

Jackson and Sharpton say their activist roles will not change

Written by Hazel Trice Edney, NNPA Editor-in-Chief
Tuesday, 18 November 2008 15:14



WASHINGTON (NNPA) – The Revs. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, viewed as perhaps the highest profiled civil rights leaders in the nation, both say their roles will not change as America beholds its first Black president.

“The issues haven’t gone away,” said Sharpton. “Barack Obama said this is the beginning of change. This is not change itself. It’s almost insulting to act like Blacks should now shut up just because we have a Black president.”

In an interview, Sharpton was responding to widely held perceptions and debates by pundits and TV personalities that President-elect Barack Obama will now become America’s new “Black Leader.”

Both Jackson and Sharpton, having been presidential candidates themselves, said in interviews that while they are celebrating the historic election, it is ridiculous to think that a sitting president could single-handedly eliminate the voluminous problems in the Black community.

Illustrating, Jackson compared the anticipation of the Obama presidency to another big day in Black history.

“It’s the biggest day since December 31, 1862,” when slaves awaited the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation.



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“After 246 years of slavery, we hoped for an Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln signed the order the next day, but still they had to wait until the 13th Amendment in 1865 to get free.”

Jackson explained: “This is the beginning of a struggle. What we want now is we want the playing field even. We want civil rights laws enforced and funded for all Americans. Just to even the playing field would be a massive step toward a more perfect union.”

Still pride in and affinity for the nation’s first Black president and the magnanimous stride that he represents will cause traditional rights leaders to reserve judgment and not act hastily toward him.

“Sure we will be patient with and sensitive to President Barack because he is our candidate and we are utterly fascinated with him,” Jackson said. “There’s no question about that. But, we must continue our quest to address the issues of pain and crisis.”

Jackson says Obama will make their jobs much easier.

“When you have a good president who is positive, you tend to get remedy,” he said. “When you have a guy like Bush, who is hostile, you tend to get rejection.”

Widely seen on national television with tears streaking his face at the Chicago victory celebration, Jackson told what he was thinking at that moment:

“I looked at Barack standing there in all of the majesty...I saw children in Kenya and Haiti and Europe all riding on his every word. It was a joy. But, then the journey to get us there was what really broke me down,” he said.

He reflected on civil rights leaders and activists who were killed, beaten and bitten by dogs.

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“After all these struggles, here was this guy standing there in all of his majesty giving leadership to the world,” he said. “It was overwhelming to me and I just wished Medgar Evers or Dr. King could have been there just for a minute to see the results of their work. They were redeemed that night. The marchers and the martyrs and the murdered - they were redeemed that night.”

Among those who were there among the civil rights protestors of the 60s was the Rev. Joseph Lowery who co-founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference alongside Dr. King. An avid Obama supporter throughout the entire campaign, Lowery said after the election that civil rights leaders must now stay the course:

“We must continue to speak truth to power no matter what color power is,” he said.