X. Today we are trying to build institutions whose momentum cannot be destroyed by an assassin’s bullet.”

To “institutionalize assistance to blacks in the political arena” while creating a permanent and trustworthy

source of research on issues of concern to blacks is still Williams’ primary goal. He is determined that the Joint Center should become a first-rate think tank, a permanent place for all to find information on how government programs and funding could be used to assist disadvantaged black Americans. Williams speaks openly of constructing the Joint Center as a “poor man’s Brookings Institution.”

As for the kind of leadership he planned for the Joint Center, Williams was equally direct. “I’m not another charismatic black leader,” he said in one speech soon after his arrival. “I’ve fought hard to keep people from stereotyping me and

seeing me in terms of the old style of black leader. The Joint Center is run more along corporate lines than a civil rights organization or advocacy-style group.”

In fact, the Center as envisioned by Williams would keep enough distance from any one black leader or movement to protect its independence.

Soon after his arrival, Williams began to strengthen and broaden the institution’s staff. He engaged Herrington Bryce, an economist and policy analyst and a former fellow at the Brookings Institution, to be the new research director, and he retained Republican Clarence Townes as director of governmental affairs.

In 1974, Williams hired Farrar, at the time MARC’s vice president, to become the Center’s vice president. Two years later, Kathleen Vander Horst was recruited from Johns Hopkins University to help raise funds.

“I tried to build this institution the way [Washington Redskins coach] George Allen tried to build football teams,” Williams said. “I went out and got the best person for the job.”

In addition to building a highly professional staff, Williams set about publicizing the Joint Center more effectively than ever before. Under his leadership the organization sent press releases to both broadcast and print media, and published books not only on political strategy but on policy issues, ranging from whether federal revenue sharing was benefiting the black community to the effectiveness of federal drug treatment programs.

At the same time, the Center held conferences in all regions of the country to provide officials with the expertise they needed to run a government, including how to prepare and implement plans and budgets. In addition to holding conferences, the



institution provided hands-on assistance to black elected officials in their local jurisdictions.

The Center's data on black America began to catch the attention of politicians, reporters, and policymakers of all races,



Joint Center Board Chair Andrew F. Brimmer (1990-1993) with George Knox of Philip Morris.

parties, and ideological stripes.

When one conservative senator from the South failed to receive some material from the Center, according to Williams, "his office called and raised holy hell."

Joint Center publications have also received attention from judges and lawyers, sometimes on opposite sides of constitutional issues. Thus, for example, in 1987 the state of Mississippi and opposing civil rights lawyers both cited Joint Center *Roster* data in *Push v. Allain*, a controversial voter registration case.



In May 1976, realizing that black participation in the upcoming Presidential election was likely to be dismally low, the Joint Center turned its energies to a new strategy. "Operation Big Vote," the popular name given to the newly organized, nonpartisan National Coalition on Black Voter Participation, was put together to increase voter registration and turnout. Williams, capitalizing on his role as an independent leader—not speaking for Democrats, Republicans, or civil rights organizations—championed the all-American ideal of full citizen participation in democracy.

With the encouragement and backing of Margaret Bush Wilson, then chair of the board of the NAACP, William Pollard, director of the AFL/CIO civil rights division, and representatives of more than twenty-five other national organizations, Williams led the charge to turn out the black vote. At a conference on this subject later that summer, Williams told the assembled preachers, heads of fraternal, civil rights, and labor groups, and black politicians that the value of voting had to be voiced loud and clear “in our speeches, sermons, and rhetoric—it should be heard in our conferences, in the media, in our schools, churches, and homes. It should become popular in private clubs as well as in pool halls and on street corners.”

In the November election of 1976, black voter turnout showed a considerable increase, particularly in the South, as a Democrat, Jimmy Carter, won the White House by a slim margin. Carter had drawn a substantial black vote. Four years later, the National Coalition again helped stimulate a large black turnout, though it would prove insufficient to keep Carter in the White House.

The National Coalition became an independent entity in 1982 and has survived to this day. It now includes eighty separate organizations among its members.

The year 1976 was crucial in the life of the Joint Center for yet another reason. Having been founded “jointly” by the Metropolitan Applied Research Center (MARC) and Howard University, program oversight rested with MARC, while administrative and financial control were Howard’s responsibility. In time, the



United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali at a 1994 symposium on ethnic conflict cosponsored by the Center and the National Defense University.

Center found these administrative arrangements increasingly restrictive. After extended negotiations with the university and the Ford Foundation, it became an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan institution in October 1976. The first major transformation in the corporate life of the Joint Center had been completed.



There was another factor pressing even greater change on the Joint Center. By the late Seventies a new generation of black politicians was coming into office. These younger, better-educated politicians were less likely than their immediate predecessors to be tied to the civil rights movement or to the clergy. Increasingly, black politicians were people with law degrees and with business and corporate experience. Some had attended the best colleges and universities. Their constituencies were both black and white, and some of the officials had even come up through ward politics and been rewarded for their service by the once-segregated political parties. Those belonging to this new breed of black politicians were still concerned about protecting civil rights, but they were equally concerned about the economic issues plaguing impoverished neighborhoods: the problems of poor public schools, drug abuse, and crime.

During this same period, black mayors and state legislators as well as public officials at other levels started to form their own groups, such as the National Conference of Black Mayors and the National Caucus of Black State Legislators. The Joint Center had helped all these organizations get started, but now the groups were able to function on their own and take on responsibilities previously managed by the Center.

Times were quickly changing, and Williams would have to figure out how to keep the institution a step ahead of the fast-paced events of the early Eighties.





To look at the future, the Joint Center convened a special conference in December 1980, including educators, lawyers, journalists, and public officials. Among those in attendance were Wiley Branton, dean of the Howard University Law School; Judge Robert Carter; Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund; Eleanor Holmes Norton, chair of the EEOC; Basil Patterson, Secretary of the State of New York; social psychologist Thomas Pettigrew; and Roger Wilkins of the *Washington Star*. They were familiar with the history of the Joint Center and anxious to help plan its next steps.

Williams wanted the institution to have a stronger voice in the debates over the nation's social and economic policy. How could the Joint Center best do that?

After the meeting, the participants issued a joint statement agreeing that "obtaining leverage on political, social and economic issues is fundamental to all other matters; that blacks must regain the initiative on race-related policy issues through access to and use of data; that translation of political participation into economic benefits is essential"; and that advancement was not to be limited to "the language of civil rights but also [encompass] fundamental opportunities for economic advancement."

The push to reorient the civil rights efforts of the Eighties with added emphasis on economic issues gained additional momentum when Williams asked Clark, who was still a member of the Joint Center's board, and the eminent historian Dr. John Hope Franklin to write an essay on the nature and status of black



General Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, discusses his thoughts on the changing role of the U.S. military with Joint Center staff during a meeting of the Leadership Discussion Series.



progress. The essay was to serve as both a retrospective assessment and a starting point for looking ahead.

After recounting some of the progress made by blacks during the Sixties and Seventies, Clark and Franklin concluded that “a significant number of black people are still left out and seem likely to stay that way. In short, a black underclass has become a permanent feature of American society.” To deal with the problem of economic progress, they continued, “requires a united effort on the part of the entire black community—a national black consortium.”

### Research and Public Policy

Clark and Franklin were pointing the way to a new type of black rights organization, something outside the mold of civil rights groups, beyond support for “charismatic” black leaders.



Chairs of the Joint Center's board of governors Wendell G. Freeland (1981-92) and George L. Brown (1993-present) with Eddie Williams.

The authors boldly stated:

“The cult of personality among black political and civil rights leadership no longer serves black interest and is a pathetic residue of the past.”

The Joint Center and its leadership were listening to the comments and advice that emerged from the deliberations of the December group, from the pens of Franklin and

Clark, and from its own in-house discussions. In 1981, with the support of its board of governors, the organization once again refined its agenda, choosing to become a full-blown public policy think tank. The Joint Center would still offer

support to black politicians, but its research scope would be extended to embrace urgent social and economic issues.

The focus now was on developing the capacity to produce reliable research and public policy analyses, yielding data that could be used by politicians and policymakers—black and white—to help all America in dealing with issues of race, poverty, and disadvantage, regardless of liberal or conservative affiliations.

In a 1981 issue of *Focus* magazine, Williams wrote: “To be successful, [black Americans] must know the right questions to ask and the right answers to give. We must know more about ourselves and the society as a whole and be able to formulate policies which are at once responsive to our needs and to those of the nation.”



Yasumasa Hirasawa, associate professor, Osaka University, speaks at a Joint Center symposium on the status of ethnic minorities in Japan.

The key to this transition, Williams decided, was finding the right person to direct the Joint Center’s research and to make certain that the organization was analyzing important subjects with first-rate scholarship. In 1979 he asked

Dr. Milton Morris, the first black researcher at the Brookings Institution and a former public policy fellow at the Joint Center, to take the job. Morris, a political scientist by training, had a special interest in black political behavior as well as immigration policies and issues of diversity. Today he directs a staff of seventeen scholars representing a number of different disciplines.

“After 1981, policy research and its dissemination became our primary focus,” Morris said in a recent interview. “Black elected officials were very pleased with the new direction. It was a departure from our earlier emphasis, but not a radical departure. Black officials moved from having one set of expectations of us to having another set of expectations.”



From the outset of its new incarnation as a think tank, according to Morris, the Joint Center sought to make its research a distinctive blend of active engagement with timely policy issues, on the one hand, and dispassionate analysis of deep-rooted social problems, on the other. He pointed to the Center’s work on voting rights as an example. Renewal of the 1965 Voting Rights Act emerged in 1981 as a controversial issue in which the African American community had a great stake. The Joint Center assembled a team to deal with its own information needs on the subject, but also worked hard—behind the scenes—to advise and assist others who were on the front lines of the legislative struggle seeking not only the Act’s renewal but a broadening of its application.

Simultaneously, the Center pulled together a group of scholars to study the lingering and increasingly subtle practices that continued to bar black citizens from the full expression of their vote. The result was a book entitled *Minority Vote Dilution*, edited by Chandler Davidson of Rice University, still considered the definitive work on the subject. When the 1982 voting rights law reached the U.S. Supreme Court in *Thornberg v. Gingles* four years later, the High Court cited this Joint Center book extensively in what became one of the landmark voting rights decisions of the Eighties.

In short, the Joint Center had taken on a new approach to addressing black voting issues. Just as it had responded in 1976 by forming the National Coalition on Black Voter



Participation, in the early Eighties it responded with research. It produced study after study on obstacles to voting, strategies for mobilizing black voters, and the political attitudes of black Americans, as well as documents dissecting critical elections involving black candidates.

In the mid-Nineties the Joint Center is engaged in studying yet another aspect of voting rights. It is examining the controversial issue of redistricting as a tool, to determine whether it helps or harms black political power to redraw district lines as the 1982 voting rights act mandates.

In addition, it is pursuing its long-term commitment to building coalitions across racial and ethnic groups. "If you look at the Joint Center's mission statement," Morris noted, "it calls for building such coalitions. That is because they can enhance the power of African Americans and because making diversity work is vital to our own well-being as Americans."

Starting in the early Eighties, the Joint Center began looking at black relations with Hispanic, Jewish, and Asian Americans, as well as with the Japanese. The Center cosponsored conferences, published academic papers, and featured articles in *Focus* on coalition building.

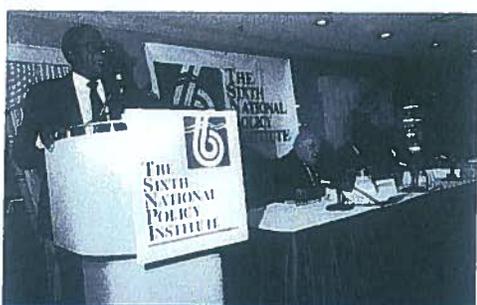
When Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakosone made insulting remarks about African Americans in the fall of 1986, prompting vigorous protests by black Americans and others, the Joint Center did not just protest; it held a number of discussions to air the issues raised. Participants in these discussions included Japanese and American scholars and businessmen as well as government officials.

The Joint Center maintains an active working relationship with key organizations in the Jewish community as well. Matters of mutual interest, from affirmative action to the

Crown Heights riot in New York City, were discussed at meetings leading to joint publications. Morris, who spearheads the Center's work on black-Jewish relations, sees it as a vital part of the emphasis on coalition-building across ethnic lines. "Not only has there existed a long, productive relationship beneficial to both communities, but even today the two groups are closer in voting behavior and issue orientation than any other two groups in American society."

Throughout the Eighties, the Joint Center focused more and more attention on the African American community's economic condition. Its scholars were finding that even during

this decade of nationwide growth, the poverty of black families, particularly of children, was deepening. Joint Center data also showed that the yawning racial gaps in wages and employment were not narrowing. By the end of the decade, the Center had brought a stream of facts and insights to the public debate, including its work on black economic progress and analyses of minority entrepreneurship.



Eddie Williams discusses 1992 election strategies, candidates, and issues, with journalists Jack Germond (*Baltimore Sun*), Clarence Page (*Chicago Tribune*), and Juan Williams (*Washington Post*).

In 1986 the Joint Center recruited Dr. Margaret Simms from the Urban Institute to head up its economic research. Four years later the Center added the word "Economic" to its name. Williams explained this change succinctly: "If blacks were better off economically, there are reasons to believe they would be better off socially. It is not surprising, therefore, that strengthening the role of blacks in the American

economy is widely viewed as the nation's most important unfinished civil rights agenda."

The growth of the organization's research on social policy has paralleled the growth of its economic research, especially regarding the conditions of young black males and children. The Center has shed much needed light on the inadequacy of America's social policy, particularly in comparison to that of other Western democracies.

"One of the fascinating things," said Morris, "is that, as the Joint Center has grown, we have become not only black America's think tank, but one that other countries and communities in the black world tend to look to for answers to their own development problems. Lately the Joint Center has been working in several African countries, helping them to build viable democratic institutions."

Under the direction of Dr. Pearl Alice Marsh, an outstanding South Africa specialist, the Joint Center has brought South Africa's emerging political parties together for training and other nonpartisan activities. "In 1995, we will expand our role," said Morris, "as we help to develop local, nonpartisan research capability in South Africa. In a sense we are sharing with others our own long experience in assisting newly-enfranchised populations become active participants in the political arena."



Eddie Williams greets President Bill Clinton at the 1993 Annual Dinner. Clinton told the guests, "I can assure you that the Joint Center will sit at my table for as long as I am here."

In addition to paying a good deal of attention to developing African countries, the Center's international programs also focus on African Americans' participation in U.S. foreign policy and in the nation's military, as well as the impact on the black population of U.S. trade policy and international competition.



Looking to the future and its growth as a research and policy analysis institution, the Joint Center created the Committee on Policy for Racial Justice. The group consists of twenty-five distinguished black scholars called together to look at the problems confronting the black community in the Eighties and to propose ways of dealing with them.

The committee first met in July 1981, chaired by John Hope Franklin and Kenneth Clark. In its first essay, *A Policy Framework for Racial Justice*, the group concluded, "The most urgent problems facing excluded blacks can best be addressed by focusing on three areas: the progress of the economy, the condition of the black family, and educational opportunity."

The committee has published three additional essays, including *Black Initiative and Governmental Responsibility*, released in 1987. This publication has been widely acclaimed as a major contribution to framing a debate on the black community's needs.

Analyzing basic premises underlying "the public discussion—and confusion—about black community directions today," the committee wrote:

Pervasive and persistent poverty has eroded but not destroyed the strong, deep value framework that for so long has sustained black people. These values—among them family, education, and hard work—are so deeply held that they remain and can be explicitly tapped today... [They] can be the basis for a newly-energized and expanded effort from within the black community to



tackle a new variety of unusually resistant social and economic problems.

The committee's vision and its focus on the values and strengths of the black community speak directly to many of today's crucial issues and have helped the Joint Center widen its perspective and its agenda.

### Think Tank for 2000 and Beyond

Today in the nation's capital, the Joint Center fills a critical niche. It is a reliable source of data and analysis on key racial and social issues affecting blacks, and its research is always available to public officials, black and white. For example, after the organization released a study on the black family, Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan phoned Williams and invited him to his office. Moynihan explained that years earlier, in the late Sixties, he had been excoriated and unfairly called a racist for a groundbreaking book he had written on the problems of the black family. Now that a scholarly, reputable, black research center had done similar work, the rage and fire of racial anger around the research had cooled. According to Williams, Moynihan said, "You've opened the door so we can get something done." Then, Williams added, "We began to talk about policies that could help black families."

The accomplishments of the Joint Center make it clear that independence, flexibility, and adaptability lie at the organization's soul. The Center serves the black American community, but it is not a black organization. It supports black politicians, mostly Democrats, but it is not a political group. It is deeply concerned with politics, but it has no party affiliation. It is usually associated with liberal causes but has strong supporters among conservatives. And it is not afraid to take a stand on issues such as the Census undercount, voting rights, and most recently the North American Free Trade

Agreement, which the Center supported when many in the Congressional Black Caucus opposed its enactment.

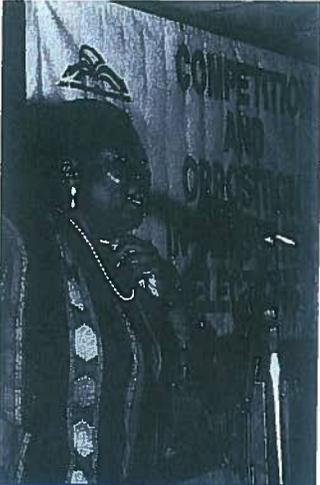
"I don't think you can be totally out of sync with black leadership," says Williams. "But you can say, 'Let us not get locked into democratic liberal ideology to the point that problems cannot be solved.' If a Republican conservative like [Speaker of the House Newt] Gingrich is talking about welfare reform and you also support welfare reform and if both sides are reasonable, there are perhaps some things you can agree on. But you've got to talk."

Broad-gauged think tanks, Williams believes, pride themselves on being independent in thought. "It is important that we not be perceived as being in anyone's hip pocket."

The Center's independence and flexibility are not to be confused with an absence of core beliefs. It has never moved away from its first principles: a commitment to helping black Americans become a power in American politics. It has always been keyed into black politics and still is. It has always been committed to helping black people swim in the political mainstream. From the beginning, the Joint Center has been an interracial organization, open to coalitions even when the political climate was hostile to talks of bridge-building between the

racess or between political factions.

One of the problems for the Joint Center has been its lack of a ready-made public identity that is easily recognizable when people first come across it. It is not a household name, it



Pearl Alice Marsh, manager of the Center's South Africa project, speaks to representatives of that country's political parties at a January 1994 forum in Capetown.

does not have the history and visibility of traditional civil rights organizations, and yet, as a black think tank, it plays a unique role in the advancement of African Americans and the nation as a whole.

In an age that insists on easy political labels, the Joint Center has avoided being categorized. It has close relationships with black leaders who often are considered part of the civil rights movement. It has developed collaborative programs with diverse groups and institutions. And always, sometimes in the background and at other times out front, there is the Joint Center's ongoing relationship with black elected officials—as individuals and as organized entities.

This continuing connection between the Center and its earliest constituents finds expression, at the start of every Presidential election year, in a National Policy Institute held in Washington, D.C. These institutes mirror the early meetings that led to the founding of the Joint Center. They respond to the current interests of black

public officials, allowing them to exchange views on national issues as well as to devise strategies on how to influence public debate in an election year.



Host Jim Lehrer, political analysts Peter Hart and Linda Dival, syndicated columnist Mark Shields, and Eddie Williams discuss the upcoming 1994 elections on the *MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour*.



Consistency and credibility are perhaps the organization's most valuable and carefully protected assets. Over the years the Joint Center has succeeded in establishing lines of trust,

understanding, and communication among the nation's minority groups, including African Americans of diverse views, and among supportive whites.

"The myth that gains for one group mean losses for another must be dispelled," Williams wrote in *Focus* magazine in 1992. "We must be willing to respect, accommodate, and support the distinct needs of other groups even when our own interests are not at stake."

The words of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., spoken after the long voting-rights march to Selma, would seem to capture the Joint Center's place in history. Standing on the steps of Alabama's state capitol, King pointed out that to deny the black man his right to vote was to deny America the chance to be "a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience." Anticipating passage of the Voting Rights Act a few months later, King warned his listeners that there would still be hard work ahead, getting black voters registered and accustomed to going to the polls. King's words come alive today as if he were speaking of the Joint Center's steady hand and its commitment to the future:

The road ahead is not altogether a smooth one. There are no broad highways to lead us easily and inevitably to quick solutions. We are still in for a season of suffering... [but] however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth crushed to earth will rise again. How long? Not long!... because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.

The flexibility of the Joint Center fits with that moral universe. The Joint Center may bend, but like the arc it "bends towards justice."

## About the Author

**P**olitical analyst Juan Williams is a national correspondent for *The Washington Post*, where he has also served as an editorial writer, columnist, and White House reporter. He is the author of the nonfiction bestseller *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*, companion volume to the highly praised PBS series.

Williams' writing has appeared in *Fortune*, *Ebony*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The New Republic* among other publications, and he has been a commentator on numerous television programs.

He is currently working on an authorized biography of the late Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall.