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1997–The Good and the Bad

by Eddie N. Williams

This year has been eventful, so I thought I'd use this space to look back over some of the major stories we covered in *FOCUS*. For us, the year began on a sad note. In January, Louis E. Martin, one of our founders, died at 84. Louis was my mentor and friend over a span of four decades. But his life touched many who never knew him. He was truly the Godfather of Black Politics and profoundly influenced the course of American history in the second half of the century. The January issue of the magazine was devoted to his memory.

Louis began his career as a crusading journalist in Detroit before World War II. By the 1960s, he had become a White House power broker who urged presidential action on civil rights initiatives and promoted the appointments of Thurgood Marshall to the U.S. Supreme Court, Andrew Brimmer to the Federal Reserve Board, and Robert Weaver as the first black member of the Presidential cabinet. He was a trusted advisor to Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Carter, and he also retained the confidence of black leaders. He was indeed what he liked to call others: a great American.

We will also miss Frank Parker, civil rights lawyer and Joint Center Scholar, who met an untimely death in July at the age of 57. We at the Joint Center remember him as a warm, witty visiting scholar who often wore a rumpled jacket and a white panama hat and sported a big cigar. But Frank was also one of the nation's premier civil rights litigators. An Oxford scholar and graduate of Harvard Law School, he shunned the promise of a lucrative career as a corporate lawyer to fight for the voting rights of blacks in Mississippi and across the nation. "An Advocate's Struggle," which appears in our August issue, chronicles how Frank, as an attorney for the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, spent 14 years challenging Mississippi's multimember and at-large districts that denied black candidates a fair chance at election and diluted the votes of black Mississippians. Frank also took on the state's racial gerrymandering of congressional districts.

Today, there are nearly 800 black elected officials in Mississippi, including 10 state senators, 35 state representatives, and a member of Congress. Few of those politicians would have careers in public office had it not been for the work of Frank Parker and the Lawyers' Committee. In tribute, Brenda Wright, the current director of the Lawyers' Committee Voting Rights Project, has said: "Frank Parker's passion for justice, his indomitable spirit, his tenacity and sheer stubbornness in pursuing justice made him irreplaceable and unforgettable."

One of the good things we can point to this year is President Clinton's renewed commitment in his second term to establishing a government that reflects the people of America. Several issues of *FOCUS* covered second-term presidential appointments. In the January edition, we reported that the President moved Alexis Herman from the White House to be Secretary of Labor, and brought Rodney Slater from head of the Federal Highway Administration to be Secretary of Transportation. Herman's good offices in the resolution of the UPS strike and Slater's ability to maintain public confidence in the safety of air travel in the wake of several serious airline disasters are further proof, to those who still doubt, that people of ability can be selected for positions of leadership from all segments of this society. I certainly believe that to be true of President Clinton's appointment of Dr. David Satcher to be both Surgeon General and Assistant Secretary for Health. I enthusiastically endorsed Dr. Satcher's appointment to these posts in my October Perspective. He is one of the nation's finest health policymakers.

The President has earned the admiration of most of the civil rights community for standing by his commitment to have Bill Lann Lee head the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department. This is a post that requires competent

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and effective leadership because the struggle for civil rights is not over.

The Joint Center's national opinion survey conducted this year confirmed that discrimination is still universally perceived to be a serious problem and that race relations are not improving. The summary was published in the August issue. The survey found that both blacks (93%) and the general population (77%) overwhelmingly agree that racial discrimination is "still very common today."

Nevertheless, opponents of affirmative action would have us believe that state and local governments and private employers should behave as though we live in a "colorblind" society and that opportunities for employment and advancement are equal for all. Some go further and charge that even voluntary efforts to include minorities in the workplace are tantamount to "reverse discrimination." These assertions have been used as rationales for an all out assault on affirmative action.

These attacks on affirmative action are unjustified. Our October article, "Lawsuits Rock Corporate Discrimination," catalogs some in the growing list of major corporations that have agreed to multimillion dollar settlements of discrimination lawsuits, including the petroleum giant Texaco; Albank, an Albany, New York–based savings and loan institution; the Allstate and Nationwide insurance companies; national electronics retailer Circuit City; and Publix Super Markets operating in the Southeast.

Recent Equal Employment Opportunity Commission data show that African Americans, who make up 12.6 percent of the U.S. population, continue to lag far behind whites in high-paying positions. The data illustrated in a table appearing in the October *TrendLetter* shows that blacks make up just 5.8 percent of all officials and managers and 5.9 percent of all professionals. By contrast, blacks are overrepresented in low-paying, low-skill blue-collar laborer (19.2 %) and service worker (23.9 %) occupations. These statistics demonstrate that minorities do not compete for jobs on an equal basis and that remedies are still required to address ongoing disparities.

But all is not bleak on this front. In articles appearing in issues of the magazine published this fall, we reported that the members of the Congressional Black Caucus successfully led an effort to stop an anti-affirmative action measure (H.R. 1909) from progressing through the legislative process. If enacted, the legislation would have banned the U.S. government from considering race and gender in employment or the granting of contracts.

During the November 4 election in Houston, a broad-based, multiracial coalition waged a well-organized campaign to successfully oppose a local anti-affirmative action initiative. And in this issue, an article on "Understanding the Piscataway Settlement" outlines how the Black Leadership Forum assisted in the settlement of the *Board of Education of the Piscataway Township (New Jersey)* v. *Taxman* case. The settlement precluded the possibility that the U.S. Supreme Court would hand down an adverse ruling on affirmative action based on this flawed case.

This year, our Health Policy Program has provided us with a lot of material to cover in *FOCUS*. We were alarmed that dramatic changes taking place in the U.S. health care system might be contributing to a further decline in the numbers and status of black doctors (reported in the October issue). Domination of the health care delivery system by managed-care plans, a reduction in the number of new physician training slots, and attacks on affirmative action are all taking their toll on the pool of black physicians.

This is occurring at a time when the health status of African American communities is already precarious, with AIDS and other infectious diseases still on the upswing, homicide a leading cause of death among black youth, and more than 10 million American children are without health insurance coverage.

We applaud the Clinton administration's proposal to implement stricter air pollution standards to reduce ozone, a primary component of smog, and fine soot particles known as particulates, which are mainly emitted by diesel engines, factories, and power plants. Our story, "Putting a Price on Clean Air", in the February/March issue, noted that these airborne agents have contributed to a dramatic increase in the number of reported cases of asthma among inner-city black children, who are hospitalized with the disease at twice the national rate. It is estimated that the new standards may prevent 15,000 premature deaths a year.

Finally, history was made in several mayoral elections this year. On December 6, former White House drug czar Lee P. Brown won a runoff to beat businessman Robert Mosbacher to become the first black mayor of Houston, Texas, the nation's fourth largest city. The election of councilman Preston Daniels as mayor of Des Moines, Iowa, on November 4 was another first. Once synonymous with white supremacy and segregation, Jackson, Mississippi, elected Harvey Johnson as its first black mayor on June 3.

Several black incumbent mayors won reelection. On November 25, Atlanta mayor Bill Campbell prevailed in a close runoff to beat city council President Marvin Arrington to secure a second term. By contrast, Detroit mayor Dennis Archer won a second term by a landslide, garnering 83 percent of the vote. He has taken this victory as a mandate to pursue ambitious development projects such as new housing construction, and some controversial ones—two stadiums and three casinos. Minneapolis' first black and first woman mayor, Sharon Sayles Belton, defeated another woman, former talk show host Barbara Carlson, to win a second term.

Also in November, the voters of Cleveland endorsed mayor Michael R. White's programs by granting a third term. White is credited with generating over $1 billion in economic development, stimulating job growth, expanding housing construction, and reducing crime.

These are just a few of the major issues and events we covered in the magazine over the year. We hope that *FOCUS* has been a useful resource for our readers in 1997 for news, information, and analysis of the major issues that confront African Americans. We are working to be an even better resource in 1998. ■



PRESIDENT

Understanding the Piscataway Settlement

The Black Leadership Forum Participated in the Settlement of a Supreme Court Case That Threatened Affirmative Action

by Yvonne Scruggs-Leftwich

In the highly publicized settlement of *Board of Education of the Piscataway Township (New Jersey)* v. *Taxman*, our organization, The Black Leadership Forum (BLF), played a major role. The BLF promotes creative and coordinated leadership among its member civil rights and service organizations, currently 21 in number.

Inaccurately characterized by some as an example of affirmative action run amuck, the Piscataway case involved the school board's 1989 decision to lay off a secretarial studies teacher in the township's high school in an effort to trim the workforce. The secretarial studies program had two teachers, one white and one black, who had been hired the same day, so they had equal seniority. The school superintendent also subsequently judged them to have equal qualifications and experience. Instead of tossing a coin to determine which teacher to retain as had been done to break previous ties, the board decided that to keep Debra Williams, the black teacher, and lay off Sharon Taxman, the white teacher, to further its diversity objectives.

Taxman filed a discrimination complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. After an EEOC finding in Taxman's favor, the Justice Department, under the Bush administration, initiated a suit on her behalf against the school board, which she later joined. Both the federal district court and the Third Circuit Court of Appeals ruled for Taxman and ordered the board to pay her $144,000. In addition, the appeals court issued a broad opinion stating that Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act did not allow race to be taken into account in making any employment decision except to remedy proven past discrimination. There was no allegation of a pattern of past discrimination in the Piscataway school system.

Largely because of the substantial monetary judgment, the school board appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which agreed to hear the case during this term. Civil rights groups were concerned that the conservative 5-4 majority of the Court might further weaken affirmative action. At this stage, lawyers for Taxman and the school board worked toward reaching an out-of-court monetary settlement. The High Court then dismissed the appeal, precluding a sweeping opinion based on this flawed and inappropriate case.

Described by BLF Chairman Dr. Joseph E. Lowery as "...an act which benefits both the nation as a whole as well as all minorities and women who seek guarantees of opportunity, access, fairness and equity," the Piscataway settlement nevertheless continues to draw fire from anti-affirmative action forces, and BLF's motives in offering assistance to the school board have been questioned.

These are the facts concerning the settlement: The Black Leadership Forum did not settle this case. That was accomplished by negotiations between Taxman's lawyer and the school board's lawyer. The BLF, however, ultimately added $308,500 to the school board's contribution of $125,000, to pay the $433,500 settlement cost.

From the outset, BLF accepted the judgment of most civil rights attorneys that the case was a poor vehicle for testing the legitimacy of true affirmative action. The Piscataway case involved a layoff decision based on race alone, rather than the more typical circumstances such as hiring or promotion, where taking race into account along with other relevant factors promotes diversity and inclusiveness. The lower courts were unaware of Williams' claim that her master's degree made her better qualified than Taxman who only had a bachelors degree. Furthermore, Taxman has been rehired, and the only remaining issues were back pay, and other monetary benefits.

Inasmuch as the High Court had rejected similar arguments about taking race into account in making layoffs in other cases, the school board's decision to appeal to the Supreme Court was considered by many as ill-advised. Moreover, lawyers' fees and interest payments to Taxman would only increase if the board's Supreme Court appeal was unsuccessful as it most likely would be. And, of great importance to BLF and the civil rights community was that a Supreme Court ruling on this case, like that of the appeals court, would almost surely be used to condemn affirmative action programs nationwide.

The Piscataway school board had considered settling the case. However, they could not justify doing so to constituents without monetary assistance to pay Taxman's judgment and her sizable attorneys' fees.

BLF then sought financial contributions to assist the school board, an action preferable to providing an opportunity for the conservative majority of the Supreme Court to terminate legitimate affirmative action as a remedy to discrimination in education, employment, and perhaps other areas as well. Based on a widely shared concern for a more rational review of affirmative action than this case offered, BLF ultimately received a large number of donations, earmarked for Piscataway, from across the country. With this help, the school board concluded negotiations, resulting in a ratified settlement on November 20, 1997. ■

Dr. Scruggs-Leftwich is Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer of the Black Leadership Forum, Inc.

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Legislating Support for AIDS Prevention

A Joint Center Forum in Durham Calls on Elected Officials to Pass New Laws to Help Fight AIDS Among Black Youth

by Wilhelmina A. Leigh

Despite a decline in the U.S. death rate from AIDS in 1996 for the first time since public health surveillance of the disease began in 1981, HIV infection and AIDS continues to spread in North Carolina. And black North Carolinians are disproportionately victims of the deadly virus. As part of an ongoing program to address this concern, the Joint Center hosted its fourth HIV/AIDS prevention forum in Durham, North Carolina, in October 1997—which was both AIDS Awareness Month and "Let's Talk (with Teens About Sex)" Month.

Entitled "HIV/AIDS and African American Youth in North Carolina: The Role of Leadership," the forum attracted more than 170 federal, state, and local officials, representatives from religious organizations, and community activists from across the state. Like those conducted in 1995 and 1996 in Detroit, Memphis, and Oakland, this forum was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It was organized with the assistance of a local liaison committee chaired by Dr. Elaine Hart-Brothers of the Metropolitan Durham Medical Group and co-chaired by North Carolina State Senator Jeanne H. Lucas.

While African Americans constitute 22 percent of North Carolina's population, they account for 63 percent of the nearly 7,600 cases of AIDS that were reported in the state between 1981 and June 30, 1997. During the first half of 1997, African Americans accounted for nearly three-fourths of all AIDS cases reported in North Carolina among adults and adolescents age 13 and older—comprising, for example, 73 percent of the AIDS cases in Durham County, 59 percent of the cases in Wake County, and 41 percent of the cases in Orange County. State Representative Thomas E. Wright, a panelist at the forum, noted that HIV/AIDS was a leading cause of death among blacks in 1996 in Durham and other counties in the state.

Forum participants pointed out that the "faces of AIDS" are changing, with women and teenagers now the fastest growing groups of newly infected persons. While AIDS was once perceived as a disease contracted by white homosexuals, community leaders are becoming more and more aware that the disease may be contracted by anyone, regardless of race, gender, or age. Jacqueline S. Clements, a forum panelist who is a pre- and post-test HIV/AIDS counselor of youth at Lincoln Community Health Center in Durham, notes that "The face of AIDS that used to be white, gay, and male, today may be an 18-year-old, heterosexual, black college student." A pregnant teenager is now just as likely to become infected with HIV as a female prostitute. As a result, it is becoming harder to ignore the disease, its related social consequences, and the real people behind the statistics.

As HIV infection and AIDS has spread to all segments of the population in North Carolina, community leaders have urged elected officials in the state to pass legislation to address the needs of young people and other groups at high risk of infection. Forum participants discussed three areas in which legislative initiatives have been introduced in the North Carolina General Assembly—comprehensive health education, a needle exchange pilot program, and state funding for the HIV/AIDS prevention activities of community-based organizations.

Comprehensive Health Education

Under a law passed by the North Carolina Assembly in 1995, health education related to sexuality is limited to instruction about abstinence, except in jurisdictions where parents have indicated at local school board hearings that they want broader sex education for their children. The consensus of forum participants was that a statewide health education curriculum should be comprehensive and address a full range of topics, including abstinence, general family health, contraception, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, abortion, adoption, and hygiene. Eddie Davis III, a member of the North Carolina Board of Education and a teacher at Durham's Hillside High School, noted that it is critical for people who favor comprehensive health education to show up at school board hearings and make their views known. Lavonia Allison of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People suggested that more African Americans run for seats on local school boards throughout the state in order to ensure that these hearings are held and that the interests of black North Carolinians are represented.

AIDS counselor Jacqueline Clements said that an essential part of arming children to resist high-risk behaviors is to teach them first that they are special. We need also to teach—not preach—abstinence and how to abstain. We need to teach teens what to say and what to do when confronted with "If you love me, you'll do it." She added that those who choose not to abstain must be taught how to protect themselves.

Numerous speakers, including Durham School Board member Beverly Washington Jones, supported the need for peer educators or "youth ambassadors" to convey health-risk-avoidance messages effectively to other young people, including gang leaders and drug dealers. Others spoke of the importance of educating parents and clergy in addition to

Dr. Leigh is a senior research associate at the Joint Center.

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youth themselves. Sharon Vann, a health educator, felt strongly that health education about sexuality should take place not only in schools but also in churches and at other social and civic institutions.

Needle Exchange Programs

Legislation was recently introduced (but not passed) in both houses of the Assembly that would have established up to four pilot needle exchange programs around the state. This measure would have also mandated that the needle exchange programs periodically provide data to the state Department of Health and Human Services for evaluation of their effectiveness. State Senator Jeanne Lucas noted that several scientific studies have shown that needle exchange programs lessen the risk of infection with HIV and do not increase substance abuse. In fact, needle exchange programs may reduce the use of injected drugs because regular contact with counselors at needle exchange sites encourages some addicts to seek treatment. Since use of injected drugs is implicated in the heterosexual transmission of HIV infection, needle exchange programs have great potential to slow transmission during the current phase of the epidemic.

In addition to Senator Lucas, Representative Wright, and the other members of the Black Caucus of the North Carolina General Assembly, state health director Ron Levine has indicated publicly that he would support a needle exchange program in the state. Bill Newkirk of the North Carolina Education Association, who is a Baptist minister, told the audience that he changed from being an opponent to being a proponent of needle exchange programs as a result of the forum discussion. Newkirk subsequently asked the audience for suggestions on how to better educate other ministers about the issue.

Community-Based HIV Prevention

Legislation to appropriate funds to increase community-based efforts for AIDS prevention was also introduced (but not passed) in the Assembly. This legislation would have provided $1 million to enhance the prevention efforts of both existing community-based organizations and local health departments ($300,000 for each), and would establish new community-based organizations to provide outreach and referral services for persons at risk of HIV infection ($400,000). Kat Turner, with Project StraighTalk of the Durham County Health Department, noted that these would be the first funds from the state of North Carolina to be used for HIV prevention. Jacqueline Clements mentioned two exemplary community-based organizations with youth outreach efforts that could benefit from this legislation—Teens Against AIDS at St. Augustine College in Raleigh and The Adolescent Connection in Greensboro.

At the end of the forum, consensus statements on these three issues were voted on. Approval for each statement was nearly unanimous, and forum attendees volunteered to duplicate and distribute the statements in their communities to generate greater support. This effort would also extend to local elected officials in order to educate them on the concerns discussed at the forum so that they might be pushed in the General Assembly and city councils as legislative proposals.

In his forum presentation, Representative Wright mentioned the possibility of a future in which the only African Americans remaining were the elderly and children orphaned by AIDS. The attendees at this fourth Joint Center forum on HIV/AIDS education pledged to work to prevent such a horrific future. ■

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TRENDLETTER

POLITICAL REPORT

Minorities Discouraged from Applying to Medical School

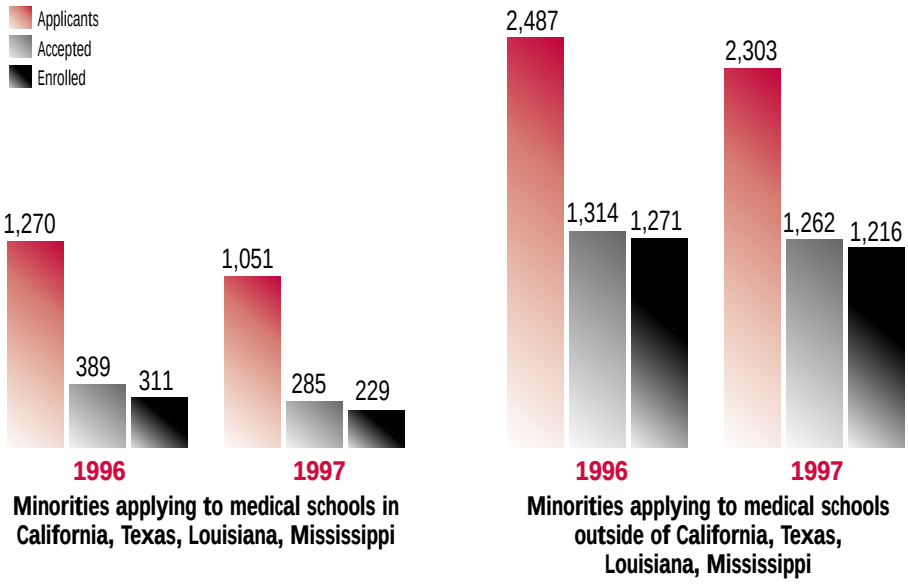
The number of underrepresented minorities accepted to medical schools across the country this year declined by an alarming 6.8 percent, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC).The AAMC has identified the assault on affirmative action in higher education as the primary reason for the decline, and concluded that it is discouraging minorities from pursuing careers in medicine. This is particularly true in states that have eliminated their own university affirmative action programs—California, Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. As a result of California's Proposition 209 and the *Hopwood v The State of Texas* decision, 125 fewer minorities in these four states pursued medical training in 1997.

The AAMC found that in these four states, the number of underrepresented minorities—African Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans—who applied to in-state medical schools was 17 percent lower in 1997 than in 1996. In comparison, underrepresented minorities residing in and applying to medical schools outside of the affected states declined by a much smaller 7 percent. The decline in the affected four states accounts for nearly 40 percent of the nation's overall drop in the number of minority applicants.

In California, the Board of Regents of the state's university system killed all of its affirmative action programs in college admissions. In November 1996, the state's Proposition 209 extended this prohibition on affirmative action to hiring and promotions in state employment and to contracting. Last year, in its *Hopwood* decision, the Federal 5th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the University of Texas Law School had violated the constitutional rights of white applicants who were denied admission as a result of a policy that admitted some black and Hispanic applicants with lower combined college grades and Law School Admissions Test scores. The 5th Circuit court further ruled that race could no longer be used in admissions to higher education institutions (including medical schools) within its jurisdiction, which includes Louisiana and Mississippi.

"We fear that medical school admissions committees are being bullied into strict reliance on only quantitative criteria like grade point averages and test scores" , says Dr. Jordan J.Cohen, M.D., AAMC President. "Test scores are important for mea-

Impact of *Hopwood* decision and Proposition 209 on 1997 medical school minority applicants



Source: Association of American Medical Colleges, November, 1997.

suring an applicant's knowledge, but we know that an individual's character and ability to communicate effectively are also critical." Cohen notes that, based on his organization's tracking data, the climate engendered by the *Hopwood* decision and Proposition 209 is discouraging minorities from applying to medical school. "This is an ominous sign for the medical community and our nation, which badly needs a physician workforce that is both diverse and reflective of our society as a whole," Cohen adds. "We find it particularly alarming that a large percentage of underrepresented minorities are not just avoiding the medical schools in California, Texas, Mississippi, and Louisiana, but choosing not to pursue careers in medicine at all."

Brown Wins Houston Runoff

By a narrow 53 to 47 percent, Lee P. Brown, former drug czar for the Clinton Administration, won a December 6 runoff to become the first black mayor of Houston, Texas, the nation's fourth largest city. Before Brown's election, Houston was the largest city in the nation that had never elected an African American mayor.

In the November 4 election, Brown finished first in a field of eight candidates with a final tally of 42 percent of the vote, while second place went to Robert Mosbacher who received 29 percent. The two were required to stand for a runoff since neither of them received a majority. Even though most of the electorate was split along racial lines, Brown was able to put together a solid multiracial coalition to edge out local Republican businessman Rob Mosbacher, son of the Bush administration's secretary of commerce. Mosbacher spent a record-breaking $4 million on his failed bid, Brown spent $2.1 million.

Brown, who grew up on a small farm in Oklahoma, holds a Ph.D. in criminology. As Houston's police chief from 1982 to 1990, he won accolades in the city and nationwide for overhauling a department known for its brutality and racism. He also headed the police departments of Atlanta and New York City. After two years as drug czar for the Clinton administration, he returned to Houston in 1995 as a professor at Rice University. Mosbacher ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. Senate in 1984 and for Texas lieutenant governor in 1990. Local political observers believe his mayoral bid was his last run for elected office.

Brown advocated "neighborhood-oriented government" that would resemble the neighborhood-oriented policing programs he instituted as a police executive. Mosbacher opposed the city's affirmative action program. If elected, he planned to run the government like a business, pursuing a deregulation scheme and privatizing government operations like the maintenance of city vehicles.

With the city's once sluggish economy on the upswing and crime on the decline, the mayoral campaign centered on negative personal attacks rather than on issues. Mosbacher characterized Brown as a career bureaucrat and an incompetent administrator. Brown countered by calling Mosbacher a tax dodger because a company in which Mosbacher was a major investor moved rather than pay higher taxes.

Along with the strong support of Houston's substantial minority community—the city is about one third Hispanic and one quarter black—Brown secured the endorsement of the popular outgoing mayor, Bob Lanier, and of former mayor Kathy Whitmire, giving him enough backing from whites to capture the election, in which only about 31 percent of the eligible voters cast ballots. About one-third of the votes in the election were cast by African Americans.

Both candidates brought in big guns from their respective parties. Rudolph Giuliani, the Republican mayor of New York, criticized Brown's performance as police commissioner in that city, specifically his response to the Crown Heights riots when Jewish and black residents clashed in 1991. Former President George Bush also stumped for Mosbacher, and First Lady Barbara Bush was featured in television ads. President Clinton figured prominently in Brown's radio ads, while Vice President Al Gore attended Brown fundraisers.

Despite his history-making victory, Brown is seen politically as a moderate who is expected to continue the policies of his predecessor without initiating many wrenching changes that would threaten the establishment.

Brown's runoff triumph follows another show of minority voting power in Houston. In last month's election, black voters turned out in large numbers to confirm their support for the city's affirmative action programs in hiring and contracting. Nevertheless, divisions remain. Most whites voted against affirmative action, while most minorities voted for it, and most whites voted against Brown while most minorities voted for him. What Brown's election will mean for Houston will hinge on his performance as mayor during his two-year term and his ability to meet the very different expectations of the disparate components of his fragile coalition.

ECONOMIC REPORT

by Cecilia Conrad and Malinda Lindquist

The Economic Status of African Americans: A Year-End Review

On January 27, President Clinton will make his sixth State of the Union address. Topping his list of accomplishments will surely be the booming U.S. economy and its prolonged expansion, which has helped a portion of the population move to work from unemployment, welfare, or retirement. Yet certain communities continue to languish in poverty, and the question remains: "Will this rising tide be able to lift *all* boats?"

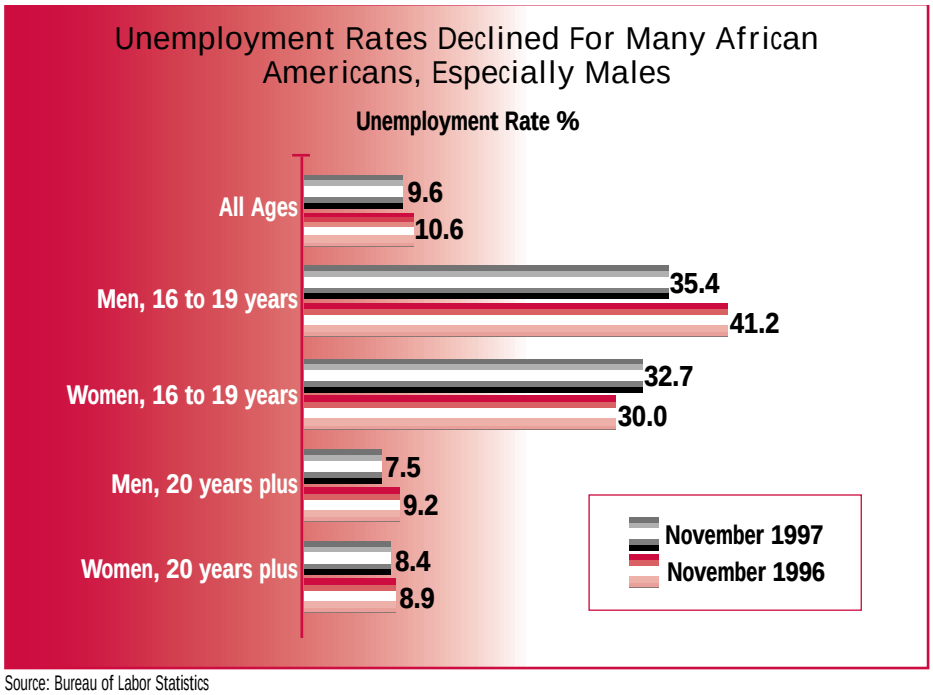
Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics confirm that many African American workers benefitted from the robust economy. The unemployment rate for African Americans fell to 9.6 percent in November 1997, down a full percentage point since the previous November. The drop in unemployment was most significant for black men. Black men 20 years of age and older experienced a 1.7 percentage point decrease in unemployment during the same 12-month period. The decline in joblessness for black male teenagers was even more substantial—5.8 percentage points—from 41.2 percent to 35.4 percent. The labor force participation rate of black teens increased 1.8 percentage points to 39.3 percent.

These rosy figures, however, must be viewed with caution since recent job gains could be the result of strong growth in service occupations, which typically offer low wages, few benefits, and little room for career advancement. During the same period, the number of service workers increased by 2.7 percent. (Service occupations include housekeepers, child care workers, guards, police officers, cooks, nursing aides, and janitors.) Over 21 percent of employed African Americans work in these occupations compared with only 12.5 percent of whites. Hence, growth in employment in service occupations is more likely to benefit African American workers, particularly young workers with little labor market experience.

Despite these recent declines, the black jobless rate remains twice as high as the overall unemployment rate, which stood at 4.6 percent one year ago. Furthermore, it is uncertain yet whether the improvement in the labor market status of African American men will translate into increased incomes and reduced poverty rates in the African American community. Black household incomes increased between 1995 and 1996 (the latest available data), but not dramatically (see the October 1997 issue of *FOCUS*). For households with one earner, median household income decreased slightly in real terms between 1995 and 1996. However, for households with two or more earners, median income increased by 3.5 percent after adjusting for inflation. Figures for 1997 are likely to show that these declining unemployment rates, particularly among males, led to continued growth in incomes for some households. While that situation should continue into 1998, achieving greater economic security in the African American community will require even lower jobless rates and increasing employment participation rates among all blacks regardless of sex or age.

A Healthy Economy, But . . .

The most important factor determining the future economic prosperity of African Americans is the overall performance of the U.S. economy. By most indicators, the prospects seem bright. According to the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis, gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 3.3 percent and personal income increased by 0.5 percent in the third quarter of 1997. The national unemployment rate for November was at its lowest rate since 1973. Inflation is low, and



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which reflects changes in the price of a typical market basket of goods and services that households purchase, rose only 0.2 percent in October.

Despite the resilience of the economy, one possible indication of job insecurity is the low percentage of the unemployed who are "job leavers," that is, persons who voluntarily leave a job. When unemployment rates are low, economists expect a high percentage of the unemployed to be persons who are confident enough about the labor market to quit their jobs and seek better opportunities elsewhere. In November 1997, only 10.4 percent of unemployed persons were job leavers, down from 11.5 percent one year earlier. However, a smaller percentage of workers may leave their jobs if their employers are providing competitive salaries and benefits.

Another potential cloud on the horizon is consumer debt. Measured as a percentage of personal disposable income, consumer debt is at a record high (nearly 21 percent). Some analysts worry that the high debt-to-income ratio will slow consumer spending. However, according to *Economic Trends*, published by the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, this ratio is not a good predictor of future patterns of personal consumption. Furthermore, once adjustments are made for the fraction of credit card balances that are paid in full at the end of the month, the ratio of consumer debt to income decreased to less than 19 percent.

If there are signs of trouble ahead for the U.S. economy, they are not easy to spot. With the economy likely to continue to grow in 1998, the critical question for African Americans is how the benefits of this economic prosperity will be distributed across the population. Will all African Americans receive an equitable share of the growing pie?

The Assault on Affirmative Action

Opportunities for African Americans to share the economic pie are threatened by the current attack on affirmative action programs, particularly those in higher education. In December 1995, the University of California Board of Regents voted to end race-based affirmative action in university admissions, an action reinforced by passage of Proposition 209, known as the "California Civil Rights Initiative."

The experiences at University of California (UC) medical and law schools, where race has already been eliminated as a factor in the admissions process, illustrate the possible effects of ending affirmative action. Under the former affirmative action program, UC law schools admitted 22.3 percent of the 934 African Americans who applied to enter in the fall of 1996. For the fall of 1997, the first class admitted under the new policies, UC law schools admitted 9 percent of the 651 African American applicants.

Compared to law schools, medical schools base their admissions less narrowly on numerical criteria, such as standardized tests and grade point averages, and more on broader criteria such as interviews. Still, fewer African Americans applied for admission this year, and the percentage of accepted students who enrolled was lower at some campuses. UC medical schools admitted 47 of 1,038 black applicants for the class entering in the fall of 1997, compared with 62 of 1,216 black applicants for the prior year's class.

The Federal 5th Circuit Court of Appeals' decision in *Hopwood v. State of Texas* has ended race-based affirmative action programs in Texas's public university system. As a way to ensure some measure of diversity in higher education, the Texas State Legislature is requiring public universities to admit all students who graduate in the top tenth of their high school class.

Proposition 209 and *Hopwood* are not the last initiatives in the effort to end university affirmative action programs. Currently, there are two class action suits challenging admissions policies at the University of Michigan. If attacks on affirmative action discourage black students from attending college, there will be serious long-term consequences for the economic prosperity of African Americans. The economic returns from a college education have never been higher (See the September 1997 issue of *FOCUS*). Whatever the fate of affirmative action, policy makers must take steps to insure that quality higher education remains accessible to all.

Economic Outlook for 1998

Even if affirmative action is scaled back, a robust economy should continue to provide near-term opportunities for upward mobility for most African Americans, but primarily among the well educated. For less well-educated workers, growth employment opportunities could increase job security without increasing wages. For this group of workers, however, the positive effects of economic expansion will be offset by the effects of welfare reform. As "work first" initiatives push welfare recipients into the labor market, the increase in the number of low-skilled workers looking for jobs will keep wages low for the less educated. Thus within the African American community, as well as in the larger population, the gap between the haves and have-nots is likely to grow.