Op-Ed article for the Baltimore Sun
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A very thoughtful editorial in The Evening Sun of February 26 ("What the NAACP should be doing") suggested some approaches the NAACP might consider to deal with "the national unfinished agenda on civil rights, a critical challenge for the 1990s."

I agree that the agenda is unfinished. And the challenge is critical. But while I found your suggestions to be provocative, I also found the bases on which they were apparently made, to be somewhat misinformed.

At the outset, let me clear up any misapprehensions about my announced intention to retire next April. Under the terms of the contract, I owe them a full year's work. During that time, I do not propose to leave the nation's civil rights agenda "waiting in the wings," as your editorial suggested it would have to be.

As I said at my recent press conference, I have no intention of conducting my last year in office as a lame-duck executive. The board has the job of finding my successor. I have the job of continuing to do what I have been doing for the last 15 years. I announced my intention to retire, not surrender.

One of the first questions to be settled, you say, is "where to put the emphasis" of the NAACP's work.
You ask. "Should the NAACP invest still more energy fighting cases in state as well as federal courts, or return to the lobbying wars that made the late Clarence Mitchell famous? Or might another, different area yield better gains, say, education, state and local politics, business development, housing?"

It is a fact that the courts have become increasingly peopled with right-wing conservatives who are hostile to anything that even looks like (or as they would probably say, smells like) civil rights. We have traditionally turned to the courts to remedy civil rights violations. Despite the judicial shift to the right, we could not act as if the courts were not there, and we continued the legal fight.

And amid our losses, we won some significant victories.

Lenell Geter was freed from a life sentence in prison for a crime he did not commit. The family of Michael Steward, who died in an altercation with New York law-enforcement officials, eventually won a $1.2 million settlement after a long legal battle. We won freedom for Marine Cpl. Arnold Braeley after he was falsely accused of being a spy in Moscow.

Having played a major role in obtaining the enactment of the historic 1965 Voting Rights Act, we are constantly being called upon to defend it, in court, against attempts to whittle it down. At the moment, we are involved in nine redistricting cases -- and we'll be filing another one here in Maryland -- to protect the principle of one man (or woman), one vote.

In the area of job discrimination -- which is not as blatant as it once was, and therefore is more difficult to combat -- we have initiated a number of suits attacking the
residency requirements that some suburban jurisdictions have used to exclude minorities from employment. To date, we've won six; four others are being negotiated.

In housing discrimination, we won a precedent-setting verdict in Boston which provided monetary damages to black families who had been steered away from certain public housing projects, and, through a consent settlement, we opened thousands of housing units to African Americans in the Starratt, City case (New York).

And in the fight against school segregation, we have been able to link this continuing menace judicially -- for the first time -- to housing segregation, and the city of Yonkers, N.Y., was ordered to build low-cost housing outside of minority neighborhoods.

Such cases were and are part of our daily judicial menu. We could not and did not push our plate away.

And we will not.

On the question of lobbying: The Sun's editorial was right -- Clarence Mitchell was a legendary lobbyist for the NAACP. But the editorial overlooked a crucial fact: We have never stopped lobbying. We continue to have an effective Washington Bureau whose chief function is lobbying.

Meanwhile, Mr. Mitchell and Roy Wilkins, my predecessor, recognized -- 40 years ago -- the need for the NAACP to work in coalition with other groups to achieve its legislative goals. They were instrumental in forming the Leadership Conference on
Civil Rights. It now has more than 180 organizations as members. I have served as its chairman for the last 10 years. We have achieved tremendous successes, including the Martin Luther King Holiday Bill, passage of South African sanctions, overriding President Reagan's veto of said sanctions bill, the Minimum Wage Bill, putting teeth in the Fair Housing Act, the Hate Crimes Statistics Bill, Japanese Reparations, the Voting Rights Act extension and defeat of the intent test which the Reagan administration tried to impose in that bill, and the 1991 Civil Rights Bill.

We should also remember that there was not a single anti-civil rights bill passed by Congress in the last 12 years, despite the hostility to civil rights advances of President Reagan.

The wisdom of Mr. Wilkins and Mr. Mitchell in creating the LCCR, along with the dedicated support of it by the NAACP, has resulted in a string of legislative victories. (I’m appending a list, in the event that you would like to print it, too) But for some reason unknown to me, the NAACP’s role in these efforts has been largely unheralded and ignored.

Next: "The NAACP must also win the interest of a younger black generation ... What today’s young achievers want most is help getting entrepreneurial ventures off the ground, help finding ways around the corporate glass ceiling."

Did you know that under the NAACP’s Fair Share program, more than 60 major companies have signed agreements to show fairness and equity in hiring and promotion, to put African
Americans on their boards of directors, to enter into contracts with minority businesses and to contribute in various ways to the black community?

Did you know that through these agreements, we have channeled in excess of $47 billion in economic benefits to minority businesses?

Did you know that through our ACT-SO program, approximately 150,000 youngsters in more than 400 U.S. cities and towns have been involved over the last 11 years in a program that has awarded more than $300,000 in prizes and scholarships for academic excellence?

(More importantly than its prizes, it has also emphasized the idea that there is a positive asset in developing one’s mind, rather than the negative stereotype that "studying is the white man’s plan to further enslave us.”)

Did you know that through our Back-to-School/Stay-in-School program, we are assisting more than 50,000 at-risk children in more than 50 cities, by helping them to complete their schooling, preparing them to be ready to go to work, and bring them together with employers at job fairs?

And finally, did you know that there are more than 70,000 members in the NAACP’s youth division, and NAACP chapters on the campuses of colleges and universities? We have seven youth members on our board of directors.
Next: "It is also clear that the NAACP, a secular organization whose strongest supporters are church men and women, has fences to mend among its core audience. Today, important church leaders are disaffected, and their congregations disengaged."

Four representatives of the largest black church denominations in the United States serve on the NAACP's board of directors or trustees, representing some 20 million black churchgoers. As I am sure you know, I am a Baptist minister -- and an active one. As the NAACP's executive director, I am in constant contact with 15 to 20 major religious leaders, seeking their advice and assistance. The NAACP's relationship with the nation's black churches is direct and strong and our financial support has never been stronger.

Next: "Disputes that have local officers opposing the leaders on national issues, as happened during the Thomas confirmation hearings, mean more than discipline has been lost. Two-way communication between grassroots and leadership on means, methods and ultimate objectives have been frayed."

Of the NAACP's more than 2,000 chapters, only three expressed disagreement with the national board's decision to oppose Senate confirmation of Clarence Thomas for a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court.

I invite your editorial writer to our national convention. It is the highest-ranking policy-making body in the NAACP. More than 20,000 NAACP members attend. A large number of them are regional, state and local NAACP chapter presidents. The debate, to put it mildly, is spirited. There's nothing "frayed" about our two-way communication. We go to great lengths to make sure we all understand each other.
Lastly, I have combined several sentences of the Sun’s editorial into a single package:

"An organization that values (the younger generation’s) participation must also accept its ideas and enthusiasm, stating aims very differently from those given priority by old-line rights groups ... problems in the (NAACP’s) leadership style must be resolved ... rebuilding the solid consensus through which the NAACP reshaped the American civil rights agenda must be its top priority."

Nearly five years ago, the staff and the national board of the NAACP, after a series of retreats over a period of several years, prepared and published the "NAACP Long Range Plan -- The Year 2000 and Beyond." It said in part:

Some new and non-traditional problems confront black Americans as they approach the year 2000.

"There is a view that these problems, such as teenage pregnancy, female-headed households, violence in the black community, drug and substance abuse, school dropouts and poor academic performance, are outside the purview of traditional civil rights concerns. So they may be.

But they are not outside the orbit of the NAACP’s concern. And we have been at work to attack these problems.

"The NAACP is duty-bound to address these grave issues. For there is no advancement for our people as long as these new forces of individual and group degradation steals the hopes of our young."

We reached two definitive conclusions:

First, that the NAACP would not retreat from its historic commitment to the attainment of civil rights.
Second, because the NAACP is the largest and best-organized secular association in Black America, we must and would expend a part of our resources and ability and know-how on addressing the many problems affecting our community internally.

New leadership will most certainly want to review our priorities and what we have done to meet them. Future NAACP leaders will determine whether to continue, alter or supplement our work -- and so it should be.

But it is not accurate to suggest that the NAACP is not fully aware of all the issues facing Black America in its present crisis, nor that it has failed to address them.

We cannot do it all, but we are doing our part. I have confidence that new leadership will find that the NAACP’s work, at this point in the nation’s history, has been invaluable and irreplaceable.

The NAACP has done the best it could, and I think history will record that its best, over 83 years and right up to today, has been very good indeed.

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