

NAACP's Ben Jealous issues 'New Call for a New Century'

Written by Hazel Trice Edney, NNPA Editor-in-Chief
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(NNPA) - In a grand centennial meeting that drew thousands to New York City – the founding place of the NAACP, President and CEO Benjamin Todd Jealous proclaimed that the next move of the civil rights organization against new “layers of racism” will be to strengthen its inner ranks by becoming a majority through coalitions.

“We will change. Not for the sake of change itself, but for the sake of growth,” Jealous said in prepared remarks to be rendered at the convention Monday evening. “We must be able to march forth as a majority and that means we have to be about organizing coalitions, maximizing our power to build bridges of understanding and mobilizing our entire rainbow of champions for social change.”

Jealous was specific about his strategic vision.

“We will invest in research to ensure that what is obvious to us cannot be questioned by any. We will train and retrain with a focus on organizing even better and smarter than we are already. We will forge new coalitions...big, broad, effective strange-bedfellow coalitions. We will build campaigns that capture the imaginations of generations. We will embrace technology,” he said. “But we can't do this work alone. So today, we issue a new call for a new century.”

That call comes in what is historically among the most exciting years for African Americans. Jealous reflected on the election of President Barack Obama as the nation's first Black president, but also underscored how his election spotlights the vestiges of racism that still prevail.

“January 20, 2009, was a day when hopes were fulfilled, when dreams came true, when ancestors sacrifices were remembered with tears of joy; in short, it was a day when the dream of this country seemed within reach of every family,” said Jealous, 36, the youngest president to lead the civil rights organization. “And then January 21st came, like every day thereafter, and families woke up to a new morning and were facing the same questions: Why can't Dad find a job? Why does Mom have to work so many jobs just to make ends meet? Why is my family's dream being foreclosed on? Why are our schools an embarrassment to everything this country stands for? Why are so many of our children... and mothers... and fathers dying of AIDS?”

He continued, “Tonight, in this city and in so many others across this land, too many families, in

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too many neighborhoods will conclude it's just too dangerous to sleep anywhere but on the floor...under the window sill and out of the way of random gunfire. We woke up on January 21 to the fact that we have one Black man in the White House, but we have one million in prison," he said. "And so...we can't wait for someday, somehow - we need real change right here, right now."

Rights Leader; NAACP Chairman Julian Bond was the Spingarn recipient this year.

It was February 12, 1909, 100 years after the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, that a racially diverse coalition met in an apartment in lower Manhattan "to issue an historic call to action," Jealous recounted the founding of the NAACP.

That historic call to action read in part: "Hence we call upon all the believers in democracy to join in a national conference for the discussion of present evils, the voicing of protests and the renewal of the struggle for civil and political liberty."

He described, "They were Black and White, Christian and Jew, men and women. They shared a commitment to fulfilling the promise of equality that was guaranteed by the Emancipation Proclamation, the 13th amendment, 14th amendment and the 15th amendment of the Constitution. A few months later, a few hundred more - many of them leaders of the Black church - joined with them at our first convention, where they vowed to take the campaign back to the field."

That field now consists of about a half million members across the nation and millions more who benefit from the NAACP's battles.

Despite those evils that remain, Jealous cited several battles that are close to being won.

"Before we meet again, we will deliver the first woman of color to a seat on the Supreme Court. We will pass major reforms in states like California and North Carolina. We will outlaw racial profiling everywhere. And in Savannah, Georgia, where our local volunteers and national staff have delivered more than 65,000 signatures calling for the DA to reopen the case, the tide is turning every day - we will save Troy Davis' life and get the real killer off the streets."

The death penalty case of Troy Davis –involving a list of witnesses who have recanted their original testimonies against him – has been hard-fought by the NAACP under Jealous' tenure. It appears to be making headway as the U. S. Supreme Court recently put off until September a decision on whether to grant Davis a new trial.

Still, thousands more Black males imprisoned across the U. S. have cases of questionable justice. Jealous has cited institutional racism within the criminal justice system as the next layer of racism that has come after "presumed inferiority".

He explained, "They said we just weren't good enough to be the quarterback, the coach or the CEO. But over the past 40 years, we've blown that fallacy out of the water - Oprah, General Powell, Tony Dungy and Mike Tomlin, Tiger Woods, Ken Chennault, Barack Obama, Dorothy

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Height, and Venus and Serena Williams.

"But racism is like an onion - once you peel back one layer, there's another layer underneath. Peel back the layer of presumed inferiority and you find that today the primary justification for racism is presumed criminality," he said. "The fact of the matter is that this layer is both more permeable and more volatile. If I see you as inferior, I will probably never get past it, but I might be inclined to treat you in a way that is paternalistic and even give you a job in my house. If I see you as a criminal, once you've been vetted, it's no longer a concern, but until that point you are a threat, you ain't coming in and there's nothing I won't do to protect my family from you. And so, the places of familiarity become this fear, becomes an overwhelming and ubiquitous justification for racism."

Because of the new layers that are increasingly obscure, yet just as damaging to America's progress, the NAACP is also clarifying its focus, Jealous said. He encouraged the audience to broaden its vision as well.

"Dream big and work with us to get smart on crime...to end racial profiling, and the draconian drug laws and unequal sentencing. Dream big. Help us ensure equal access to the green jobs and new technologies of the digital age. Dream big. Stand with us for the confirmation of Sonia Sotomayor. Dream big and work with us to pass the Employee for Choice Act. Dream big, and insist with us that the schools in our neighborhoods and the teachers who serve our children are the best in the world.

Dream big, and expel the army of predatory lenders who have invaded our communities. Dream big, and be a better parent, a better father, a better student, a better citizen."

He concluded with a message of hope: "We are winning...And when we win - and we always win in the end - we win really, really big."