

Black Caucus must work on keeping it real

By William Reed
Special to Sentinel-Voice

The best and brightest illustration of Black political empowerment will be in Washington, D.C., September 26-29. During that period, the Congressional Black Caucus will be holding its 37th Annual Legislative Conference.

The ALC is considered the premier African-American conference on public policy and issues. Over 30,000 students, politically active and politically connected citizens, corporate representatives, vendors, legislators, and big-name entertainers will gather this year for four days of exhibits, luncheons, V.I.P. receptions, dinners, parties, panel discussions and workshops.

ALC weekend is the platform the nation's 42 African-American members of Congress will use "to share progress of their work on legislative items that are of critical concern to their constituents." Socially, the ALC is "the place to be and be seen."

From coast to coast, people with good government and corporate jobs will gather in the nation's capital to join Congressional Black Caucus members "to focus on issues that challenge Black America."

In 1971, the CBC was formed with the specific aim of challenging President Richard Nixon's conservative civil rights and so-

cial welfare policies. In 1976, CBC members formed a non-profit foundation to carry out public policy research and hold conferences on issues related causes for Black equality.

The formation of a caucus for Blacks was hardly unique. In both the House of Representatives and the Senate, members often organize informally into groups based on their shared interest on an issue.

There are currently 200 such caucuses, which shape Congress' legislation. When they were focused on Blacks' political empowerment, CBC members and ALC attendees annually compiled legislative agendas and an "alternative budget."

But, as the ALC has evolved in number and stature of government and corporate executive attendees; and the CBC has increased its clout in congressional committees and their party's leadership, the ALC weekend's Black political empowerment achievements have waned.

Broad political empowerment among all African-Americans may still be a project in the making, but CBC members and the CBCF, the fundraising arm, or the Congress-



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sional Black Caucus Foundation, have arrived on that issue. Each ALC raises more than \$30 million for CBCF programs.

In the name of their companies, Black corporate executives in tuxedos and long gowns "host" a multitude of CBCF events with hefty "donations." Prime sponsors of ALC events shell out \$500,000. Exhibit sites go for as much as \$250,000 and the cheapest seats at the CBC awards banquet are \$750.

This year's ALC theme is "Unleashing Our Power." Officials say that the theme is designed to "challenge legislators and citizens to use their collective power to level the playing field for African-Americans, and recognize the historic number of CBC members leading congressional committees."

In comparison to the successes of other caucuses in attaining their legislative goals, ALC attendees and CBC members have lost their way.

Instead of attention to the fashions on display, ALC attendees should start getting real. African-Americans are a racial minority in a country where racism is a fact of life, founded on economic and imperialist racism.

As CBC members have gained more clout and status in the Congress, they have adhered more to established procedures to maintain the status-quo. As the ALC's corporate executive attendees have increased their patronage of the event, the agendas they promote are those of their employers.

Despite the platforms CBC members and ALC attendees hold, African-Americans' issues still sit on the legislative back burner. At this point, the ALC and CBC are hardly pillar foundations of an African-American-oriented interest group that is bringing our issues to the forefront of American political discourse.

The ALC holds out the promise of being an African-American interest group. It is an ideal conference to gather and process information about the nation's policies.

Such sessions should be equipping participants with comprehensive information, analyses and strategies they can use to affect change. Instead of planning the day's networking and party events, while they are in Washington, Black America's best and brightest would do the cause of their people better by actually engaging themselves and CBC members in formation of a real Black caucus agenda.

William Reed is president and CEO of Black Press International.

Senate should reject latest GOP judicial nominee

By Marc H. Morial
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Remember Charles Pickering, the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals judge who never won confirmation but still served? After the U.S. Senate twice rejected his nomination, President George W. Bush did an end-run around the chamber and made a recess appointment in early 2004, just a few weeks before Martin Luther King Day, which was ironic in light of Pickering's less-than-stellar record on civil rights.

As a federal district court judge, he championed the hate crime case of a man convicted of burning a cross on the lawn of an interracial

couple. Pickering even pressured federal prosecutors to drop a charge against the convicted cross-burner.

The judge retired near the end of his recess appointment only to be followed by yet another conservative jurist — Mississippi Attorney Michael Stevens, who the American Bar Association deemed as unqualified, a determination that doomed his nomination.

Now, in 2007, the ghost of Pickering appears to be haunting the U.S. Senate in the



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form of Judge Leslie Southwick, a former Mississippi state court judge nominated to take his place on the New Orleans-based 5th Circuit, one of the most heavily Black circuits in the nation.

Southwick, 57, served as a member of the Mississippi Court of Appeals from 1995 through 2006. During his tenure, he favored the employer

over the employee, the corporation over the consumer. However, in a 1998 employment case, Southwick pulled an about-face, siding with a White state employee rightly fired for calling a Black colleague a "good ole n***er."

The social worker was reinstated to her job without punishment after the state appellate court ruled that her use of a racial epithet in the workplace "was not motivated out of racial hatred or racial animosity."

Sounds a lot like the excuse radio shock jock Don Imus used last April in defense of the inflammatory racist and sexist remarks he made about the Rutgers University women's basketball team. I bet Imus wished he worked for the state of Mississippi. He'd still have a job.

In an editorial earlier this year, *The New York Times* concluded that Southwick "revealed a thorough lack of understanding of the odious impact of such language" in supporting the social worker.

Southwick also joined with a lower court's majority in denying custody to a mother, who had never married the father of her 8-year-old daughter, because she lived with another woman.

The Magnolia Bar Association, a group of Black lawyers in Mississippi, has ques-

tioned whether Southwick could "properly enforce" the law when "it comes to the rights of those who are unpopular and who are marginalized by the political process."

As the Times editorial suggested, a "non-negotiable quality" of judicial nominees should be a commitment to equal justice.

In Southwick's case, that attribute has been thrown out the window, just like it was for his predecessors. Again, another conservative jurist is pulled out of what seems to be a bottomless well.

How insensitive, given that the 5th circuit is based in New Orleans, a city still suffering from the effects of Hurricane Katrina and from a lackadaisical federal response to it.

In early August, the Senate Judiciary Committee cast its approval for the Southwick nomination by the slimmest of margins — one vote. It is now headed for the Senate floor, where a vote could be taken as early as this month.

Lawmakers must soundly reject Southwick's nomination to send a signal that the White House needs to provide more mainstream candidates who enjoy support from a broader range of interests than what the president and his cohorts currently consult.

The White House should seek the opinions of a wider range of groups — including civil rights organizations — when making judicial nominations. With a wider range of opinions, the president and his advisers are less likely to put forward divisive candidates, whose nominations end up causing gridlock and creating an air of partisan tension in the Senate. And the more contentious the fight over a judicial seat the longer it will go unfilled, which is a great injustice for everyone.

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gressional session.

The above are the top 10, but don't worry all 535 of them are doing quite well. The rookies are learning fast from their comrades, and no one on Capitol Hill is hurting financially. The Congressional Black Caucus is probably the poorest group of members but that will be changing, as we are starting to get CBC members who understand business and return on investment like never before.

Of the top 50, there are no Black members and just one Hispanic, Loretta Sanchez, No. 39. That old saying, "Power Begets Money," is certainly true in America, and it's working well on Capitol Hill.

Let's forget about Republicans being rich and Democrats being common. It doesn't matter on Capitol Hill. Of the top 10, six are Democrats. Of the top 50, 22 are Democratic.

Who makes off with tax decreases? I say we should certainly include them — all of them!

Conflicts of interest appear to be rampant.

Senator Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., dissolved her blind trust, which last year was estimated to be worth \$5 million to \$25 million. She has holdings in General Electric, Cisco Systems, Home Depot, Johnson & Johnson, Merrill Lynch, Microsoft, Texas Instruments, Time Warner and Walt Disney — all of whom have vast issues being voted on Capitol Hill on a routine basis.

She even has holdings in right-wing companies such as Wal-Mart and News Corp, the owner of FOX News.

Some can use their spouses with efficiency. Senator Evan Bayh, D-Ind., has his wife on the payroll of eight companies. WellPoint has given her \$750,000 in stock and options. E-Trade Bank and Natesth Pharmaceuticals have also been quite generous to his spouse.

The point is this: Can these people adequately feel your pain and dire situation?

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