From Protest to Politics:
Still an Issue for
Black Leadership

TAMAR JACOBY

IN POLITICS, as in many other aspects of civic life, America has come a long way since the civil rights era. In the years since the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the number of black elected officials has grown from under 100 to nearly 9,000, while black voter registration has soared, particularly in the South. (Even in the southern states that began with the best numbers, registration has doubled and, in some places, multiplied by a factor of ten.)[1] Yet, for all the increase in participation and political sophistication, the nation's black leadership is still in a state of transition from "outsider" to "insider" politics—still caught between the appeal of expressive, symbolic protest tactics and the challenges of effective, problem-solving governance.

Nothing captures the uncertain moment better than the election in 1998 of Anthony A. Williams as mayor of the District of Columbia. The reserved, Harvard-educated former city financial officer was hailed even before he was elected as one of a "new breed" of black mayors: low-profile, nonideological, "technocratic" city executives who eschew racial politics for managerial savvy. Like Detroit's Dennis Archer, Cleveland's Michael

White, and Denver's Wellington Webb, among others, Williams campaigned on a promise of efficient government and fiscal solvency. Before and after the election, in front of both blacks and whites, he emphasized the need "to bring everybody in our city together."[2] Unlike his confrontational predecessor, Marion Barry, he avoided color-coded power plays, and his low-keyed, fiscally minded campaign paid off handsomely in support from middle-class white voters. To many, in the city and further afield, Williams's election seemed a triumph for black politics—a victory, finally, for responsibility over theatrics and for sober-minded government over empty millennial promises.

The only problem was that many poor, black Washingtonians were at best indifferent, if not hostile, to their new mayor. In the Democratic primary, tantamount to the election in the overwhelming Democratic District, 70 percent of the majority-black electorate stayed home. Worse still, though Williams dominated in better-off white enclaves, winning by a factor of four to one, he managed only to split the vote in middle-class black areas, as he lost outright in the poorest black neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River.[3] In the wake of his victory, several black newspaper columnists assailed the outcome. "The eastern sections of town are downright disillusioned," one critic wrote bitterly, denouncing Williams as a traitor and a tool of the white establishment whose budgetary restraint could only be bad for black people.[4] (Williams did little better among poor blacks in the general election, once again eliciting a heavy turnout in affluent, white neighborhoods, while only one in four voters from across the Anacostia bothered to come out to vote for him.)

It was a small pocket of dissent, seemingly inconsequential in the short run—Williams was elected by a healthy margin—but potentially ominous for the longer-term future. For years now, well-meaning whites and a handful of black intellectuals have bemoaned the state of the nation's black leadership, elected and otherwise. In the wake of the civil rights era, this conventional wisdom held; no one had emerged to guide the later, more difficult stage of the black struggle for inclusion. Instead, angry and often corrupt, race-baiting demagogues had taken over and misled impression-

able followers, ushering in an era of urban decline, stalled race relations, and divisive identity politics, among other ills. Disturbing as it was, in its way, this was a hopeful diagnosis because it meant that change at the top could ease many of the black community's remaining problems. But the experience of the new mayors, Williams included, tells a more complicated story. Whatever the flaws of the older generation of angry, color-conscious spokesmen, they have an enduring appeal for a certain segment of the black population, and as long as their brand of divisive racial politics plays in the inner city and elsewhere, the transition from outside to inside leadership will never be complete.

Thirty-five years after the passage of the great civil rights laws, the old-style "outside" leadership is no longer as explicitly radical as it once was. Except for an occasional, high-profile demonstration, by now the movement has come in off the streets, and few black spokesmen still talk about overturning or seceding from the system. But black protest politics haven't disappeared; they've just gone under cover. The new breed of black mayors is still the exception, not the rule. Most black members of Congress and most executives of the NAACP, the National Urban League, and Jesse Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH Coalition still view the world in color-coded terms and, even when they have chosen to work within the system, still see their jobs as essentially protest by another means. Their methods, as often as not, are confrontational; their stock-in-trade is racial grievance and racial remedies. Like many insurrectionary or protest movements, they brook little dissent within their ranks. (Those with differing views, like Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and California businessman Ward Connerly, are castigated as race traitors.) And whatever their success in delivering for their people, they still command respect as racial champions willing to stand up to power.

Yet, popular as the old-style leadership may be, a number of signs suggest that it is no longer truly in step with the people it claims to represent. On educational issues, all-important to black advancement, one recent survey found that 84 percent of rank-and-file blacks believed parents should be able to send their children to a school of their choosing, whether

public or parochial.[5] But most national black leaders—in Congress and the major civil rights organizations—vigorously oppose school choice of any kind. On crime, another survey found 73 percent of black respondents in favor of "three strikes and you're out" laws that sentence thrice-convicted violent criminals to life imprisonment.[6] Yet when this issue came up for a vote on Capitol Hill in 1993, the Congressional Black Caucus voted overwhelmingly against the sterner penalties. On welfare, 91 percent of blacks are in favor of requiring able-bodied recipients to work for their benefits.[7] But when welfare reform came to the floor in Congress, in 1996, only three out of nearly forty black Democrats voted for it.

This gap is at least two decades old, and, if anything, it is getting wider. It is often seen, in ideological terms, as a gap between liberal leaders and a more conservative community, and there is something to that: the black population also differs from most of its spokesmen on questions of abortion and school prayer and, indeed, how one labels oneself politically. (Though the black rank and file almost never votes Republican, in ideological orientation, by its own account, it is evenly divided—32 percent conservative, 32 percent liberal, 32 percent moderate[8]—while virtually no one in the civil rights establishment would use the C-word to describe themselves.) But to see the divide in purely partisan terms is to miss its deeper philosophical significance: a critical, growing difference in assumptions about what exactly ails the black community and what can most usefully be done to fix it.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the leadership gap was first unearthed in 1985 when an American Enterprise Institute poll found that 66 percent of rank-and-file black respondents felt that blacks as a group were "making progress" in America, whereas 61 percent of their spokesmen said that as a whole the group was "going backwards."[9] The same division appeared again a year later when a survey by two national news organizations asked ordinary blacks how much discrimination they faced in their daily lives, and sizable majorities answered, in effect, "relatively little." (Seventy-five percent experienced no discrimination in "getting a quality education," 73 percent experienced no discrimination in "getting decent

housing," 60 percent experienced no discrimination in "getting a job," and 57 percent experienced no discrimination in "getting equal wages" for their work.)[10] In contrast, if one listens to the national black leadership, one would believe that discrimination and enduring "institutional racism" dominate the lives of every black American.

The difference is critical, not so much as a gauge of bigotry but because of what it says about most blacks' hopes and expectations for their own lives. Though few black politicians explicitly discourage followers from taking advantage of opportunity, if the leadership's dire picture is correct, then there is little point for blacks in making much personal effort: no matter how hard one tries at school or work, no matter how talented you are, in the end, "the system" is always going to hold you back and limit your possibilities for achievement. But apparently most of the black rank and file harbor some doubts about this demoralizing vision of America. Whatever skepticism or anger they feel, and whatever discrimination they have faced in their lives, the polls suggest that ultimately they are far more optimistic than their leadership—an optimism reflected in their gradually shifting personal and political strategies.

As their responses to questions about education, crime, and welfare show, more and more ordinary blacks feel that the road ahead runs through personal responsibility and what in another context is called "development"—schooling, work, community-building, and a stake in the status quo. Though much black leadership remains committed to a strategy of agitation from outside to change the system—protest, legal challenges, economic boycotts, and the like—ordinary blacks seem increasingly committed to making their way from within, using the system to their own advantage and sharing in its fruits.

This shift has drawn little attention, and it is far from complete, but it is already producing a measure of ferment across black America. There is a growing sense among black scholars on both the right and the left that the civil rights establishment is not serving the interests of ordinary blacks. Political scientists as ideologically diverse as Harvard's Martin Kilson, Columbia's Manning Marable, and San Francisco State's Robert C. Smith

have all voiced bitter criticism of their community's alleged spokesmen. Kilson denounces not just the "lawbreaking and norm-flouting" of many black elected officials, but also what he sees as a kind of nationalist "immaturity on the part of the black leadership . . . an ethnographic solidarity [that] is both misplaced in a pluralistic democracy and politically counterproductive." Smith, whose book on the subject is entitled bluntly, *We Have No Leaders*, complains that the political class is so committed to "symbolic" gestures and "the politics of personality" that it is largely "irrelevant in post-civil rights era national politics." These and other black critics differ over whether their leadership is too radical or too conservative, too preoccupied with defending affirmative action or not attentive enough, too concerned with their own power and prerogatives or too enthralled with identity politics. But all agree that the real needs of the black poor—whether for better schools or jobs or police protection—are being sorely neglected.[11]

Meanwhile, like all Americans, black voters are showing less and less interest in electoral politics. Black turnout is notoriously volatile, dependent on spikes of enthusiasm—and distaste—for individual candidates. But even when black participation runs high, as it did in 1998, it remains slightly lower than national turnout figures, which were lower in 1998 than they had been any year since 1942.[12] Queried by journalists, many blacks express dissatisfaction with the relentlessly color-coded concerns of their elected officials: "Most issues should not be defined as black or white," Atlanta realtor Terry Tate, among others, told a *Wall Street Journal* reporter surveying national sentiment. "We *all* need jobs, we *all* need safety, we *all* need to be rid of the scourge of drugs."[13] And in many cities, rather than rallying to politicians, the black rank and file is now turning instead to urban ministers like Rev. Eugene Rivers of Boston and Rev. Floyd Flake of New York (a retired U.S. congressman) who use their church coffers and bully pulpits to promote an agenda of self-help and community development.

What's complicated is that, like any group undergoing a major change, many blacks are still ambivalent and uncertain, confused about what exactly their people need and what they want from their leaders. The men who

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attended Rev. Louis Farrakhan's 1995 Million Man March brought this uncertainty home for all America to see. As much as anything, it was clear, the ideology that drove these men was about self-help: the issues of personal responsibility and accomplishment and community-building that Farrakhan evoked when he talked about "atonement." The irony is that all these themes have been staple fare among black conservatives for more than two decades now. But unlike Farrakhan, virtually no conservative black spokesmen could produce enough followers to hold a rally—in large part because their prescriptions come without the angry edge that Farrakhan specializes in. In the long run, that hate-filled, race-baiting rhetoric is antithetical to a real push for self-help and development. (The more you blame "the system" for holding you back, the less likely you will be to take full responsibility for your own life.) Yet the men who traveled to Washington for the Million Man March didn't want to have to choose between protest and self-help. They thrilled to Farrakhan's angry outsider's politics—and wanted to work the system, too. Uncertain which way to go, they held fast to both antithetical options.

Theirs isn't an uncommon ambivalence. However much the black rank and file may differ from its leaders on important questions like education, crime, and welfare reform, they reelect members of the Congressional Black Caucus by overwhelming margins. (Once they've won a place in Congress, half of all caucus members run unopposed in either the next primary or general election, and their average margin of victory falls in the 80 percent range.) Technocratic "crossover" mayors like Anthony Williams have been running and winning elections for more than a decade now, but they almost never inspire a large, enthusiastic black turnout either in middle-class neighborhoods or in poorer parts of town, and many find it hard to win a second term or to rally black voters when they try for higher office. Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum, flamboyant race-baiting street leaders like New York's Rev. Al Sharpton and Khalid Abdul Muhammad command only a very small following. In spite of repeated tries for office— for U.S. senator and mayor—Sharpton has never garnered more than 130,000 votes in all of New York City or New York state, and Muhammad's

so-called "million youth marches" in Harlem in 1998 and 1999 drew no more than a few thousand followers. But, except in the rarest of circumstances, neither rank-and-file blacks nor more respectable black elected officials dare to denounce demagogic race men like Sharpton and Farrakhan. To do so would be implicitly to repudiate the anger they trade in—an anger that still galvanizes blacks of all classes.

Which trend is stronger—the commitment to self-help and development or the angry alienation? It's hard to say, and it would be a grave mistake to underestimate black estrangement. Every TV viewer remembers the black reaction to the O. J. Simpson verdict. Millions of black Americans, poor and better-off alike, still believe that "white society" has a "plan" to destroy them. According to one 1990 poll, 29 percent think it is or "might be" true that "the virus which causes AIDS was deliberately created in a laboratory in order to infect black people"; 58 percent think it's true or likely that "the government deliberately makes sure that drugs are easily available in poor black neighborhoods in order to harm black people"; and 77 percent believe it's possible that "the government deliberately singles out and investigates black elected officials in order to discredit them in a way it doesn't do with white officials."[14] Surprisingly enough, educated, middle-class blacks are even more likely than the poor to harbor these paranoid fantasies. And both the poor and the better-off are often suspicious of plans for the economic revival of black neighborhoods. Though it would bring jobs and stores and opportunity where now there are none, many residents of places like Harlem and the majority-black city of Detroit fear that development will inevitably mean economic exploitation of blacks by whites—and, if so, they would rather forego the prosperity. Indeed, much of the black opposition to technocratic mayors like Anthony Williams and Detroit's Dennis Archer turns on just this sort of economic nationalism: because he advocates fiscal solvency and color-neutral economic growth, Williams is denounced by both poor and better-off blacks as a "bandit" whose policies will usher in an era of "occupation."[15]

Still, in the long run, the appeal of the technocratic mayors lies in their pragmatism, and, for all the alienation of better-off blacks, it is an appeal

that should only grow as more and more of the black population make the transition into the middle class. The new crop of managerial executives benefits from the experience of earlier pioneers going back a generation: Los Angeles's Tom Bradley, Atlanta's Andrew Young, and Baltimore's Kurt Schmoke, among others, who tried with varying degrees of success to move beyond old-style racial leadership and govern more effectively for all constituents. Like them, the new guard generally steers clear of ideology. They avoid open repudiations of their predecessors, no matter how demagogic. They never explicitly abandon the civil rights tradition and rarely dismantle the racial remedies they inherit—including, in many cities, extensive municipal set-asides. They are not immune to racial pressures, as Anthony Williams proved disappointingly less than a month into his mayoralty, when he allowed public opinion to force out a key city official for no other reason than that he had used the word "niggardly" at a meeting. But even when they can't rise above racial politics, what's important about the new mayors is their focus on the bottom line: not, after all these years, the realization of a millennial civil rights vision but "merely" fiscal solvency and a city that works—for both blacks and whites.

But the truth is that, even more than the middle class, it is the black poor who need leaders with a more pragmatic, bottom-line approach. Whatever the appeal for poor people of an angry, outside protest leadership, they more than any are the ones who suffer when their politicians don't deliver. The experience of the city of Detroit makes the case as vividly as any. "Mayor for Life" Coleman Young, who governed from 1973 to 1993, was an old-style leader in the classic mold. He came into office promising Black Power in one city, then made a career out of gratuitous race-baiting and thumbing his nose at the white suburbs. Detroit voters thrilled to his racial grandstanding and hardly seemed to notice as businesses fled and city services deteriorated—everything from schools to garbage pickup to, most disastrously, the police. By the early 1990s, the auto industry had all but abandoned Detroit for the suburbs. One in three residents lived below the poverty line, and, in some neighborhoods, more than half were unemployed. Two decades of ill-disguised contempt by the mayor had dis-

astrously undermined the police force, allowing crack and the crime that came with it to devastate huge swatches of the city. Teenage pregnancy was more the norm than the exception, and by the time they got to high school, 70 percent of the city's young men had already had some involvement with the criminal justice system, often for major offenses.[16] Young's successor, Dennis Archer, makes no appeals to solidarity, but he has devoted himself to restoring services, markedly improving the quality of life for both poor and more comfortable Detroiters.

Like all the "technocratic" black mayors, Archer has waged a multifront war. Like Cleveland's Michael White and a number of the others, he has moved aggressively to reduce crime in the city by restoring confidence in the police department. Also like many of his fellow pragmatic urban executives, he has pushed to restore the city's school system. (The mayors' methods vary from city to city. In Cleveland, for example, White is moving toward a voucher system; in Detroit, with Michigan governor John Engler's support, Archer has replaced the old elected school board with a more directly accountable "reform board" of his own choosing.) Like many of the other new mayors, Washington's Anthony Williams included, Archer is nudging the city toward a more balanced budget. But perhaps most important, in Detroit, as in Cleveland and other places governed by the new breed, Archer has made it a top priority to bring business back into the center of town. Some of Detroit's new enterprises are big, revenue-generating behemoths: a $220 million casino, a new GM headquarters expected to employ hundreds of people. More significant in the long run, some are smaller, start-up companies that will restore jobs and create a business culture in poorer neighborhoods. ("The secret to revival," one Detroit city planner said recently, explaining the mayor's success, "is connecting the dots" of big, downtown commercial projects with an urban fabric of restaurants, shops, and other small enterprises.[17]) The one thing Archer does not particularly care about is whether the new business is white- or black-owned. This fiscally minded color blindness has infuriated many of the city's middle-class black residents, who complain among themselves that the mayor isn't "black enough."[18] But over time, it is hard

to imagine that the all too tangible, day-to-day benefits of Archer's approach—the lowered crime and better-paying jobs and new housing development—won't eventually wean both the city's poor and its better-off blacks from their yen for confrontational, outside leadership.

An old cliché left over from the heyday of the civil rights movement captures the uncertainty ahead in Detroit and other cities. "There is a little bit of Malcolm X," the old phrase went, "and a little bit of Martin Luther King in every black man"—a little bit, that is, of angry, alienated outsider but also a measure of hope about eventually belonging and feeling at home in America. Just which of these two sides prevailed has depended over the years on several things, including which tendency the reigning black leadership encouraged and how open the system proved to black advancement. Today, the hope is that the new-style leadership can make a difference, reinforcing and fortifying the side of people that wants to let go of the past and take advantage of new opportunities. The difficulty, as the experience of the managerial mayors shows, is that leaders can do only so much to change hearts and minds. At long last, a better leadership is emerging in black America. The question for the future is whether its followers are ready.

Notes

1. Figures are from David A. Bositis, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

2. *USA Today*, September 16, 1998.

3. *Washington Post*, September 17, 1998.

4. *Washington Times*, September 18, 1998.

5. *Investor's Business Daily*, April 1, 1998; poll conducted in 1997 by the Washington-based Center for Education Reform.

6. *Ethnic News Watch*, January 4, 1997; poll conducted in 1996 by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

7. *Investor's Business Daily*, April 1, 1998; poll conducted in 1993 by Fabrizion, McLaughlin & Associates.

8. David A. Bositis, "The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies 1997 National Opinion Poll—Politics."

9. Cited in Martin Kilson, "Problems in Black Politics," *Dissent*, Fall 1989.

10. Ibid. The poll was conducted in 1986 by ABC News and the *Washington Post*.

11. See Kilson, "Problems in Black Politics"; Robert C. Smith, *We Have No Leaders: African Americans in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996); Manning Marable, *Black Leadership* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

12. *New York Times*, November 6 and 8, 1998; *Wall Street Journal*, November 5, 1998.

13. *Wall Street Journal*, October 13, 1992.

14. *New York Times*, October 29, 1990.

15. *Washington Times*, September 18, 1998.

16. Tamar Jacoby, *Someone Else's House: America's Unfinished Struggle for Integration* (New York: Free Press, 1998).

17. *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 1999.

18. *U.S. News and World Report*, March 15, 1999.