New Year an opportunity to reflect on the past, plan for a brighter future

by Marc_H._Morial

With the holiday season over and 2008 upon us, it's time to reflect upon the past year and assess our achievements and setbacks in order to start the New Year anew.

In January 2007, the black community observed the installation of new congressional leaders, including the first ever black chairman of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee - New York Rep. Charles Rangel. Rangel was joined by a handful of other blacks ascending to leadership, including South Carolina Rep. Jim Clyburn.

Later in the month, the world of professional football observed two firsts at Super Bowl XVI: Tony Dungy became the first black to lead his team to victory against Lovie Smith, who beat out Dungy by a few hours in becoming the first black head coach to get to the Super Bowl in the first place.

That was capped off by the announcement of Illinois Sen. Barrack Obama to enter the 2008 presidential race - the first black since Jesse Jackson to be considered a serious contender for his party's nomination. Al Sharpton and Carol Moseley Braun have also run in previous presidential cycles.

In March, the National Urban League unveiled its Homebuyer's Bill of Rights in response to the growing foreclosure problem, which worsened over the year. By December, we were down on Wall Street rallying in favor of something being done.

The Bush administration unveiled a plan giving some headed for foreclosure a five-year reprieve on rising interest rates. Just weeks before, the U.S. House had passed a "better than nothing" bill to address the fiasco.

In April, the National Urban League unveiled its yearly State of Black America report. Our Equality Index revealed little improvement in the status of blacks - still 73 percent that of whites. In 2007, the report focused on the black male, prescribing ways to bring light to the increasing population of those lost in the system. One recommendation included greater investment in second-chance programs. By November, the U.S. House heard our pleas, passing prisoner re-entry legislation.

That month shock jock Don Imus proceeded to make the airwaves a vehicle of racism by disparaging the Rutgers' ladies basketball team, eventually losing his job. But by year's end, he made his way back. Let's just hope he learned his lesson.

In May, the U.S. House passed the first minimum wage hike in over a decade. Enacted in June, the law, a priority for the NUL, still fails to index the minimum wage for inflation, something we had championed, but at least gives a much needed raise to the thousands of hardworking families who struggle to make ends meet.

In June, a jury in Jena, La., found Mychal Bell guilty of aggravated second-degree battery for his alleged role in a racially-charged schoolyard brawl that left a white classmate unconscious. Bell and five other black youths, now known as the Jena Six, had been charged with attempted murder, charges later reduced. The incident was the culmination of months of racial tension touched off by the hanging of nooses on Jena High School grounds. The case struck a chord with blacks and civil rights activists across the nation, who descended upon the small town en masse in September to show their support. Following the protest, a wave of noose incidents nationwide occurred.

In July at our annual conference in St. Louis we unveiled our Opportunity Compact, a comprehensive set of policy recommendations designed to jump-start urban America. All four presidential candidates who appeared embraced the compact with gusto. But just how their rhetoric turns into reality will be something we will be interested to see.

At year's end, the U.S. Supreme Court, which had earlier in the year struck a major blow against voluntary school integration programs and wage discrimination plaintiffs, redeemed itself in ruling to give judges leeway in their sentencing for crack convictions. The nation's highest court ruled that possessors of crack cocaine should be treated the same as possessors of powder cocaine. A day later, the U.S. Sentencing Commission announced that up to 20,000 prisoners with crack convictions could be eligible for reduced sentences.

I would be remiss if I did not remember the great blacks we lost in 2007 - including jazz innovator Max Roach, Reps. Julia Carson and Juanita Millender-McDonald, former Congressmen Gus Hawkins and Parren Mitchell, former Grambling State football coach Eddie Robinson and civil rights activist Yolanda King, among many others.

With the presidential campaign already upon us, 2008 provides a great opportunity for us to sound our voice and influence our leaders. It is our responsibility to make sure we're part of the discussion of where to take the United States in the coming decades.

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