

EDITORIALS • COMMENTS • OPINIONS

SCLC Tarnishes Dr. King’s Image

By George E. Curry
NNPA Columnist

On Tuesday, the day after the nation officially celebrates the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., suspended Southern Christian Leadership Conference Board Chair Raleigh Trammell of Dayton, Ohio and Treasurer Spiver Gordon, a resident of Eutaw, Ala., are scheduled to appear in an Atlanta court to contest their dismissals amid allegations that they directly benefited from a secret \$500,000 board account.

To the public, SCLC, co-founded by Dr. King, has been on the rise after almost going out of business in 2004. Charles Steele, Jr., one of my childhood friends from Tuscaloosa, Ala., brought the organization back from the brink of extinction as president and CEO, raising \$8 million during his tenure from 2004 to 2009.

Approximately \$3.3 million of that amount was used to build a new SCLC headquarters on historic Auburn Avenue. Even civil rights icon Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth – who

once referenced SCLC by saying, “Only God can give life to the dead” – acknowledged the civil rights group had returned from the dead under the leadership of Steele, now an Atlanta businessman.

While the public perception of SCLC was that it had finally rebounded, Trammell was busy getting the board to revise the organization’s bylaws, shifting many of the powers traditionally held by the president to him. Dexter M. Wimbish, the general counsel, was directed to report to Trammell instead of President Steele. Against the counsel of his closest advisers, Steele went along with the power shift, arguing that his personal friendship with Trammell would still allow him to function effectively.

That Trammell and Gordon could rise to top board positions should have been an embarrassment within itself. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported on Nov. 10, 2004 that Trammell “went to prison in the 1970s for cheating a county welfare department in Ohio.”

Gordon, the SCLC treasurer, lost

his city council seat in Alabama after pleading guilty in 1999 to federal vote fraud charges. He admitted that he had asked a person who lived outside of Greene County to fill out an absentee ballot and falsely list a county address. Gordon was sentenced to six months in federal prison, given three years of supervised probation and fined \$2,000.

In the rough-and-tumble world of SCLC board politics, Trammell and Gordon have survived because they were among the last people standing.

Their fall from favor is tied to the unaudited secret account, described by one SCLC insider as “a slush fund.” Approximately \$500,000 has flowed through the account over the past three years, including about \$200,000 said to have been siphoned off from prison ministry program operated by Gordon. Although some SCLC staff members were told that the account, opened in Eutaw, Ala. and supervised by Gordon, was subject to an outside audit, no record of an audit has been

uncovered. Also, there is no known record of tax returns ever being filed for the account. Some SCLC board members said they had no knowledge that the secret account existed.

Charles Steele raised questions about the account before he resigned a year ago. Steele feared that contributions to SCLC would dry up if the public ever learned about the secret fund. Once Attorney Wimbish and Executive Director Ron Woods learned that there were no independent controls on the board account and suspected that some SCLC funds may have been embezzled, they felt a responsibility to share their concerns with Interim President Byron C. Clay.

On October 29, the board, which had recently elected a half dozen new members, was made aware of the special fund. On November 13, Trammell and Gordon were removed from their board positions, with the new members casting the critical votes against them.

Even before the vote, efforts were made to get Trammell to quietly step aside. A longtime former

assistant, based in Dayton, filed a sexual harassment complaint against him with a state human rights agency. Persons familiar with the complaint say the assistant claims to have sexually-explicit videotapes of Trammell, a married minister. She is also said to be ready to make additional allegations that, if true, could lead to his returning to prison.

Rather than stepping aside, a request for an injunction was filed December 29 in Atlanta seeking to restore Trammell and Gordon to their former positions.

The board infighting continues as Bernice King, the youngest daughter of the late civil rights leader, prepares to take over as the first female president of SCLC. Her oldest brother, Martin Luther King III, served as president from 1997 to 2004, but left after a bitter dispute with the board.

According to several people who serve on the board or staff of SCLC, Trammell said that under his leadership, no woman or another member of the King family would serve as president of the

organization. However, the self-styled master politician made a major miscalculation.

As a condition for accepting the job as interim president and CEO of SCLC, Byron Clay requested – and got – about six people added to the board. Trammell campaigned for the election of former Arkansas Court of Appeals Judge Wendell Griffen as president and presumed he had the votes of the new board members recruited by Clay. He presumed wrong. Instead of going with Trammell’s candidate, all of them backed King, providing the margin for her 23-15 victory.

If Bernice King is to be successful at SCLC, she’ll need to get rid of Trammell, Gordon and those aligned with them for good.

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Demanding New African-American Consumer-Marketer

By Norm Bond
NNPA Guest Commentary

(NNPA) - The African-American consumer market represents the largest emerging market in the world. With revenues projected to reach \$1.2 trillion dollars by 2012 according to the US Census Bureau, this market segment has more retail purchasing power than Mexico, a nation to which many US companies are beating a path.

The segment has richly rewarded many retailers, wholesalers and manufacturers. Indeed the African-American consumer has built entire television networks, established new fashion trends and revolutionized the use of consumer electronic and communication tools from pagers to cell phones. We’ve “passed the Courvoisier,” “put a ring on it” and had “everybody in the club getting” tipsy.” We’ve made the words “bling-bling” part of the popular culture, created a market for overpriced football jerseys (“throwbacks”) and made more ways to wear jeans than Levi could have ever imagined. But what have we received in return? I guess we’d better “blame it on the alcohol.”

This is why the actions of companies like General Motors are so disturbing today. The notion of Black people driving Cadillacs is part of the lexicon within the African-American culture. The brand has been a status symbol for the aspiration of Black leaders from Baptist preachers, to organization leaders to today’s “Ballers” whose whip of choice is the Cadillac Escalade. With such extreme brand loyalty from a segment that over-indexes and contributes 24 percent to the companies’ market share, you would expect willingness, even a strong demonstrated desire by the company to reciprocate. In a challenging economic environment why not go to our base? Look to further build a “relationship” and partner in new and more creative ways. Would it be too much to ask for support of the things that are of interest to your loyal consumers including the institutions and media outlets that deliver the messages? Clearly not, however, the research shows just the opposite. GM has taken the loyalty of the African American consumer for granted.

Even in the boom years, the company did not spend a commensurate share of its annual advertising budget with Black-owned media outlets. And now, in tough economic times we have learned of the nearly \$3 billion dollars the company spends in annual advertising, it spent an insulting \$35 million, about a third of one percent, with Black-owned media. This represents on third of a penny, for every \$100 dollars it receives from Black consumers who buy GM vehicles. The company recently received \$50 billion in government bail-out monies, tax-payer dollars, many of whom are African-American but the company is still refusing to increase its advertising spend with this core-demographic segment that has been “ride or die” with the GM brands – the African-American consumer.

Some would play “devil’s advocate” and say – why should they? Why should a company, for example, that has 95 percent penetration into the African-American consumer market and spend \$0 in advertising directed toward this group – support Black-owned media? Surely, their research and consultants will tell them “we can put those dollars to better use elsewhere.” Besides, what do they have to lose?

I would argue – they could lose a lot. Particularly if these same African-American consumers start to wake-up, become conscious of their influence, and start to leverage their consumer retail spending power in an effective manner. Definitely, if leaders like Danny Bakewell and the NNPA, are able to use the same medium available to these companies, the Black Press of America and inform their readers of the atrocity of continuing to blindly support companies who don’t respect our institutions, our community, nor our Black-owned media outlets. Certainly, if responsible Black elected officials like the Congressional Black Caucus are willing to call to task the senior management of General Motors and demand an accounting for the gross inequities of their faulty marketing and advertising practices, companies that follow these outmoded strategies stand to lose even more than profits and market share.

But can Black consumers toe the line? Recently, John and Maggie Anderson of Chicago answered this question. As an upper middle-class African-American family they decided they were tired of just talking about the inequities many of us see every day. They launched the “Empowerment Experiment” and for an entire year “lived off of Black-owned businesses and professional services.” This simple act by one family has grown and sparked renewed interest in the possibilities of creating new solutions by seeking out and supporting Black-owned businesses. Perhaps General Motors should take notice. Some will refuse to sit idly, watch and complain as our businesses, our institutions, and our community continues to deteriorate and we spend billions of consumer retail dollars with companies that don’t share our values. Indeed the growth of the Empowerment Experiment is proof positive that a new way of thinking is beginning to take root within the African American Community and from a new vanguard of leaders.

This fresh, new leadership is rooted in the visionary action of Rev. Leon Sullivan, the founder of OIC and developer of the Sullivan Principles which helped end apartheid in South Africa. It’s rooted in the commitment to action of Black business owners who realize that a “jobless recovery” means that the African-American community must find ways to generate jobs from within its own base by increasing the number of new businesses that are created. It’s rooted in new organization leaders who are building local, regional, national, and global networks using social media, traditional media, and their personal networks to create a new balance of power. This group is moving forward with a firm belief that if the question is – can Black consumers toe the line and crate new mutually beneficial relationships with companies that respect their interests? Then the answer is, “Yes we can!”

Norm Bond is the national president of the National Alliance of Market Developers, Inc. (NAMD) founded in 1953.

Young Black Men Are Precious Too

By Phill Wilson
NNPA Columnist

(NNPA) - My recent Op-Ed piece titled “Precious and a Princess” kicked up a firestorm. Some readers were offended because I compared the lives of some Black women to that of Claireese “Precious” Jones’s life in Lee Daniel’s film *Precious* — even though many Black girls live under the burdens of poverty, domestic violence, molestation and, yes, HIV infection.

One reader was upset that I talked about teaching our daughters how to use condoms rather than just encouraging abstinence. I agree we should encourage our daughters to abstain from sex until they are in healthy, stable relationships. But there is a large (and growing) body of research showing that teaching our children only abstinence instead of comprehensive sex education that includes abstinence as well as clear safer sex guidelines just leaves them in greater danger of having unprotected sex, putting them at higher risk for HIV and other sexually-transmitted diseases. HIV/AIDS is a deadly disease. We have a responsibility to ensure our children have every possible weapon to protect them from infection.

Another reader attributed Black women’s struggles to their embrace of feminism, rather than structural issues like racism, failing public school systems and the declining availability of urban manufacturing jobs for high-school-educated men. I vehemently disagree. Returning women to the back of the gender bus will only rob them of the power to control their own destinies. But the most provocative comment came from a man who chastised me

for focusing on the plight of Black girls and women because Black men are in far worse shape than Black women. And by almost every measure, he’s right. But this is not an either/or proposition. Black women faring badly, but better than Black men, are not mutually exclusive facts. Raising Black women up does not mean pushing black men down. Suggesting we take better care of our daughters does not exclude the need to take better care of our sons.

So I want to say some things about the condition of Black boys and young men. Recent data show white men facing an unemployment rate of just over 10 percent compared with over 18 percent among Black men. Among young Black men without a high-school diploma, the data are catastrophic; nearly half have no jobs or even prospects for employment. These rates are based on a labor-force number which excludes those in prison; given that there are five times as many Blacks behind bars as whites, including the incarcerated would make the terrible unemployment gap even worse.

Black boys/young men are 40 percent of the male US prison population, but represent only 13 percent of the male population in the U.S. If research shows that half of Black girls ages 14 to 19 have an STD, the rate must be also be high among our boys. In 2006, Black teens ages 13-19 accounted for 69 percent of new AIDS cases among teens. Research also shows that the HIV rate among urban gay and bisexual Black men under 30 is in the range of 50 percent.

Recently the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Black AIDS Institute conducted focus groups on attitudes about HIV/AIDS in Black communities.

One of the panels involved only Black men. In addition to asking their perspectives on a host of AIDS-related issues, we inquired about the state of their lives. Some of the answers we heard were sobering.

We learned, for example, that young Black men don’t just feel isolated from white America — in fact, many of them have written White America off and have long given up on being accepted by the larger society. The shocker is they feel isolated from Black adults, leaders and institutions, from the community that they would traditionally turn to when mainstream society rejected them. Many young Black men believe that Black America has rolled them under the bus — that the oppression they face is not only coming from white people. White women, they say, aren’t the only ones clutching their purses and crossing to the other side of the street when they seem them coming; Black women and grandmothers are pulling away from them as well.

The truth of the matter is, a lot of Black adults think of young Black men only as a problem, not part of the solution. As alienated and disillusioned as they might be, young Black men want to participate in our community. We are only fooling ourselves if we think that our community can improve itself while leaving Black boys and young men behind. Just as elevating Black women makes our entire community better, so investing in Black men is good for us as well. As Martin Luther King admonished us forty three years ago, “We are bound together in a single garment of destiny”. We need to do both.

Phill Wilson is the founder and CEO of the Black AIDS Institute (www.BlackAIDS.org).

Criticism, Criticism, Criticism

By Ron Walters
NNPA Columnist

(NNPA) - I think that the pundits and the public should face up to one fact. The mess that President Barack Obama inherited will not be fixed in one year, or two or possibly even during his entire term. That makes it exceedingly difficult to determine, in this time framework, especially through the screen of the constant criticism of him and his policies what the real nature of his presidential contribution will be.

The media works on a timeframe of instant results. While grudgingly admitting that the George Bush administration presided over the wars, the sorry state of the economy and the home foreclosure crisis, and passed it on to Obama, they nonetheless, constantly criticize Obama’s personal actions and proposals in his attempt to fix these problems. Those who come to his defense in the welter of attacks are rare, sense it appears from surveying many media outlets that most of those who are allowed the privilege of participating in the public interpretation of events are opponents of this White House. The frequency of Republican and conservative Democratic voices invited to comment on every action of the White House has been overwhelming, something the Democratic party did not experience under George Bush.

So, what are we to make of the fact that Obama inherited the worst situation going into office of perhaps any president in American history and that his poll numbers are just below 50% at the end of one year in office? Are these good considering the problems or do the pundits and the American people realistically expect that he would have resolved the problems they face

in one year? Or is this merely a symbol of American discontent with the personal situation that that they impute to the president as the custodian of the problems? I think it is the latter. Somewhere, reality must trump symbolism and it is my belief that this is not only the task of historians, but it is the responsibility of serious media as events occur.

Too often, unjustified criticisms of this Administration have been uttered on the talk shows, the internet and in other forums without opposition by hosts, commentators and other persons who influence public opinion. This means that the media has been influential in driving down Obama’s favorable ratings by doing things like trying to make him responsible for the high unemployment rate and the response by the “Tea Party” phenomenon as a legitimate sense of the American people, when it is little more than a carefully crafted and funded Right Wing mobilization.

Too often media commentators have not corrected or given balance to the criticisms such as: George Bush kept us safe during his tenure when no one knows whether that is true; or that Obama promised to put everything on C-SPAN; or that he waited too long to respond to the Detroit airline bomber; or that he hasn’t focused on job creation; and that the Stimulus Package has not worked at all.

If George Bush had been as criticized and interrogated as much as Obama, perhaps the edifice of problems that now challenge the very viability of America might have been stopped. In fact, in the context of the problems his administration faces, the personality and actions of Obama exist in a war of interpretation but I do not see them positioning their troops to fight it.

Besides the concrete accomplishments of any president, its legacy will often be determined by who wins the war over the interpretation of the actions of his administration at the time it is in office. Those interpretations will often exist for a long time because historians use media interpretations as well.

My sense of this was heightened by remarks by Richard Cohen of the Washington Post who recently wrote that given his low favorable numbers Obama has “failed” as president. How do you fail in one year and is that an accurate interpretation of how to read the polls? Nevertheless, by stating that Obama has failed, Cohen has influenced the judgment of many people in that regard. The lack of reality that resides in such judgments is one of the reasons why some of us believe that the interpretations of Obama’s actions have much to do with race, at base a belief in the inferiority of black leadership (even if he doesn’t profess to be a black leader). Indeed, a new study by Stanford University researchers strongly correlates racial bias with negative attitudes toward Obama.

That aside, I believe that the nature of the skewed interpretations of Obama’s administration have much more to do with the times, the severity of the crisis, the hegemonic power of the Right to influence opinion and the lack of a forceful set of voices to right the balance of opinion. Despite the criticisms, the reality is that the Obama administration has made a dent in the problems America faces. Someone must answer why has he not been given the credit he deserves?

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