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Has Obama Kept His Promises To Blacks?

By Hazel Trice Edney
NNPA Editor-in-Chief

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - On Nov. 3, 2008, an important telephone conference was held in Black America. That was the day that then candidate Barack Obama, on the eve of his historic election to the presidency, promised African-American leaders and representatives across the nation that if elected, he would never forget that Black people are specifically and disparately hurting from social ills.

"Everyone under the sound of my voice understands the struggles we face. Everyone understands the fierce urgency of now. You all know what's at stake in this election," Obama said on the teleconference, covered by the NNPA News Service.

He mentioned crime, civil rights, education, health and the economy as just a few of the categories in which African-Americans are clearly in worse statistical categories than any other race.

"I mention these issues because this community, our community, the African-American community, during these challenging times, suffers more than most in this country," he said. "Double-digit inflation, double digit unemployment, stagnant wages, our kids are more likely to drop out, more likely to be in jail, more likely to die. We're going to have to do better. And if we continue the momentum we've seen across this country over the last several weeks, we can do better."

But, one year after his historic election - which has often been described as the fulfillment of the "dream" of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., has now President Obama kept his campaign promise to the Black community?

Political observers pondered this question in anticipation of the National King Holiday on Monday and the Jan. 21 anniversary of the historic inauguration. Some say that Obama, who enjoys studying past presidents for their wisdom and leadership styles, especially Abraham Lincoln, should learn lessons from some - especially Lyndon B. Johnson.

"In so far as he has announced a position of public policy which says that he is not taking ethnicity into consideration, this belies the approach of previous presidents like Lyndon Johnson and obviously his relationship to Dr. King, who actually, I think was won over by Dr. King," says political scientist Dr. Ron Walters. Johnson ultimately signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. "Johnson was playing with race at first. But, I think he came to believe that he had to do something special for African-Americans. And one suggestion was that it was the pressure that the civil rights movement put on him."

Walters continues, "If you go all

President Barack Obama took the oath of office a year ago after crediting Black people for his election. But, some question whether he has kept his promises to African-American voters so far?

the way back to Abraham Lincoln (who is credited for freeing Black slaves with the Emancipation Proclamation) and come all the way forward to Bill Clinton (who established the White House's first race office), presidents have felt that given the differential socio-economic status of Black people, that they had to at least consider doing something special."

Thomas N. Todd agrees. The veteran civil rights lawyer, who was former president of the Chicago chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Operation PUSH, says past presidents have often listened to civil rights leaders who ultimately influenced policy.

During World War II civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph put pressure on President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to include Blacks in an executive order to make sure they got contracts. That was executive order 88-02, he cited. Dr. King put pressure on President Lyndon Johnson to issue executive order 11-246 to make sure that Blacks were protected against employment discrimination.

"Then, although Lyndon B. Johnson was a friend of the Negro, when Dr. King disagreed with him on Vietnam, he challenged him. We need to learn the lessons from history," Todd said. "What Blacks must do now is separate the presidency from the person and separate the institution from the individual. There are only three branches of government and if you concede the presidency without putting pressure on the president, we've lost."

Some prominent Black leaders, including Actor Danny Glover, Ben Jealous of the NAACP, Marc Morial of the National Urban League, the Rev. Jesse Jackson of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, and the

Rev. Al Sharpton of the National Action Network, have expressed disappointment at what they view as Obama's lack of attention to issues that are disparately damaging in the Black community - especially joblessness.

The latest example happened on Friday, Jan. 8, the same day that the Bureau of Labor Statics announced its new monthly jobs numbers, showing that the Black unemployment rate had risen from 15.6 percent to 16.2 percent and that the White unemployment rate had fallen from 9.3 percent to 9.0 percent, still under the average rate of 10 percent.

In a televised speech on jobs and clean energy that day, the president briefly paused from his focus on the progressing health care bill and his refocusing on the "war on terror" in order to speak publicly about the jobs situation. But, he again failed to mention the fact that while the average unemployment rate held at 10 percent, the Black unemployment rate continued to creep upward to record numbers.

"The jobs numbers that were released by the Labor Department this morning are a reminder that the road to recovery is never straight, and that we have to continue to work every single day to get our economy moving again. For most Americans, and for me, that means jobs. It means whether we are putting people back to work," he said.

But, Walters says he has reviewed executive orders that President Obama has promulgated since he's been in the White House and he does in fact consider race in certain decisions - just not pertaining to Black people.

One executive order mandated that heads of executive agencies consult with Indian tribal

governments. Another mandated the increased participation of Asians and Pacific Islanders in federal programs. He also told the Hispanic Caucus that when their unemployment number reached over 10 percent, that was not just a problem for Hispanics, "it was a problem for the nation."

Walters argues, "It seems to me that you can't have it both ways. You can't announce a policy which says in affect that I'm not going to do that and on the other hand write executive orders that in fact does it, which means that he's got a problem with us."

Looking at the depth of issues in the Black community, Walters says he would not have expected major change so soon, "but at least I would have wanted a president who would make sure that his statements are moving in that direction."

Others feel that it is much too soon in Obama's presidency to make such judgments. "We cannot rush to judgment," says Gary Flowers, executive director and CEO of the Black Leadership Forum, a loose knit coalition of 32 major Black organizations which meets with Obama administration officials every month.

But, Flowers, who was on that Nov. 3 teleconference, warns that African-Americans must and will wield their political savvy if the president does not follow through with his promises.

"We are early in the administration. Yet, Black people are among the most sophisticated voters in American History as evident from the 1960s to the present. Democracy percolates up. Therefore, people must hold politicians accountable to their promises as a matter of civic engagement."

On that Nov. 3 teleconference, Obama was clearly hat-in-hand in front of the Black community, which he credited for having brought him through the Democratic nomination and to the threshold of the historic election.

"Our campaign is alive and thriving ... And mainly it's because of an energized African-American community. You have done this," he said.

Now, they can only hope that he will keep faith with his promises for change:

"I'm convinced that not only are we going to change this country, but we're going to change this community," he said on the phone that day. "We're going to change our sons, our daughters, our grandchildren, how they look at themselves. We're going to transform barriers in the world. We're going to change the hearts and minds of people around the world. That's a powerful thing. That's more powerful than any policy out there and any governmental program."

Federal Appeals Court Rules Convicted Felons Can Vote In Washington State

(NNPA) - The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals last week held that Washington State's law denying the vote to people with felony convictions is racially discriminatory and violates the Voting Rights Act (VRA).

"This landmark ruling recognizes that racial discrimination in Washington's criminal justice system has infected the State's political process," said John Payton, LDF director-counsel in a statement "The result is that Black, Latino and Native America persons convicted of felonies in Washington are disproportionately denied the right to vote."

The Court found "compelling" evidence that "in the total population of potential 'felons' ... minorities are more likely than Whites to be searched, arrested, detained, and ultimately prosecuted. If those decision points are infected with racial bias, resulting in some people becoming felons not just because they have committed a crime, but because of their race, then that felon status cannot, under section 2 of the VRA, disqualify felons from voting."

The State did not dispute this compelling evidence.

As a result of Washington's law, 24 percent of Black men and 15 percent of the entire Black population in Washington have lost their voting rights because of a felony conviction. Collectively,

African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans represent only 12 percent of Washington's population, but comprise 36 percent of the State's incarcerated population.

"The evidence showed that the rate at which Blacks, Latinos and Native Americans are convicted of felony offenses and consequently disqualified from voting is not reflective of their actual participation in criminal behavior, said Ryan P. Haygood, Co-Director of LDF's Political Participation Group. "These racial disparities tell a troubling story of minority overrepresentation in the criminal justice system resulting not from any public safety imperative but rather from discrimination."

Nationally, more than 5.3 million Americans are denied access to the fundamental right that is preservative of all other rights. An estimated 2 million of the disfranchised, roughly 38 percent, are African-Americans. Maine and Vermont permit prisoners to vote by absentee ballot from prison.

Attorney General Rob McKenna and Secretary of State Sam Reed have announced that they will appeal the decision to the U.S. Supreme Court. On Tuesday, McKenna's office filed a motion requesting the 9th Circuit stay its decision for 90 days to allow the state time to file its petition for certiorari.

THE SEATTLE MEDIUM (ISSN 746-5394) is published weekly on Wednesday for \$34.00 per year by Tiloben Publishing Company, Inc., 2600 South Jackson Street, Seattle, WA 98144. Periodicals postage paid at Seattle, WA. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: THE SEATTLE MEDIUM, 2600 South Jackson Street, Seattle, WA 98144.

Chris B. Bennett & Joan Owens, Co-Publishers

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