

Mfume Senate bid makes things interesting

By Ron Walters
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At the time Kweisi Mfume resigned as head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, there was much speculation about what he would do and if a try for the Senate from Maryland was in the cards.

The big unknown was what sitting Senator Paul Sarbanes would do. Now that Sarbanes has announced his retirement from the Senate at the end of this session after five terms, the door is now open for Mfume and possibly others.

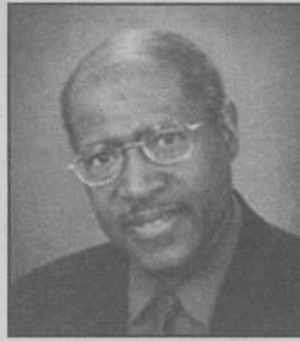
There will doubtless be other names thrown into this race, but there should also be a sense among members of Maryland Democratic voters that the time for Blacks, has come. Blacks have not only been loyal to the Democratic Party, they have been down right slavish in some respect, pulling a heavy load of votes from places with substantial Black populations, such as Prince George's County, Montgomery County, Baltimore City and even Howard County and making the difference in many elections for statewide office. The problem is that they have not been rewarded by the Party.

The height of insults was in the 2002

election for Governor, won by Bob Erlich (52-48 percent) over Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, a member of the famous Kennedy clan. Townsend made a fatal mistake by selecting a former Republican, Charles Larson, to run as her candidate for Lt. Governor while significant Black candidates were waiting in the wings. She lost this election by the margin of disaffected Black voters and right away, a Black person, Isaiah Leggett, a well known former official in Montgomery County, was named State chair of the Democratic Party. The only place to go now for Blacks is up, and the party should support a Black candidate for statewide office.

This nomination, however, would not just be Mfume's for the asking. While a Black member of Congress, Rep. Al Wynn, has said he would not seek the seat, his colleague, Rep. Elijah Cummings from Baltimore, former chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, is reportedly considering it.

Serious White candidates are also looking at the open seat, such as U. S. Rep. Benjamin



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Cardin a long time member of the House of Representatives who is well known and respected in the state. Add to him a junior member of Congress, Chris Van Hollen, and Baltimore Mayor, Martin O'Malley. Who turns out to finally be the most credible candidate depends a lot on whom Sarbanes anoints as his successor. Mfume was a six

term member of Congress holding the seat now held by Cummings and regularly won re-election by large margins, but he did not have a statewide base. So, he would need to be supported by some of the heavy hitters in other parts of the state, and the relationship between him and Sarbanes was good.

On the Republican side, Lt. Governor Michael Steele, who is an African-American, might be tempted to make a run. Maryland would appear to be a solid Democratic state, outpacing Republicans two to one in registration, but the Erlich/Steele victory might open the door for Steele. He would be in the strongest position to take advantage of the Republican victory as Lt. Governor. Otherwise, if Erlich loses next year, Steele would be out of

a job, so he might as well take advantage of his current position.

Think of the national implications: two high profile Blacks running for Senate, in an unusual situation where each is supported by his party. When Alan Keyes, the well known Black Republican who recently ran for Senate against Barack Obama in Illinois, ran for a Senate seat in Maryland against Sarbanes, because he was not supported by the Republican Party, he pronounced the national party as racist.

This time, given the current push of the Republican Party to make inroads into the Black community, this would seem to be an opportune moment for them to give Michael Steele all of the support he could handle. The strategic advantage would be to make further inroads for the Republican Party in the state of Maryland by winning both a gubernatorial and a Senate seat in the State. Maryland would then take center stage in the elections next year.

Let's see how the candidate field eventually shakes out for this one. It will be mighty interesting.

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NNPA

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nal, was founded in 1827 in New York, the same year the state abolished slavery. The two editors, Samuel E. Cornish and John B. Russwurm, declared in that first issue: "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us."

That history was not lost on Obama.

"One-hundred and seventy-eight years after the first *Freedom's Journal*, we are still pleading our own cause," said Obama, only the third Black U. S. senator since Reconstruction. "Centuries of progress later, the role of the 'Black Press is still promoting a diversity of ideas and covering a diversity of issues in cities and towns across America. It is absolutely vital that we have an independent African-American press that will speak to our issues. And that's what all of you do."

Obama's election last November was hailed as historic. But the modest junior senator from Illinois does not share that assessment.

"I haven't made history yet. I just won an election. History has yet to be made," he explained. "There's a history of struggle on the part of our people, and overcoming. To the extent that I accept this award, I accept it on behalf of all people who have struggled to overcome. And I appreciate those who have elected to make sure that story is told."

With the Senate meeting



Inonge Mbikusita-Lewanika, ambassador of Zambia, talks with NNPA board member Mel Foote, executive director of constituency for Africa (left), NNPA Foundation Chairman Brian Townsend and other NNPA member publishers.

late into the night to consider President George W. Bush's proposed budget, Obama interrupted his legislative duties to accept the award at a downtown hotel before rushing back to Capitol Hill. He credited the Black Press with covering the real newsmakers. Obama said, "They are the single moms who work two jobs, the teenagers who need to stay out of the jails and in the classrooms."

The Newsmaker of the Year is the top award given

during Black Press Week. Previous winners have included Jesse Jackson Sr., Colin Powell, Minister Louis Farrakhan, Dick Gregory, Maxine Waters, C. Delores Tucker and Army Brigadier General Vincent Brooks. This year marks the 178th birthday of Black newspapers and the 65th anniversary of NNPA.

Title sponsors for the dinner were Lockheed Martin Corporation and the Coca-Cola Company. Co. Sponsors were: AT&T, IMB, Of-

fice Depot and Sodexo USA. Contributors were DaimlerChrysler Services, the Democratic National Committee, GMAC and PhRma. Supporters were Pfizer and R. J. Reynolds.

This year is also the 40th anniversary of Bloody Sunday which kicked off the Selma-to-Montgomery, Ala. March. Congressman Lewis, then chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was one of the leaders of the march that led to passage of the 1965

Voting Rights Act.

Lewis was introduced at the dinner by his long-time friend, John B. Smith Sr., publisher of the *Atlanta Inquirer* and NNPA first vice president.

In his speech, Lewis, who grew up on a farm outside of Troy, Ala., recalled applying for a library card in Troy in 1956. He was told they were for Whites only. Seven years ago, he held a book signing in that same library for his autobiography, "Walking with the Wind."

"It illustrates that progress has been made at laying down the burden of race," Lewis said. "Without African-American publishers, the civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings... As publishers, you must never, never give up. We have a mission and a mandate from our forefathers and foremothers."

The Lifetime Achievement Award went to the late writer, actor and civil rights icon Ossie Davis and his wife, Ruby Dee.

The actress was abroad working on a movie. Elinor Tatum, publisher of the *New York Amsterdam News*, presented the award to their grandson, Jamal Davis, a student at Howard University. He drew a chuckle from the audience as he recalled his grandfather's love for Black newspapers.

"He was a very strong reader and supporter of the Black Press. On my grandfather's desk were stacks of Black newspapers," he said. "If you go into the office, there were all kinds of Black newspapers, but he wouldn't allow anybody to throw those papers away."

Alexis Herman reminded the audience:

"If the lions do not write their own history, then the hunters will get all the credit," she said, quoting an African proverb. "And I thank you for writing our history, for capturing our story. For making sure that you always kept the faith."