

BETWEEN THE LINES

THE MFUME SELECTION

By A. Asadullah Samad

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) took a significant step toward credibility when it recently announced the selection of Maryland Congressman Kweisi Mfume as its next Chief Executive Officer.

Now, don't take the "Colored People's Association" off the junk heap yet. It still has a lot of problems. A lot of problems. The national office and its perpetual dysfunction is still on "deathcon 4" (deathcon 5 being nuclear annihilation). The debt is still there. "That board" is still there. And most despondently, the "coloreds" are still there (old and young), so quite frankly, the doubt is still there.

The reality of the NAACP problems are centered in the petrified mindsets of former generations "that just refuse to let go" the leadership mantles (except to like-minds that appear to be just as confused) that has paralyzed many of the branches. Its largest branch, Detroit (50,000 members), is in a big civil war as we speak (much like what has taken place in New York, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Dallas and Richmond, Va.)

Conflict brought by those who take their lead from the board's annual antics, resemble nothing less than a common bar fight. The lack of depth in the issues they advance signal a lack of capacity to "chase down" the

issues like they used to. It's more of a wave, a statement and a puff of smoke. But it's more than being in need of young legs and younger minds.

The NAACP is in need of strong legs and a younger, progressive, highly skilled mindset.

A young, progressive, credible national player is what they have in former Congressional Black Caucus chairman, Rep. Kweisi Mfume. And the brother got "skills." Most importantly, he has roots "of being part of community grassroots people," a nationalist background, a (African) traditional name all which he has successfully managed to mainstream. He has demonstrated a cooperative spirit of self-determination that serves the interest of all black people, regardless of his position. His willingness (as Black Caucus chair) to establish a working covenant with the NAACP, The Rainbow Coalition and Nation of Islam was landmark.

Even after the fallout, he continued to be his own man, negotiating his own terms and participating in critical forums that speak to his people (as demonstrated by his speaking at the Million Man March). To pull a player of his caliber into this proverbial "crab-barrel" is a major coup. Coming out of a like environment (called Congress),

It's a perfect fit. Stand to reason that if Mfume can survive the cut-throat fights in the House, he ought to do "ahh-ight" in the NAACP (but don't let your guard down; colored people have been known to play possum before).

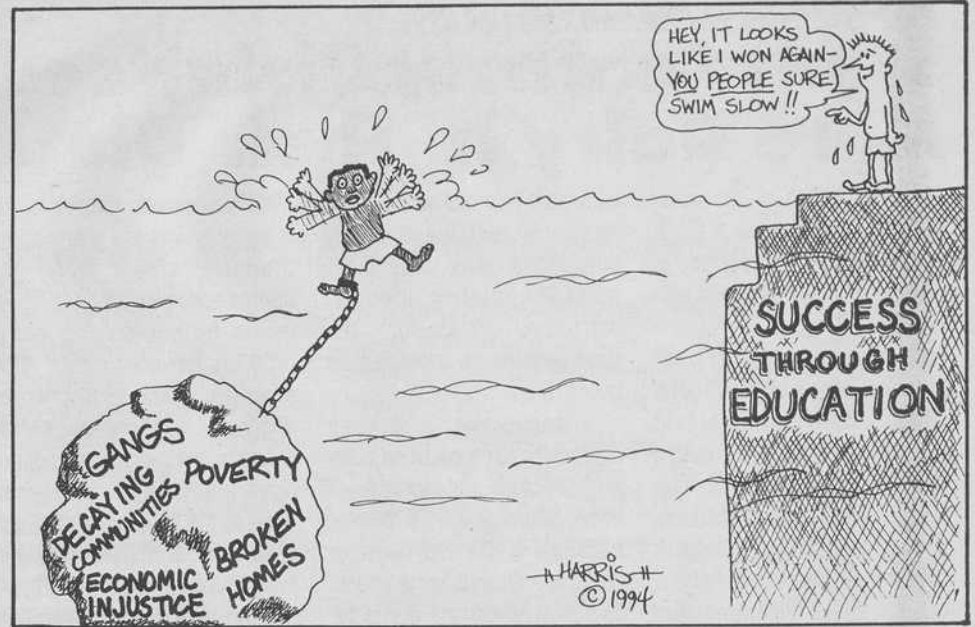
Still, surviving the NAACP is another. This choice is a chance to save the tiring swimmer that has been treading water longer than they should have had to and is ready to go down for the third time, Savior, might be a little strong. No one person can save this drowning victim. Mfume is a life-raft for the NAACP. If he can get this shell shocked swimmer out of its panic (before they both drown), he could lead them safely to shore. It's a challenge extraordinary.

Much to his credit, Mfume went in the door dealing with terms that subjected other executive directors to the politics of compromise before they were even settled in the seat. In fact, he wouldn't even take the title, executive director, but the title of President and CEO. The president was formally ceremonial.

Mfume came with his own three-pronged revitalization plan (political empowerment/registration and voting, guiding youth toward educational excellence and developing the infrastructure for blacks to achieve economic parity) and he put the NAACP's biggest impediments on the table. The organization's fiscal integrity. The dysfunction of the NAACP's focus. The macro management style of the organization's "64 bosses."

Even the "name thing" (and you know how sensitive the colored people are about that name. You know you got some juice when you tell 'em out front we may have to give it (name-change) some thought (debate and discussion Mfume called it).

Translation in political terms; debate, discussion, vote it, name change. Now that's progress. Mfume cut the deal of life when he got the colored people to agree to reduce board and report only to an executive committee. Now that's leadership. But I'm sure that it did not come without significant thought and negotiation (neither of which has been an NAACP forte in a while). It wasn't the normal petty, pressure sand-box politics that permeates the NAACP's national and branch involvement where largely lesser skilled people broker selections based on criteria that have more to do with re-enforcing their own



empowerment than the organization's. Make no mistake, this is major movement as far as the colored people go.

Much credit should be given to its new board chairperson, Myrie Evers-Williams, for setting up processes to take the politics out of the decision making. The selection committee brought only one name (from over 200 interviews) to the board, who don't need much of an excuse, at all, to go in another direction. With significant "camps" still occupying the board, another

name, regardless of who, was an invitation to another free-for-all. If Mfume's name had been submitted with Mickey Mouse's, the mouse would have gotten 31 votes just because Hatfield's don't side with McCoy's on any issue, given a choice. This point is not meant to downplay Mfume's "quals," by any means. It's meant to show how petty the board's politics play out. The committee, under Evers-Williams' guidance, played it just right.

While many corporations and

foundations will take a "wait and see" approach to financial support from the NAACP, many blacks will take the same approach to see how long it takes for Mfume's leadership to trickle down to the branch involvement. But with a leader that's talking about taking the "colored" out of the colored people's association, that kind of talk and leadership I can respect and support. It's a fit that might take the coloreds by surprise, but it will save the organization, from itself, in the process.

CONGRESS MUST WORK TO CLOSE PRESCRIPTION DRUG LOOPHOLE

Richard Bryan, U.S. Senator - Nevada

Americans spend \$80 billion a year on all prescription drugs. For senior citizens, who use prescription drugs more than any other age group, the costs of prescription drugs are particularly burdensome as Medicare does not cover these costs. Therefore, older Nevadans must pay all prescription drug costs continue to rise, many seniors are left with a choice between buying food or paying for drugs prescribed by their doctor.

I recently joined Senator David Pryor (D-Arkansas) in offering an amendment to close a loophole in a trade law which has resulted in windfall profits for drug companies and higher drug prices for many commonly prescribed medications.

The million dollar mistake was unintentionally created when the prescription drug industry was excluded from a generic competition provision in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) treaty passed by Congress last year. The loophole means that prescription drug companies have a three-year longer patent period, without any competition during that time from generic companies. Generic drugs cannot come to the market

before the brand's patent expires.

The loopholes has created a multi-dollar windfall for certain drug companies that must be corrected. For example, the world's best-selling ulcer drug, Zantac, will cost twice as much as it should because of the loophole and the hypertension drug, Capoten, will cost 40 percent more than it should because cheaper, generic alternatives to these drugs will not be available to consumers for three more years. Additionally such drugs as Mevacor for lowering cholesterol, Prilosec for ulcers, and Diflucan, an anti-fungal agent are affected. Glaxo, the maker of Zantac and the world's largest pharmaceutical company, is earning \$6 million a day in profits from the sale of Zantac.

For seniors, this loophole means they will pay higher drug prices for three extra years because of a mistake. Without the ability of generic drug companies to compete, drug prices will remain artificially high during the three year period. There is no reason why seniors should suffer because of a mistake that can be corrected. A former analyst for the Congressional Budget Office projected that if this loophole was corrected, it would save

seniors \$517 million.

This loophole will also affect the drug prices paid by the Medicaid program. Medicaid already faces deep cuts in its funding. If this loophole is not corrected, Medicaid will be forced to pay higher drug prices during the three year period.

Veterans will also suffer as the Veterans Affairs Administration will be forced to pay higher drug prices. The bottom line is that taxpayers will pay more for the drugs used by these programs than they should, because competitive generic alternatives will not be available. There is no reason to allow some prescription drug companies an unintended windfall profit to the detriment of all Americans who depend on drugs for their continued health. Seniors, veterans, and the most vulnerable in our country deserve our protection from unnecessarily high drug prices.

Senator Pryor withdrew his amendment following a 48-49 losing vote on a delaying motion to send the measure to the Senate Judiciary Committee. This is the closest we have come to passing legislation to close this loophole. Senator Pryor and I intend to look for other opportunities to offer our amendment in the coming months and protect consumers.

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