

Black voters can't lose political focus

By Hazel Trice Edney
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) — African-Americans should be less concerned about whether Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry is bungling outreach efforts to Blacks and more concerned about President Bush's poor civil rights record, seasoned political activists say.

"We don't necessarily need Kerry to motivate us. The motivation should be to defeat the present forces that are so hostile to our interests," says Jesse Jackson Sr., founder and chief executive officer of Rainbow/PUSH coalition in Chicago. "[President Theodore] Roosevelt didn't inspire labor to organize. Labor inspired Roosevelt when they organized. The Black troops weren't inspired by [President Harry] Truman, the Black troops challenged and inspired Truman. The Supreme Court didn't inspire Thurgood Marshall. He inspired the Supreme Court. In Alabama, [Gov.] George Wallace and the powers that be didn't inspire Dr. King and Rosa Parks. They lifted up a nation and inspired everybody. The motivation to fight back must come from those who need to fight."

Jackson, the two-time presidential candidate who spent last week registering voters on the campuses of Black colleges and universities, said thousands who are adding their names to voting rolls must have their own reasons to vote and inspire others.

"Students are registering to vote by the thousands because their hope is in the need for the Pell grant and the need not to go to Iraq to fight a war. These needs are driving the student agenda big time," he says. "Our motivation to fight back must be bottom up. Our own ability must be driven by our real needs. We must vote in record numbers because we have record needs."

The Bush administration showed what will happen to some of those record needs when it put federal agencies on notice that the 2006 fiscal budget may include \$2.3 billion in spending cuts from virtually every domestic program, including education.

Though African-American voters supported the Democratic ticket 9-1 in 2000, some Black leaders say Kerry has not appealed enough to the Black electorate and certainly has not been

specific enough in pointing out what's likely to happen if Bush gets a second term.

"I want to remind him again of the strength that he has in the Black community. I want him to use these elected officials," says Congressional Black Caucus Chairman Elijah Cummings (D-Md.), who wants Kerry to sit down with Black elected officials to map out an urban strategy.

Others, however, recognize Kerry's limitations.

"Citizens have got to understand that John Kerry can only lead them but so far," says Donna Brazile, campaign manager for Al Gore, who received 543,895 more popular votes than Bush, but lost the Electoral College. "While John Kerry can provide direction and provide the road map, these citizens must provide the fuel for John Kerry to go out there and campaign non-stop from now until Election Day because he's fighting for them. He's fighting for their jobs, and he's fighting for their health care — he's fighting to remove George Bush from the White House. And so, they're going to have to rally behind John Kerry. John Kerry can't just lead without people willing to help him fight the battle. This is an all-hands-on-deck fight."

Kerry, who had focused largely on his service in Vietnam and defending himself from ads questioning the legitimacy of his war medals, appeared to be changing his campaign strategy during the largely Black audience at the Congressional Black Caucus weekend.

There, he focused more on domestic issues, including Bush's opposition to affirmative action.

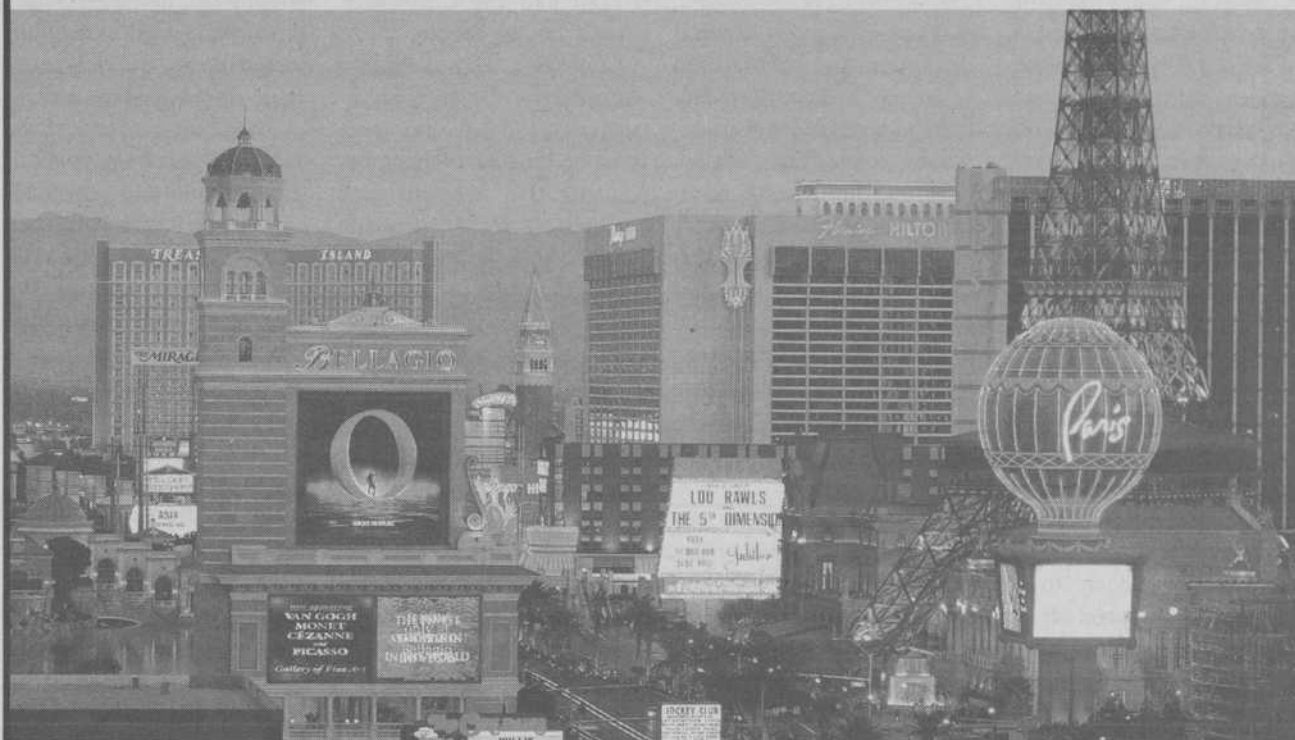
"If I was Kerry, I would go politically wild on him the next four weeks," Al Sharpton, a former Democratic presidential candidate says, referring to Bush. "I don't think that he can win in the election without really having an impressive kind of go after Bush strategy on the issues. You can't unseat the champion just boxing. You've got to knock him out."

Jackson, Sharpton and Brazile all agree that the most crucial issues for Kerry are jobs, the economy, education, health care, judicial nominations, affirmative action and terrorism.

But in order to knock out Bush, Sharpton says, Kerry must mobilize his staunchest supporters.

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