

Bush tells CBC he's 'unfamiliar' with Voting Rights Act

By Roland S. Martin
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) — President George W. Bush met with the Congressional Black Caucus as a group last week for the first time in nearly four years, but what CBC members said stood out the most was the president's declaration that he was "unfamiliar" with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, one of the most significant pieces of legislation passed in the history of the United States.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Bush — who attended along with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice — was asked by Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. (D-Illinois) whether he would support the re-authorization of a portion of the Voting Rights Act that must be approved every 25 years (It will come up for consideration next year).

"I don't know anything about the 1965 Voting Rights

Act," Jackson recalled the president saying in an interview with the *Chicago Defender*.

He said that a hurried Bush went on to say that "when the legislation comes before me, I'll take a look at it, but I don't know about it to comment any more than that, but we will look at it when it comes to us."

"It was so unbelievable to me that as soon as I walked out, I got Frank (Watkins, Jackson's top legislative aide) on the telephone, put (Congresswomen) Maxine (Waters, D-Calif.) and Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas), so that I could confirm what he just said is what I heard," Jackson said.

Rep. Bobby Rush (D-Illinois) said he recalled the president saying he was "unfamiliar" with the Voting Rights Act.

"I was surprised and astounded," Rush told the *De-*

fender.

White House spokesman Allen Abney did not specifically address Bush's statement of being unfamiliar with the Voting Rights Act, but said that "there is a section of the Act that is up for re-authorization in 2006, and the president is firmly committed to protecting voting rights. He indicated today that he would be looking closely at the Act as it comes up for re-authorization and certainly take their concerns into consideration."

According to the description on the Department of Justice's website, the Voting Rights Act is "generally considered the most successful piece of civil rights legislation ever adopted by the United States Congress."

The bill guaranteed that African-Americans and any other group would not be denied the right to vote, and put in place provisions to

ensure that voting rights would not be trampled on by local and state officials.

Representative Waters told the NNPA News Service: "I don't think [the meeting] had enough specificity to it yet. It's something. But we'll wait and see what happens."

Mel Watt [D-N.C.], the new chairman of the CBC, said: "We told the president that he will have three opportunities in the next few days and weeks to signal to us his willingness to work with us to achieve closing and eliminating (racial) disparities."

In addition to public comments about the meeting, Watt said the Caucus is paying close attention to Bush's State of the Union address on Wednesday and the budget he submits to Congress for fiscal 2006.

"The president appreciated the opportunity to meet with members of the Congressional Black Caucus to listen to issues that are important to them and discuss ways that we can work together on shared interests," White House spokesperson Maria Tamburri told the NNPA News Service.

Bush's meeting with the

CBC was the second of two days of meetings with Blacks. On Tuesday, he met with more than two dozen pastoral and business leaders, all supporters of the president's policies.

A couple of weeks ago Bush sat down with Kweisi Mfume, who had recently announced his resignation as president and CEO of the NAACP.

Rush said Wednesday's meeting was different from the others because he has had a fractious relationship with the CBC, and was dealing with "more knowledgeable people around the different issues that affect the African-American community."

"In that room you had 43 individuals whose whole life of activity and endeavor have been around trying to upgrade and uplift the life of Black America," Rush said.

"We are elected into the Congress, and we know the ins and outs of it, and we know the machinations that the administration and the Republicans engage in. And so, yeah, we weren't wild-eyed and in a state of ecstasy just to meet the president. We came to be about business."

As for Bush's mood, Rush

said the president was "cordial" but also "as non-responsive today as he was four years ago to the overall agenda."

"He did become animated around the issue of Darfur (Sudan)," Rush said.

As for Rice, Rush said the new secretary of state said "absolutely nothing. She was just there. For what reason, I'm not sure."

Jackson praised CBC Chairman Watt for focusing on the disparities facing African-Americans in six categories, including economics, social justice and international issues.

He said Bush mostly nodded his head and took notes, but he was adamant about his opposition to statehood for the District of Columbia, a point raised by Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton, who represents Washington, D.C. in Congress.

Jackson said Bush thought he was going to bring up the issue again and cut him off, saying, "I'm against statehood. I'm consistent on that and have been consistent on that since I was governor (of Texas)."

Roland S. Martin writes for the *Chicago Defender*.

EOB

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dilemma facing the organization: "This Head Start program has been apart of this community for the past thirty years and we've been operating this program without a glitch. This situation has been the only one that has occurred within the past thirty years. There was a meeting of the policy council and the executive board, and they decided to adopt a resolution to retain an attorney from (Washington) D.C., to take up our appeal. We feel very confident that we are going to win our appeal."

Logan continued, "There was never a deficit in the Head Start program. The deficit was with the State Child Care Assistance program, and that debt was totally repaid which was approximately \$2.3 million. HHS is alleging that some issues regarding our budget were never approved by the policy council. The budget has to be approved by both boards before it becomes effective. That (allegation) is not true; and we have the documentation to prove that; and we expect to send that information to the attorney for him to review. They (HHS) are alleging that they came in and couldn't locate certain files. We had a flood at our EOB Head Start office, and a lot of things had to be removed. We had a short timeframe [to work with from then until the time] they came in during their audit process." Concluding his remarks, Logan stated, "The program is going to stay active until it is resolved. Head Start in this community will not cease to exist. The federal government will come in to ensure that the program remains ongoing. They may choose to put the contract out to bid if we're unsuccessful in our appeal, but we don't believe that that will occur. We anticipate that we will be successful, so there won't be any huge layoffs in jobs or other unusual things taking place."

The EOB has taken measures to address some previous management operational deficiencies that have taken place in the organization. An interim managerial company has been hired to oversee the operations of the Head Start program until a new man-

agement team can be hired.

According to Mary Twitty, the Interim Executive Director of the EOB, from the MICA (Mid Iowa Community Action) Crisis Intervention Team of Iowa, "We were hired by the board, in July of 2004, to address a variety of problems with the agency, including the Head Start program. We have made great strides in turning the agency around. We have worked with every funding source that the agency has and corrected all the deficiencies both programmatically and fiscally. We have been reviewed by our funding sources and have been found to be in compliance; or that there are no significant findings to program or fiscal deficiencies."

She added, "Our team brings a sense of professionalism, especially to the EOB, and the ability to resolve their problems immediately — and we have worked very hard to do that. We are going to continue to improve on these efforts . . . evaluating our programs and services to make sure that we are meeting the needs of the community that we are serving. The next thing that we will be doing is to start the hiring process to select the permanent staff for the agency. Our contract with the board is up in July (2005). Between now and May, we will need to hire a highly qualified CFO, to assure the organization of having its financial house in order, along with hiring an innovative and driven Executive Director to manage this organization under the board's directive and set a strategic plan to build upon the community's confidence in the agency."

During this appeal process the EOB plans to continue offering its Head Start program to the children served by this process. The Policy Council has informed parents of this dilemma and the actions that will be taken to address and resolve this matter. No programs have been eliminated due to non-compliance issues, and other funding sources of the EOB have done their reviews throughout 2004 and continue their support, according to the organization's management.

Yucca Mountain and future generations - let's talk



The Department of Energy plans to start shipments of high level nuclear waste to Yucca Mountain by 2010. Currently, the proposed repository is designed to store 77,000 metric tons of radioactive waste and will be transported across America by truck and rail.

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