Black Political Power: Mayors, Municipalities, and Money

By J. Douglas Allen-Taylor

Earlier this winter, Ron Dellums, mayor of Oakland, California did something that spoke volumes about the nature and effect of political power in that Bay Area city. In his annual State of the City address before a packed City Hall, he pointedly avoided using the "b" word—"b" as in black or black people. Instead, Dellums used a word more common in the modern progressive lexicon—the "d" word—diversity. It's a telling difference.

Although many cities have tried to solve their social problems simply by moving some of their residents out of the city, Dellums said that this was not going to happen on his watch. In Oakland, the mayor said, we celebrate and welcome diversity.

Dellums, once described by Van Jones as "the legendary congressman who personally helped speed Apartheid's demise" in South Africa, wanted to go on record as reversing the gentrification policies of his predecessor, Jerry Brown, under whose watch the exodus of African Americans from the city escalated at a rapid pace. But he did not appear to want to spell out that it was African American residents he was looking to retain.

The action was no aberration. Four years ago, a multiracial coalition of Oakland citizens began a petition campaign to convince Dellums to come out of retirement as a public official and run for mayor. But it was the African American leaders within that coalition who

had begun the original "Run, Ron, Run" chant at a meeting of Oakland black activists, which sparked the petition campaign that was subsequently taken up by other ethnic and racial groups.

"Because Ron was a black politician, if blacks had been prominent in the forefront of the petition drive it would have been identified as a 'black campaign,' the press would have jumped on it, his opponents would have attacked it, and it would have hurt Ron's chances," explained one activist who had drafted Dellums.

In the city that was once the unofficial capital of black radical political action when it was the national headquarters of the Black Panther Party four decades ago, in an area (San Francisco Bay Area) still considered one of the most progressive in the nation, too close an identification with "black" by black politicians and political activists can sometimes become something of a liability.

Photo:

Oakland Mayors

(From left to right) Lionel Wilson, Elihu Harris, Jerry Brown, and current mayor, Ronald V. Dellums.

In reality, the history of political power in American cities is flush with examples of ethnic solidarity. Communities elect politicians from their own ethnic group who, in turn, dole out jobs, programs, projects, and favors to their community members, thus enhancing the community's political clout. The Irish in New York, Boston, and Chicago and the Italians in New York and San Francisco are examples. Even in Oakland, Latinos and Asian Americans are continuing that trend with little contention. In fact, the city only recently ended the practice of treating the At-Large City Council seat as the unofficial Asian seat after Asian Americans showed that they could win seats without such a set-aside. But for African Americans in Oakland, the process appears to have reached a dead-end.

Testing The Limits of Black Power

The strongest indication of the limits of black political power in Oakland came in 1996, when African Americans held a majority on the seven-member Oakland Unified School District board and four of the nine City Council seats, including the mayor's office. Recognizing that African American students in Oakland schools were falling behind in achievement—in part because many of them spoke a unique dialect known to American linguists as Ebonics—the school board directed the school district to set up training programs for teachers so that they could instruct African American students using Ebonics. The idea was to help the students in learning both, standard English and other subjects, while maintaining "the richness and legitimacy" of Ebonics. The school board suggested that funding for the proposed Ebonics program could come from federal education funds earmarked for students whose primary language is not English. What happened next is documented in a feature article entitled "Double Talk" that I wrote for the *San Jose Metro* newspaper at the time:

"In a fierce-hot reaction that rolled over the country and back with interwarp speed, Oakland's Ebonics policy was both ridiculed and denounced on talk shows and op-ed pages and in newsgroups everywhere. A spokesperson for California Governor Pete Wilson called it a 'ridiculous theory' and a 'dubious plan.' North Carolina Senator Lauch Faircloth called the use of Ebonics as a public teaching tool 'absurd... It's teaching down to people.' State Senator Ray Haynes of Riverside accused the Oakland board of 'want[ing] to institutionalize bad speech patterns.' But certainly the most damaging blows to the Oakland plan came from national African American leaders. Jesse Jackson initially called the Ebonics proposal 'an unacceptable surrender borderlining on disgrace.' Poet-educator Maya Angelou was quoted as saying she was 'incensed' by the plan, and NAACP President Kweisi Mfume called it 'a cruel joke.'"[1]

It was some time after the controversy had died down that American linguists and education specialists began expressing public support for the Ebonics proposal because, in their expert opinion, the underlying linguistic assumptions and educational roadmap were based on sound fundamentals. But by then the political damage had already been done. The Ebonics program was never implemented, Oakland's black leadership became a national laughingstock, and no African American political officeholder from Oakland has come out with an overtly pro-black program since.

As a matter of fact, in cities around the country, there is a clear decline in the ability and willingness of African American political officeholders to deliver direct and specific political benefits to the core constituency that largely helped put them in office.

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Photo:

Bobby Seal's 1973 campaign for mayor paved the way for later black candidates.

Courtesy of www.jetcityorange.com

Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson's Black Majority

In his *New York Times* obituary for Maynard Jackson, the first African American mayor of Atlanta, Georgia, reporter David Halbfinger wrote "...it was [Jackson's] fiery advocacy for the new black majority that had elected him [in 1973]—in particular, by setting up affirmative-action programs for hiring city workers and contractors, and by giving neighborhoods a voice in city planning—that constituted a political revolution in the heart of the South. Seemingly overnight, it transformed Atlanta into a mecca for talented, aspiring blacks from across the country."[2]

The signature black advocacy event of Jackson's mayoral tenure occurred during the expansion of the Atlanta airport. As Jackson took office, Halbfinger wrote, Atlanta "was becoming the air travel crossroads of the South, Atlanta's airport was expanding to meet the needs of a major hub, and Mr. Jackson demanded that black workers and contractors receive their fair share of the business building and operating its new terminals at Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport." Jackson refused to move forward with the terminal building until those demands were met, and though the city's white business leaders initially balked, they could not outlast the new mayor.

Halbfinger also noted that "Mr. Jackson often boasted that the airport was built ahead of time and under budget, even as the city contracts granted to minorities duly soared from less than 1 percent in 1973 to nearly 39 percent within five years. He also boasted that Atlanta gained dozens of new black millionaires, many thanks to joint ventures of minority-owned and white-owned companies at the airport."

It was the perfect yardstick for how black political power should work to support black business and black workers who, in return, throw their political support back to black political officeholders who can perpetuate the cycle. But 15 years after Jackson left office, that cycle appears to have been broken.

The Shrinking Black Voter Base

In a December 4, 2009 online piece on Atlanta's mayoral race, Errin Haines of the Associated Press writes that after four decades of African American leadership, with the election of Atlanta's fifth consecutive black mayor, "...the fissures in the [city's black political] machine were exposed, its future viability cast in doubt... Atlanta's black population has shrunk and its white population grown since its current mayor, Shirley Franklin, was elected in 2001. Its voting rolls are filled with newcomers unfamiliar with Atlanta's habit of assigning its business interests to whites and its political interests to blacks. The reality is sinking in that black political power here is not as strong or united as it once was, and is destined to weaken as more whites seek office and more blacks shed their civil rights-era sentimentality."[3]

"A major challenge to the machine is the thought, rapidly taking hold, that black leadership has not always meant black progress in Atlanta—the city still has a poverty rate of 22 percent, far more than the national average of 13 percent," Haines points out.

In New Orleans, the loss of black political power came directly from the inability of key black officeholders to hold on to black people. Following the disaster of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Ray Nagin, the city's fourth consecutive black mayor, was either unable or unwilling to rebuild the communities devastated by the floodwaters, particularly in the city's majority-black Ninth Ward. Once dubbed "the Chocolate City" by Nagin, New Orleans' black population dropped by the thousands following Katrina, resulting in this year's election of the city's first white mayor since 1978.

Photo:

Maynard Jackson takes the oath of office as Atlanta's mayor on Jan. 7, 1974, from Judge Luther Alverson.

© 1974 Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Perhaps the best chance to translate black political victories into sustained black political power along the Irish and Italian models was lost with the 1987 death of Chicago Mayor Harold Washington of a heart attack just months after being elected to a second term. Washington—who understood ethnic power politics well—was elected in 1983 after a registration campaign that pulled in 100,000 new African American voters with a thinly disguised Black Power slogan that said, "It's Our Turn Now." That the next African American politician from Chicago to emerge into national prominence after Washington is Barack Obama—who represents the very essence of diversity and coalition politics and is the antithesis of a black politics that openly and specifically goes after black-identified issues—is symptomatic of the times.

The reason why black political power has traveled a distinctly different road from America's other ethnic and racial minorities has been well documented: No other racial or ethnic group suffered the cultural and institutional disintegration that African Americans did under slavery and, therefore, are as vulnerable to continued outside manipulation and disruption. African Americans served as the battering ram to open the door for the rights of other Americans—many ethnic and racial groups, women, gays—but it left the African American institutional and group infrastructure seriously weakened. Whether African Americans will rebound from these setbacks or the direction that that rebound will take is a tale yet to be told.

Jerry Brown's Promise to Oakland

For the moment, the Oakland experience seems prototypical of the national trend: In 1980, African Americans constituted 47 percent—the largest racial bloc—of this multiracial city. That black plurality re-

The Role of the Black Panthers in Oakland Politics

The root of the problem with African American politics in Oakland goes back to the successful 1977 campaign of Lionel Wilson, the city's first black mayor, according to Geoffrey Pete, an African American business leader.

Four years prior, after the Black Panther Party sponsored a 1972 voter registration drive that put several thousand new voters on the books for Alameda and Contra Costa counties, Black Panther Party Chairman Bobby Seale had run for Oakland mayor. He shocked political observers by coming in second in the first round of voting and forcing a runoff against the incumbent white mayor, John Reading. With Reading choosing not to run again in 1977, Wilson won the mayoral election in a runoff.

"The Black Panther Party helped [Wilson] get elected more so than the Democratic Party or the Republican Party," says Pete. "Lionel admitted that, and his quote was printed in one of the Black Panther Party papers. It was just a fact. They were organized. They were at the pinnacle of their powers and development at that particular time."

In the normal course of events, the Black Panther Party would have used its organizational power to put pressure on Wilson to address specific African American interests and issues in the city. But Panther co-founder Huey Newton had just returned to Oakland from exile the year of

Wilson's election as mayor, setting off a fierce turmoil and infighting within the Black Panther Party, which led to the ouster of Seale and Elaine Brown—Panther leaders and architects of the party's foray into electoral politics. Under Newton, the Black Panther Party veered away from electoral politics—including coalition politics with the newly-elected mayor—and the Party itself fell into disarray, eventually imploding and disintegrating.

"Because the Panther Party was gone, they never held Lionel responsible and [they failed] to remind him who he was beholden to," said Pete. "So Lionel went the other extreme. That's not to say that he didn't advocate for African American interests, but the blueprint [for advancing black interests in the city] was never cemented." ∎

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sulted in two consecutive African American mayors—Lionel Wilson and Elihu Harris—between 1978 and 1999 and at one point, a majority-black Oakland City Council and Oakland School Board. But those years of black political power in Oakland resulted in a backlash, and an August, 1999 article in the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Mayor Jerry Brown in his campaign had "promised to dismantle the African American-dominated political machine that presided over much of the city's decline since the 1970s."

Brown won with 59 percent of the vote—a large chunk of it African American—against several black candidates. And ironically, though he was the only

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Photo:

Oakland Black Panther headquarters shootout, Sept. 10, 1968.

Courtesy of www. jetcityorange.com

candidate who openly targeted the power of another racial group, a *City Journal* article of August 1999 speculated that Brown's election "may signal the waning of Oakland's counterproductive race politics." A *Salon.com* article from June 1999 notes that "[m]uch of [Oakland]'s black leadership, and a plurality of its black voters, seemed prepared to elect this white man mayor, judging that his track record on issues of concern to African Americans more than made up for his lack of melanin."

Some of the city's African American leadership had warned that a Jerry Brown administration with its ambitious plans to move 10,000 new residents into the city's downtown area would lead to gentrification—and a loss of black lower-income residents. They had a point. Mayor Brown's development plans became so synonymous with gentrification that Oakland activists began calling the phenomenon "jerryfication." Though Oakland had already been losing its African American population before Brown was elected—it dropped by 21,000 between 1990 and 2000—during his two terms in office that trend accelerated and the city lost another 34,000 blacks from 2000 to 2008. Many left because of a lack of jobs, others because they could no longer afford the rents in their neighborhoods, yet others because many of the lower-income African American neighborhoods have been unable to rise above the squalor, drug dealing, crime and violence for years. It is one of the largest movements of a population in California since African Americans poured into Oakland during World War II to work in nearby factories and shipyards.

Whites now make up about 37 percent of Oakland and outnumber African Americans by about seven percent. The numbers of Latinos and Asian Americans also rose in Oakland during Jerry Brown's eight-year term. This is the Oakland that elected former congressman Ron Dellums mayor in 2006.

The Age of Dellums

During his tenure as Oakland's congressional representative, Dellums was something of a progressive icon because of his opposition to the war in Vietnam and Apartheid rule in South Africa, but was always forced to subvert overtly-black political issues within his own district because he was one of the few blacks to serve in a non-majority black congressional district. Whatever his personal beliefs, Dellums always underplays the black agenda, either from habit or political survival instincts. And while his administration's programs are often of direct benefit to African American interests—a highly-successful re-entry program that helps find jobs and other support for the mostly black ex-prisoners returning to the city, and reforms within the Oakland Police Department (OPD) that are helping to close the long-time split between blacks and the OPD, for example—Dellums himself rarely, if ever, speaks of the programs as having direct black benefits.

Geoffrey Pete, an Oakland business leader and Dellums supporter who has been active in city politics and African American organizations for many years, and who led the original "Run, Ron, Run" chant that eventually led to the Dellums mayoralty, thinks the current political conditions in Oakland make black politicians leery of being too openly identified with black-specific causes. Pointing out that Oakland runs on coalition politics, Pete says, "Coalition politics means that you work with Asians, you work with Latinos, you work with unions, you work with environmentalists, you work with gays. That's good, and it's necessary, and we should be doing it. But the black interests are sometimes swallowed up in that process." ∎

Endnotes

1 www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/02.27.97/cover/ebonics1-9709.html

2 www.nytimes.com/2003/06/24/us/maynard-h-jackson-jr-first-black-mayor-atlanta-political-force-dies-65.html

3 http://blog.taragana.com/politics/2009/12/04/atlantas-black-political-machine-intact-but-battered-after-narrow-victory-in-mayors-race-4670/

Photo:

Tracie Cooper, whose son, Michael Greer, was detained with his friend, Oscar Grant, by BART police on New Year's, confronts Mayor Ron Dellums at a Jan. 14, 2009 rally.

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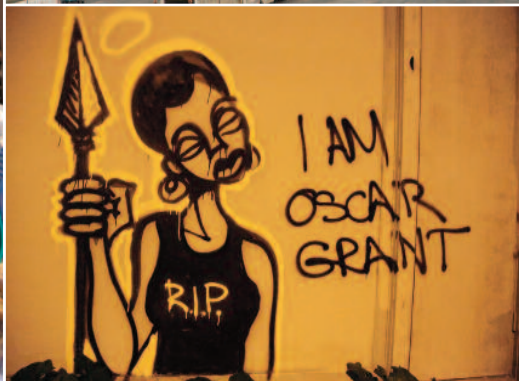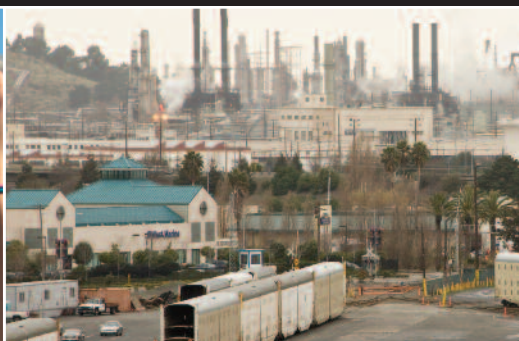
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