

Colbert I. King

In Search of the New Black Power

The headline on The Post's lengthy lead editorial on June 29, 1972, said it all: "Black Power Comes of Age." It told the story of how black politicians, led by then-D.C. Del. Walter Fauntroy, Rep. Louis Stokes of Ohio and Missouri Rep. William Clay organized a campaign to corral delegates to the '72 Democratic National Convention. It was an audacious move at the time, brought on, said the editorial, by the feeling that "black votes, delivered in great lumps in recent years to the Democratic Party, hadn't been paid for in real political terms and that the Republican Party wasn't even listening." Sound familiar?

But black politicians of the 1970s were a different breed from today's cautious, accommodating and ever so grateful "leaders." Perhaps it was the training ground of the '60s civil rights movement that made them so bodacious. Whatever the cause, African American leaders of that day vowed to gain greater self-sufficiency and a stronger voice in addressing problems affecting their community. That desire came alive one year before the '72 Democratic convention.

At a series of quiet strategy meetings held around the country, black leaders planned to participate in the '72 electoral process in a more significant and sophisticated way. They pulled together an agenda and a game plan for the primaries designed to win a large block of uncommitted convention delegates. The strategists wanted to enter the convention ready to deal with party leaders and presidential candidates from a position of strength.

The old pre-1972 framework in which Democratic presidential candidates could get by with the recitation of comforting words about harmony and brotherhood—and by spreading a little walking-around money in black neighborhoods on Election Day—would be replaced by hard

bargaining in the convention. The new '70s leaders weren't looking for pats on the head; they were after political quid pro quos.

And it came to pass at the '72 convention in Miami. The political camp most in need of a block of delegate votes to win a first-ballot victory was South Dakota Sen. George McGovern's. And the McGovern people came to the table, ready to bargain, ultimately buying into many of the black leadership's demands.

That also was the year in which Rep. Shirley Chisholm, a New York African American Democrat, launched her own candidacy for president. She didn't make it, but she, too, achieved a milestone, winning 151 delegate votes at the convention. Lest the impression is left that '72 was all sweetness and light for black political unity, Chisholm, The Post editorial observed, complained that Fauntroy and company had veered from their original strategy by cutting a deal too early in the convention, and that they didn't get much in the end. But the final maneuvers didn't really matter.

McGovern lost the November election in a landslide, as blue-collar, George Wallace Democrats and much of the country—spooked by McGovern's proposed \$30 billion cut in defense spending, his guaranteed annual income for everybody, his end-the-war platform and mishandling of the Tom Eagleton affair, and by the growing influence of blacks in the party—jumped ship to Republican Richard Nixon. Staging a Democratic convention that seemed to have been dominated by the cast of "Hair" didn't help McGovern much, either.

But as The Post's editorial noted, no matter how McGovern fared, this was clearly the first time blacks had participated in a serious, critical and political way in a major

American political party's decision-making process. The editorial, however, contained one glaring misjudgment. The '72 African American strategy, it said, "set on track a black mode of participation in the political process in this country which is not likely to be reversed in the near future." Little did The Post know.

Fast-forward to today, when there is a visible regression in assertiveness among black Democratic leadership. In '72, a critical mass of politicians took the electoral process seriously and, in turn, caused their party to take them seriously. Today, the Democratic Party's leadership gets away with treating African American voters as aliens from a far-off planet, to be recognized only on Election Day, and then by only a few leaders who have nothing better to do with their time. Case in point: this month's midterm elections, in which party financial support for African American candidates was relatively sparse, issues of concern to many African American voters were ignored, and suburbanites and single-issue groups were getting all the play until a few days before the polls opened. Then Democrats served up Bill Clinton, who, coming on like Moses, sought to lead his black flock to the polls. This year's election scene called to mind the line from the '72 Post editorial that spoke of black voters who "continue tagging along picking up whatever happened to fall off the back of the liberal bandwagon."

It doesn't have to be that way two years from now. In fact, if the Democratic Party expects its most loyal core constituency, African Americans, to produce in 2004, it had better not be that way.

And yet there are signs that the back of the bandwagon is where some prominent party figures think black voters belong. In a Wall Street Journal editorial page article this

week, Al From, fou cratic Leadership C are "more whites t must win the swing "Those voters ten loosely tied, if at all, and work in non-u their own peril, bec wrote.

Unanswered is w enthusiastic suppo time for the Democ this may be the ti leaders to revisit ar ago and enter the c ite sons and daught der Democratic Pau the state to come av also forces the outs for those voters. / these days requires reliance on toothpe and the blessing of

As mentioned in can American Den to go toe-to-toe wit and satisfied with stomach for a fight generation take ov black Democratic across the country

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Drawing Board



Roger E. Hernandez

Crazy About Ca

Jack Nicholson, Robert Redford, Danny Glover, Kevin Costner, Jane Fonda, Woody Harrelson, Matt Dillon, Ed Asner, Shirley MacLaine, Naomi Campbell, Kate Moss, Oliver Stone and the latest, Steven Spielberg, nounce a regim hold m does nc jails the