

## POINT OF VIEW

## Our View

## New organization, same old results?

At a sparsely attended Friday press conference at North Las Vegas City Hall, Gene Collins, the controversial deposed leader of the Las Vegas NAACP, announced his anointing as president of the local chapter of the National Action Network, a civil rights watchdog group founded by the Rev. Al Sharpton, a similarly controversial but undoubtedly effective human rights proponent.

The announcement followed days of speculation that Collins and other NAACP brass deposed after national NAACP officials revoked the charter's chapter in April were ready to emerge, like a phoenix rising, and morph into a sleeker, more powerful version of the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—without all the baggage, of course.

Collins hit the radio airwaves on Saturday, outlining the network's goals and asked locals to pony up \$25 for membership.

Given this town's sad state of racial affairs — racial profiling; disinvestment in predominantly black West Las Vegas, Hispanic East Las Vegas and multiethnic downtown; lack of managerial diversity and minority business procurement in the casino industry, and the list goes on — the birth of a new organization led by a credible, if not contentious, leader like Sharpton is welcome. His wit and unbending verve could be the elixir needed to quench rights activists' thirst for equality.

But once the equation veers from Sharpton, questions arise, namely: Why would he tab the oft-fallible Collins as his local figurehead?

Not that Collins is an ineffective bumbler — he disproved that by enlisting a team that helped the local NAACP earn recognition for its improvement and shone a harsh light on Big Gaming's mistreatment of minority- and women-owned businesses — but he did little to divorce the NAACP from problems that have plagued it since 1994.

That year, the group was beset by an election scandal. The subsequent years saw lawsuits, sexual misconduct allegations, infighting, an eviction from local offices and more election chicanery. Similar problems plagued Collins' administration, culminating in an April decision by national board members to pull the charter. Now, it seems, Collins has washed his hands of the NAACP, and taken up the National Action Network's mantle.

Which leads back to Sharpton and the question: Why Collins? Especially given Collins' baggage. Grabbing a newly disgraced leader to head any organization, much less a fledgling one trying to anchor itself in this typically blasé town, can destroy credibility.

Sharpton would have been best served, first, by examining Collins' background—he could have read articles from the *Las Vegas Sentinel-Voice*, now there's a thought; this is, in fact, the state's largest African-American newspaper. Then he could have spoken with NAACP members — both for and against Collins. He could have talked to African-American politicians as well as other community activists.

Culled from this would have been a truer picture of the former state assemblyman. Revealed would have been his civic commitment — which has never been unquestioned — but also his savvy-deficient persona — which has won him enemies.

For the National Action Network to make an impact and distinguish itself from the other human rights organizations, it needs a proven leader, one able to execute plans, one with enough leadership to direct battles and enough self-esteem to step back and let the heavy hitters have at it.

Whether Gene Collins is that person is questionable — though he very well could be. But if Sharpton is wrong and Collins remains a lightning rod for controversy, activism will suffer, highlighting perhaps the local black community's most pernicious problem: the failure to cultivate new leaders.

## Honesty needed to quell race issues

By Armstrong Williams  
Special to *Sentinel-Voice*

Much of the tension regarding skin pigmentation in this country is rooted in the cultural patterns that slavery wrought. It has to do with the not-so-subtle social hierarchies that a shared history of slavery created. These cultural divisions were sewn so deep into our social fabric, for so long, that even today White Americans have trouble imagining themselves as the "other" skin color.

For much of the past four decades, our government has consciously attempted to undo these racial hierarchies and to create a country not of Blacks and Whites, but of humans. To this end, the government has backed several civil rights measures aimed at engineering equality between White Americans and their former slaves.

The justification for this civil rights legislation was straightforward: minorities are owed affirmative action and preferential quotas so as to rectify the overt discrimination of the past.

There is little doubt that these measures helped haul along race relations in this country. Just one thing: the emphasis of much of this civil rights legislation is on retribution, rather than conventional social activism. The major implication: blind obedience to the original civil rights legislation might ultimately create a culture of victimization which never moves beyond those initial steps.

Four decades later, it is time to take a hard look at race relations in this country, and to reconsider whether embracing victim status for all members of a fixed group-

in this case, minorities will truly help this country to truly move beyond race. To this end, we should be willing to do what so many of our cultural torch bearers are afraid to do—examine our civil rights legislation from a critical perspective so as to ensure that they do not ultimately become a straight jacket.

One of the first things we must address is school busing. Clearly this program has not worked as it was intended. It has little or no effect on ending racism. How can we expect a child who is bused from a poor, urban area to a school in another, better neighborhood, to learn how to overcome racism when they may face it from more advantaged kids who are not bused in from poor districts?

The school districts, while their hearts might be in the right place as they try to provide opportunity for the best education, may unknowingly be contributing to racism in their schools. When these children are sent home at the end of the day, they face racism in their backyards, in their streets, all around them. They may be witness to a new segregation.

Busing allows school districts to work around the problems of the inner cities, not solve them. It is an admission that nothing can be done to improve the quality of inner-city schools. It further fuels the argument that urban area schools simply cannot be competitive enough to attract students in their own districts.

We should be more concerned with the quality of our public schools, regardless of their location. Our tax dollars pay for them, yet many of us are not concerned enough with what goes on in them.

Are we simply admitting our failure and accepting the idea that nothing can be done to improve our schools? We should be building each other up rather than bring each other down in our attempt to level the playing field. But what else can be done?

We can have our children spend time with those of other races and backgrounds, exposing them to other cultures so that they can interact with each other as equals and see that they are more alike than not.

The key is to start them off early before they are influenced by stereotypes. Sleepovers, vacations and parties are some of the ways to maintain close contact between children. Environments where they are all treated fairly, impartially, and without favor will instill in them a sense of equality that they will hopefully carry with them throughout their lives.

Adults cannot be allowed to pass on their racism to their sons and daughters. They, too, must put aside their personal prejudices, which limits them and their children, breeding contempt and discrimination. Let young people learn for themselves

how other people live, how they act, and how to treat those who are not like them. Let people think for themselves and make up their own minds how to live their lives.

There are those who wish to maintain their heritage and their individual and group identity. There is nothing wrong with that, as long as it does not lead to persecution of those outside of your group. A healthy pride in one's history is a good thing, but not when it starts to impede the rights of others.

This brings us to affirmative action. We have heard the argument that minorities cannot get ahead without the assistance that affirmative action gives them, because America has not changed much since the days of slavery and of segregation.

But America has changed a lot since those dark days. What has happened since the 1964 Civil Rights Act is that programs that were designed to give oppressed groups a helping hand as a means of getting ahead has become an end in itself.

Yet we must address the reason why people believe otherwise. Their perceptions

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