

The meaning of the jobs meeting

Written by Julianne Malveaux, NNPA Columnist
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(NNPA) - It was good to see the photo of NAACP President Ben Jealous and National Urban League President Marc Morial leave the White House, snow hip deep, after they met with President Barack Obama to talk about the ways the unemployment crisis is affecting African Americans.

It was unfortunate that Dr. Dorothy I. Height, who at 97 doesn't let much stop her, wasn't able to make the meeting because of the weather. It was puzzling to see the National Action Network's Rev. Al Sharpton included in the meeting, as I'm not sure that the NAN has done work on employment and unemployment, though Sharpton has been an effective spokesman on race matters.

Still, the NAN is not an organization of the stature of the NAACP or Urban League. If another leader might have been included, it should have been the Rev. Jesse Jackson, leader of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, or a labor leader like Bill Lucy of AFSCME and the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. And it is unfortunate that Dr. Height could not send an NCNW representative so that African American women would be represented in the conversation.

I quibble. I'm glad the meeting took place.

After indicating that he is the President of "all" Americans, I wondered whether President Obama would ever meet with African-American leaders. I do hope they shared the devastating impact unemployment has had on the African American community. Our unemployment rate is not 9.7 percent, as the overall rate is. It is not the 16.7 percent that is officially reported. According to my own calculations, the Black unemployment rate is at least 28.7 percent. Would such a rate be acceptable if "all" Americans were experiencing it?

The visual of Black leaders leaving the White House reminded me of the tortured history of African Americans with White House leaders. In the nineteenth century, only two African Americans visited the white House in a non-service capacity. President Lincoln signed Sojourner Truth's autograph book when she visited the White House, and President Roosevelt Hayes invited Frederick Douglass to the White House for a conversation.

President Theodore Roosevelt had Booker T. Washington as a dinner guest on October 16, 1901. This is the first time that an African American had dinner in the White House, and it was the last time, during Roosevelt's term, that an African American was invited to dinner. Booker T. had the opportunity, on other occasions, to visit the White House, and several African American leaders were invited to receptions, but it was not until the latter part of the twentieth century that African Americans were regular dinner guests at the White House. Imagine the irony, then, that now an African-American woman, Desiree Rodgers, is the gatekeeper who draws up lists of White House guests.

President Woodrow Wilson, for all his academic acumen, was extremely hostile to African American people. History does not record a regular presence of African-Americans until the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, was an outspoken opponent of racism. She invited Marian Anderson to entertain at the White House, and was at least partly responsible for her historic concert at Constitution Hall.

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President Roosevelt also had a “kitchen cabinet” of African American advisors that included NAACP President Walter White, economist Robert Weaver (the first African American to serve on a Presidential cabinet, as Secretary of HUD under President Lyndon B. Johnson), and Mary McLeod Bethune, who was Roosevelt’s special advisor on Minority Affairs.

One might think that with an African American man in the White House, there is no need for African American leaders to clamor for regular attention from this President. But African American leaders should not take President Obama for granted and assume that, because of his race, he will pay special attention to Black issues. He should not. Instead, African American leaders must be as insistent with this President as they would with any other. And indeed, they must look back to the history of the kitchen cabinet to develop a relationship with President Obama that provides him with regular input about African American issues, just as he is gaining information about labor issues, women’s issues, gay and lesbian issues, Latino issues, and other issues. All of these groups, I believe, have had meetings with our President. Why not African Americans?

Hopefully, last week’s meeting will be the first of many. And, hopefully, beyond meetings, work must be done both to lower the unemployment rate and close the black/white unemployment gap.

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