

## State of the Black Union: Tavis assembles Black luminaries in L.A. for 10th Annual gathering

Written by Kam Williams

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The 10th Annual State of the Black Union, hosted by Tavis Smiley, convened in Los Angeles on Saturday, Feb. 28, again bringing many of the best and brightest African American thinkers together to air their concerns for the community during an all-day affair aired live on the C-Span Network. The event was divided into two different panels consisting of leading luminaries from all walks of life.

The morning session was moderated by N.J. Attorney Raymond Brown, Jr., and featured the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr., U.S. Rep. Maxine Waters, Harvard Law Professors Charles Ogletree and Stephanie Robinson, motivational speaker Les Brown, Brown University Professor Tricia Rose, former talk show host Iyanla Vanzant, former N.J. Attorney General Peter Harvey, Washington Post finance journalist Michelle Singletary, Georgetown Professor Michael Eric Dyson, and Urban League President Marc Morial.

Highlights from the first half of the program included Dyson's spirited indictment of America as perhaps "post-racial" but not yet "post-racist," Brown's assertion that "Any lawyer who is not a social engineer is a parasite," Waters' criticizing the event's sponsor Wells Fargo for being among the corporate vultures taking advantage of the poor via predatory lending, and Jackson's suggestion that college students ought to have access to TARP loans at the same 0% interest rate available to banks.

By far, the most compelling person sitting in the overstuffed beige armchairs on the stage had to be Vanzant, who shared the intimate details of how she recently came to lose her home. The

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fall from grace was understandably humiliating for the attorney-turned-talk show host and author of 13 books, five of which have landed on the New York Times best-seller list.

Her host of woes include the death of a daughter, having to take custody of her granddaughter and an inability to get health insurance due to a pre-existing condition. "I can't get sick," she told the shocked audience," after admitting to feeling ashamed and guilty about her plight.

The standout of the afternoon session, hosted by Tavis himself, was newly-named Republican Party Chairman Michael Steele, if only because his right-wing agenda and subdued speaking style sharply contrasted with the passion and progressive ideas of public intellectuals Cornel West and Julianne Malveaux, L.A. Sentinel publisher Danny Bakewell, Sr., Psychologist Na'im Akbar, Environmentalist Van Jones, California State Assembly Speaker Karen Bass, Obama youth organizer Erica Williams, African-American Images founder Jawanza Kunjufu and L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa.

Steele seems to have served himself well by attending, despite the cool reception he received. For not only did he get a chance to make his Republican Party recruitment sales pitch, but he even seemed to be taking mental notes, such as when he nodded in agreement with Dr. West's assessment that President Obama won the election because the "Southern Strategy" of demonizing Blacks no longer worked.

Kudos to Tavis Smiley for successfully juggling so many celebrity egos to produce another very worthwhile day's worth of informative and thought-provoking conversation designed to inspire impressionable young minds to aspire to be the very best.

To see an excerpt from the State of the Black Union featuring Tavis Smiley and Michael Steele, visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTDEXvj56XQ>