

EDITORIAL

Why We Must Support Black Farmers

On May 8, when black farmers—and their white allies—descend on the nation's capitol, they should not stand alone. The nation should stand with them.

They will need all the support they can get because very few power brokers in Washington ever listen to them. In fact, even when Capitol Hill is working with the farmers, they don't actually consult with them, partner or ensure that the things that were agreed upon are sufficiently met.

We should stand with them and here's why:

—Black farmers are rare. In 1920 there were over 900,000. Today, there are less than 20,000. Jim Crow and discrimination in the south have systematically driven the vast majority of black farmers off their land. Historically, Black farmers have had to combat racism and discrimination without the benefits of institutional support systems.

—Black landowners are rare. Since WWII Black land loss has averaged over 500 acres per day. Historically, blacks who

have owned land have always been at threat of losing their ground to Jim Crow, night riders, gentrification and other tactics utilized to ensure that black landowners remained few and isolated.

—Farm and land ownership are a source of empowerment for the families and communities that thrive around them. As mortgages are the primary building block of wealth in our nation, the dismantling of landownership is an attack on the economic well being of black communities.

When black farmers come under threat, the national community is also threatened. As many small farmers have learned, when black farmers are forced off their land, we all lose ground. The only way to survive is to work together and take the fight to the source.

Write letters, make phone calls, send e-mails to your congressperson. Or join the rally May 8 and be counted: do what you can to show support to those who help feed the world.

—*The Black Press of America*

Oakland's on the Go?

BY EMORY CURTIS

Oakland is a California city with enough African American voters to elect and keep the office in black hands. However, it didn't at the last election. It replaced a black mayor with a white mayor like some other black-electoral controlled cities.

Jerry Brown, ex-governor of California, won the mayor's job over a passel of black and non-black candidates in the primary. And the black voting strength hadn't been diluted by increases in Hispanics voters as Los Angeles and its satellite cities are experiencing.

Jerry won because a majority of Oakland voters, black and non-black, felt the black mayors had let the city slide down over the years. As a result many Oakland voters bought into Jerry Brown's line that as mayor he could turn the city around.

That's believable because Oakland is a city with a lot of natural and location advantages besides its proximity to San Francisco, everybody's city. In transportation, Oakland has direct connections to every transportation mode used in moving goods and people.

Oakland's physical location is a naturally attractive backdrop for a city -- hills surrounded by flat lands that lead down to an active port. In terms of economics and population, the city is ripe for a re-making.

That's true because the residential housing and office market within reasonable commute distance of Silicon Valley is very stressed. That stress is so great that some lower-wage employed workers there have sunk to renting sleeping floor space for as much as \$400 per month.

That's why Jerry Brown's Oakland remaking plan may succeed and we lose because Oakland is home for many of the San Francisco Bay Area black professionals. Inherent in Jerry's re-making plan is to make Oakland the home for many well-paid Silicon Valley dot com workers.

That another way of saying he wants to attract young white and Asians with money to Oakland. If successful, black households will be replaced with the price Oakland blacks will pay replacing a black face with a white face in the mayor's office?

Jerry didn't just take Mayor's Office, he took over the city. He got the voters to increase the mayor's power, give the mayor three members of a ten-member school board, and let him have virtual control of the City Council.

Previous mayors wanted that power but couldn't get it. Jerry got it on the first bounce.

Jerry Brown started his term with uninviting commercial streets, fear of crime. At the beginning of Jerry Brown's term, the commercial streets were uninviting, fear of crime (deserved or not) was general, and the public school system's performance was a tragic joke. Just a few years ago, not one black high school graduate from Oakland public schools qualified to apply for admission to the University of California system.

Among Jerry's first acts as mayor was to kick out some department heads that were not performing up to his idea of par. I don't know whether there was a tie-in, but, as regular visitors to Oakland, Edlene and I noticed that the streets began looking cleaner.

However, for Jerry to be Oakland's savior, just having clean streets won't do it. He knows that the perception of crime in Oakland has to be reduced.

Also, for Jerry Brown to make Oakland attractive to middle class residents, they must be able to trust Oakland public schools with their children.

Both of those goals, attracting the middle class (whites) back to Oakland and making major changes in the school system, will run into some real opposition, even from some of Jerry's supporters.

If Jerry's plans works, Oakland will join the city house-gouging parade. Cities in Silicon Valley (Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties) have astronomical housing costs and they lead the house-gouging parade. One third of the homeless in Santa Clara County have full-time jobs.

Their housing market is so tight that eviction notices are sent tenants if they are five days late on rent. A Silicon Valley studio apartment in undesirable neighborhoods costs about \$1,000 per month (pay three months in month).

That's why if Oakland had decent housing at a fair price, the houses would sell. However, for Oakland there is a catch. Without a decent school system, the housing would only be attractive to homosexuals and singles.

And now, since all the public schools in California are rated on a scale of 1 to 10 from the same tests, the rating of a neighborhood school makes an area attractive or unattractive to middle class movers with (or expecting) school kids. Those are the very families Jerry Brown and other mayors want their cities to attract.

Without a decent school system, middle-class workers may work in the city, but they'll live in the suburbs. That's what Chicago's Mayor Daley found out from his ethnic supporters who left Chicago for the suburbs. They liked their old neighborhood but couldn't send their kids to the local schools.

Oakland's problem is a school system that is a joke, a tragic joke. Their foray into Ebonics is not erasable in the short term. It reminded me of skits from the Amos and Andy skits show with Andy and Kingfish plotting some Knights of the Mystic Sea hustle.

Mayors ought to take more responsibility for the schools. The economic viability of their area depends on the public school system. And since our kids make up such a large percent of students in low performing schools, we ought to be concerned too.

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Many Black Politicians In Deep Trouble

BY EARL OFARI HUTCHINSON

NAACP leaders turned the tepid issue of the Confederate flag fluttering over the South Carolina statehouse into a life and death battle against racism. Now black politicians in the state have gone from one better and are waging mortal combat against a plan by South Carolina governor Jim Hodges to require elementary school students to say "sir, and ma'am" when addressing teachers and school employees.

Black politicians screamed racism and railed that this is nothing but a sneaky way of forcing blacks to bow and scrape for white folks again. Hodge's plan is a sideshow gesture that does nothing to reverse the deplorable drop out rates and miserably low test scores of black students in South Carolina's public schools. But the black lawmakers didn't attack Hodge's worthless idea because it doesn't improve the state's abominably underfunded and underserved schools. That won't snatch media and public attention and send the troops scurrying to the barricades.

The courtesy title squabble is yet another troubling sign of the penchant of many black elected officials to grab at showy, chic issues rather than pounding on the crucial problems of poverty, violence, poor education, the disastrous disparities in the criminal justice system, and the gut of social programs that have taken a massive toll on poor and working class blacks.

Their political ineffectiveness in attacking these issues has caused them to freefall in state and national politics. In the past two years they have lost mayorships to whites in majority black cities of Baltimore and Oakland. The number of black state legislators has plummeted from 12 to 6 in the California legislature since 1994. They have lost seats on dozens of local and municipal offices nationwide.

The Congressional Black Caucus has been unable to get any substantial legislation through Congress. When the Republican-controlled Congress eliminated key committees such as the Post Office and Civil Service and the District of Columbia Committees, CBC members were displaced, and hundreds of committee staff jobs were eliminated many of which were held by blacks. Their blind subservience to Clinton's policies has rendered them little more than malleable foot soldiers for the Democratic Party.

Black politicians blame their political slide on voter apathy, alienation, inner city population drops, suburban integration, and displacement by Latinos and increasingly Asians who some claim have far more cohesion and political savvy than blacks. These factors have contributed to the evaporation in the number, power and influence of black elected officials.

But they are biggest culprits to blame for their slippage. Many black politicians make little or no effort to inform and involve the black public on vital legislation and political actions that directly impact on black communities. Their all-consuming obsession is to elect more black Democrats to office and making sure that those in office stay there.

Many black politicians are accustomed to the unchallenged and unquestioned brandishing of power. They jealously hoard what they view as their sacred right to make all final decisions on proposing laws and supporting public policy they deem important for blacks. Yet those laws and policies often boost middle-class blacks and corporate special interests rather than poor and working-class blacks.

Black politicians are also crippled by their near total dependence on the Democratic Party for patronage, support, and assorted party favors. Few would dare break ranks with the party and attempt to pressure the Republican Party to take black issues seriously. Many Latino and Asian leaders and elected officials are not straight-jacketed by mind-numbing obedience to the Democrats. They have pushed the Democrats and Republicans to cease immigrant bashing, increased funding for bi-lingual education programs, champion Latino political representation and implement outreach programs to Latino voters.

They are leaving blacks in the political dust. The downward shift in black politics should be a wake-up call for black elected officials that guilt tainted appeals for black solidarity and voter registration caravans and buses into black neighborhoods are not going to make blacks dash to the polls to vote for politicians they feel have, or will, fail them. The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a black think tank, found that the frustration and disgust of many black voters with black politicians has soared so high that less than 20 percent of eligible black voters bothered to cast a ballot in many municipal and statewide elections in 1998.

The cruel truth is that with a pivotal presidential election only months away the power and influence of black politicians has badly eroded. And they only make things worse by waging symbolic fights over issues such as flags and how students address teachers while refusing to craft an agenda that confronts the dire problems of the poor and working class blacks. This virtually guarantees that the Democrats will continue to take them for granted, the Republicans will continue to ignore them, and more and black voters will turn away from them.

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What If Elian Was Black?

BY LEE HUBBARD

Elian Gonzalez has become the most famous six-year-old in the world. He was found floating in the Atlantic Ocean off the Florida coast on Thanksgiving Day, having watched his mother drown in a valiant attempt to come to the United States.

His mother didn't make it, but Elian has. Big-time. The cute little boy's face has been beamed into the living rooms of millions of Americans every day as cameras follow him as he walks back and forth and plays in the backyard of his uncle's Miami house.

While his father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, has pleaded for his return, Elian has been showered with presents and with admiration for his survival instincts. He has been hailed as a young and gifted child whose talents need to be developed in the United States. Both presidential candidates have spoken out on behalf of the child staying in the United States. Anti-Castro protests in Miami's Cuban community are seen around the clock. One question that hasn't been asked amid all the controversy is: How would people react if Elian was named Du Bois and he came from Haiti? Would a black nappy-haired boy be at the center of such debate?

I don't think so. All one has to do is look at the treatment that Haitians are accorded when they try to step on American shores. Like Cubans, who live in poverty and face tyranny and political repression under the Marxist government of Fidel Castro, Haitians also live in tyranny in a dysfunctional democracy. But unlike Cubans, who are given political asylum here, Haitians are given a pat on the back and a ticket back to Haiti.

Most blacks favor Elian's return to his father. There is a strong belief in "family values" within the black community who feel that the reunification of a father and a son should take place no matter the political system, no matter what pleasures one can

find in a particular country. It was the ordeal of slavery through the cross-Atlantic slave trade, and then the domestic slave trade, that helped break up the black family. This historical breakup is what has helped many blacks to form strong family bonds over the years. In a recent Miami Herald poll, 92 percent of blacks polled felt that the Elian should return to Cuba with his father, while 76 percent of whites favor his return and only 8 percent of Cubans.

This strong showing of the majority community (black and white) in Miami hasn't deterred the Cuban exiles who have set up encampments around Lazaro Gonzalez' house to protest Elian's return to Cuba. They seem intent on not paying the custody order any mind. To them, Elian is a political trophy to place on a dresser as a reminder of their protest against Castro's Cuba. "He (Elian) faces serious psychological problems if he goes back to Cuba," said Ramon Saul Sanchez, president of the Democracy Movement for a Free Cuba, on the "Both Sides with Jesse Jackson" TV show. "Cuba is a dictatorship that doesn't want people to see them think for themselves." A reluctant Sanchez said he favored the boy reuniting with his father in this country.

But some segments of the Cuban American exile community in Miami feel Elian shouldn't be reunited with his father at all. The bottom line is that the boy needs to be returned to his father, regardless if he decides to stay in the states or go back to Cuba. There isn't a bond stronger than that between a father and his son.

According to all accounts, the bond between the two was strong before Elian's fateful trip away from Cuba. Let's hope the bonds will be strengthened when he is reunited with his father for good.

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