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BACKGROUND

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Black-Jewish Relations: A Strategy Paper For AJC

by

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Black-Jewish relations in the U.S. have entered a new phase that requires an innovative strategic and substantive response. Ties between the two communities can no longer afford to ride the momentum of an historic alliance that lasted for decades through the 1970's. They must now face the political and social facts of the mid-1980's and speak to the issues and outreach needs of both groups.

Relations between Blacks and Jews will always carry a special aura because of the struggle the groups waged together against discrimination in the U.S. But at least four new considerations dictate that the alliance will have to be viewed in new ways that lead to a new strategy:

- Leadership cadres are changing in both communities. While an earlier generation of Black and Jewish leaders had regular contact with each other and worked together on historic issues and public struggles, this is less true of their colleagues who have entered the field in the past decade. While this younger echelon still occupies deputy or assistant level jobs in the Jewish community, they are now reaching key positions in Black political campaigns and communal organizations. Since Blacks are demographically a substantially younger community than Jews, their emerging leaders reach power sooner. They care deeply not only about the traditional civil rights agenda but also about political influence and foreign policy on questions like South Africa. They need to be approached not in terms of a history they did not experience but on the level of substantive issue discussions.
- The issue concerns of both communities are shifting. The equal opportunity struggles of the past still carry importance in each group, but a new agenda is also emerging. Blacks now want not only social progress but their own empowerment as an independent political force that has influence on the full range of domestic and international challenges facing the country. Jews retain a direct concern with foreign policy issues such as Israel and Soviet Jewry but have also placed renewed emphasis on a national agenda that includes church-state separation, sexual equality, alliance building and



immigration. Both groups, from differing perspectives, view affirmative action as a key question. Realistic Black-Jewish strategies must speak directly to these issues of current concern.

- Communal leadership is taking new forms among both groups. The established public interest and communal agencies remain important centers of power. But the political process has recently produced a new leadership of well-identified Black and Jewish public officials and candidates. As little as a decade ago, Stephen Isaacs, in Jews and American Politics, wrote that Jews feared because of anti-Semitism to run for office. They are now public officials in numbers substantially disproportionate to their share of the population. Moreover, many of them have not given up their communal identity to achieve success; some use it as part of their popular appeal. These same points apply to Black officeholders on both a national and local level. They have special credibility because their community has endorsed them with their votes. Black-Jewish strategies should stress contact with this rising group of leaders.
- Bigotry has reemerged as a salient concern of each community. Anti-Semitism in the Presidential primary campaign has given new emphasis to this issue among Jews. Defense activities are becoming more vigorous, and the Jewish research agenda in the next year will likely be heavily influenced by concerns about extremism. Blacks consider racism the chief reason for resistance to their emergence as a powerful independent political force. Moreover, hard line elements have emerged in each community that identify members of the other as key elements of opposition to them. A realistic strategy will both have to recognize the legitimacy of concern with bigotry in each group and reach out to coalitionally-oriented leaders who genuinely represent important segments of their constituency.

Any new initiative in Black-Jewish relations, in short, will have to identify leaders emerging into important new positions, speak to the salient issue priorities of both groups, relate to new organizational structures and take account of resurgent concern with racism and anti-Semitism. Programs must be sensitive to both the agendas they address and the participants they involve. They must be aware of the history of Black-Jewish contact, but focus on the current needs and aspirations of each community.

To achieve these goals, AJC in the next year should place priority on the following specific programs:

1. Action with Black and Jewish Officeholders:

Jewish and Black public officials have taken a significant interest in communal relations. In many cases, broad coalitional support is important to their electoral chances or to prospects for legislation they aim to pass. As community leaders, however, politicians have often played a reactive role, responding to crises that arise or problems that need to be addressed. In the current situation of Black-Jewish relations, they should increasingly become proactive role

models of productive intergroup cooperation. AJC can facilitate this process by several activities. We should maintain regular contact with Black and Jewish political leaders and stimulate action on matters of mutual concern. We might publish a regular newsletter or fact sheet aimed at this group. We could promote the formulation of a common Black-Jewish legislative agenda and generate support and publicity for it. At strategic moments, AJC could also encourage and distribute important joint statements by key leaders. Together with other groups, we could also provide the auspices for announcements or discussions of new initiatives. AJC should also do analyses of Black and Jewish voting patterns and legislative performance by officials of each group to explore mutually supportive political behaviors. It is important that these activities be carried out at the state and local as well as the national level and that they involve AJC chapters as well as the national office.

2. Exploration of the Psychological Roots of Black-Jewish Relations:

A special quality inheres in relations between Blacks and Jews that differentiates contacts between the two communities from other intergroup activities. Each group is important to the other's sense of identity and place in American society. Each therefore projects onto the other its ideas and conceptions about self and community. While these factors are hidden in meetings or one-to-one contacts they are none the less real and have a powerful impact. They need careful study, evaluation and integration into planning and training programs. AJC, through its ethnotherapy project, has developed a tool capable of penetrating the surface of Black-Jewish relations and yielding insights at a deeper level of self-identity and projection. This process is especially important in understanding relations among young Jews and Blacks now coming into contact with each other. AJC in the next year should undertake a major program utilizing ethnotherapy techniques to explore the special nature of the Black-Jewish encounter.

3. Peer Dialogues:

Substantive discussions between Blacks and Jews should not take place only at the level of formal agencies or political leadership. Groups should be brought together representing common elements of the two communities that have some special significance for each other. Black and Jewish women, for example, represent the most socially and economically mobile segments of their communities and so have natural mutual interests that could lead to productive dialogue. A priority should be placed on setting up meetings of young and emerging Black and Jewish leaders. People in professions and business may form another logical peer group, though care must be taken to assure that expectations are not aroused that would see this effort as only some new job-development unit. In all of these meetings, the focus should be not only on enhancing mutual understanding but also on concrete

discussion of emerging issues that will lead to positive joint action by these common interest groups. These sessions should be encouraged on both the national and local levels.

4. Issue Development:

Some issues important to Jews and Blacks can be immediately recognized and discussed in terms of joint action strategies. These include human and civil rights, family support, urban revitalization, education, employment and work-sharing. Others need some development. In the foreign policy area, Israel and the Middle East will be an increasingly important issue as polls show a slippage in support for Israel among younger Blacks. A positive strategy of explaining our point of view will be needed. Blacks will put apartheid in South Africa on the table since they see the actions of major Jewish agencies on this issue as inadequate. In national affairs, we will have to continue our project to define and generate support for a middle-ground position on affirmative action. This will be a major challenge since each community has strong and opposite positions on racial quotas. Little fruitful dialogue has taken on this issue and AJC's consensus effort remains to be tested. Finally, in any issue dialogue, the topics of racism and anti-Semitism will have to receive prominent attention.

5. The Media:

Mainstream media have paid more attention to crises than to positive Black-Jewish interaction. Workshops with key media leaders on the impact of their reportage and analyses on pluralistic values are needed. An additional significant problem has arisen in the internal community press of both groups. Black and Jewish newspapers have often played confrontational and polarizing roles. It is difficult to deal with this problem by meeting with editors and reporters since they often see these sessions as hostile, but we should still encourage skillfully run editorial meetings to present our point of view. It might also be useful to adapt a technique used successfully in other dialogues of developing agreements for Jews to respond to statements problematical to Blacks in the Jewish press and Blacks to respond to remarks of concern to Jews in Black papers.

These proposals aim to speak to the current moment in Black-Jewish relations. They identify needs and action strategies that will encourage ongoing and active coalitional efforts. If adopted, they could revitalize an old alliance on the basis of present issues.

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