

At the precipice of change: The budget

Written by Ron Walters, NNPA Columnist
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With lightening speed, President Barack Obama has moved from stimulus package to a home foreclosure package, to working on the financial bailout package, and now to the budget.

In his recent speech to Congress he said something that most people who know anything about government agree with: the budget is not only about spending dollars and cents, it is a statement of priorities and therefore, the most important policy document that reveals the direction he is taking the country.

The other packages were put together to handle the crises that President Obama was handed. But most close observers I have read mark his recently rolled-out federal budget as the most fundamental shift in priorities since Ronald Reagan.

His \$3.6 trillion Budget buttresses the direction of spending in the other three packages (the Financial bail out yet to be presented) and it shows a \$1.7 trillion deficit for next year, most of which he inherited from the Bush administration.

This budget, however, contains a new emphasis in spending for health, education, energy and the environment and a push for job creation. That budget is a statement about the change that the American people voted for, the change they need.

The press always asks, when it comes to social expenditures, a question seldom asked for military spending, for the rich, or for any other of the pet projects of presidents such as the Iraq War – “how will you pay for it?” Obama will pay for his budget by letting the tax cuts given to the top 1 percent of earners expire in 2010, thus raising their taxes after he believes the economy will have recovered. He will also pay for it by cutting the budget of programs that don't work or are not needed, like some weapon systems.

Passing this budget will not be easy because of something I have said before about his election. President Obama was elected by a coalition that was 60 percent white and 40 percent non-white, a coalition that does not reflect the power structure of this country.

The power structure in neither the House nor the Senate reflects Obama's winning coalition. The power of the lobbyists arrayed against spending proposals for human needs does not reflect Obama's winning coalition. The power of the private sector does not reflect Obama's winning coalition where foundations, corporations and civic institutions weigh-in on policy battles.

What this means is that we may be able to count on the 43 percent of Whites who voted for Obama. But unless the 40 percent of non-whites get busy, where the need for government-sponsored human services is most manifested, the President's budget is likely to come out of the political process looking something like the 55 percent of Whites who voted for John McCain and who dominate the major political, economic and social institutions of the country.

How can the overhand of conservative power be confronted? For those of you who watched Tavis Smiley's State of the Black Union on C-Span television recently, you could not escape the

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speakers' dominant theme of holding the government accountable. The missing element was how this was to be done and the clear implication was it could be done by individual citizens taking responsibility.

Let me depart from that answer and suggest instead that the most powerful method of achieving accountability is through the organized power of individuals.

The Congressional Black Caucus went to meet with President Obama recently, but I have not seen anything about the result of that meeting. Some organizations such as Delta Sigma Theta came to Washington, DC for their Annual Delta Days on Capitol Hill to talk to members of Congress and seek accountability and the National Urban League is in intimate touch with the administration about job training and other urgent priorities.

But where do you come in? Citizen task forces need to be created in every city to track the flow of financial resources into the states and especially into their communities. These task forces need to participate in the decisions about how those resources are to be used.

They must do the research, engage elected officials, attend the meetings, and show out if necessary, to bring attention to urgent community needs. "Getting busy" this way should get the change we need.

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