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FOCUS

The monthly magazine of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

Young Black Males: Alternative Choices

Social and Economic Factors Contribute to the Growing Number of Inner-City Youth Turning to Violence

Politics and the Legacy of Malcolm X

New Film, "Malcolm X," Has Sparked a Debate Over Who the "True" Malcolm Was, Reflecting Long-Standing Tensions Among Blacks

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POLITICAL TRENDLETTER®

Perspective

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After 20 Years Questions Remain the Same

In November, *FOCUS* quietly celebrated its 20th anniversary. With the election of Governor Bill Clinton as president, the dramatic expansion in the number of black members in Congress, and the continuing increase in the number of black elected officials in general, November was indeed a propitious month to make our milestone.

For the past two decades, *FOCUS* has reported and analyzed shifts in political power at the national, state, and local levels, and it has been a major conduit of communication between blacks and policy makers of all stripes. Echoing the mission of the Joint Center, which was founded in 1970, *FOCUS* has helped to document for the nation the nature and extent of blacks' participation in the political and economic life of our society.

The first *FOCUS* featured an article titled "Guess Who's Coming to Congress." The piece profiled Yvonne Braithwaite Burke of California, Barbara Jordan of Texas, and Andrew Young of Georgia as the new additions to the Congressional Black Caucus, bringing the caucus' total to 16. In November 1992, 17 new black candidates were elected to serve in Congress: 13 filling new House seats, three replacing outgoing incumbent black members, and one elected to the Senate. In the House, there are now 39 black members, 9 percent of the 435-member body.

As stated in the first issue of *FOCUS*, our mission is "to identify public policy issues which have implications for our constituents, to analyze and clarify those issues, to illuminate the minority perspective, and to suggest alternative policies or strategies for consideration by political activists and decision-makers." In large part, this has meant helping the nation's growing cadre of black elected officials (2,300 in 1972, nearly 8,000 today) meet the increasing demands upon them to produce policies, programs, and resources for their constituents.

Against the backdrop of a changing political landscape, the Joint Center also has evolved. On our 10th anniversary in 1982, Ronald Reagan was in the White House, black elected officials numbered 5,160, and *FOCUS* analyzed Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley's unsuccessful gubernatorial bid in California.

In Perspective that year, I posed several challenges that continue to confront us. First, what is the proper role of government in a democratic society—what is the right "balance between public and private interests, between federal and state authority, between government protection and government interference...?" And second, "Where will leadership come from, particularly in our own community, in the years ahead? What individuals and institutions will we turn to for knowledge, commitment, and courage in our search for a just society? We all agree that the days when a single individual or a small group of individuals could speak for the black community are long gone. And yet we must have leaders who can help bring coherence and unity to our cause."

As President-elect Bill Clinton prepares to take control of the government in January, and as the number of black elected officials approaches 8,000, these challenges are as relevant now as they were 10 and 20 years ago. Both the leadership of the nation and the leadership of black America are in the process of transition. As these transitions unfold, the Joint Center will continue to offer the highest level of research and analysis we can provide. We will do so with the high standards set out in my first Perspective when I declared that we would be "a center of excellence—an organization whose ability is unquestioned and whose credibility is beyond reproach." ■



PRESIDENT

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Young Black Males: Alternative Choices

Social and Economic Factors Contribute to the Growing Number of Inner-City Youth Turning to Violence

by John Wilson, Jr.

Like all men in the United States, African-American men are defined by their ability to generate income. The roles they assume are shaped from infancy by the perception that they will grow into adulthood to assume a role as a major contributor to the economic well-being of their families. However, since the 1960s, there has been a substantial decline in the ability of African-American men to maintain employment, resulting in a decline in the black labor force participation rate that is more than twice that of whites. Consequently, the ability of African-American men to assume their expected roles in their families is diminished substantially.

No Income, High Poverty Rates

Black men's inability to generate an income contributes to the high proportion of black children under the age of 18 living in poverty. In 1990, of the more than 2.5 million black families headed by a female with children under 18, over 56 percent were living in poverty. In comparison, of the more than 2 million married black families with children under 18, only a little over 14 percent were living in poverty. Over 44 percent of the nearly 10 million black children under the age of 18 lived in poverty in that same year. As a result, we see a situation where African-American children living in poverty are likely to come predominately from single-parent, female-headed households, and middle-income black children are likely to come from families headed by a husband and wife.

A large proportion of single-parent, female-headed households are comprised of women who have children but have not married the fathers of their children. Many of these mothers have concluded that, while giving birth to a child will have its benefits, there is little that can be derived from marrying a man who cannot contribute to the economic welfare of the family. Their perception of African-American men as having limited economic potential is borne out of the high visibility of African-American men who are out of work. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, over a quarter of African-American men, age 20-24, are unemployed during 1992.

The fact that such a large proportion of African-American men are unable to secure adequate employment has consequences for families which cannot rely on fathers as a source of income. It consigns families to a life of poverty and has left many families with a sense of hopelessness. One wonders how these conditions affect the manner in which children come to assume adult roles. More specifically, how do these conditions influence the adult roles African-American males come to assume?

Educating Young Black Males

In the United States, education is considered a primary avenue for improving the quality of life. The United States has a storied history of immigrants disembarking with the belief that they could change their life conditions by getting a good education and working hard. Although many immigrant groups have been able to improve the quality of their lives, that dream has escaped many African Americans, most of whom were born in this country.

Educating children who live in poverty is compounded when they come from a single-parent, female-headed household. In 1988, close to 80% of all African-American children under 18 years of age living in poverty came from single-parent, female-headed households. Single mothers must find a balance between "bringing home the bacon" and nurturing their children's development. They are often forced to devote more time to children's financial support than their educational development.

According to a study by the National Center for Health Statistics, children who grow up in families without both biological parents present are likely to have more behavioral problems in school, to be suspended more, and to be more likely to be expelled or to drop out from school. The problem is exacerbated when, as is sometimes the case, a single parent has not had a successful school experience. Even with the best of intentions, this parent is not likely to be able to provide the kind of assistance a child will need to negotiate new and sometimes confusing learning experiences.

Nearly half of all African-American eighth graders live in conditions that put them at risk of school failure. According to data published by the U.S. Department of Education, over 46% or almost half of all African-American eighth graders live in single-parent families. Another 47% of African-American eighth graders live in poverty. The combination of living in a single-parent family and in poverty has placed 44% of African-American eighth graders at risk of school failure.

These figures have serious implications for the success

(Continued on page 4)

Dr. Wilson is a senior research associate at the Joint Center and is heading research on the crisis of black male youth.

Black Males

(Continued from page 3)

of African-American children in school and for the remainder of their adult lives. When children fall behind grade level, their risk of dropping out of school increases. Where white students who drop out of school are more likely to return and complete school by age twenty-six, that has not been the pattern for African-American students who leave before completion.

African Americans who leave school before completion have limited options. Young black males with poor credentials, who are trying to make the transition into adult roles, find themselves facing low-wage job offers and high unemployment. Many abandon the labor force completely. If they are unable to find employment due to their lack of specialized education or training, they must rely on some sort of alternative method of survival. For most, that translates into hustling for a living. Black men who do not have a high school diploma are more likely to become involved in the underground economy. As a result, this option has made African-American males vulnerable to a "lock-em up" prison policy. Consequently, the number of African-American males between the ages of 20 and 29 in prison is greater than the number of African-American males enrolled in any type of higher education program.

Looking Ahead for Hope

From the perspective of a young African-American male, the future is a dismal prospect. The victories of the Civil Rights Movement were, at best, hollow victories. Many young black men in urban environments attend schools and live in communities that are segregated, have a quality of education that pales in comparison with suburban schools, and have no thoughts of growing old because they do not believe they will live beyond the age of 25. With so many African-American youth defining themselves by the environment from which they come, many will never have any idea about how to achieve their goals through society's mainstream. They come in contact with very few people who are achieving the goals to which many youth ascribe by conventional or traditional means.

This fatalistic attitude of young black males in inner cities is the result of a sense of hopelessness. They live in a world where only the strongest survive. They feel they only have an obligation to do for themselves. In addition, there are many who have come to want the American Dream, and all that comes with it, as quickly as possible. They want it instantly, even if only the fittest survive.

Displaced Anger

Young black men's idea of the American Dream is defined by television and music videos. While these images help them to define what is "important," it also is the source of a great deal of frustration. This frustration is the result of not knowing how to achieve their goals. They don't know how to: set a long term, legitimate goal; identify the legitimate methods to acquire the resources they will need to achieve their goal; work for that goal; and marshall the resources available to them to purchase the items they desire.

Psychologist Louis Ramey describes what he calls a "free-floating anger" that saturates the African-American community. This free-floating anger is characterized by feelings of anger that any small provocation can ignite. It is accompanied by feelings of frustration, helplessness, and hopelessness. Ramey believes that race and class place African-American males so far outside the economic and social mainstream that finding a place within this framework is impossible. As a result, they feel such a sense of isolation and neglect they are left feeling perpetually irritable. The anger that young black males may feel because of a bleak future will build and stew until it becomes necessary to displace it. Unfortunately, this displaced anger is usually exacted on another male within the African-American community.

A lost sense of hope, a misdirection of goals and energy, and a false impression of what it means to be successful will plague young black inner-city men unless the environment from which they come is improved. The impetus for change will come from new economic measures that will encourage employment opportunities in the black community and a revitalization of the entire education system that will provide practical incentives for learning and reinvestment in children's futures. ■



Joint Center Hosts Conference on Black Males

On January 14, the Joint Center will hold a one-day conference on the plight of young black males in America. The conference, "Reclaiming Our Youth: Challenges to Black Male Development," will feature several panel discussions that focus on innovative community programs for black male youth as well as examine the different stages of black male development, from early childhood through adolescence.

POLITICAL TRENDLETTER

Inside This Issue:

- Joint Center President Eddie N. Williams and Vice President for Research Milton Morris analyze black voter turnout in the November election.
- The Supreme Court rules that Mississippi has not done enough to desegregate its colleges and universities.
- Joint Center poll reveals that both black and white Americans view the economy, education, and health care as major concerns.
- Across the Nation: Sandra Kennedy becomes the second black woman to be elected to the Arizona state senate; Michigan's mayoral election is heating up; Jim Hill is elected the first black state treasurer in Oregon; and Hampton, Virginia elects its first black sheriff.

Blacks and the 1992 Election

The following analysis is excerpted from a paper written by Joint Center President Eddie N. Williams and Vice President for Research Milton Morris titled, "African Americans and the Making of the Clinton Victory."

High Black Voter Turnout

Despite the sharp downturn in black turnout during the presidential primaries, black voters had a dramatic impact on the presidential election in November. Most indications are that about one million more blacks voted in 1992 than in 1988, and therefore turnout may have been several percentage points higher than in 1988. State-by-state data indicate that although turnout by blacks varied widely across the country, it was mostly up. Of 21 states and the District of Columbia that together contain about 90 percent of all black votes, the actual number of black votes cast exceeded that for 1988 in 15 states and the District of Columbia, while it fell in the remaining six. For example, black turnout fell by 40 percent in Pennsylvania, while in Illinois and Texas it increased by 89 and 82 percent, respectively. It is particularly noteworthy that in 12 of the 21 states the black share of the total votes cast was higher than in 1988, indicating that, in these states, black turnout may have increased more than that of the rest of the electorate.

While reasons for the fluctuation in black turnout across states are not entirely clear, indications are that black voting increased where black candidates were running for statewide or federal offices, or where the presidential contest was highly competitive. In Pennsylvania, for example, which had the highest falloff in black voting, no black candidates were running for major new offices and President-elect **BILL CLINTON** held a strong lead throughout the campaign. There was a highly competitive Senate race, but blacks appeared to have been more divided than mobilized by it. Incumbent Republican Senator **ARLEN SPECTER** was well-known and highly regarded by blacks and won substantial support from them. On the other hand, in Illinois, where there was an 89 percent increase in black votes cast over 1988, black voters seemed to have been attracted by the opportunity to help Democrat **CAROL MOSELEY BRAUN** become the first African-American woman elected to the Senate. In Texas, North Carolina, Florida, and Georgia, where blacks were first-time candidates for new congressional seats and where the presidential race was closely contested, black votes exceeded 1988 levels by 82, 51, 36, and 34 percent, respectively. Thus, President-elect Clinton appears to have been the beneficiary of an unprecedented level of black electoral opportunities.

Distribution of the Black Vote

According to exit poll results, President-elect Clinton won about 82 percent of the black vote while President **GEORGE BUSH** received 11 percent and Independent candidate **H. ROSS PEROT**, 7 percent. No other distinct

group in the electorate matched this level of support. Jewish voters came closest with their votes going 80 percent, 10 percent, and 9 percent for Clinton, Bush, and Perot, respectively, followed by Hispanic votes with 62 percent, 24 percent, and 14 percent. Asians voted decisively against President-elect Clinton by 52 percent, with 32 percent, and 17 percent voting for Bush and Perot, respectively. Thus, black and Jewish voters remained together as the cornerstones of the Democratic party's resurgence.

The 82 percent black support President-elect Clinton received is about 4 percentage points lower than Democratic Governor **MICHAEL DUKAKIS** received in 1988, and, in fact, is about the lowest by a Democratic presidential candidate since 1960. However, this comparison might be misleading. The lower level of support was partly a result of Perot's presence on the ballot as the most formidable third party candidate with national appeal during the past three decades. It is very likely that the 7 percent of the black vote that Perot received would otherwise have gone mostly to President-elect Clinton. Furthermore, while President-elect Clinton's percentage of the black vote was lower, the total votes he received were substantially higher than that Dukakis received. In fact, in 13 of the 21 states we examined, the black share of Clinton's total vote exceeded that for Governor Dukakis.

The importance of African-American support for President-elect Clinton is heightened by its heavy concentration in some key "battle ground" states. The black vote exceeded Clinton's margin of victory in seven states (Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, and Tennessee). In fact, in New Jersey and Georgia, states the Republican party has carried comfortably over many years, President-elect Clinton won with a margin that was less than the increase in black turnout in those states. Stated another way, if black turnout in those two states had remained at 1988 levels, President-elect Clinton would have lost them to President Bush. Absent the black support he received, what was a comfortable margin of victory would have been a razor thin margin at best.

Mississippi's Black Universities Are In Danger of Closing

A June 26 U.S. Supreme Court decision may result in the doors closing at two of Mississippi's historically black colleges. In a 17-year-old desegregation case, *U.S.* v. *Fordice*, formerly *U.S.* v. *Mabus* (see December 1991 Political TrendLetter), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 8-1 that the state of Mississippi had not done enough to desegregate its colleges and universities, and that the vestiges of discrimination were still evident in the higher education system which had been legally desegregated with the admission of **JAMES MEREDITH** to the University of Mississippi ("Ole Miss") in 1963. The High Court remanded the case to a lower federal court and ordered that court to review policies that have prevented integration, including such matters as admissions, funding, the number of schools in existence, and any duplication of programs. The lower court was the U.S. District Court in Oxford which was also charged with approving a remediation plan for the state in order to rid the higher education system of any remnants of segregation.

In the remediation plan, the state of Mississippi, via the governing body for higher education (the College Board), submitted to U.S. District Court Judge **NEAL BIGGERS** a plan that would close one of the three state-supported predominantly black colleges and merge a second one with a predominantly white college. The plan has not been received well in the black community which views it as racist and an attempt to curb blacks' access to higher education. The state plan would close 42-year-old Mississippi Valley State in Itta Bena, a small town with approximately 3,000 residents. The school has 2,222 students, 99 percent of whom are black, and has more than 200 black faculty and administrators. The plan would also merge Alcorn State University, located in Laurel, with predominately white Delta State University in Cleveland, a small rural town on the Mississippi Delta. Alcorn State has a student body of 3,500, 95 percent of whom are black, and has 200 blacks on the faculty and in the administration. (Sixty-eight-year-old Delta State has about 4,000 students, 77 percent of whom are white.)

"The state's plan is the educational death of black folk, " said the plaintiffs' attorney **ALVIN CHAMBLISS, JR.** of the North Mississippi Rural Legal Services. "It does not follow the Supreme Court's dictate in terms of the state's obligation to eliminate the vestiges of segregation. We want to achieve equity and parity in terms of black participation in the system and the plan restricts access to higher education for black people," he continued.

Chambliss said the plan offered by the College Board does not address the issue of the state's liability for employing discriminatory policies, nor does it remedy complaints of different educational operations between white and black colleges. According to Chambliss, the only realistic remedy is an increase in funding to the black colleges

so they may play "catch-up" after 30 years of disparate treatment and enhance their facilities and curricula. Raising taxes to upgrade the three historically black colleges would cost as much as $100 million by some estimates.

This legal battle began 17 years ago. The case was originally filed in 1975 by **JAKE AYERS**, the father of a student at Jackson State University. Ayers and 22 others claimed that the state supported a dual system of education for the state's five historically white and three historically black state-supported colleges and universities. The plaintiffs claimed that, between the white and black schools, there were differences in funding, curriculum offerings, and admission requirements.

On September 24, 1992, Judge Biggers issued an order requesting that both the plaintiffs and the defendant submit remediation proposals to him by October 22. The proposals were to include issues that both parties agreed upon, as well as issues on which the parties did not agree. Instead of submitting a remediation proposal to Judge Biggers, however, Chambliss submitted a report discussing areas of liability. According to Chambliss, he did not submit a remedial plan because the "question of the state's liability has not been firmly established and acknowledged." After the October 22 deadline, Biggers gave both parties until November 19 to negotiate in an effort to establish areas of agreement regarding the case. But by the 19th, no agreement had been reached, and the issue remained contentious between both parties. It is now up to Judge Biggers to decide what the next step will be.

In terms of the political fallout, black citizens have called for the firing of **RAY CLEERE**, the white commissioner of higher education for the state who is hired by the College Board. Blacks have also protested that the members of the College Board should be removed. The board consists of 12 members appointed by the governor for 12-year terms. Three of the members are black, two of whom voted for the state plan. Ironically, one of the two black members of the board who approved the state plan, **SIDNEY RUSHING**, is an alumnus of Mississippi Valley State. According to Hinds County Supervisor **BENNIE THOMPSON**, black members of the state legislature have indicated that they will use their clout to "hold hostage the higher education budget if an attempt is made to decrease funding to the black colleges or close any of them." When the legislature convenes in January there will be 32 blacks in the 122-member house and 10 in the 52-member senate.

Poll Shows Black and White Agreement on Issues

According to a nationwide Joint Center survey, there is a convergence of opinion between black and white Americans on the three issues that concerned them the most—the economy, education, and health care. The telephone survey of African Americans and a companion general population survey (excepting African Americans) were conducted by OMNIFACTS of Philadelphia for the Joint Center between September 18 and October 14, 1992.

The state of the *economy* was the prime concern of 38 percent of those African Americans surveyed and the second mention of an additional 16 percent. In the general population survey, 54 percent of those surveyed mentioned the economy as the most important issue with 17 percent mentioning the economy as the next most important. The quality of *public education* was the next most cited issue with both samples similar in the pattern of responses. Among black Americans, 20 percent mentioned education as the most important issue and 22 percent as the second most important. In the general population sample, 19 percent of those surveyed mentioned it as the most important issue and an additional 24 percent named education as their second choice. *Health care* was mentioned as the most important issue by 11 percent of those surveyed in both samples. Among African Americans, 15 percent named health care as their second issue, and in the general sample, 20 percent named health care their second most important issue.

Three issues—*poverty and homelessness*, *drug abuse*, and the *state of race relations*—were identified as a secondary level of concern. A larger proportion of those interviewed in the black sample than in the general sample named poverty and homelessness (10 versus 6 percent), drug abuse (10 versus 5 percent), and the state of race relations (5 versus 1 percent) as the most important issues.

About 50 percent of the blacks in the sample and 55 percent of the general sample believe that there should be a 25 percent cut in *military spending*. Among African Americans, 25 percent thought that cuts of 25 percent were too much and 18 percent thought the cuts should have gone deeper. In the general sample, 28 percent thought cuts of 25 percent too much, while 13 percent favored deeper cuts.

ACROSS THE NATION:

ARIZONA: In November, Democrat **SANDRA KENNEDY** became the second black woman to be elected to the state senate. Kennedy, 41, received 16,976 votes in the November general election to clinch the victory in the 23rd senatorial district, far ahead of her nearest competitor, Libertarian candidate **ROBERT HOWARTH** who won only 2,094 votes. Kennedy was in her third term as a state representative when she decided to run for the senate seat.

She will take over the seat occupied by **ARMANDO RUIZ**, a former state representative who had been elected in an April 1991 special election to fill the position left vacant by the premature departure of **CAROLYN WALKER**, the first black woman elected to the state senate. Elected in 1986, Walker was into her third term as state senator when she was expelled in March 1991 on bribery charges. Walker, who was also the senate's majority whip at the time of her expulsion, was subsequently convicted of conspiracy earlier this year. After serving the remainder of Walker's two-year term, Ruiz decided not to seek reelection, opting to devote his attention to his full-time position as executive director of a local chapter of the YMCA, the South Mountain branch.

MICHIGAN: With the presidential election over, the city of Detroit is preparing for a potentially contentious 1993 mayoral election. Although the primary date is not until September 14 of next year, and the last day that candidates can file with the board of elections is June 22, names for the mayoral seat are already being tossed around. Six-term mayor **COLEMAN YOUNG**, 74, has not announced his reelection for the office yet but may find a strong competitor in black attorney **DENNIS ARCHER**. (Archer, who announced his candidacy for mayor of Detroit last month, had not filed for candidacy at press time.) Fifty-year-old Archer, a partner in the law firm of Dickinson, Wright, Moon, Van Dusen & Freeman, served on the Michigan Supreme Court for eight years. He was the first black person to sit on Michigan's High Court in 20 years, and only the second black in the state's history to do so. In 1977, Archer co-chaired Young's mayoral campaign.

Archer is well-established in the Detroit community, having received his undergraduate degree from Western Michigan University and his law degree from Detroit College of Law, as well as having taught classes at his alma mater and other local universities. In 1991, *The National Law Journal* named Archer one of the 100 Most Influential Lawyers in America. Young and Archer could also have competition from **SHARON McPHAIL**, 44, a black assistant county prosecutor who has shown interest in running in the Nov. 2 election. Although she has been a supporter of Young, McPhail, who is chief of Screening and District Courts for the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office, told the *Detroit News* last month, "There's a real power struggle between the old guard, with all its factions, and the new guard, which includes some people supportive of the mayor... At 44, if I don't step up now, when am I going to do it?" She is expected to make an announcement in January.

Other potential candidates bantered around in Detroit include **DAVE BING**, 49, a businessman who formerly starred on the Detroit Pistons basketball team, and **DON BARDEN**, 49, owner of Barden Communications Inc., a Detroit cable company.

OREGON: In November, Democratic State Senator **JIM HILL** won a close race to become the state's first black state treasurer. Hill, an accounts manager for Mentor Graphics electronic company, defeated Republican challenger **DAVID CHEN**, receiving 50 percent of the votes to Chen's 49 percent (620,385 and 562,672 votes, respectively). Chen, a 57-year-old Asian American who was born in China, was an assistant administrator for the Farmer's Home Administration before he left that job to join the race for state treasurer. As state treasurer, Hill will administer $20 billion in state money.

Hill won both Multnomah County, the largest county in the state of Oregon, and Lane County, an area that Chen had thought could go to either candidate but proved to be Hill's hands down (60 percent, Hill; 36 percent, Chen). According to 1990 census bureau figures, over 90 percent of Oregon's population is white; 2.4 percent is Asian American, and 1.6 percent is black. A member of the state legislature since 1983, Hill served in the state house for four years before being elected to the state senate in 1987. (Hill, who is 45 years old, will resign from the state senate on January 4, the same day that he is sworn in for state treasurer.)

VIRGINIA: When **B.J. ROBERTS** was elected to a four-year term as the sheriff of the city of Hampton, he became the first black to be elected to a constitutional office in the city which is the home of the famed Hampton University. He was sworn into office on November 9.

Roberts soundly defeated all of his competitors in the five-way race, winning 19,049 votes. Roberts defeated **RONNIE STATON**, a retired Hampton police officer, and **C.E. MICHAEL**, the outgoing sheriff of Hampton. His closest competition came from Staton who received 9,728 votes, while Michael won 7,656 votes. The other two candidates, **JOE D. TUGWELL**, 55, a retired police officer, and **GARNER DEEL**, 59, a former worker in the sheriff's department, received 4,209 and 1,830 votes, respectively. Roberts, who is director of campus police for the Hampton University police force, won 18 of the 22 precincts in the city. Hampton has a population of over 130,000—78,000 whites and 52,000 blacks.

Politics and the Legacy of Malcolm X

New Film, "Malcolm X," Has Sparked a Debate Over Who the "True" Malcolm Was, Reflecting Long-Standing Tensions Among Blacks

by Richard D. Shingles

Controversy over director Spike Lee's new film on the life of Malcolm X reflects a historic division between African Americans who wish to become part of the American Dream and believe that they can do so and those who think otherwise. It is manifest in simultaneous integrationist and separationist tendencies borne of prolonged discrimination.

Malcolm X, an advocate of black nationalism during most of his career, was undergoing a fundamental transformation in his views on race when he was killed in 1965. Once a race firebrand who equated whites with "devils," by the time of his death, he was modifying his stance, rethinking his analysis of race relations, and making amends with the civil rights community he had once repudiated. His assassination, coupled with the publication of his autobiography chronicling this transformation, created a popular, but ambiguous hero who is claimed by different factions within the black community.

The struggle over Malcolm's image reflects a conflict that has existed within every generation of African Americans, beginning with slavery and continuing with the struggle for civil rights. The political spectrum with black separatism at one pole and racial integrationism at the other is historical. During slavery, there was conflict between field slaves, who were treated as chattel, and house slaves, who could hope for something better. Early in this century, tension existed between W.E.B. DuBois, a scholar, activist, and a founder of the NAACP, and Marcus Garvey, leader of the popular back-to-Africa movement, The United Negro Improvement Association. At the turn of the century, DuBois had another rivalry with Booker T. Washington, a leading southerner who was a race conservative and a separatist. As spokesperson for the separatist Nation of Islam, Malcolm rivaled integrationist Martin Luther King, the leading personality in the civil rights movement. Today, the conflict is manifest in the competition between Louis Farrakhan, the current head of the Nation of Islam, and civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the National Urban League.

DuBois observed that blacks have strived for the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship and for acceptance by the larger community. The great majority of blacks wish to be at one with the nation, yet are held apart. In response to insult and injury, there is the propensity to distance oneself from further harm by renouncing the majority; thus the ambivalence, pushing African Americans in the seemingly irreconcilable directions of integration and separation. The tension between separatist and integrationist tendencies is an honest and legitimate disagreement among African Americans with different life experiences and, consequently, different views on race relations. Each African American potentially confronts this tension and must reconcile it in his or her own way, as Malcolm X did.

The number of blacks who believe in separatism tends to increase as the social, economic, and political conditions worsen. Therefore, although separatists remain a distinct minority in the African American community, they survive. As a class, the group of very poor who are cramped into the most blighted areas of America's inner cities has never had much basis for hope and, consequently, are more readily drawn to separatists like Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan, and Marcus Garvey. The black middle class tends to have greater access to opportunities made possible by the legal reforms of the past 25 years—reforms that were due, in great part, to the impetus of civil rights and black power movements.

The black community is not homogeneous in thought. There are multiple ways to resolve the tensions associated with being both black and American. Both separatists and integrationists have their own forms of black consciousness. One can have a strong, positive black identity and still be an integrationist. Liberals use civil rights to push for group mobility into the American mainstream. Separatists seek equality through group autonomy.

Malcolm X was a bright, articulate, and extremely forceful voice for racial justice. Because of this and the ambiguity surrounding the end of his life, different factions within the black community wish to claim him as their own. Their spokespersons include: Louis Farrakhan, who protects the image of black Muslims; writer Amiri Baraka, who switched from a nationalism based solely on race and culture to include an economic, largely Marxist perspective; Malcolm's widow, Betty Shabazz, and the civil rights leadership, who downplay Malcolm's animosity towards white America; and conservatives, like Shelby Steele, who overlook Malcolm's call for collective self-help in their stress on individual self-reliance. What each "sees" in Malcolm reflects his or her own vision of the proper course of black politics. Therein lies the struggle to shape memory and myth. ■

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BOOK ANNOUNCEMENT

From the Framers of the Constitution to today's community activists, the struggle for the voting franchise has been an epic drama—one on which the curtain has yet to close. This conclusion is underscored in the Joint Center's latest book, *Voting Rights in America: Continuing the Quest for Full Participation,* which contains 12 essays on the evolution of the voting franchise in the United States, from the colonial period to the 1982 extension of the Voting Rights Act. Former congresswoman Barbara Jordan says that "Voting Rights must be read for a complete understanding of the past, present, and future of voting rights in America." Illinois senator Paul Simon calls Voting Rights "a guide to the battles yet to be won."

Co-published by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies and the Leadership Conference Education Fund, the volume offers a sweeping view of the struggle for voting rights and leaves us with hints on where the next legislative and community action ought to take place. This book contains many highlights—from a speech on current voter-access legislation by President-elect Bill Clinton to thoughtful discussions of the inclusion of African Americans, women, Asian Americans, and Native Americans into the American electorate. Among the contributors are: Mary Frances Berry of the University of Pennsylvania, a member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights; Charles V. Hamilton, Wallace S. Sayre Professor of Government at Columbia University; and Al Raby, the late chairman of Project Vote, the highly successful voter registration organization based in Chicago.

For a paperback copy, send $24.00 (price includes shipping; make checks payable to University Press of America) to: Voting Rights, Dept. F/ O.I.R./ Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies/ 1090 Vermont Ave., Suite 1100/ Washington, DC 20005-4961

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