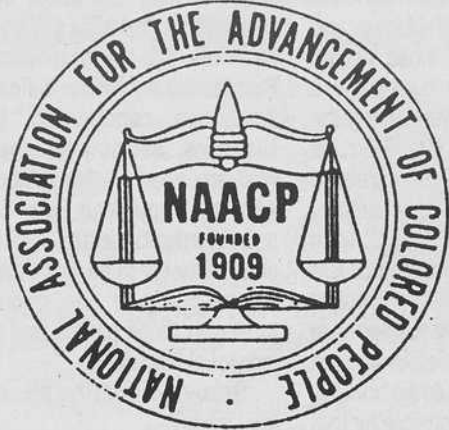
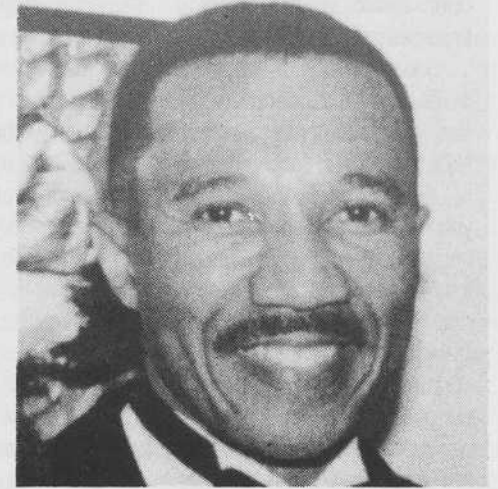


# One on one with Kweisi Mfume



In a recent interview with Sentinel-Voice Publisher Ramon Savoy, the national president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People espouses on the organization's new direction, welfare reform, corporate partnerships and Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole.



**Savoy:** Welcome to Las Vegas. When were you here last?

**Mfume:** About three months ago.

**Savoy:** So we always like to have visitors come back. One of the first things I would like to speak to you about today is welfare reform. President Clinton finally put his signature on the new welfare reform bill, and I want to know the NAACP's position now that it's officially taken place. Did the President make a wise move?

**Mfume:** Well the NAACP has been involved with this whole area of welfare reform for a long time. We have insisted that government find a way to end the kind of dependence that has often times been bred into the system because of the way it has been constructed. We believe also that it is counterproductive to have men, women, children and families, if you will, forever being on, almost in terms of generations, public assistance because that does not help with the esteem of the individual nor does it help with the productivity of the society.

But having said that, we're very concerned about this bill that has been put forth in an election year under the guise of reform. This bill does not reform welfare as we know it in many respects, because it does some things that are quite counterproductive. There are good aspects of the bill, aspects of the bill that we think are important in terms of reform however, the overall thrust of the bill we think is very negative and I'll give you an example of what I'm talking about. This bill upon signing automatically pushes one million new children under the poverty level, automatically in addition to the ones that are already there.

This bill upon signing automatically pushes two and half million families into poverty and under the poverty level. The bill eliminates Aid to Families with Dependent Children which significantly hurts the ability of the families who have these dependent children to do very much about their own situation. And so essentially, what it does is punish children for the transgressions of their parents. We think that is incomprehensible, we believe that it is anti-American and we believe that while we all want to reform welfare that there are more humane ways to go about doing it since children are the largest growing group in poverty today. They have the least to say about what happens to them and this bill while it has some good aspects certainly hurts the ability of children and their parents to do very much about their own situation.

**Savoy:** So the idea of this particular bill was to save the United States of America dollars to balance our deficit, do you feel this was one of the reasons for the bill coming to fruition?

**Mfume:** I hope nobody is suggesting that

reforming welfare is going to take care of the deficit situation. What's going to take care of it is doing away with tax breaks to millionaires and being able to spend our money wisely in terms of the area of defense and making sure also that we create an opportunity in the economy so everybody can participate and that there is a circular flow of income. But reforming welfare will not do that.

There are too many larger entitlement programs and other things that contribute to the national deficit as we know it. I just believe clearly and without any equivocation whatsoever that being in an election year, being three or four months away from an election date that this Congress - which I, up until six months ago, was a part of - made an expedient move to give the impression that they have somehow solved the welfare problem and have created welfare reform. It is a real danger because this bill takes the authority which was once vested in the federal government and gives it now to states and to state governors.

The reason why we had a civil rights movement to begin with was because states had an unequal application of the law. We needed the federal government to have uniform laws and uniform application so now we have a welfare system that punishes children, does away with Aid to Families with Dependent Children, pushes more people into poverty and then it says at the same time Governor A, Governor B, Governor C here is some money you go and you administer welfare reform. Well if every governor was divine and had a pure heart or every governor in the country clearly had a sensitivity to the needs of people, we wouldn't have a problem. But the fact of the matter is that there are many governors in many states and many state legislators who don't like defending people to begin with.

They have by virtue of their policies created the situation where Jim Crow continues to exist under another banner. They're going to spend less on trying to find ways to provide assistance to people. They're going to be less aggressive in terms of making sure that there is equal protection under the law. They're going to be less concerned with poverty rates as it relates to children who may be African-American, Hispanic or Asian and so my real fear is the same fear that people had fifty years ago in this country and that is that we need the federal government to make sure there is a uniform application of the program and not states and governors.

**Savoy:** I found it kind of enlightening that when the government found a speck of something that could be life from another planet they were ready to infuse millions of dollars back into the space

program. Do you feel that that's an accurate way to utilize America's money to go exploring in outer space?

**Mfume:** Well space exploration clearly is important. It's important because in many respects we have to be masters of our universe and the only way you do that is to get a broader sense of the universe that you're in. And so the work of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration since the days of John F. Kennedy has been I think appropriate in many respects. However, having said that, you can not institute as you do this bill under the guise of welfare reform and punish children for the transgressions of their parents. You can not continue to reduce government.

You can't do other things that we're doing while at the same time being prepared to want to spend all this money now to investigate life on Mars. I mean there's a disconnect there I don't understand, if we're going to reduce government fine, if we're going to find ways to deal with real reform whether it's in welfare or something else fine, but at least be consistent. If we're going to do all those things let's not jump up all of a sudden because there might be a possibility, one in 100,000, that there is some life on another planet to suggest that there ought to be this new appropriation of funds given to NASA to go ahead and follow through on that. What we ought to be concerned about is life here on earth first I think and get our priorities straight and so that's why I see a disconnect in that.

**Savoy:** What will be the new direction of the NAACP? And how do you put new life into the younger NAACP participants and reestablish increased youth involvement with the organization?

**Mfume:** I believe first of all we don't have any choice, the only way we ensure our viability into the future is to make sure we have generational change now. Doesn't mean throwing out everybody that has given so much of their time who may be up in years and have a sense of wisdom that we need it means keeping them and ushering in a whole new generation of younger individuals who can learn from them and who at the same time bring a new sense of ideas and a new sense of vision. That's how we all got started many years ago in this association it should not be different now. But the larger question is how do you get hold of young people who for whatever reason don't find any relevance at all in the association or how do you get a hold of those who have a decreasing sense of relevancy with respect to our association and I think you get out of a hole the same way you got into one and that's one shovel at a time. And so the quickest way that we attract young people is through other young people. We brought on a

young man who is the head of the Youth and College division, twenty-four year old graduate of Morehouse, a divinity student at Duke University full of ideas energy and vision to help empower our movement on college campuses.

We want to go from seventy chapters on seventy campuses to one hundred and forty. But we don't want to limit it to just historically black colleges and universities because our young people are all over the place. Some are in Ivy league schools so we're opening up chapters at John Hopkins, Princeton and elsewhere because we believe we have to go to where they are. But we're also wise enough to know that many of our young people are not in college or on a campus some are in vocational technical schools and so our approach has been aimed at those schools also. The third reality is that some are not in college, vocational schools or anywhere else, their on the street corner or on their way to jail and so when we talk about our approach in reaching them I'm very honest and open when I talk about going to wherever young people might be. It doesn't mean conveniently picking this nice college and say I'm going to go donate a few hours there. It means finding them on street corners, playgrounds and anywhere else that they might be. So we do that I think most effectively when we have other young people to do it and we do it most effectively when we're consistent.

There's no sense going out and saying to a young person I want you to do this, that, this, that, this, and we go out the next day and do just the opposite. Because then its a matter of I can't believe what you say because I see what you do. Once we lose that kind of credibility its very difficult to get it back. The reason we find young people now, to some extent, involved with the Nation of Islam or the Rainbow Coalition or this group or that group is that those groups are trying to reach in and fill a void. The NAACP will fill that void and we will do it in a clear and objective manner and we will do it with a great deal of efficiency but we will do it also with a sense of honesty to young people and challenging them as we bring them in. It's not enough to say come now and bring your ideas, at the end of the day we want to hold them accountable for those ideas because I think that's how you create responsibility so it's going to be tough but one of the interesting things is that the fastest growing age group within the association over the last three months has been the 18-25 year old age group.

We think that's going to continue we think it's good news for the Association because every time

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