

POINT OF VIEW

Our View

NAACP, Urban League creating new images

The two heavyweights enter the ring. Each one can live off its legacy. But both are eager to fight their way back to the top. Who will be the winner? Black people.

More and more, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League, each a storied champion of the rights of minorities, the poor and the downtrodden, are taking the reigns of issues both big and small in an effort to improve the quality of life for Black Americans. Civil rights are still important, but each group seems to realize that Blacks could use help on other fronts.

Scandal. Budget mismanagement. Sexual harassment. All of the above, and more, plagued the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization just years ago. Now, it appears the national NAACP is working a bit of magic, resurrecting itself — with the hope of its renewing energizing local chapters — and once again becoming an organization that matters and can get things done.

Grading hotels on their relationship with Blacks — how many Blacks they employ, how many are in middle and top management — was an excellent idea. Exposing corporate America to its lily-white core is key in getting legal redress for discriminatory practices and forcing the government to prod industries to hire qualified minorities.

The NAACP has taken an active stance empowering communities through its resource development initiatives and its economic reciprocity programs which urge African-Americans "to buy black." Recognizing the chance to cement ties to Africa and create mutual gain for both sides, the civil rights group has also pushed Blacks to begin investing in Africa and exploring the continent's entrepreneurial opportunities.

The NAACP's Legal Defense Fund also seems to be recharged.

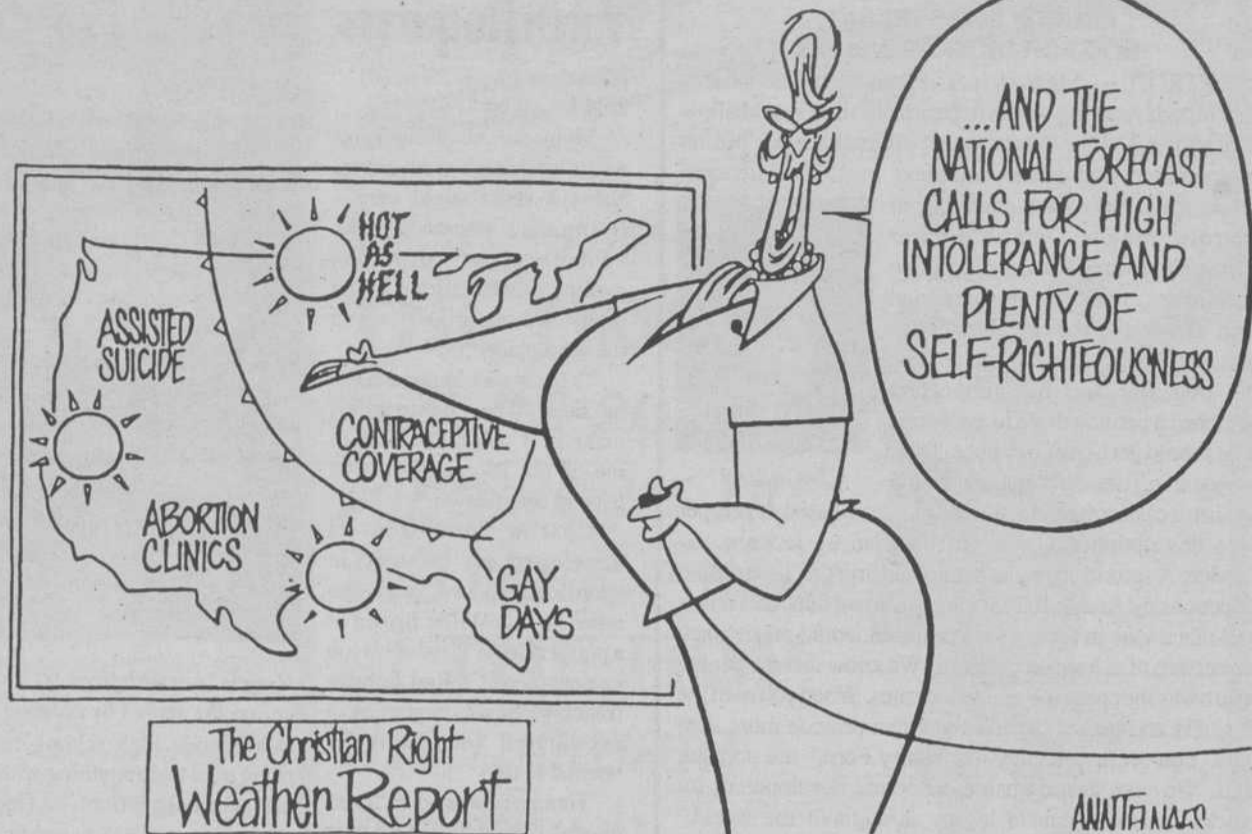
While the NAACP got the lion's share of the attention, the National Urban League quietly built a reputation. The group is quiet no more and is carrying its weight, and then some.

The Urban League champions educational and recreational programs for youth, runs rites of passage workshops and leadership conferences, helps junior high and high school students delve into entrepreneurship and much more.

The group echoes the NAACP's call to black economic empowerment and has made its voice heard on disparate cocaine sentencing laws, affirmative action and welfare reform.

Other areas the Urban League has thrown its considerable weight in are voter registration drives, encouraging Blacks to take part in the 2000 U.S. Census count so their voting power and representation won't be diluted or weakened and teaming with the Small Business Administration to ensure Black businesses have access to greater amounts of capital.

The two organizations are competing, not against each other, but against their own legacies. This bodes well for Blacks. The harder they work. The more power we have. The more power we have, the easier it is to chart our futures. That's power.



Convent prime example of environmental racism

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Convent, La. is a little town of 2700 or so people located between New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

Sitting alongside the Mississippi River, Convent is in an area the state calls the Chemical Corridor because of the dozens of chemical plants located there. Those of us who are concerned about environmental justice have another name for that area, however. We call it Cancer Alley because of the incredibly high incidences of all types of cancer found in the residents.

By the way, the majority of Convent's residents are Black and poor.

For hundreds of years the area between Baton Rouge and New Orleans was an agricultural and fishing area. Before the Civil War it was full of plantations, and in the century or so after the war it remained a rural area where people fished for oysters and grew crops which fed their families.

About 40 years ago, things changed.

The state of Louisiana decided to give tax breaks to huge chemical corporations to locate their plants along the river, where transportation was easy and cheap. The trade-off, the residents were led to believe, was good jobs.

After nearly two generations of citizenship in

Civil Rights Journal

By Bernice Powell Jackson



Convent, the corporations have not backed up their promises. Many people who live along Cancer Alley remain poor. Few work in the highly technical, high-paying jobs the plants offer.

A drive through the parking lots around the plants reveals license plates from other states and other counties.

Now the state of Louisiana wants to bring in a new plant.

They want to allow Shintech, a Japanese-owned company to build the world's largest polyvinyl chloride manufacturing plant in Convent. This \$700 million plant will be a mile-long in size and receive a 10-year industrial property tax exemption of some \$94.5 million and a \$35 million sales/use tax rebate. Of course, the company promises hundreds of jobs.

The proposed site for the plant is little more than a mile away from the local elementary school, itself a victim of the chemical corporations' transgression into Convent.

Many of the children suffer from serious cases of asthma and other respiratory ailments.

All roads in Convent are dead-end and empty out onto River Road, which runs parallel to the Mississippi. It would be nearly impossible to evacuate either the schools or the homes if an accident were to occur in that plant.

The most frightening part of the decision to locate the Shintech plant in Convent is the danger of toxic emissions from the plant. Polyvinyl chloride manufacturing means dioxins will be released into the atmosphere. Dioxins have been proven to cause cancer.

In an area already besieged by high incidences of cancer, it is difficult to understand how Convent could have been chosen for yet another plant.

As the Environmental Protection Agency studies whether to allow the Shintech plant to be built, the politics of Louisiana have taken over.

Gov. Buddy Romer, who backs the plant, held a press conference saying he asked Convent residents if they wanted the plant and they said yes. When we visited Convent this spring, we had trouble finding people who had talked to Romer. Romer has publicly threatened Tulane University Law School clinic for its legal assistance to Convent residents opposed to the plant.

Meanwhile, the people of Convent are the ones suffering. Families are split down the middle, with some supporting the plant and others against it.

Children who are already sick might face even more pollution in the air and water should big business win out. Miscarriage and cancer rates are sure to increase as will other illnesses and, likely, unemployment.

If ever there was a case of environmental racism, Convent is it. While the legal and political arguments rage, the people endure.

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