

Protest Politics and the Jena Generation

Written by Dr. Uhuru Hotep ID4235
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Protest Politics and the Jena Generation: Lessons for 21st Century Black Leaders By Dr. Uhuru Hotep - Kwame Ture Leadership Institute

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Introduction

This essay lays the foundation for a paradigm shift in Black leadership practice by exposing the limitations of protest politics and its major tactic, the mass march. If we are to achieve real power as a community of African people in 21st century America, present-day Black leaders must subject even their most cherished practices, like the mass march, to critical analysis. Without this critical analysis, future Black leaders may settle for leading noisy demonstrations that end up strengthening the powers against whom we struggle. This we must prevent at all cost. As much as our tradition is our guide, we must not be blinded by it. Times and conditions change. What was yesterday's solution may be today's problem. And so it is with protest politics and the mass march in particular.

Background

According to historian Peter Bergman (1969), Africans in the U.S. have been petitioning the White power structure for redress of our grievances since 1769. During the first six decades of the 19th century, Black leaders like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth organized dozens of rallies, made hundreds of speeches, and submitted numerous petitions to White America's political and religious leaders, North and South, demanding the abolition of slavery. Their rallies, speeches and petitions were largely ignored, so it took a bloody Civil War (1861-65) to end chattel slavery in this country.

The first series of 20th century mass protest marches held by African Americans were organized during the period 1919-25 by NAACP activists Ida B. Wells and W.E.B. DuBois. Designed to pressure Congress into passing legislation outlawing lynching as a federal crime, these early efforts at protest politics failed to achieve their stated goal, though they did succeed in placing the protest march into our political vocabulary.

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Over the past 40 years, the protest march, perfected during the Civil Rights era (1955-70), has become our preferred method of voicing our collective grievances to the White power structure. Sanctioned by the U.S. Constitution, held in public spaces and directed at the White political establishment, the protest march, like a safety valve, has been extremely effective at siphoning off pent-up Black frustration and anger, but in a fashion that leaves our oppressor in tact and empowered.

The Importance of Jena

The September 20, 2007 mobilization that attracted 60,000 Black youth (CNN reported 15-20,000) and their supporters to the backwater hamlet of Jena, Louisiana, to protest the injustice meted out to six Black high school students, breathed new life into our fading protest tradition. Columnist Steven Ward wrote in the October 10th edition of Black Agenda Report that many in his generation viewed the Jena mobilization as a “rekindling of the spirit of the civil rights movement” when wide-spread discontent with institutional racism stirred thousands of ordinary Black people to behave in extraordinary ways. According to CNN, both Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton voiced similar sentiments. However, before we embark upon yet another round of marching and protesting, let us first review the strengths and weakness of our protest tradition as revealed by the Jena 6 mobilization.

Strengths of the Jena Mobilization

First, in an article published in The Michigan Citizen, Amber Jefferies, a 7th grade student from Detroit reported that for her the Jena March was a “life-changing” event. Sister Amber speaks for thousands of Black youth who marched in Jena or who participated in post-Jena demonstrations. Our protest tradition is extremely powerful. It often makes a deep and lasting impact on those who participate in it. Coming together with tens of thousands of our people to collectively voice our discontent is heady stuff. It’s euphoric and literally mesmerizing, but only

temporarily.

Our history tells us that planning and/or participating in a protest march have been an important Black rite of passage into American political life since the 1950s. So it's no surprise that the Black youth who marched in Jena were deeply moved by our protest tradition, which can in fact change one's life. As a child of the Black Power/Black Consciousness movement of the late 60s, I too can attest to the life-changing impact of protest politics.

Second, the Jena mobilization, supported by key members of the hip hop community, was the first Internet driven Black youth protest in American history. National Public Radio's Eric Weiner reported that African American bloggers, list servers and chat room junkies, not the mainstream media, were the driving force publicizing the plight of the Jena 6 and the March. Others have noted that Black youth haven't mobilized against our racial oppression on the scale of Jena since the Civil Rights movement. As long as it exists, Black youth must use the Internet as a tool for creating educational, economic, medical, political, religious and other institutions to meet their needs and the needs of African people, both at home and abroad.

A final benefit of Jena is the opportunity it provides to begin the emotionally cumbersome but essential task of bridging the generation gap. Black activist Dr. Oba T'Shaka in his book *The Integration Trap: The Generation Gap* correctly identifies the "generation gap" between Black youth and their elders as "the most serious internal issue facing African American communities across the United States." If properly used, Jena could be the catalyst for an intergenerational dialog and then widespread cooperation between Black youth activists, progressive hip hop artists, African centered students, and their politically astute elders. Personally, I'm interested in what made the plight of the Jena 6 so compelling that it moved Black students across this country to turn off BET, pull up their pants, reach into their wallets, and travel to Jena to defend six of their own.

Weaknesses of the Jena Mobilization

The Jena March, like all one-day mobilizations including the March on Washington in 1963 and the Million Man March in 1995, is at best symbolic and at worst diversionary. We know that it takes constant, long-term pressure by those, like Blacks, who lack the organized wealth and high level influence to make even the smallest change in the American political system. We also know that nothing of lasting value can be achieved in American politics by a one-day protest regardless of the numbers involved, except that it dupes us into believing that we have

accomplished something concrete and tangible. And that's the hidden danger of protest politics.

Even when it's successful, we can still be manipulated by our psychological need for recognition from our oppressors, who are masters at weaving what Minister Louis Farrakhan calls an "illusion of inclusion," in which symbolic acts are substituted for substantive ones. In other words, once CNN, BET, NBC, MTV, The New York Times, etc., begins to cover our protest and we are invited to Washington to meet the president, or downtown to meet the mayor, we celebrate believing that we have won them over to our cause and they will soon redress our grievances, when nothing could be further from the truth. We have simply fallen victim to the "illusion of inclusion" and are confusing symbol with substance.

Furthermore, if we insist on practicing protest politics, then we must accept that as long as we restrict ourselves to protesting the actions of our adversaries, we will never be proactive. Protesting is not acting; it's reacting, which means that protesting is basically a reactionary act. If this weren't enough, protesting actually plays right into our enemies' hands because it allows them to strategically manufacture events they know will stir us to react. And as long as we are reacting to their initiatives, we are not acting to further our agenda; and as long as we are reacting, we are not building. Protest politics, by its very nature, forces us to play our oppressors' game, and not our own.

Another major limitation of protest politics is economic. It's estimated that the 60,000 youth who marched in Jena on September 20th dumped at least \$3.2 million into the local White-controlled economy. This means that White-owned motels, restaurants, fast food joints, grocery stores, gas stations, etc., made big money from the marchers as did the White-owned airlines and bus companies that transported them to Jena. The Africans who live in Jena did not share in this stupendous cash flow because they own few businesses in which the Jena marchers could spend their money. To my knowledge, no permanent Black owned and operated enterprise of any kind was established in Jena by the March organizers.

Like the Civil Rights activists who preceded them, the Jena March organizers failed to consider the economics of mass mobilization. LIB Radio commentator Keidi Awadu, has leveled the same criticism at the organizers of the Million Man March, who unwittingly delivered at least \$100 million into the hands of Washington, DC's White business community. These are funds we should have used to begin acquiring the farms, factories, hospitals and schools we desperately need to truly empower ourselves, not squandered on a one day extravaganza. Furthermore, as long as our "protesting" enriches Whites as it did in Jena, they are in favor of it. But if it stops them from making money, they will shut it down. One of the critical lessons Black

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youth must learn from Jena is that a true movement for social transformation and change will leave grassroots institutions – businesses owned and operated by our people – in its wake.

A fourth limitation of protest politics is its endorsement by the White power structure. Our right to peacefully assemble and petition the government to redress our grievances is “guaranteed” by the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution. This means that our protesting and marching are actually sanctioned by the very people who oppress us: the super-rich White males who own and operate this nation’s political and economic systems. Why? The answer is simple. There is no law or power that requires the American ruling elite and its agents to change how they govern in Jena or anywhere else because we lead a public protest. Black youth leaders and activists must understand that adopting forms of political engagement sanctioned by our adversaries will have them actively participating in their own destruction. Simply protesting and marching, even voting and winning public office will not transform or even reform how this nation treats Black people. This many of us know from living in cities governed by Black officials we elected naively believing they had the power to change the quality of our lives.

A fifth and most disturbing weakness of our protest tradition is psychological. Protest politics are rooted in what psychologist Julian Rotter (1966) calls an “external locus of control.” This means that protesting has us looking outside of ourselves and our community to our oppressor, the U.S. government and its agents – the mayor, the governor, the president, et al – to solve our problems under the false belief that they are better qualified than we to make decisions about our lives.

We foolishly turn our lives over to the wicked, then we march downtown to their city-county building, their courthouse, their police department, or to Washington, DC or Jena, to demand justice from the very people who created and profit from our unjust condition in the first place. This is absolutely insane! It’s analogous to a rape victim turning to her rapist for protection. The Jena generation must first love themselves, then “flip the script” and establish an “internal” locus of control, which means their locus or center of power, authority and legitimacy must reside within their families, our people and our culture, and not mainstream politicians and government agencies.

For 21st century Black leaders to embrace the politics of protest and its tactic of “mass mobilization for one-day of demonstration” as its preferred mode of direct action is dangerous because it misdirects our energies, finances and other resources into political activity that is largely symbolic at a time when our people need secure sources of food, clothing, shelter and the other essentials of life, not empty rituals. Consequently, Black leadership must call a nation-wide moratorium on protest marches while we shift our political paradigm to embrace

new forms of direct action tailored for Black empowerment in a post-Katrina America.

The “new” direct action that I envision will mobilize millions of us who are dissatisfied with the status quo, not to nosily march or loudly protest, but to quietly pool our resources so we can buy the land, buildings, equipment, and everything else we need, to exercise sovereign control over the production, distribution, and consumption of the basic necessities of life: our food, clothing, shelter, education, transportation, medication and self-defense. Black youth must overstand that ethnic groups in 21st century America who fail to control the production, distribution and consumption of their basic survival needs will be the servants of those who do, and no amount of marching and protesting will change this fact.

Conclusion

African people in the United States have been practicing protest politics for more than 250 years with mixed results. Over the past 40 years, the “mass mobilization for a one-day demonstration” has become the preferred medium through which Black leadership publicly communicates our grievances to the White power structure. To the exclusion of other forms of direct action, the mass protest march, according to our leaders, is the most effective way to bring attention to our concerns, demonstrate our group strength and thereby pressure the ruling class into redressing our grievances. In keeping with this belief, the Jena March is being exploited by these same leaders (or should I say “misleaders”?) to sell what they know is a failed political strategy to a new generation of Black youth and their leaders. This must not happen; this we must challenge; and this we must denounce.

In spite of the fact that protest politics has won us concessions in the form of federal legislation, its costs far outweigh its benefits. As we have seen, it encourages reactionary behavior; it obscures our need to build independent Black institutions; it compels us to spend our protest dollars with non-Africans; it persuades us to surrender control of our lives to external powers; and it blinds us to the reality that peaceful mass protest in the American political system is state-sanctioned and thus of symbolic value only.

The core political challenge facing the Jena generation and its leadership is three-fold. First,

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they must overstand the symbolic and diversionary nature of protest politics; next, they must ignore foul-mouth rappers, media-hungry preachers, hip hop scholars and anyone else who would suggest that mobilizing Black people for a one-day protest march is an intelligent response to institutional racism; and finally they must devise new and engaging forms of direct action that generate the emotional appeal of the protest march while moving us forward toward economic and political sovereignty.

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*Dr. Uhuru Hotep is a consultant to the Kwame Ture Leadership Institute, host of Kilombo, an African centered radio talk show, and co-editor of the best-selling 72 Concepts to Liberate the African Mind. He is a nationally-recognized authority on academic enrichment programs and leadership development initiatives for urban youth. Dr. Hotep can be reached at [hotep\(at\)duq.edu](mailto:hotep(at)duq.edu)

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