

NAACP Searches for Leader

Written by Robert ID725

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During his speeches to Philadelphia children, J. Whyatt Mondesire, the head of that city's NAACP branch, likes to offer \$20 to the student who can decode his group's acronym.

Many think he is on a recruiting junket for the NCAA. "I've only had to give away my money twice in seven years," Mondesire says. "That's my challenge."

As the Baltimore-based NAACP searches for a leader to replace outgoing president Kweisi Mfume, the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization is at a crossroads, some say. They believe that the changing of the guard represents a chance for the NAACP to redefine its identity with younger black Americans who, unlike their parents, do not immediately think of the group when they think of civil rights.

Some members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, such as Mondesire, think a big-name replacement to Mfume is the answer. A nationally recognized figure, such as hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons, would appeal to the next generation. Some members of the old guard are pushing for an insider, a veteran from the ranks of the NAACP's members who could navigate the treacherous waters of an unwieldy body with disparate agendas.

"We are basically 2,200 local organizations with a national title," Mondesire, 56, says of the factions. "The organization needs a heavyweight with a national reputation who can raise money, who has a vision and who has the connections to push us forward with a modern civil rights agenda."

Mfume, who is credited with bringing financial stability and credibility to an organization reeling from scandal and mismanagement when he took over nine years ago, announced his resignation Nov. 30, saying he wanted to spend more time with his family.

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Mfume has dismissed persistent rumors among the organization's membership that he was forced out because of a rift between himself and Chairman Julian Bond. But Mfume has no role in a nine-member committee that Bond has assembled to find his successor.

Many of the members say they are thrilled with the job Mfume did. He erased a \$3.2 million deficit and burnished an image sullied by the revelation that his predecessor, Benjamin Chavis, used NAACP funds to settle a sexual harassment suit.

Some accuse Mfume of losing sight of the issues that made the NAACP the leading voice for civil rights for much of the last century.

Gilbert Jonas, who directed the NAACP's national fund-raising and public relations operation for 30 years until 1995 and has written a book on the group's early history, says there was "a growing disenchantment (among board members) that they had virtually no new program initiatives" during Mfume's tenure.

He says some of the programs Mfume started, such as one to encourage high school students to excel academically, were ideas that originated in the 1980s under previous leaders.

As the committee searches for Mfume's replacement, the half-million members will be closely watching, many of them convinced the next leader could remake, or break, the NAACP's reputation.

Bond didn't return messages left for him. Roslyn Brock, NAACP's vice chairwoman and a member of the committee, says the search is "going well" and that the group hopes to have a new leader hired by July.

John Brittain, a law professor at Texas Southern University and longtime NAACP member, says he hopes the process to select Mfume's successor is an open one, where regular members can have input, rather than a closed process conducted entirely by the search committee.

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Brittain says Mfume was selected through a closed process, but "people accepted it when they found out the name. I think people were kind of hungry for a credible person to take over what was then a stumbling organization. Now, I think people want a say."

The new leader will face many challenges, including inheriting an audit as the IRS reviews the NAACP's tax-exempt status. Bond says the investigation stems from a speech he gave criticizing President Bush.

Mfume's successor also will have to deal with the sometimes unwieldy NAACP board of directors. Some say the board may have frustrated Mfume as he tried to make changes: "I publish a newspaper; I wouldn't want 64 editors telling me how to write a story," Mondesire says.

Among Mondesire's suggestions for the next leader are Elaine Jones, the retired head of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, an organization that is separate from the NAACP; and Maxine Waters, a Democratic congresswoman from California.

Scot X. Esdaile, president of the Connecticut NAACP, says he hopes someone like Russell Simmons gets the job. He would "bring the young people into the association" and wouldn't be beholden to corporations or special interests, Esdaile said. A call to Simmons' publicist wasn't immediately returned.

Esdaile, who calls Mfume "a personal mentor," says the former director will be hard to replace. "He'll go down in history as one of the great black leaders," Esdaile says. "Whatever happens, he's gone now, and it's a big blow to the organization."

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