

of the New Black Power

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meetings held around the to participate in the '72 ficant and sophisticated nda and a game plan for a large block of un-

The strategists wanted deal with party leaders a position of strength. which Democratic presith the recitation of comid brotherhood—and by money in black neighd 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 helped 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, founder and CEO of the centrist Democratic Leadership Council, reminded the party that there are "more whites than minorities" and that Democrats must win the swing voters in the political center in 2004. "Those voters tend to be white, politically moderate, loosely tied, if at all, to a political party, live in the suburbs, and work in non-union jobs. Democrats ignore them at their own peril, because they can't win without them," he wrote.

Unanswered is whether Democrats can win without the enthusiastic support of African Americans. Maybe it's time for the Democratic Party to find out. Or better yet, this may be the time for African American Democratic leaders to revisit and refine the strategy of three decades ago and enter the coming presidential primaries as favorite sons and daughters in states rich with black voters. Under Democratic Party rules, candidates don't have to win the state to come away with some delegates. That strategy also forces the outside presidential candidates to compete for those voters. And winning African American votes these days requires campaigning on the issues. The era of reliance on toothpaste smiles, photos with black children and the blessing of black ministers is over.

As mentioned in last week's column, it's time for African American Democratic leaders to muster the courage to go toe-to-toe with their party. If the elders, comfortable and satisfied with crumbs and pats on the head, lack the stomach for a fight, they should step aside and let the next generation take over. And if the elders won't move, then black Democratic voters should join their restive peers across the country and start looking for another home.

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Roger E. Hernandez

Crazy About Castro

Jack Nicholson, Robert Redford, Danny nounced not one single unfavorable word about

Drawing Board