

Black Political Leaders

In the American experience, people of African descent have played a significant role from the moment of their appearance in the New World. Arriving first as indentured servants along with white people, their fate shortly changed from living as fellow laborer to chattel slave. It was out of the clutches of slavery that black leadership, activism and political aspiration rose to become key agents in America's struggle for true Democracy.

Long before the Emancipation Proclamation was signed on January 1, 1863, black leadership was alive and growing. Even in the grip of slavery there were black political leaders, from ministers to free black professionals to a growing number of blacks involved in the abolitionist movement in the North.¹ This climate intensified after President Lincoln signed the Proclamation, delivering to slavery its final blow. Optimism ran high in October, 1864 during a black national convention in Syracuse that included such great leaders as Francis L. Cardozo and Fredrick Douglass. The convention adopted the following priorities: abolition, equality before the law, and suffrage. Additionally at the convention, a National Equal Rights League was established.²

One of America's first black leaders was Francis L. Cardozo. He was born in 1837 in Charleston to a free black woman and a prominent Jewish businessman. Unable to acquire a decent education in America, he traveled to Scotland where he graduated in 1861 from the University of Glasgow, and from there he returned to the United States where he served as Pastor of the New Heaven Congregationalist Church in Connecticut.³ It was in this position as a minister that Cardozo came into prominence as a black leader. In this era, black ministers were considered to be the conscience of the black community.

They symbolized strength, hope and determination; they were considered visionaries in a static environment.

During Reconstruction, Cardozo was elected to the Constitutional Convention in 1866 and he soon after became the first black state official in South Carolina's history. He was Secretary of State from 1868 to 1872 and the state Treasurer from 1872 to 1876.⁴ His greatest challenge in his political career came when he ran for reelection. The Democrats accused him of misappropriating funds and ran a smear campaign against him. This campaign was highly effective: Cardozo was defeated for reelection in 1876. Later the charges were proven false, but the damage had already been done.

One of Cardozo's greatest accomplishments was in the area of homestead. Much of the nation had done poorly when it came to land distribution during Reconstruction. South Carolina was an exception to this rule. The land was initially bought by the state and then redistributed to people on a long-term credit plan. The idea of purchasing land in this way appealed to the population of freeman, but from the start the land commission was plagued by mismanagement and corruption. The commission was in desperate need of new leadership and Cardozo possessed the aptitude for this role. He was successful in reorganizing the commission in 1872 as Secretary of State and many became land owners for the first time.⁵

Prior to entering the political arena, Cardozo was instrumental in establishing in 1866 the Avery Normal Institute, a school that trained black teachers.⁶ After his political career ended, he returned to continue fighting for education. He strongly believed that education equaled freedom, and he became principal of a Washington, D.C. high school.⁷

Many of the Reconstruction era black political leaders were young. John Lynch, at the age of 24, became House Speaker in Mississippi. Born a slave on September 10, 1847, in Concordia Parish, Louisiana, he grew to be one of the most respected congressmen of his day. Lynch worked in a photography shop near a schoolhouse; he would at times listen through the window while classes were in session. It was in these moments that he determined for himself to have a formal education. He eventually accomplished this goal by attending night school.⁸

Lynch made his political debut during Reconstruction in 1869 as the Justice of the Peace in his hometown of Natchez, Mississippi. In November of the same year, he was elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives and was successfully reelected in 1871. In 1872 he was elected to Congress and won reelection in 1874. One year later, Lynch played an important role in getting the Civil Rights Act of 1875 passed. This act outlawed discrimination in public places. It would be ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court however, in 1883. With the end of Reconstruction and the decline in interest in the freeman condition, Lynch was defeated for a third term in Congress. He ran again in 1890; this turned out to be a controversial election as Lynch was determined the loser, only to gain victory after challenging the election results.⁹

Toward the end of Reconstruction white supremacy was resurfacing and gaining momentum. Lynch and other black leaders were aware of this resurgence and sensed the tide turning in Mississippi. “Democratic rifle clubs paraded through the black belt, disrupting Republican Party meetings and assaulting local party leaders.”¹⁰ These and other criminal acts were committed out in the open. Intimidation against blacks increased as the election of 1876 drew near. Armed whites went through the countryside killing

black schoolteachers, church leaders and local Republican organizers.¹¹ Mississippi Democrats won a landslide victory in the election. Lynch was the lone congressman that the axe missed. Lynch asked President Grant why he had not sent the troops in to protect blacks at the polls. Grant replied, “Northern party leaders pressured me not to send troops.”¹²

In the end, John Lynch would succumb to the rising power of the southern redeemers’ class. He clung to the hope that one day an impartial historian would write an accurate account surrounding the events of Reconstruction.¹³

Lynch’s political career provides a lot of insight into the difficulties facing blacks in the American Congress. It took courage and strength of character for Lynch and others to tread where no black had gone before. The record shows that he and other black leaders were rejected and once again disenfranchised. The halls of Congress, devoid of black representation, is the story that Lynch hoped would be told one day.

The United States Senate was more difficult for blacks to penetrate, but the great state of Mississippi provided the doorway through which Hiram Revel would pass. Mr. Revel was an educator and an ordained minister. He was born on September 1, 1822, in Fayetteville, North Carolina, to free parents. He received a formal education in the north, in both Indiana and Illinois. During the Civil War he helped organize two black volunteer regiments for service in the Union Army and also joined as a chaplain to a black regiment stationed in Mississippi.¹⁴

In January 1870, Revel became the first black senator from Mississippi when he was chosen to fill the unexpired term of Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Upon his arrival in the Senate, he was an opponent of the re-admittance of Georgia into the Union

unless an effort was made to protect the black population.¹⁵ In his brief career as a senator, Revel withstood white outrage against his fulfilling Davis's term, and he fought to secure employment for black mechanics at the Naval Shipyard in the nation's capital. He was also successful in passing a bill that relieved the political disabilities of former Confederate Brig. General Arthur E. Reynolds.¹⁶ In Revel's most famous speech he stated that his purpose was to serve his race; but most importantly, he was in the Senate to champion the cause of all loyal citizens irrespective of color or race.¹⁷ Revel shared with Francis Cardozo a love of education. After his brief tenure in the Senate, he became the president of Alcorn University in Mississippi. He also became a popular lecturer, and as he traveled he became a voice for civil rights.

Reconstruction saw another black politician by the name of Blanche Bruce. His career was not as short as Revel's. He enjoyed a luxury that no other black had – longevity in political office. Bruce was born a slave on March 1, 1841, in Prince Edward County, Virginia, to a slave mother and white planter father. Bruce was highly educated and by 1870, he was a rising star in Mississippi state politics.¹⁸ With the power of Reconstruction behind him and with the influx of other black political leaders, Bruce built a powerful political machine in Bolivar County, Mississippi. He simultaneously held the offices of sheriff, tax collector and superintendent of education. His local organizations were the gateway for getting into the United States Senate in 1875.¹⁹

Bruce's success went beyond the halls of Congress. He was known as one of the wealthiest black politicians during Reconstruction. He acquired a fortune in real estate and became a successful planter.²⁰ Throughout the Republican South, the number of black political leaders rose in the early 1870's. Their representation in Congress grew

from five to seven in 1873, and reached its peak at eight in 1875, representing six states.²¹

In 1875 Bruce began his term as the second black senator. In the Senate, Bruce was more vocal and outspoken than Revel had been. He advocated just treatment for blacks, Indians and Chinese immigrants. He fought for improvements along the Mississippi River and spoke on the importance of better race relations. In the latter part of his Senate career, he focused on ending fraud and corruption in the federal election system.²²

It is important to remember that many white abolitionists supported the struggle for black equality and integration in America. There are so many who are worthy of mentioning, but I would like to comment on two political leaders who furthered the black cause. Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens were praised by black leaders and freemen as “beacon lights of our race.”²³ These two men restored hope in blacks that white attitudes were changing toward their condition.

Charles Sumner was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 6, 1811. A Harvard Law School graduate, Sumner practiced and taught law. He was elected to the United States Senate in 1851 as a Free Soiler. He was reelected as a Republican in 1875, 1863, and 1869. Sumner served in the Senate until his death on April 24, 1851.²⁴ He was known as a radical Republican because of his antislavery crusade. He was the architect of the 1870 Civil Rights Act. Later, against opposition, the Act did pass, but in a weaker version. Sumner’s political career was identified by the theme, “justice to the color race.”²⁵ He was so outspoken on the Senate floor against slavery and against those southerners who fought to protect it, that he was attacked with a cane by Congressman

Preston Brooks of South Carolina and nearly beaten to death for such a speech. In South Carolina, Brooks was heralded as a hero for assaulting Sumner.²⁶

Charles Sumner, along with Thaddeus Stevens, believed that African Americans must be given equal rights, suffrage and representation in local and national government.

Stevens was born on April 4, 1792, in Danville, Pennsylvania. He graduated from Dartmouth College and moved to back to Pennsylvania where he studied law and then opened his own practice in Gettysburg. He was elected to Congress as a Whig in 1853, and again as a Republican in 1859. He served in this capacity until his death on August 11, 1868.

Stevens, like Sumner, was determined to rid America of the institution of slavery. He planned to use every available weapon necessary to destroy the southern slaveocracy.²⁷ Labeled a radical by all that promoted slavery, he felt that if the war could be won, then the bonds of slavery would be broken. In his opinion, if the South could be reduced to ashes and repopulated by freedmen to abolish this institution, this he was prepared to do.²⁸ Toward the end of Reconstruction, Stevens saw the declining concern for the plight of freedmen. He and Sumner insisted that freedmen could never secure their rights unless they could defend them at the ballot. Suffrage must be given to them.²⁹

There were many abolitionists who advocated for suffrage to the African American. These were people that found the ability to empathize with an opposed race. In many circles in the South, abolitionists were just as loathed as black people. It was much of their effort that built the foundation for the 1950's and 1960's Civil Rights movements and victories.

In every generation one can find greatness. Even in the turmoil of slavery there was a man in which eminence dwelled. It took his personal courage and the help of abolitionists to discover and uncover his greatness. Fredrick Douglas was this person. He became the voice of his brethren in bondage, and upon their liberation he became the black voice of the abolitionist movement. The date of his birth is questionable; he never knew his father. It was rumored that one of his masters was his father. He was separated from his mother as an infant and raised by his grandmother on a Maryland plantation.³⁰

Douglass's life as a slave became the most notable account of the workings of the institution of southern servitude. In his book *Narrative of an American Slave* Douglass vividly detailed the harsh realities of this legalized bondage. Once he escaped the bonds of slavery, he used his life to bring awareness to those left behind. In his life he advocated for universal suffrage, which in his eyes was a fundamental ideal of Government. To rule this out would brand the Negroes with the stigma of inferiority. Douglass further believed that the world wouldn't end at the abolishment of slavery; he saw this as the beginning.³¹

During the Civil War, Douglass said that we were fighting something better than the old Union. We were fighting for unity – unity of ideas, sentiments and institutions – in which there would be no regional separation, no racial division, but a solidarity of a nation.³² After the Emancipation Proclamation and many years of antislavery meetings and rallies, Douglass published his newspaper, *North Star*. When speaking about his newspaper, Douglass said, “I still see before me a life of toil and trials, but justice must be done, the truth must be told, I will not be silent.”³³

Douglass indeed did not keep silent. In the summer of 1863 he traveled to Washington to fight for the equality and protection of black soldiers in the Union Army. He played an important role in enlisting blacks in the Union Army and he always believed and fought for a united America. Fredrick Douglass's life is summed up best in his own words, "...From that time until now, I have been engaged in pleading the cause of my brethren – with what success, and with what devotion, I leave those acquainted with my labors to decide."³⁴

I turn now to an African American activist who held an unpopular view in post-Reconstruction. Booker T. Washington was born a slave on April 5, 1856, in Franklin County, Virginia. He was rejected by his white father and raised by his mother, a cook on the plantation. After the Civil War and gaining his freedom, Washington attended Hampton Institute. He taught at this institution after his graduation. At the age of 26, Washington was nominated to head the African American school called Tuskegee Institute.³⁵

At Tuskegee, Washington formulated his post-Reconstruction ideology. He began to express ideas that were contrary to contemporary black philosophy. He did not believe that equality was a right that should be automatically granted to African Americans. He was an advocate for education as long as it was used to teach a skill. Education was the vehicle through which African Americans could prove their value to the white race. Racial equality would be achieved through hard work and productivity. The whites would see that blacks could be productive members in society and accept them as their equals. Many black leaders disagreed with his ideology because they advocated for an egalitarian society. To his credit, Washington was not alone in this view; several

conservative blacks argued to aggressively seek equality too fast was a mistake.³⁶

Washington further discouraged blacks from seeking political involvement. His views on racial equality and political participation were challenged by Dr. W.E.B. DuBois.

Dr. W.E.B. DuBois was born on February 23, 1868, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. He was the first African American to receive a PhD in history from Harvard University. Dr. DuBois argued that Booker T. Washington's strategy, rather than freeing blacks from their oppression, served only to perpetuate it. With this critique, Dubois galvanized black intellectuals against Washington and split black leadership into two wings. This polarized the black leadership, with conservative supporters for Washington and radical intellectuals that opposed him.³⁷

Dr. Dubois continued to defend African Americans' desire for racial equality, political participation and integration. In 1905, he convened a group of African Americans in Niagara Falls, Canada, to examine how to improve the condition of black people in America. Out of this meeting came the call for all black people to protest for suffrage, civil liberty, economic opportunity, education, and justice in the courts. This came to be called the Niagara movement. This was a movement that fought against any discrimination and specifically the Jim Crow condition of the South.³⁸

The Niagara movement was successful for a while, but competing ideologies soon brought division in the group. Without a united consensus, the group couldn't remain a cohesive entity in the midst of all the challenges facing black America. Dr. Dubois went on to become one of the founding members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. He was the organization's director of publications and research and he was the editor of the NAACP's magazine, the

Crisis.³⁹ Dr. Dubois was a lecturer and scholar, and he wrote countless books that addressed the racial problems in America.

Ida B. Wells was part of the Niagara Movement and went on to become a founding member of the NAACP. She was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1862. Her parents died of yellow fever when she was fourteen, making her an orphan. Wells took on the responsibility of caring for her siblings while still managing to get an education. She graduated from Fisk University and settled in Memphis, Tennessee, where she became a school teacher. Ms. Wells was one of the first African Americans to refuse to give up their seat to a white person under the Jim Crow system. When she refused to give up her seat she was forced to leave the train. Wells brought suit against the train company, but to no avail. After losing her case, she wrote about her story in an article which sparked her career in journalism. Her journalistic career began when she contributed to African American and religious newspapers. Eventually she landed a job as the editor of the Baptist weekly in Memphis called *Free Speech and Headlight*.⁴⁰

The written word became Ida B. Wells's weapon of war. When three African American grocery store owners were lynched by their white competitors, she wrote a series of articles calling for the murderers to be punished. In the last article, she called for all the black residents to leave the city of Memphis in protest. In a matter of days, many made their exodus from Memphis. The Baptist weekly was vandalized, equipment destroyed, and Wells fled to New York. In New York, she became a writer for the *New York Age*. She continued to publish detailed articles condemning the practice of lynching.

Wells's activism took her on a lecture tour of England and the United States, which helped facilitate anti-lynching societies. She married and moved to Chicago where she continued writing in her husband's newspaper, *The Conservator*. She used this newspaper to bring awareness to lynching and discrimination against people of color.⁴¹ Wells is best known for her anti-lynching pamphlet, *A Red Record*. This pamphlet appeared in 1895, and it was the first statistical look at the practice of lynching. It prompted the House of Representatives to discuss the problem of lynching. Wells's activism paid off when Congressman George White introduced for the first time in Congress anti-lynching legislation.⁴²

Another progressive African American contributor is Carol Moseley-Braun. Ms. Braun was born on August 16, 1947, in Chicago, Illinois. She graduated from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and went on to receive a law degree from the University of Chicago in 1972. She worked as an assistant U.S. attorney before being elected to the Illinois House of Representatives in 1978. In the House, she fought for healthcare, better education and gun control. Braun made history in 1992 when she won an upset victory and became the first African American female Senator.⁴³

In the Senate Braun was named to the Judiciary Committee, being the first female to serve. She also fought against the patent for the Confederate insignia and filibustered to restore budget money for senior citizens and youth job training.⁴⁴ Ms. Braun continues to fight for the rights of minorities and women in general. She once again in 2004 displayed the courage needed to break down racial and gender barriers with her bid for the Democratic Party Presidential nomination.

Coming in to fill the long-vacant seat in the Senate was none other than the rising star out of the Midwest, Barack Obama. Mr. Obama was born on August 4, 1961, in Honolulu, Hawaii. He is the first male African American elected to the United States Senate since the end of Reconstruction. He earned a law degree from Harvard University after graduating from Columbia University. At Harvard, Obama became the first African American to serve as president of the *Harvard Law Review*.

Upon graduating from Harvard, Obama moved to Chicago where he was a community organizer in some of the city's poorest communities. This experience piqued his interest in politics, leading him to work as an attorney on civil rights issues. After teaching constitutional law at the University of Chicago, he successfully ran for the Illinois Senate. In 2004, he was again successful in his first attempt at the U.S. Senate.⁴⁵

Senator Obama, in his book *Dreams from My Father*, delivers a stunning account about his childhood and the experiences that shaped his life. He explains throughout his narrative the many factors that motivated him to choose this path. The central reason is cemented in the struggles of his race. He became aware of the fact that a new equilibrium between hope and fear was present in the black community. This sentiment was shared by most adults and youths alike. The overwhelming feeling was the idea that some, if not most, of our black boys were slipping from rescue.⁴⁶ Internally Obama felt that this problem was not isolated to a specific community, but that it was a pervasive problem. He knew therefore that he must work harder to change the hopelessness that existed in all communities.

Mr. Obama's worldview can be best summed up in his own words taken from his key note address given at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. The Senator eloquently

said "...There is not a liberal America or a conservative America – there is the United States of America. There is not a Black America and White America and Latino America and Asian America – there's the United States of America."⁴⁷

P.B.S. Pinchback was born – free – on May 10, 1837, in Macon, Georgia.

His mother was a former slave and his father was a white Mississippi planter. When his father died, he and his mother fled to Ohio and out of the grip of slavery. In the Civil War, Pinchback was a Union officer. After the war he moved to Louisiana where he became active in Reconstruction politics fighting for political rights for blacks.⁴⁸ During Reconstruction he grew to be one of the most powerful black political figures. He was so influential during this period that when he was refused a Pullman berth as he traveled, he sued the company and won.⁴⁹

In Louisiana, Pinchback served in the State Senate from 1866 to 1871; next, he was chosen to be the state's Lieutenant Governor. In 1872 Governor Henry C. Warmoth was impeached and forced to resign and Pinchback took his place, making him the first African American to hold the position of State Governor. After his short tenure in this office he was elected to the U.S. Senate, but the election was disputed and he was not allowed to take his seat. He would go on to advocate education and served on the state Board of Education.⁵⁰ Pinchback suffered the same fate as many other black leaders when the Southern Democrats regained control under the Johnson administration.

On January 13, 1990, Lawrence Douglas Wilder became the first elected African American Governor when he was sworn in as the Governor of the state of Virginia. He was born in 1931 in Richmond, Virginia. Sensing that their son had a divine purpose in life, they named him after the great black abolitionist and activist Frederick Douglass

and the notable poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar. When fighting in the Korean War, Wilder rescued his fellow soldiers and captured enemy troops, making him the recipient of a Bronze Star medal.

Wilder used his GI bill to study law and earned his degree in 1959 from Howard University. In 1969, he was the first African American elected to the Virginia State Senate where he served five terms. He made history again by being elected in 1985 as Virginia's first African American Lieutenant Governor. Since his distinguished political career, Wilder continues to practice law and lectures at the Center for Public Policy at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond.⁵¹

The Civil Rights movement was comprised of several generations of hard work, commitment, setback, many failures and monstrous victories. A. Philip Randolph embodied the character, drive and determination needed to move an oppressed and depressed community forward. He was born on April 15, 1889, in Crescent City, Florida.⁵² He was the father of the modern day Civil Rights movement. He was a unionist, and a civil rights leader who dedicated his life to fighting the injustices that the black community faced. He is best known for successfully organizing the all-black International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. He held the position of president of this organization for over 40 years. He was also the first African American to serve as International Vice-President of the AFL-CIO.

Randolph's activism didn't stop there. He was the first to introduce the idea of an all-black march on Capital Hill in July, 1941. He proposed to march to protest discrimination in the defense industry against African Americans. In a meeting with President Roosevelt, Randolph would not back down; he declared that the march would

go forward unless the President issued an executive order banning discrimination in the defense plants. Roosevelt issued the executive order on June 25, 1941, and the march was postponed. Randolph finally got his march in 1963. Imagine his thoughts as he stood at the podium, looking at the massive crowd that flocked to Washington.⁵³ He had the honor of introducing Dr. Martin Luther King and he gained the satisfaction of seeing his vision become a reality.

Mr. Randolph pushed in 1947 for desegregation in the military under the Truman administration, and Truman the following year ended desegregation in the military.⁵⁴ Randolph's work was critical to the 1960's Civil Rights movement. He was a leader, an advisor and at times a counselor to Dr. King and Bayard Rustin, and an inspiration in maintaining unity among various ideologies.

If A. Philip Randolph signified the heart of the modern Civil Rights movement, then Dr. King was the conscience of such a movement. King symbolized and crystallized the whole movement in four simple words, "I have a dream." He was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia, to prominent and socially respected parents. King, Sr. was a Baptist minister and community leader and his son followed closely in his footsteps. King, Jr. became the voice of the Civil Rights movement in the mid-1950 until his brutal assassination in 1968.⁵⁵

King is best known for the 1963 march on Washington, but this event is only a small part of his civil disobedience portrait. He was deeply influenced by the political and spiritual leader Mohandas Gandhi. So inspired was Dr. King that he took a trip to India just to walk where Gandhi had walked. The idea of overcoming oppression through the methodology of nonviolence appealed to King. This system of nonviolence was in direct

correlation to his personal belief that one should pray for his enemies and if an enemy assaulted you, turn your other cheek. Retaliation was not part of Dr. King's methodology.

Dr. King was able to attract and galvanize a large constituency through his method of nonviolence. He became the leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), promoting this strategy throughout the South with much success. He was an inspiration in organizing the Montgomery bus boycott; the march through Selma, Alabama; and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.⁵⁶ He was also an opponent of the American troop presence in Vietnam. King's views on the Vietnam problem caused him to be criticized by whites as well as blacks. During Dr. King's crusade for racial equality in all areas of life, he was criticized on a daily basis. While incarcerated in Birmingham, Alabama, King took the opportunity to respond to his critics. This came to be known as the famous Birmingham Letter. In this letter, King spelled out his philosophy of nonviolence. He went on to plead with those who lacked understanding of the hurts, pains and disappointments that black people face every day. King felt that this letter revealed why he became a civil rights leader.⁵⁷

I feel that I could write forever about my thoughts concerning Dr. King. His leadership, his devotion, his character and his willingness to be the sacrificial lamb for a community in desperate need of a modern day savior, causes me to look daily within and ask myself, what more can I do? King was to us as Gandhi was to India: a gift, though not celebrated as he walked among us; he now remains a vivid symbol of the high cost of true brotherhood.

From the teacher to the student and from the mentor to the mentee, we now look at the Rev. Jesse Jackson. He was born on October 8, 1941, in Greenville, South Carolina. After high school, Jackson attended the University of Illinois on a football scholarship. He later transferred to the Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina in Greensboro and received his B.A. in sociology. From there he moved to Chicago where he attended Chicago Theological Seminary and was ordained a Baptist minister in 1968.⁵⁸ Jackson became involved with the civil rights movement in 1965 when he traveled to Selma, Alabama to march alongside Dr. King. It was from this moment on that Jackson became the mentee of Dr. King. Jackson, under the leadership of Dr. King, joined the SCLC.⁵⁹

Upon his return to Chicago, Jackson helped to establish the Chicago branch of Operation Breadbasket, which was the economic arm of the SCLC. After leading the SCLC, he founded Operation PUSH: People Unite to Save Humanity. This organization advocated black self-help and reached out to a broad audience with its liberal views. Jackson's activism compelled him to create another organization, the National Rainbow Coalition. This organization fought for equal rights for African Americans, women, and homosexuals. He merged these two organizations into one, the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition.⁶⁰

Through these vehicles, Jackson became a voice of the millions. He rose to national fame when he ran for the Democratic Party's nomination in 1983 and again in 1987. He didn't win, but he came closer than any other African American in U.S. history. Jackson achieved international acclaim when he visited South Africa in 1979 in an effort to speak against the apartheid government. He would later travel to the Middle East campaigning

for a Palestinian state. Jackson received sharp criticism from the U.S. Government for intervening and negotiating the release of U.S. soldiers in Syria.⁶¹

Jesse Jackson represents a new era of black leadership. He possesses a universal worldview, one that is not strictly focused on black America and black Americans. He has built a multiethnic and multicultural support group that reflects a new method of activism. Jackson in the last few years has become a champion for Media Reform in America.

In Al Sharpton is the voice of a different kind of movement. Sharpton was born on October 3, 1954, in Brooklyn, New York. In 1971, as a senior in high school, he began his work in social activism by creating a national youth organization that publicized social and economic justice for blacks. Mr. Sharpton is not a stranger to controversy however. He has on several occasions, in response to his protest and methodology, run into resistance from civil authorities and the citizenry. Sharpton in 1991 formed the National Action Network, a civil rights organization for promoting progressive policies, such as affirmative action and reparations for African Americans in connection with the atrocities of Slavery.⁶²

Rev. Sharpton in 1990 sought unsuccessfully the nomination for the Democratic Party's candidacy for the mayor of New York City. He did not give up his political aspirations in the light of this defeat. Sharpton reached even farther when he sought the Democratic Party's nomination for the Presidency in 2004, but the end result was the same. Al Sharpton's career with its up's and down's gives hope to anyone who has the will and the drive to succeed. Sharpton is a survivor in every sense of the word. Many

believe his speech at the 2004 Democratic Convention to be one of the most truthful and inspiring discourses in modern history.

Dr. Cornel West represents the African American intellectual movement. Among black scholars, Dr. West holds the past in one hand and the future in the other. Though he is deep rooted in the black tradition, he has integrated into the diverse cultures of our day in mind, body and spirit. Dr. West was born on June 2, 1953, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which was known around 1910 as the Black Wall Street. After relocating in California, West was deeply influenced by the local Black Panther group. This experience impressed upon his heart the need for black political participation.⁶³

Dr. West completed his undergraduate work at Harvard University and earned his PhD from Yale University in Philosophy. He has become one of black America's most celebrated authors on the subject of race relations.⁶⁴ In his book entitled *Race Matters*, he poetically identifies the spiritual impoverishment of the African American community. In this book he also critical analyzes the problems surrounding black leadership in America. West says, in stark contrast to the powerful black leadership of Reconstruction and the Civil Right era, that we find that the black leader today is motivated inwardly; "they are too hungry for status to be bold, too eager for acceptance to be bold, too self-invested in advancement to be defiant."⁶⁵ They can no longer connect with the moral and painful dilemma of our day.

In my independent study this semester I set out to identify the major African American political leaders and what impact they had, and still have, in the United States from Reconstruction to the modern era; what were their political ideas, struggles, victories and failures. What a journey that has been for me! I find myself at times

encouraged by their efforts and their diligence in the face of harsh adversity. From Francis Cardozo to Cornel West, black Americans have a lot to celebrate. Along with victory however, there is always, in the broader picture, a step in the opposite direction.

We have seen this great country move forward in the area of education in post-Reconstruction, and we have seen it regress in the early stages of the twentieth century. It was the same in the political environment. African Americans entered the political arena during Reconstruction only to shortly see all of their rights taken away, a real return to slavery, only without the physical chains. Without a political voice or political participation the condition of black people went from bad to worse. Who would hear the cry of a depressed and oppressed community? Where were the abolitionists of the early twentieth century? New hope came in the form of A. Philip Randolph; he had such courage that his now silent voice still teaches us that perseverance brings victory to all that know her.

We are living in the midst of a black intellectual movement that causes the oppressed people to hope again. I have an obligation, or maybe it's more accurately called indebtedness, to the great men and women, the carriers of the activist torch in their day. I can hear Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells say, "Come on, you can do it; our blood is soaked in your victory... wake our people up!" The voices of the past continue to echo in the hearts of those striving to make a difference in the world today. I will end with the words of Dr. Cornel West, words with which I am in complete agreement. He says, "None of us alone can save the nation or world. But each of us can make a positive difference if we commit ourselves to do so."⁶⁶

Michael Eric Owens

Notes

¹ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 26.

² *Ibid.*, 27.

³ Cardozo, Francis L. *America's Reconstruction: People and Politics after the Civil War*, 2003, [online], available from http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/reconstruction/section2/section2_17.html. 29 April 2005.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, 375.

⁶ Cardozo, *America's Reconstruction: People and Politics after the Civil War*.

⁷ Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, 607.

⁸ Potter, Joan. *African American Firsts* (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp, 2002), 134.

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