

Farrakhan threatens the black community

Minister Louis Farrakhan has always been the subject of hated debate, and more so since the 1984 presidential campaign. Detractors denounce him as an anti-Semitic demagogue. Some supporters embrace his racism. Others, overwhelmed by the frustration in the black community, ignore his bigotry and emphasize what they say are his valuable economic programs, without fully realizing their implications.

There are three basic problems with the Farrakhan message: his anti-Semitism; and his insistence that black economic "renewal" can be achieved only through a politically disastrous course for black America.

Besides being anti-democratic and morally repugnant, Farrakhan's anti-Semitism drives a wedge between blacks and Jews, groups that traditionally have formed the vanguard in the struggles for civil rights and social justice. He threatens to undermine the coalition of blacks, Jews, organized labor and others essential for social and economic change

in our multi-racial society. This coalition secured the legislative victories of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and laid the groundwork for major economic and social progress for blacks and other minority groups. Farrakhan's emphasis on separatism, and his position that blacks have no stake in the political system, threaten to reverse the progress that resulted from the 1964 Voting Rights Act. The increasing number of black elected officials nationwide is proof of that progress.

Historically, black nationalist movements in this country have represented emotional outbursts, lacking attainable economic programs, while relying on inflammatory rhetoric to generate support. The have arisen in times of despair, when expectations were dashed or hard-won victories were threatened with reversal. After World War I, black soldiers were confident that having helped win the war for democracy in Europe, they would find democracy at home. Instead, the 1920s brought a period of

lynchings, high unemployment, and violent raids on the black community. From this despair, Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa movement arose. Few blacks heeded his call for a return to Africa. Many, however, responded to his message of black pride and white inferiority. During the late 1960s, when the dramatic civil rights victories in the South were not followed by equal gains in the North, the Black Power movement emerged. Proclaiming that "Black is Beautiful," fiery orators, including H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael, attempted to run whites, and especially Jews, out of the Civil Rights Movement.

To this day, no one can describe the concrete economic or social program developed by the Back to Africa or Black Power movements. Faced with massive cuts in social programs, an intolerably high rate of unemployment, and indifference to affirmative action by the Reagan administration, many blacks are today responding positively to Farrakhan's

philosophy that proclaims blacks "the chosen people" and promises them "power forever." His agenda, whether a separate black nation or merely black economic self-sufficiency, is no prescription for the crushing economic realities facing black America. One wonders why, when black intellectual Thomas Sowell, and black capitalist Robert Woodson, call for self-help programs, they are branded "Uncle Toms" by the very element in the black community that most vehemently endorses Farrakhan and his "positive economic black strategy." Would Sowell and Woodson be embraced by Farrakhan's followers if they added bigotry to economic philosophy?

Community self-help and individual initiative are concepts welcome in the larger debate on black economic progress, but they are minor components of what should be an overall strategy. Technological advances, including cybernetics and robots, coupled with the movement of labor intensive industries to foreign countries, have put

countless black and poor people out of work. This is precisely the time the black population should become more active politically, and fight for legislation to promote fair trade -- as well as for training centers to aid the unskilled, regardless of color. The call for separatism is a retreat from this challenge. It is, essentially, an admission of

defeat.

The battle for social and economic justice requires building coalitions of like-minded ethnic, religious and community groups. Economic justice can be attained -- but only if the political battle is won first. Farrakhan's message contradicts this reality.

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