

# Point of View

## "THE STATE OF BLACK AMERICA: 1985"

By John E. Jacob, President  
National Urban League

*Annually for the past ten years, the National Urban League has called together a group of outstanding scholars to assess and analyze important events in a number of specific areas. As a result of that study, John E. Jacob, president of the National Urban League, recently delivered his annual appraisal of the "State of Black America."*

*Participating scholars and the titles of the papers they contributed to the Urban League study are as follows:*

*"The Phenomenon of the Jesse Jackson Candidacy and the 1984 Presidential Election," Dr. Charles V. Hamilton, Columbia University; "Modern Technology and Urban Schools," Dr. Robert E. Fulllove, University of California at Berkeley; "Blackening In Media: The State of Blacks In The Press," Dr. Samuel L. Adams, University of Kansas; "Aged Black Americans: Double Jeopardy Re-Examined," Dr. Jacquelyne Johnson Jackson, Duke University Medical Center; "Blacks In the U.S. Labor Movement: Working or Not?" Dr. Lenneal J. Henderson, Howard University; "The Black Family Today and Tomorrow," Dr. James D. McGhee, NUL Director of Research; "The Potentials and Problems of Black Financial Institutions," Dr. William D. Bradford, University of Maryland. Following is the full text of Jacob's appraisal:*

Ten years ago, the National Urban League began publishing this annual assessment of the status of Blacks in America. Over this period we have recorded some advancements and some setbacks, but what has remained constant is the continuing struggle of Black America for equity.

Black America is a special place that requires special understanding. It embraces more than 26 million men, women and children and is becoming increasingly younger and more concentrated in urban areas. While it shares many of the same concerns so common to American society as a whole—a decent education, a worthwhile job offering upward mobility, the rearing of a strong and healthy family, and retirement in comfort and dignity—it has its own special set of concerns that exert a powerful influence in determining the quality of its life.

### Editorial

"Penny wise and pound foolish" was the statement made recently by a Reno Republican Assemblyman of Governor Bryan's suggestion that the budget for youth correctional programs be cut. Other legislators and state officials suggested that the cuts suggested by the Governor would lead to a "deterioration of services for children in trouble."

Governor Bryan is suggesting a reduction in the number of youth parole officers from 16 to 13.

Youths need all the help they can get. In today's world, youths are pressured on all sides to become involved in things that may lead to their own degradation. There are drugs of all kinds, promiscuous sexual activities, lessening of authority within the family, and a general lack of respect for anyone who differs from themselves that tend to make it necessary for our youths to have all the help they can get.

We realize that, with a Republican Assembly and a Democratic Senate, it may become very difficult for Governor Bryan to secure the legislation he may desire. However, we also think that there may be other areas that can be cut without penalizing the youths of the state.

Youths in trouble desperately need all of the help they can get. To deprive them of the help they need is almost the same as denying them the opportunity to grow up as useful and taxpaying citizens.

Concerns about schools that do not teach but graduate functional illiterates, about horrendous unemployment rates and tens of thousands of people who have never held a job and probably never will, about the staggering increase in families headed by single women, about violent crimes where Blacks are both the principal victims and the perpetrators.

That Black America is not worse off today than it is, is more of a testament to its traditional ability to survive under the most difficult of conditions than to anything else. Survival is a way of life in all too much of Black America, but the word also carries with it the implication of being able to make those changes and adjustments necessary to meet circumstances of the moment.

These adjustments occurred increasingly in Black America in 1984 as more Blacks and more Black institutions, realizing there would be only minimal assistance coming from the outside, directed more and more of their own energies and limited resources toward addressing the pressing problems at hand. We will return to this point later.

When the National Urban League started this series it was because of the need to call the nation's attention to the special conditions of Black Americans, conditions that were being ignored by the leadership and the policy-makers in this country. Those who were in a position to do something about these conditions, proceeded as if they did not exist. And those who, by raising the issues that produced the conditions might have compelled attention to be paid to them, were either powerless or chose to be silent.

We spoke in the first "State of Black America" of the slow but steady decline in racial cooperation and how the "condition of Black Americans, once the benchmark of America's commitment to equality and justice, is now the object of malign neglect and hostile disregard."

A few days before the publication of our document, president Richard M. Nixon delivered the State of the Union Address. Commenting on that, we said: "It did not include a single mention of the Black citizens and their needs. It included not one word about the government's commitment to enforce civil rights laws, about the disproportionate suffering Black people have endured in the current depression, about mob efforts to defy court orders to desegregate the schools, about the urban fiscal problems of our most urbanized minority—not one word!"

"Because the public has been subjected to an analysis of the State of the Union that excludes Black people, the National Urban League has prepared a document that delineates the State of Black Americans today. It is a document that does not attempt to cover up the seriousness of the situation Black people find themselves in."

And ten years later, what is the state of Black America? Has it improved? Has it grown worse?

In the best of worlds we would be reporting that the Black condition has shown marked improvement over the past decade. But the facts argue otherwise. In virtually every area of life that counts, Black people made strong progress in the 1960s, peaked in the 70s and have been sliding ever since. Much of this, but not all, is attributable to the shape of the American economy which has gone through some trying times, and is still not out of the woods, as far as Black Americans can discern.

One measuring rod for answering the questions we have posed is employment. In 1975, Black unemployment was 14.1%, about double that of White

unemployment (7.6%). At the end of 1984, Black unemployment was 16%, more than double that of whites (6.5%). Constituting some 10% of the labor force, Blacks account for 20% of the jobless.

The economy is not the only force that continues to operate against Blacks. The national will to take positive steps to help set the scales of justice into balance has diminished tremendously over the past ten years, and has been replaced, in large measure, by a feeling that nothing more needs to be done and if Blacks are still on the outside looking in, it's probably their own fault.

National leadership must be held accountable because, by its failure to continue to place strong emphasis on those programs and policies that were improving the lives of Blacks, other minorities and the poor, it sent a signal that such matters had been placed on the backburner.

Under the Nixon-Ford Administration, the problems of Blacks and the poor were never major concerns, but there was little overt hostility, and draconian measures against the disadvantaged were not taken. For all of its professed, undoubtedly real concern for those at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum, the Carter Administration found itself so caught up in the so-called oil crisis, inflation, a worsening economy, and what it called a "malaise" of the American spirit, that it had little time or stomach for other matters.

The Reagan Administration, however, has by contrast made the shortcomings of other administrations seem minor. Its record is deplorable and includes continuing attacks against affirmative action, the unwarranted entry of the Justice Department into civil rights cases in an effort to turn back the clock, efforts to grant tax exemption to schools that discriminate, the transformation of the once independent U.S. Commission on Civil Rights into a rubber stamp for administration policy, foot dragging on the extension of the Voting Rights Act, and cuts in domestic programs that have helped drive more than half a million families into poverty.

Small wonder that Blacks overwhelmingly voted against the administration in 1984. The point that seems to have been missed by some administration supporters, who profess that the only reason Blacks voted as they did, is because they felt it was in their best interest.

There is no question but that President Reagan has revived the American spirit and fostered a sense of self-confidence among the American people. He is a popular president and under his leadership inflation has been reduced, the overall economy has improved, and the military has been given the key to the treasury.

Does this mean then that Black people were out of step with the rest of their countrymen when they voted so overwhelmingly against him? It probably does, but this does not mean that from their perspective, there was any other choice. The plain fact is that Black people are wary of this administration. They do not trust it, and the administration has given them very few reasons to feel any differently.

In its first edition for 1985, Time Magazine offered an observation that is helpful in understanding the Black perspective on the Reagan administration: "But in Reagan's America . . . there has been a fundamental shift in values. From the beginning,

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