

"Political Leadership in the Washington, D.C.  
African-American Community:  
Twenty Years After the Urban Rebellions"

Good Afternoon ladies and gentlemen , I would like to take this opportunity to thank the African Heritage Studies Association for its kind invitation to appear on this panel to discuss what as W. E. B. Dubois stated, ... "is at once the most elementary and nicest problem of social growth...that peculiarly valuable education which a group receives when by search and criticism, it finds and commissions its own leaders."

When I examined the subject of this presentation, I was struck by a singular fact. Twenty years after the loss of seven lives, the loss of many black businesses, and the loss of black property. The political leaders of Washington, D.C. who are in great part, the civil rights activists of the sixties, are faced with the same prohibitions, institutional racism and denial of constitutional rights that faced their predecessors. Against this backdrop, I would like to focus my remarks on the "peculiarly valuable education, which Washington, D.C. has received in the process of finding and commissioning its own political leaders."

We all have heard the story of how the framers of the Constitution were leery of vesting political power in the citizens of the capitol. One reason for this was obviously race. Washington, D.C. had the nation's largest free black population before the Civil War and blacks from the South were continuing in great numbers to flock to the nations' capitol.

Republicans, who won a majority of the black votes, in this Country in the 1870s, gave the District self-government. Republican Governor Alexander Shepherd, however, drove the city into bankruptcy. As a result, after three years, Congress resumed direct control of the city, providing administration by three Commissioners appointed by the President. This form of government lasted until 1967.

Thus, the most political of American cities is also the least political. The development of local, political leadership in the period after 1968 has paralleled the recognition of the need to work for the autonomy of the black community. 1968 was the beginning of the period of rapid social and political change in the black community in our Nation. In many ways, Washington, D.C. reflects this change. In many ways, however, it does not.

Today, Washington's political maturation is still stymied by the Congress. Congress retains, under the Constitution, total authority over the District: it has the legislative right to overturn D.C. Laws. The District's prosecutor and judges are appointed by the President, and Congress still reviews and approves the District's budget.

As we survey the District of Columbia political community today one notices several similarities in the political structure of 1968 and today. In 1968, the mayor was black, there was a black majority on the new nine-member city council and on the school board, and the corporation counsel was black.

Yet there are significant differences between 1968 and 1988. In 1968 the city had been controlled by Congress under a three-man Board of Commission for ninety-three years. President Johnson had named Walter E. Washington, Mayor to stave off self-government and the Congress did not authorize the election of the local school board until November, 1968. The community's input into this emerging political structure was minimal.

If one examines the process by which a community selects its leaders, one finds in the Afro-American community, a strong emphasis on structural leadership.

When limited self-government became available, the earlier activists became the political leaders.

Those individuals who had been on the "outside," of mainstream politics became the political leadership of today. One has only to look at the Mayor, the City Council members, the Chairman of the Council, Councilmembers Smith, Winter, and Wilson, and other city officials to see the evidence. In fact, nine of the thirteen members of the first elected D.C. Council were former activists; such as Douglas Moore, Julius Hobson, Marion Barry, Jerry A. Moore, Jr., David Clarke, John Wilson, Nadine Winter, Willie Hardy, and William Spaulding.

Since 1974, the city has chosen its political leadership without the input of Congress. In the fourteen years of this limited self-governance, the city has grown tremendously. There are problems that the city has faced and is facing today, but more importantly, there are many successes that this young,

maturing city government has achieved. Many city services have been streamlined and the reconstruction and revitalization of blighted areas are in progress. Economic growth continues to surge through Washington. People are renovating houses and apartments; the business district has been thriving and moving eastward into territory developers once shunned; and property values are increasing. The District's new Convention Center is thriving and stimulating a big hotel-building boom in what was a decaying area.

However, these are some areas where black political leadership has made no great progress. In shifting focus from protest to politics, from policy formulation to policy implementation, the leadership has found no clear consensus on how to unify the segments of our community. The fact that the District is held captive by Congress exacerbates the problem. It has been described as "a halfway house between servitude and autonomy." Moreover, a lack of identification and pride in the city by the diverse elements of the city. You might say there are three Washington's. One is the Washington of the nation's capital, a picturesque city of gleaming monuments, famous buildings, impressive government complexes, museums, historical landmarks, and broad, tree-shaded avenues and malls, another Washington is home to some 650,000 persons, it is the place where they live, work and raise families. It is the city that is confronting many problems common to most U. S. metropolises: traffic congestion, air and water pollution, rising taxes, poverty, crime, drugs and

rapid population changes. Problems which have been exacerbated by the unusually rapid growth of the suburbs in neighboring Maryland and Virginia. Problems which strain the resources of an already crowded city which functions as the hub of a metropolitan area with over 3 million people. The third Washington, is the Washington of the major law firms, the trade associations, lobbyists, large businesses and corporate offices, who located here principally because of the proximity to Congress. These institutions consider themselves in Washington, but not of Washington. The challenge and opportunity that the black political leadership of this city has is uniting these diverse elements of the city and merging all behind a unified Washington. The task of unifying these segments is formidable, because each group pursues separate agendas. Until this is done, however, I don't believe that Washington will achieve the greatness that is its destiny. The problem of creating one city instead of the "other city" and home rule is a constant concern of black political leadership in this city. Until it is resolved, the differences between 1968 and 1988 will be overshadowed by their similarities.

Over the years, I have discovered that you don't have to be brilliant to be a good leader. But you do have to understand how other people feel, their concerns, their aspiration, and their needs. The political leadership among the Afro-American community has derived its strength from these basic tenets. The

persons who were thrust into positions of leadership articulated the needs, desires, and visions of the community. Failure of the leadership to continue to do so will serve the struggle for home rule poorly.

My message has in fact been bad news. I ask that you think about the maturation, political leadership in Washington has shown in the past two decades. Observe the development and I believe you will agree that twenty years after the urban rebellions, the political leadership of the African-American community has evolved from the activist role of earlier days but it has not lost its activist spirit. I suggest that you measure the success of this leadership by how far it has come, not how far it has to go. Otherwise the way Frederick Douglas described the District before the turn of the century will remain true. He said:

They have neither voice nor vote in all the practical politics of the United States. They are hardly to be called citizens of the United States. Practically they are aliens - not citizens, but subjects. The District of Columbia is the one spot where there is no government for the people, of the people, and by the people. Its citizens submit to rulers whom they have had no choice in selecting. They obey laws which they had no voice in making. They have plenty of taxation, but no representation.

Thank you for your interest and attentiveness.