

# Phony leaders exploiting phony issues

By Phill Wilson  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

I didn't notice the insult at first. During the week that President Bush and his congressional colleagues declared my family to be the nation's most pressing problem, I was too busy trying to end the AIDS epidemic to pay much attention.

Their timing was classic. It was the first week of June, a week in which we marked the 25th anniversary of the first AIDS diagnosis. So, I had joined an unprecedented coalition of national Black leaders — from politicians to celebrities — in calling the community to action against AIDS. That was my priority — saving lives.

As the late Coretta Scott King once said, "Anyone who sincerely cares about the future of Black America had better be speaking out about AIDS." Washington, alas, had other priorities.

The White House and its congressional emissaries paid no attention to the June 5 call to action. What preoccupied them? Healthcare for all, you ask? Rebuilding New Orleans? Trying to figure out how to reduce the price of gas, or bring our soldiers home from Iraq? It was none of those things.

Instead, they wanted to link into the Constitution a ban on gay marriage — a triple

redundancy, given that a 1996 federal law already does just that, and only one state in the nation issues same-sex marriage licenses. The Senate, nevertheless, leapt into action, and, voting largely along party lines, the august body chose to leave the Constitution as it is, for now.

Now, I'm trying to figure this out. American soldiers are dying every day in Iraq. Interest rates are going up; property values are going down. Students in California and other states can't pass their exit exams. "No Child Left Behind" has become "no child left." Nearly a year after Hurricane Katrina, most of the residents of New Orleans still can't go home. Half a million Americans are dead from AIDS. And the most pressing issue for the "leader of the free world" is denying gay and lesbian families equal protection under the law? How can that be?

As the Bush administration and Senate Republicans pandered to their political base last month, the Ryan White CARE Act lingered untouched on the congressional workbench. The CARE Act funds treatment and care for low-income people with HIV/AIDS around the country. Congress was required to reauthorize the Act last year but hasn't gotten around to it yet. Too busy with other priorities it seems.

Of course, even if Congress reauthorizes the CARE Act, the White House has urged lawmakers for years not to give the program any real new funds. Today, with an estimated 40,000 new infections every year and more Americans living with HIV/AIDS than ever, the CARE Act remains at largely the same funding level it had in 2001 — five years and 200,000 new infections ago.

For the AIDS epidemic's first eight years, America's leaders similarly chose other priorities over AIDS; President Reagan didn't even bother to discuss the subject publicly until 1987.

Our politicians' willingness to dismiss the carnage back then (because it appeared largely to plague gay men) gave HIV the space it needed to take root. Those roots now stretch into every part of our society, particularly Black society. Nearly 70 percent of the new HIV/AIDS cases among women affect Black women, and nearly half of Black gay and bisexual men in some of our urban cities might already be infected.

Maybe it's just a question of priorities. Perhaps the 54 percent of annual new infections of Blacks register no greater import to today's leaders than the infections among gay and bisexual men did to those of the Reagan era.

Those infections are, however, a priority to me, as are all of the estimated 1 million Americans living with HIV — a quarter to a third of them don't know they are infected, and roughly half are Black.

And now, I have decided what my own priorities are and I have taken note of how out of step they are with those of my political leaders, and I'm finally insulted by the spectacle Washington created in the first week of June. This is the question for me and others who share the desire to end this plague: What will we do about the jarring misalignment of values?

If we learned nothing from Hurricane Katrina, we should have learned this: They are not going to send the boats or the buses for us in time. AIDS in America today is a Black disease. There is no getting around it. It's also painfully obvious that we can't wait for our political leaders to save us from that fact.

Perhaps, we should remind Washington of Thomas Payne's famous plea: Lead, follow or get out of the way. Right now, too many of our elected officials, of all political stripes, are just plain in the way. It's up to us to move them.

Phill Wilson is CEO and founder of the Black AIDS Institute in Los Angeles.

## Gordon

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issues: immigration. It's a tricky subject for the NAACP because, more than other groups, Blacks worry that immigrants take jobs from Americans, though Gordon notes that Blacks and Latinos have many common bonds. Rather than joining this spring's massive street demonstrations calling for immigration reform, the NAACP issued a news release and Gordon attended a Latino conference.

"Wherever there's an issue that African-Americans are concerned with, they [NAACP] should have a presence," said Lorenzo Morris, a political scientist at Howard University. "They haven't been as effective as I'd hoped."

## Bush

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Gordon said he was glad Bush is speaking to the group, especially with renewal of the 1965 Voting Rights Act still before the Senate. "This is a great opportunity for the president to express his commitment for voting rights reauthorization," he said.

Every president for the past several decades has spoken to the group. Until now, Bush had been the exception.

Willis Edwards, an NAACP board member from Los Angeles, said Gordon should get credit for Bush's promised visit.

In the year he's headed the

David Bositis of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a Black think tank, said that the lack of victories isn't surprising with a Republican president and the GOP controlling Congress.

"In the past few years," Bositis said, "Jesus could have been head of the NAACP, and unless he was going to perform miracles he wasn't going to make the terrain all that much better."

Donna Brazile, a Black political consultant, was at Gordon's meetings with President Bush last year after Hurricane Katrina. She said Gordon was "savvy" and helped win more federal support for New Orleans and storm victims.

Gordon already has met with Bush three times — his

civil rights group, Gordon has had three meetings with Bush — compared to one meeting in nine years the president had with his predecessor, Kweisi Mfume, a former Democratic congressman. "The White House has evidently listened to (Gordon)," Edwards said.

Snow said Bush has a good relationship with Gordon. While they have political disagreements, "it marks an opportunity to have a conversation," Snow said.

Gordon agreed. "The communications channels between the NAACP and the administration — I feel they're wide open," he said.

predecessor, Kweisi Mfume, who is running for Senate in Maryland, managed it once. The president has announced through a White House spokesperson that he will attend the group's gathering today at the Washington Convention Center, a mile from the White House.

Gordon said he is unconcerned with critics or supporters. He is focused on improving the lives of Black Americans by the NAACP's 100th anniversary in 2009.

"We are going to be very outcome oriented, very results oriented as opposed to activity and effort oriented," said Gordon, a Camden, N.J., native who retired in 2003 as president of Verizon's retail division.

"If we stage a direct ac-

"There ought to be a constructive dialogue between the president and the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization. This is a good symbol."

But Rep. Diane Watson, a Democrat from California, was more skeptical about Bush's visit.

The president is "reading the polls," she said. "He says he doesn't pay attention to them, but when he was flying high, he didn't come."

There is a history of bad blood between Bush and the NAACP. During the 2000 presidential campaign, the NAACP's National Voter Fund ran a television ad

tion, if we protest, if we rally, if we have letter-writing campaigns, if we do things that mobilize our membership base to advocate for a particular issue, but we don't achieve our mission, then I can't declare success. We have to produce outcomes, and those outcomes need to be measurable."

Within the NAACP, Gordon has reorganized departments and hired a string of new department heads: Chairman Julian Bond said he has "brought a level of competence that we hadn't had." He noted that Gordon has traveled nonstop, quickly learning the organization's culture, and is winning support from members nationwide.

That's particularly impor-

tant because Gordon wants to fatten the membership rolls. For years, NAACP officials said the group had 500,000 members, but Gordon said that number is closer to 200,000. "We need to be a million," he said.

That also would help the NAACP's finances. Tax returns for 2004, the most re-

cent year available, show the group spent nearly \$4 million more than it took in, its third consecutive deficit.

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