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## COMMENTARY

## 16 'The Power Brokers'

By Maynard Jackson

*Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson captivated the imagination of the Class of '76 during his address before a crowd estimated at more than 12,000 who participated in the celebration of Howard University's 108th Commencement on May 8th. The following is an excerpt from Mayor Jackson's message. Ed.*

There is a certain Black political presence in this Bicentennial year that is being felt in the nation as never before. There are more Black public officials and a greater opportunity for Black political action now than at any other time in the history of the United States.

But, presently currents in the society are accentuating lingering problems which have surfaced dramatically from time to time in the country's history: problems of inequitable distribution of resources among the body politic; problems of caring for those who cannot care for themselves; problems of ensuring equality to victims of prior discrimination and exclusion; problems of guaranteeing the basic rights to livelihood and a humane quality of existence for all citizens.

These are a few basic problems from which other problems which afflict most Americans now derive, including—but not limited to—the widely publicized areas of crime, popular disillusionment with government and urban crisis in a nation where 80 percent of the people live on 2 percent of the land.

It is no secret that these problems ravage Black and poor people in the United States. What is less commonly understood—or less commonly admitted—is that each of the problems is the direct result of politically dynamic, racially and economically oppressive

public policy decisions made by the power brokers of this nation.

Let us review, for a moment, a few characteristics of the structure of current policy-making in the United States. How is policy made? By whom? In the 1st century of this nation's history, the bias favoring the power brokers was reflected in the absence of a strong governmental role. The *laissez-faire* (or minimal state) concept of government dominated. Thomas Jefferson's phrase, "That government governs best which governs least," characterizes that period. Business was growing and developing in its early stages, competition was strong, and no serious challenges to business rule existed in the political system at that time.

However, in the 20th century, the growth of huge monopolies, capped by the appearance of powerful multinational corporations, placed serious restraints on the interplay of competitive forces. These fetters became obvious in the great depression of the '30s. Moreover, as political participation was extended to the masses, challenges then began to develop to the dominance of business interests. And the people began politically to demand the formulation of new social welfare policies. Therefore, the role of government was greatly expanded through the first half of this century in response to those new political developments . . . by the masses . . . the yearnings . . . the reaching out. But still, the focus of decision-making remained biased toward safeguarding and extending the privileges of the few at the expense of the many.

There were at least five institutional shifts in the United States in this century which have removed the Federal Government, to an alarming degree, from popular participation and control by the people . . . less and less participatory democracy. Here are the five reasons:

First, as overall government has become

Maynard Jackson



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increasingly centralized, the role of the Presidency has grown in relation to the two remaining branches of government. As a result, key policy decisions can be made with little opportunity for public scrutiny and debate. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Presidency normally has been a captive of the elite economic interests that financed the President's election.

Second, the court system in the United States has assumed more and more of a legislative and administrative role. Although between the Second World War and the mid-1960s, the courts often upheld the validity of the struggle for civil rights and civil liberties, the Court nonetheless is generally a reluctant innovator made even more tradition-bound by infrequent changes in its membership. One need only recall the Nixon Court to which we are wedded.

A third shift has been the consolidation of what might be called the technocratic model of government. No longer are elected officials expected, in the spirit of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, to make decisions on their own training based on their own common sense and based on their own intuition. Today, national, state and local officials are ever more dependent on the advice of



so-called “experts” who comprise a buffer which deflects citizen capacities to influence the process of policy-making. In time, the most significant politics involved in policy-making may be the politics of expertise in which technicians in their respective fields attempt to influence people and decisions by managing the flow and the presentation of information to the public and, most importantly, the flow of information to public officials.

Although access to special information can be required for many types of decisions, there is the added danger that, insulated from most public accountability, technocrats will be responsive to the requirements of the powerless groups in society even less than the elected officials they seek to advise.

A fourth related development has been the systematic penetration of international public policy by huge multinational corporations whose profit motive regularly conflicts with the interests of the masses in foreign nations and at home. This extension of Western enterprise assures that the United States budget retain inordinate expenditure levels for military materials. Ignored and neglected as a consequence of these misplaced priorities are the full health care, education, employment and welfare needs of the masses in American society and other societies all across the globe.

The fifth and final institutional shift is integrally connected with the other four developments. The convergence of a political, corporate and military elite at key sectors of the society reinforces the tendencies already described. None of these institutions, individuals or groups, therefore, will favor or sponsor any changes in the society which are any more than cosmetic. Seldom do those with power voluntarily give up enough of their power to make a difference in how the masses live. It is as if we were

off the shore swimming in the surf and all of a sudden a great undertow catches us. We see the lifeguard, President Gerald Ford, standing on the shore; and knowing that it is the job of lifeguards to save those who are drowning, we yell, “Save us . . . save us . . . lest we perish!” And President Ford and Richard Nixon simply wave good-bye. If we expect . . . if we expect anything different . . . if we expect the oppressor to relieve the oppressed voluntarily, then we might as well believe that elephants will begin to roost in trees, and that Rockefeller won’t have a cent, and the baboons will ride up and march down Broadway singing “Stardust” and this year we’ll have a Black president . . . that will be the day.

Professor Michael Parenti in his book, *Democracy for the Few*, asserts that, “About one-half of one percent of the population—that part constituting the ‘super rich’—controls the great part of the corporate wealth of this country.” The existence of disproportionate business/government relationships also has helped the emergence of the corporate state. In any given year, the United States Treasury distributes about \$10 billion to \$13 billion in direct payments to manufacturing, shipping, aviation, mining, timber, agriculture and other enterprises to enhance their profits and to diminish their losses. An additional \$10 billion a year is paid out in benefit-in-kind subsidies, including subsidized commercial mail delivery, private airports, public lands, industrial machinery, etc. Also, between \$6 billion and \$7 billion annually is allocated to high income farmers and large farm corporations to limit acreage production and to buy up crop subsidies. All of this while there are people here and across the world who are hungry.

People in power decide who shall have it and who will not. That’s why they are there . . . to make those decisions. But the name of the game for us is to change

the people who make policy so we can change the policies that change our lives. That’s politics.

Policy alone dictates where the national priorities are. One case in point, and not the only one, is the defense budget—I’m not against having a defense budget, we need it for the protection of the country. The question is how much for defense? The defense budget goes up while the hope of the people goes down, and elected officials make those decisions.

For \$9 million, or the price of one A-6E “Intruder” airplane, the type used in Viet Nam, we could have 257 apartments at \$35,000 each. For \$200,000 or the price of one 20-MM cannon, we could have 8 single-family houses at \$25,000 each. For \$4 billion, or the amount of the cost overrun—not the cost, but the cost overrun—on the F-111 plane, we could provide a visit to the health clinic for 120 million people. For \$105 billion, or the eventual cost of future weapons system now being planned, we could clean up the entire American natural environment. Finally, for \$1 billion, or the amount reported last year as the cost overrun on the B-1 bomber (of which not one prototype yet has been completed), we could have had the child-care program for child nutrition, for health and for day care that was vetoed by President Ford on the heartless fiction that it cost too much money.

Meanwhile, what about America’s have-nots? “Don’t the people already have enough? Aren’t the Blacks getting too much too quickly,” as the late Howard Hughes apparently suggested to one of his aides. What about America’s have-nots? Two areas in which Howard University has made outstanding contributions to Black people and to America in general—the areas of education and health—illustrate the continuing urgency of our need . . . us . . . the masses of people in this country.

If we are not careful, we are going to be



18 so busy celebrating the Bicentennial that we are going to overlook the fact that an estimated seven million school-age children have severe reading deficiencies; if we aren't careful, we are going to overlook the fact that over one-half of the unemployed youth between the ages of 16 and 21 are functionally illiterate (that's nearly 1 million people), and there are more than 18 million adults in this country who are functionally illiterate. If we aren't careful, we are going to overlook the fact that a recently released study by the Children's Defense League revealed that, in 1972-1973, school districts enrolling 53 percent of the nation's school population suspended over 1 million children for a total of 4 million school days. Black children were suspended at twice the rate of any other group. Twenty school districts reported suspending one-third to one-half of all of their Black students. If we aren't careful we're going to be so busy popping firecrackers that we're going to overlook the fact that the high school dropout rate for minority students is nearly twice the national average.

Despite increased college enrollment among minorities over the last decade, access to higher education remains a frozen dream for the majority of poor and Black students who have the desire and the potential to continue their education. If we don't watch out, Black and poor students more and more are going to be forced exclusively into vocational and trade schools by the skyrocketing costs of liberal arts colleges and the destruction of financial aid programs. There's nothing wrong with vocational education. I'm for it, but if we aren't careful, we will get funneled exclusively, I say, into it. The liberal arts generally are the most persuasive in facilitating the development in students of a critical understanding of how the society works. As W. E. B. DuBois, observing in 1900 the need for liberal arts in a humane and democratic society, said, "The object of all true education is not to make men carpenters,"

(he should have said "people," but he said "men") "it is to make carpenters men."

Now what about the area of health where Howard University has been so persuasive and so influential? This is of great concern. Poor people, African-Americans and other minorities historically have received inferior health services in America. Of the Black children under 14 years of age who were born in a public hospital, 60 percent have never been seen by a dentist. An African-American is four times more likely to die before the age of 35 than a white American is. For example, the life expectancy of the Black Michigan man, on the average, decreased over a 10-year period between 1963 and 1973 by almost two years. Of all physicians and dentists in the United States, African-Americans comprise less than 2 percent. Since crime is also bad for our health, we ought to know that. If you are an African-American, the chances that you will be robbed are triple those if you were white; the chances that you will be burglarized and have your car stolen are almost double. If you make less than \$3,000 a year, your chances of being robbed are five times greater than if your income is more than \$10,000 a year, and a poor Black woman's chances of being raped are four times as high as if she were white and not poor.

Things don't have to be this way, but the priorities of America today are the expressions of the wishes of the privileged few who have a strangle-hold at this time on the nation's democratic processes and on the presidency as an institution. That explains in part the brutal, uncaring vetoes by President Ford of jobs for the jobless and day-care for the needy and aid for struggling cities while, at the same time, supporting more arms for defense, more money for the monied and more power for America's powerful. Also, remember the sordid saga surrounding the Nixon White House where the

President and all the President's men—captives of the national power brokers—piously plundered America's founding ethic and caused the public to recall Joe South's warning of hypocrisy in high places:

*There are people walking up to ya'  
Singing 'glory hallelujah,'  
And all the while they're trying to  
sock it to ya'  
In the name of the Lord.*

Things don't have to be this way. We need to build a political apparatus to house our aspirations, and it only can be built, in my opinion, from the ground up.

Three and one-half centuries ago, an old, gray-haired mother stood on the shores of the mighty African Continent and watched with strained gaze a small ship slowly fade from view. As that vessel of evil disturbed the serenity of that tranquil sea, she endured the pain of recalling that her sons and daughters had been stolen, beaten, chained and sold into a system so perverse that it challenged her understanding. That old, gray-haired mother in Africa knew nothing of the politico-economic arrangements of that day. Words such as mercantilism and imperialism meant nothing to her; but in her heart she knew that something had just made an attack upon the soul of her people. Although she was left behind, too old to be privy to the plunder, she felt the tremors when that enslaved Black humanity, which theretofore had thrived under the moon and stars of freedom, survived the Middle Passage and was spewed onto the docks of Jamestown, Virginia, to make cotton king and to make the king corrupt.

As Black people in America were defined as chattel, sold like a horse, worked like a mule, mated like cattle and treated like a dog, the spirit of that old woman presided over us. She consoled us while we endured pellagra, boll weevil, exploitation, lynching, castration and racism so barbaric that its

vestiges plague the oppressed and the oppressor even a century later.

We ought to remember our common roots, especially that old Black lady who is our "Rock of Ages," that tower of power who is so often seen standing at the bus stop, clothed in the raiments of poverty, surrounded by rumpled shopping bags, waiting for her ride home after a hard day's work for too little money. Hers, this Rock of Ages, is not the smooth contour of the Venus de Milo; hers is not the mysterious smile of the Mona Lisa or the languid beauty of a Paul Gauguin "Polynesian Bather." She bulges from too many starches. She grimaces from corns and bunions that vie for position on tired and weary feet. She is weathered by experience and withered by the heavy burden of being overworked, oppressed and ignored. But she is still our Rock of Ages, standing steadfast against the tides of trouble, the rancor of racism and the bitter winds of benign neglect, and, she is in trouble today. She needs our help—quickly! She expects us not to be a grasshopper in the Biblical sense, because, if we see ourselves as grasshoppers, then others in Canaanland will see us as grasshoppers too. We have the will as manifested by those who gave us birth and gave us life . . . by the Black man and by the Black woman who have survived despite . . . and despite . . . and despite . . . and despite for three and one-half centuries in this country. And . . . they have made it because there is something unusual about the African-American. That is the capacity to keep on keeping on . . . the will to do when others don't . . . will power. □