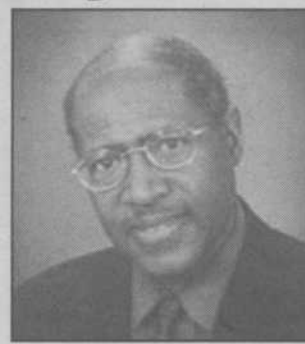
Is new leadership style in works at NAACP?

By Ron Walters
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Initial comments on the recently installed head of the NAACP, Bruce Gordon, a retired Verizon Corp. executive, have focused important issues, including whether a female should have been chosen, his lack of civil rights experience, whether this signals a further shift in the organization toward business and economic development, etc.

Many, including me, are concerned about whether the selection of the new CEO puts the NAACP in a better position to lead the organization in confronting the challenges that the Black community faces at this moment in history. In short, it raises the question whether Gordon's selection is an exercise in institution-building rather than the selection of a warrior who could help the organization battle more effectively.

The most important general sticking point is that the search did not attract some candidates with well-known names and backgrounds in civil rights work, including some females. This should stand as a serious problem to be dealt with internally which may point most especially to the unwieldy size and intrusive nature of the board of directors as a factor that may have troubled many potential candidates.



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Now that Gordon has been selected, some positive aspects are that he is known as an effective manager of people, a skill which could prevent the organization from further embarrassing issues in this respect and shore up institutional relations among its various units.

Kweisi Mfume spent considerable time dealing with branch and national office issues that are central to moving the whole apparatus effectively in one direction or another. In fact, so attentive was Mfume to institutional issues that it opened up the criticism that the NAACP was often missing in action when important issues arose that affected Blacks. Becoming mired in the daily minutiae of institutional problems may be good for business, but it can spell the death knell for a civil rights organization when the public expects it to have a consistently strong public presence on issues. Gordon also sits on several corporate boards. This is a role that is compatible with the fact that the organization has gone more aggressively toward the corporate community for fundraising in the past two decades. A decade ago, when the cash flow dried up, Myrlie Evers and then Mfume went to the corporate community for the quickest source of funds, and that sector has remained a vital resource.

This raises the question of whether economic development will become the most important item of the organization's agenda. My view of previous NAACP efforts in this area is that while it developed joint projects with several banking establishments to promote economic literacy and activity within the Black community, it failed to aggressively take them to task for red-lining, inflated loans and other negative practices. Mfume was faced with the question of whether you could eat at the corporate table and fight with them at the same time. He believed you could. I believe that the jury is still out.

The most immediate crisis this raises is that shortcuts and imaginary alternatives will continue to prevent the organization from effectively mobilizing the Black community. When the NAACP depended on its own members for funding, it could fight the system more effectively. But if, in attempting to secure resources, it becomes merely an extension of government or the corporate sector, it fails in the task of self empowerment. That is the strongest position for the Black community in the long run. As an example, the discussion about the role of young Black professionals in the organization, the subject of a recent leadership summit, should not only concentrate on positions within the organization, but on their growing ability to support it financially.

Gordon's selection may suggest a permanent stylistic change in leadership. In one sense, the generation with strong civil rights background is fading into the background. This means that future leaders of all Black organizations may come from such professions as Gordon's. But there are many in their 40s and 50s with strong credentials in community development and policy expertise, the stuff of the NAACP agenda. The surprise is that they were not tapped for a leadership role.

So, the question remains: Is the NAACP adopting a more moderate style of leadership at the very moment when it — and the Black community — faces the most conservative era? We're facing some of the most blatantly racist and unprogressive challenges in domestic and international policy that we have faced in a long time. I'm willing to give the brother a chance, but the pace of historical events may not wait very long to test his strength and direction.

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Black Press

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over half of its members listed as family-owned and controlled. Some of those publications remain under the control of the third and fourth generation. However, many experience drawbacks.

When Frederick Douglass founded the *North Star* in 1847, his children assisted in printing the type, locking the forms, folding, wrapping, and mailing the paper. When he later published the *New National Era* in the 1870s, both his sons, Frederick Jr. and Lewis, joined the venture. Lewis, who had apprenticed with his father, worked in the Government Printing Office before joining the venture as chief compositor and manager of the print shop. Frederick Jr. worked as the publication's business manager. In 1873, Douglass handed the paper down to his sons who assumed the newspaper's management.

The transition to the younger generation continues today. In 1987, *Ebony/Jet* Magazine completed its first transition as Linda Johnson Rice succeeded her father John Johnson, who founded the publication. And the profitable *Black Enterprise* magazine is still overseen by its founder, Earl Graves Sr., with divisions headed by his three sons Earl Jr., Michael, and John.

Jake Oliver, is former president of the NNPA, presided over the *Afro-American* in Baltimore, and he said many Black businesses, including African-American media organizations, are often inadequately prepared to conduct business. Without a plan for succession, problems can threaten the future of the family business.

Junior generation family members view the family business as sacrifice or burden.

They view, for instance, the senior generation's long hours, no vacations, and low pay as undesirable. Family conflicts tend to blur the line between business issues and personal problems.

Sometimes a tragedy within the family business has an abrupt impact from the inside causing a ripple effect.

The *Atlanta Daily World*, founded in 1928 by William A. Scott II, would have experienced at least three generations of ownership by traditional standards. But Scott's murder in 1934 left the publication — and his family — in disarray during a critical period as the newspaper was experiencing exponential growth.

M. Alexis Scott, now publisher of the *Atlanta Daily World*, succeeded her great uncle, Cornelius Scott, in 1997. She said his dedication to the paper for such as extended period of time was a result of her grandfather's death.

"He, psychologically, couldn't stop because of my grandfather's early death," she said. C.A. Scott was 89 when Alexis Scott took the helm of the paper.

By sharing the impact of a family tragedy on their newspaper, Scott sparked the NNPA initiative to explore and invest in family business succession planning.

This kind of difference of opinion should be addressed before a death, Professor Herbert advises. Many family businesses fail to do this but should with the assistance of their business advisors, including attorneys, accountants, financial planners, and insurance agents, Herbert said.

Among some of the intergenerational strategies suggested are to establish a family council and a participation policy for members; teach and develop the values and capabilities of the junior generation; develop the family's mission statement and business' strategic plan; provide relevant work experience; establish career plans for members of the family; install an outside board of directors; and develop a new management team as the succession plan is implemented.