Joint Statement of Purpose

by

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Announcing the CALL for a Summit Conference

of National Black Organizations on the Black Family

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The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League have parallel histories based on a common mission: the attainment of full equality for black Americans. In continuing pursuit of this historical as well as contemporary goal, both organizations will sponsor jointly a Summit Conference of National Organizations on the Black Family from May 3 to 5 at Fisk University in Nashville, Tenn.

Founded less than a year apart in New York City three-quarters of a century ago, the NAACP and the NUL have proud histories of mutual respect and cooperation. It is only therefore natural that they are now pooling their resources once more to meet a grave challenge that threatens not only the survival of black people but also the social fabric of the nation as well.
The NAACP and the NUL were born in a period pregnant with concern for the social and economic plight of blacks. So it was no coincidence that both organizations had visionary blacks and whites working through these new vehicles of change to achieve social and civil rights advances for oppressed citizens. Two of these founders of the NAACP were Mary White Ovington, a white New York City social worker who had done extensive studies of blacks in the urban environment, and Dr. William E. B. Du Bois, the great scholar and visionary leader who authored the revolutionary work, The Philadelphia Negro. This was a model study on the black community.

Similarly charting the NUL's early course were Ruth Standish Baldwin, a white liberal who was chairman of the National League for the Protection of Colored Women and deeply committed to the social upliftment of blacks. Working closely with her in the leadership of this mission was George Edmund Haynes, a sociologist at Fisk University. Like Du Bois, Haynes was a graduate of Fisk University.

Describing these early cooperative efforts, Ovington wrote:

Most fortunately, about six months after we began, the Urban League was formed. George Haynes, sociologist from Fisk University, came into our office one morning with plans to form a national organization in the fields of employment and of philanthropy. Elizabeth Walton and Hollingsworth Wood were back of him. Some of us gasped at having so large a field of "advancement" taken out of our program, but nothing could have been more fortunate. We could not have raised money for "philanthropy" as successfully as an organization with a less militant program, and securing employment is a business in it itself. So the two national organizations divided the field, working together from time to time as action demanded.

So it is now that the NAACP and the NUL are again working together to develop strategies for preserving the traditional strengths of the black family. Both organizations are pooling
their resources to ensure the survival of the black family. To achieve this goal, they are stressing the traditional strengths as well as values and resources that have been used to improve the lives of black people. They are also examining more closely the societal pressures that are threatening the continued progress of black people.

The challenge is so enormous and so urgent that both organizations are inviting other black membership organizations, including churches and fraternal groups, to participate in developing appropriate strategies. These strategies will include action programs and interorganizational networks and linages for implementing the results of the conference.

The points of concern we identify and the strategies we develop will permit each cooperating organization to execute its own plan for fulfillment of the summit's goals.

Scope of the Challenge

A crisis confronts the black family that derives from the historical nature of racism in America. Forcefully uprooted from their native African land, black people were brought to America as slaves to work on southern plantations and in other areas demanding their physical strength.

In Africa, black people had well-established family structures that enabled them to cope with their native societies. Transplanted to the United States, they were forced to discard their own traditions and identities and to adapt to new customs and cultures. They adopted customs and social mores, including Western family structures.
American slavery was a very "peculiar institution," however, in that, unlike forced servitude in other epochs and nations, blacks in bondage in this country were prevented from maintaining permanent family structures. Forcibly torn apart at the whims of slave owners, slave families were more the exception than the rule. Individuals, therefore, hardly knew what it was like to be loved or cared for by their parents or other family members for any extended period. Insecurity as well as a faceless identity thus became imbedded in the foundations of whatever black family structure existed in slavery.

Following emancipation, black families were confronted with other yet equally devastating pressures. The basic pressure resulted from unbridled racism which manifested itself in segregation and continuing brutal economic exploitation. Compounded with urban and other social pressures, these forces continued to function in a centrifugal manner, shattering the black family unit.

These were some of the conditions that led to the founding of the NAACP in 1909 and the Urban League in 1910. These conditions were exacerbated in subsequent years by dramatic demographic and sociological changes that affected the nation as a whole. So, for example, in that period, 82 percent of black Americans lived in the rural South compared to 15 percent today.

During that time, racial demographic and sociological realities have changed profoundly. Just looking at the past 24 years we see that:
-- Black female-headed households have a median income of less than a third of the income of all American families.

-- About one out of every five (41 percent) female-head of households of a National Urban League sample were employed, while nearly three out of five were not.

-- In 1970, 66 percent of black families were married couples and about 31 percent were headed by females with no husband present. By 1980, the percentages of black married couple families had decreased to 54 percent and female headed families with no husband present had increased to 42 percent.

-- In 1980 about one out of every five (22 percent) black female household heads interviewed in the National Urban League's Black Pulse survey had never been married while over two out of five (43 percent) were either separated (23 percent) or divorced (20 percent).

-- In 1983, 47 percent of black households with children were headed by women, compared to 21 percent in 1960 and 8 percent in 1950. The 1980 percentage was more than three times that of white households.

-- In 1979, the majority of black children births were from single women.

-- Well over half (59 percent) of the Urban League's sample of female households heads had not completed high school in 1980, a figure which helps explain some of the difficulties they had experienced in the job market and helps account for their relative poverty.

The problems are enormous. Their roots are extensive and deeply imbedded in the fabric of systemic racism which permeates American society. Black institutions do have an obligation to assume this challenge and examine these underlying problems in a manner that is not possible by less intrinsically involved bodies.
In the end, though, the problem threatening black family structure is an American one which requires the total involvement of all segments of society for the development of solutions.

The Summit Conference of National Black Organizations on the Black Family has as its ultimate goal the involvement of the society as a whole in combatting the grave crisis afflicting a large segment of the population which is identifiably black.

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