Marion Barry has been at the forefront of American race and politics for four decades. The latest firestorm for Washington, D.C.'s "Mayor for Life" is his campaign victory party comment that Asian business owners in his ward "ought to go." At a political celebration the venerable Barry caused widespread condemnation among the District of Columbia Democratic Party faithful when he said: "We've got to do something about these Asians coming in and opening up businesses and dirty shops. ... They ought to go. But we need African-American businesspeople to be able to take their places."

The question is one of relevancy; whether Barry has any clout now that the African Americans Mayor Barry made rich have left town. Barry came to national prominence as the first civil-rights activist to become chief executive of a major American city. At the end of the 1960s, urban political campaigns took over from civil rights protests and over the next 30 years, voters elected African-American mayors in more than 300 cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Birmingham, Dallas and Washington, D.C.

Barry became famous as mayor of the nation's capital. Currently he serves as a member of the D.C. Council, representing the District's Ward 8, which is 93.5 percent Black and 0.4 percent Asian. Barry served as the second elected mayor of the District of Columbia from 1979 to 1991, and again as the fourth mayor from 1995 to 1999. In addition to his current term, Barry also served two other tenures on the D.C. Council, as an at-large member from 1975–79, and as Ward 8 representative from 1992–95.

After winning the Democratic primary for his Ward 8 council seat with 73 percent of the vote, Barry told supporters "We've got to do something about these Asians." He posted photos of Asian-owned stores with Plexiglas barriers and indicated that these businesses "lowered standards" in his constituents' communities.

Barry and Washington, D.C. are symbolic of a major American social problem. Tensions have existed between urban Blacks and Asian merchants since the 1992 Los Angeles riots. In this latest spat between Blacks and Asians, Councilmember Barry said that he was referring to merchants "who don't sell healthy food and don't engage with the community or hire local residents." "We need businesspeople that'll be a part of the community, not exploit the community" Barry said. He claimed that some Asian-owned convenience stores and restaurants don't "respect" the Ward 8 residents. "These are the only stores in the immediate neighborhood. It is to these less-than-stellar Asian-American businessmen … that my remarks were directed" Barry said. He made note that during his time as mayor, he created the city's Office of Asian-Pacific Islander Affairs and established a sister-city relationship with Beijing.

Is Barry an icon for the Black business and professional class, or are they guilty of exploiting the city too? Where Barry's life-long efforts for naught? There is little question that the former mayor is directly responsible for the success of many affluent African Americans. He was the catalyst for the expansion of the city's Black middle-class. He insisted that professional

positions in the District government be filled by minorities; and, he spearheaded the movement to require that all contracts considered by the D.C. government for services, supplies and development include a mandatory 35 percent participation for minority-owned businesses. Barry's support in awarding the District's cable franchise led to BET founder Robert Johnson becoming one of America's first Black billionaires.

These days, Black wealth and influence are on the decline in D.C. Most African Americans of means have left town. "Chocolate City" is just under 50 percent Black. In the 2010 Census, the city was 34.8 percent white. Don't expect that the Blacks Barry made wealthy to help him rid the city of Asian merchants. The Blacks Barry made wealthy have left D.C., taken their tax bases, and valuable property payments, to Prince Georges County, Md., gaining prominence as the most affluent majority-Black county in America.

William Reed is head of the Business Exchange Network and available for speaking/seminar projects via the Bailey Group.org