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# *Conversation:*

## **Minister Benjamin**

## **Muhammad**

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Many historians of the black American experience have argued that black ideology and political culture since the mid-nineteenth century have been characterized by two distinct polar positions: integration and black nationalism. The central political organization that has fought for the desegregation of social institutions and the assimilation of blacks into the mainstream of American life for nearly a century has been the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). At the other end of the political spectrum, the Nation of Islam (NOI) reflects the philosophy of strict racial separation and the development of black-owned institutions. The only African-American leader to have occupied leadership positions in both of these divergent formations is Minister Benjamin Muhammad, the former Reverend Benjamin Chavis.

In 1993, Chavis became the head of the NAACP, and won widespread praise for expanding the base of the mostly middle class organization, especially appealing to the hip hop generation. An ordained minister with the United Church of Christ, Chavis pushed a progressive agenda around issues such as

economic justice and environmental racism. In 1994, however, Chavis was charged with secretly diverting more than a quarter of a million dollars of the NAACP's funds to settle a sexual discrimination lawsuit. When Chavis was fired from the NAACP, NOI leader Louis Farrakhan quickly hired him as the national coordinator for the 1995 Million Man March. In 1997, Chavis surprised many former allies by converting to Islam and joining the NOI. Farrakhan subsequently named Minister Benjamin Muhammad the head of the prestigious Mosque No. 7 in Harlem, established in the 1950s by Malcolm X.

In 2000, Muhammad was named the national director of the NOI-inspired Million Family March, Farrakhan's campaign for conservative family values. Several months after this interview, Benjamin Muhammad became embroiled in a fresh sexual harassment controversy, as NOI member Anita Williams sued him in a \$140 million lawsuit. Although the Million Family March in Washington, D.C., in October, 2000, successfully attracted several hundred thousand participants, Benjamin Muhammad was removed as Mosque No. 7's chief minister, and was rele-

gated to the background by an embarrassed Farrakhan. Although widespread speculation about Benjamin Muhammad's future as the possible successor to Farrakhan within the NOI has diminished, his remarks here provide important insights into the recent political history of black America.

**Minister Benjamin Mohammed:** In the name of Allah the beneficent, the merciful, who is so thankful to Allah, God Almighty, for the opportunity to be here on the prestigious campus of Columbia University and to be in the company of a brother, a scholar who we have deep respect for, Professor Manning Marable. I want to begin tonight by giving you our greetings of peace. We say it in the Arabic language, *as-salâmu alaykum* . . . (Audience response: *alaykumu s-salâm*), and I also want to say that I spoke to the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan last night, he knew that we would be on the campus of Columbia today, and Brother Manning, he asked me to give you his personal greetings of *as-salâmu alaykum* and to wish us well tonight in our discussions.

You began by giving a parallel analysis of the articulation of the demand for freedom, the demand for liberation and certain trends, certain evolution of thoughts from some of our heroes. And when I say heroes, I mean men and women who generations ago lifted up their voices to demand an end to white supremacy, demand an end to the suffering and the oppression of our people. I am a student, I am fifty-two years old, but I am a student of the Most Honorable Elijah Mohammed, a student of the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan, and one of the things that I am striving to do now is to deepen my own understanding of an expanded worldview of life, because our demand for freedom here in what is known as North America is not isolated or disconnected from the demand of freedom that's still in Africa.

So, I am very interested, with those preliminary remarks, to let you know that the Nation of Islam, we are committed to the redemption of our people and the redemption of all people. We are meeting here tonight on the eve of a great gathering, the Million Family March. And so again, thank you for giving us an opportunity to be here. I know that you will not refrain from asking the tough questions, and the only thing that I would like to say is that when you ask a tough question, be prepared for a tough answer.

**MM:** I wonder if you could talk about your personal background. You have been one of the most prominent people in the past quarter century in the African-American freedom struggle. Your family life as a child, how you grew up, and most importantly, how did you become a part of the Black Freedom Movement when you were a teenager and a young adult in the 1960s and the early '70s?

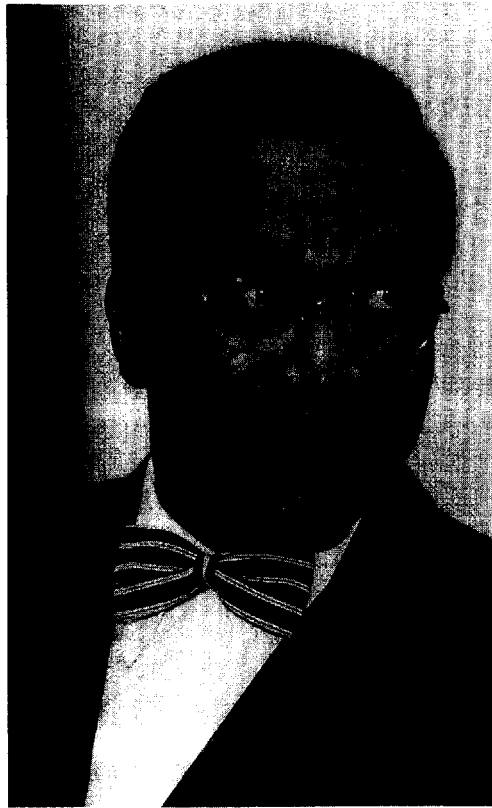
**BM:** I was born in 1948, in a small rural town, Oxford, North Carolina. You asked how did I get into the freedom movement: I was born in it. My mother and my father were freedom fighters. My grandfather and grandmother were freedom fighters. My great-great-grandfather and great-great-grandmother, both of them, they were freedom fighters. In fact, my great-great-great-grandfather was the Reverend John Chavis. One of those blacks, I'm talking about in the 1700s, who picked up a musket and helped fight against the British. A former slave who had freed himself and went and got some education at a place now called Princeton University and became the first brother to be ordained as a Presbyterian minister in the United States. This is back in the 1700s. This is prior to the Civil War, prior to the Nat Turner insurrection. After the Nat Turner insurrection in 1831, the state of Virginia, the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, and

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Georgia, passed a law making it a felony in those states to teach a black how to read or write or to even speak in an academic way to black slaves. Why? Because there was a fear of other slave insurrections. The Reverend Nat Turner did a good job, but there were reprisals, legislative reprisals, to the Nat Turner insurrection, and my great-great-great-grandfather, Reverend John Chavis, found himself as an ordained Presbyterian minister being told that he could not preach to blacks but can only preach to whites. And so like a good Chavis, he disobeyed the rules and set up underground schools in my home county, Granville County.

Where I was born, we literally had been on the land, the same land in Granville County, since 1750. One of the "benefits," and I say that with quotes, of segregation was that we have our cemetery and when me and my wife go home, even now, take my children to the cemetery to tell them where their grandparents lie and to explain something of what happened in the generations in the 1700s, in the 1800s, and the 1900s, and even of this day. So, I was born in the movement. And by being born in 1948, by the time I was in elementary school in the '50s, I remember what happened to Emmet Till, and I remember the reaction of my mother to the case of Emmet Till, this young black man being beat to death in Mississippi, visiting one summer from Chicago, and my mother would not let me go out that summer, out of the house. Although this murder had taken place in Mississippi, I'm in North Carolina, so I was more angered by what happened in Emmet Till than the fact that I couldn't go out. But the truth of the matter is that there was a danger to young black males, and being a young black male, I didn't like seeing my mother and father worried about me or my other partners in the community.

To make a long story short, by the time I was twelve years old, I figured I was grown



*Minister Benjamin Muhammad Discusses the Black Freedom Movement. Photo by John Smock*

enough to stand up and not wait on my parents to strike out for freedom, because I felt that the generation of my parents was too tolerant. I respect my parents, but I didn't like tolerating abject injustice. One day, walking home from school, I went into the library, which was segregated, and demanded a book. Somebody asked me earlier today, why did you do that? Because I was tired of reading books with no covers on it. The young people today don't know what it is to be told you cannot even go into a library because of the color of your skin. You cannot go into the movies, you cannot go swimming in a swimming pool, you cannot do this, you cannot do this, and I got tired of it and risked going to jail.

I didn't go to jail at twelve, but I kind of learned something at an early age, that if you don't stand up to injustice, injustice will never change. Even when you stand up, it still may not change, but at least you stand up trying to change it. You are not tolerant of it, and I guess the generation of the '50s and '60s was the generation of young brothers and sisters who just got tired, can't take it no more. Going to do something to strike out for freedom, and of course when I say that, use that language, I don't want to appear to be undisciplined. I was a card-carrying member of the NAACP at twelve years old. My mother and father were life members of the NAACP, and I was proud, but I remember when I got my NAACP card my parents didn't want me to take it in my pocket, and I obeyed my parents because they felt that if you pulled out your NAACP card back in the '50s, it could get you in trouble. That's the answer to your question. I was born in the freedom struggle, come from a long tradition, particularly in the church, from my great-great-great-grandfather, Reverend John Chavis. All of my grandfathers were preachers and my father was a lay pastor in the Episcopal church, and I sort of grew up in the United Church of Christ Episcopal church, and of course if you are down in the South, everybody got some Baptist in them, so I was a part-time Baptist too.

*MM:* I think that I first learned about you as a person in the Black Freedom Movement when millions of others did, in connection with, and the leadership of, a group called the Wilmington Ten. In the 1970s, along with Angela Davis, you were one of the most prominent political prisoners in the United States. Now there is a new generation of students, our young people, who don't know, I think, don't know that part of your history, and I want to briefly, if you could talk about that—what the Wilmington Ten case was

about, how it became both a national and international issue, and what you took away from the experience of being a political prisoner in this country.

*BM:* The Wilmington Ten case arose out of a city, Wilmington, North Carolina. In the early 1970s, there were a lot of struggles over school desegregation in the south. Keep in mind now that this is three years after Dr. King's assassination in 1968, and if we could just back up one little bit, I worked for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). I was the North Carolina state coordinator for young people, for the youth, from '65 up until the time that Dr. King was killed, and I really felt a calling to the ministry, but as a young college student I felt the ministry was a little too restrictive. So while I had a calling to the ministry, I didn't answer right then, and I became very much involved in student organizing, as a student myself, because in the 1960s, when you are sitting up in a college classroom, what's in the textbooks has to have some application to what's going on in the community. And that's why if you go back and read the '60s, a lot of the activism came from students on predominantly black college campuses, also predominantly white college campuses, and I was one of those students. Then when Dr. King was killed, April 4, 1968, it was very traumatic. Here a man who preached peace was gunned down. I became very angry, I wanted to join the most radical black organization I could find because I was through with nonviolence, at least in my mind, and I joined a very militant organization in Charlotte, North Carolina. That didn't last too long, because when people start turning on one another, I needed some nonviolence. So I got out of that pretty good, and I decided to answer God's calling to the ministry. I am being very honest, don't have time to go by detours, that's giving it to you very straight.

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So I answered God's call into the ministry in 1969.

Albert Clegge, somebody that people should study, who wrote *The Black Messiah*, founded this Shrine of the Black Madonna, was a friend of Brother Minister Malcolm [X] of Detroit.

**MM:** That's where Malcolm gave his message to the grassroots switch.

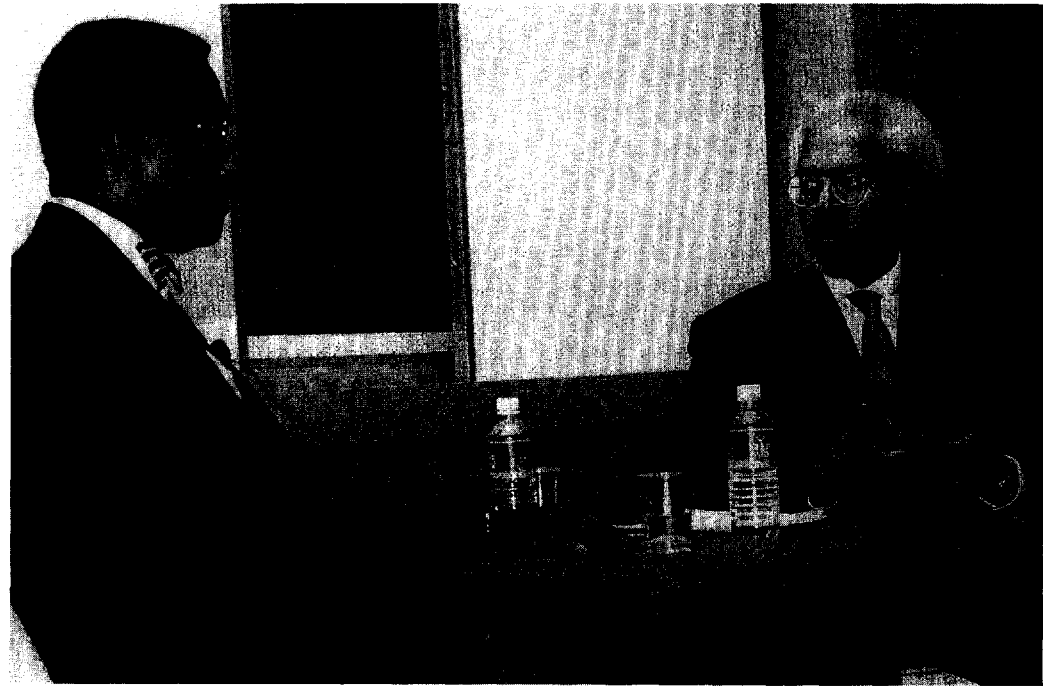
**BM:** Right, the Shrine of Black Madonna. Well, I was first ordained as a Black Christian Nationalist minister. Most people don't know that the BCN, the Black Christian Nationalist Minister, was a subset of the United Church of Christ. You go look in the yearbook right now, you'll find the Shrine of the Black Madonna listed as a United Church of Christ church, a predominantly white church, Shrine of the Black Madonna. Albert Clegge, fiery black preacher, who just died this year, may Allah rest his soul, was a nationalist, but who believed that there was white supremacy institutionalized in the Christian theology in the Christian church and set up this movement that's still alive today in Detroit, Atlanta, and Houston, and several other cities.

Now so you have to understand that by the time I became a United Church of Christ minister, I had a thorough background of working for Dr. King, working for the NAACP, SCLC, Shrine of the Black Madonna, and I was an organizer, I knew how to organize. So the United Church of Christ sent me to Wilmington, North Carolina, in February of 1971 to give assistance to black high school students, and there was a young man in junior high school at that time named Michael Jordan, who was just learning to play basketball. He's from Wilmington, North Carolina, and even Brother Michael Jordan and some of the students in that school system were being persecuted. NAACP had went to court, had a school de-

segregation suit against the city, and the implementation of the court order desegregation plan really punished the black community. It closed inner-city schools, and they were busing black students to the suburbs. When the buses got to the suburbs and tried to go to these schools, they were physically attacked. That's why the United Church of Christ sent me to Wilmington. I organized the students, by the grace of God. We met a church called the Greater Congregation of the United Church of Christ.

There is an organization in my home state of North Carolina called the ROWP, which is to the far right of the Ku Klux Klan. ROWP stands for the Right of White People organization. It is a power military white supremacist organization. They literally attacked the church. Now keep in mind what was going on in 1971, Nixon and Agnew had run on a law-and-order campaign, so we said, well now, where is our law and order? We're in our own church, we are in our own community, yet we are being attacked by these white supremacists. The chief of police, whose name is Williamson, said to me personally, he said, "Reverend, close up the church, stop having the meetings, and the Klan and ROWP will not have anything to shoot at." And I said no. Not me, the community said no. The church was the last refuge they had.

So we stayed and defended ourselves. And because we stayed and defended ourselves, the governor sent in the National Guard, and even though we were the victim of the bullets, they put us in jail. Ten of us, and I was the oldest at twenty-two years old. The others were only fifteen-, sixteen-, seventeen-year-old high school students. We became known as the Wilmington Ten. They charged us for conspiracy charges, conspiracy to riot, conspiracy to arson, all of which were false charges. They gave us a trial that lasted a month long. We were sentenced to 282 years in prison. This was in October of 1972. So for almost ten years, the whole



Minister Muhammad and Dr. Manning Marable. Photo by John Smock

decade of the '70s, we had to fight to free ourselves from this unjust conviction, and that's how we became known as political prisoners. On December 4, 1980, the Fourth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals overturned the convictions of the Wilmington Ten, cleared our records, and let us out of prison. But suffice it to say, it was a trying ordeal for all of the members of the Wilmington Ten, and unfortunately, sad to say, two members of the Wilmington Ten did not make it. Today, as it was then, there's drugs in prison and one of my codefendants became a drug addict while he was in prison, because drugs are sold to the inmates by prison guards in state prison institutions all over the country. Another one, the youngest one, died of an injury he had in prison, he was sixteen years old, his name is Joe Wright.

So when I tell the Wilmington Ten story, I can't go into all of the intricacies of the story,

but that's it in a nutshell. Ten people falsely accused. Someone said, well, if you didn't do anything how can you wind up being sentenced to prison for 282 years? But what we did, we stood up and demanded justice, we stood up and tried to protect the rights of the children in the schools, and the criminal justice system is that, it is criminal, and it will criminalize you.

**MM:** What do you take from the experience that you had in prison that shapes you today when you think back on that ordeal, that experience?

**BM:** Well, I would like to feel that I was shaped before I went to prison, but I would say that the prison did have impact on me, and it made me more intense, more disciplined. I decided, along with my codefen-

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dants, that you shouldn't just serve time, you should make time serve you. You should try to improve yourself while you are in prison. So if you ever get out—keep in mind, when I was sentenced, I had the longest of the ten sentences. My sentence was thirty-four years. So I had no idea, although I was hoping and praying that we would win the case, I had to prepare myself for a long haul.

In fact, while I was in prison, I began to study the teachings of the Most Honorable Elijah Mohammed, deepening my own faith. At the time, I was a Christian minister, and I was always curious about why do we have this separation between the three monolithic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And of course, you know, I spent a little time across the street at the Union Theological Seminary, and I still feel that our academic institutions are not only to ask the hard questions but search for the truth. The truth is, there is only one God, and religion has been used to put people to sleep rather than wake people up. And religion has been used to divide people rather than to bring people together.

So what does that have to do with the Wilmington Ten? In my impact, I came out of prison a more determined freedom fighter. Because one of the things that I learned in prison, even though I was a political prisoner, I could be selfishly just concerned about my self. So I identified with the prisoners' rights movement. The threats on my life made me understand the threats on all the inmates' lives, and I must tell, since this is truth-telling time, the church, at first, only wanted to free me, and I refused. I said no, ten of us went to prison, standing up for the church, the church needs to defend all of us, and the church did. So what I found out is the church will do right, the church has the proclivity to do right when pushed. You have to push the church to do what's right. It will not do what's right if

you don't push it. And I find that for all religious institutions.

I came out as a more determined brother. I think I remember a reporter asking me what was your greatest learning experience in prison, and I wrote these words to that reporter from the *Charlotte Observer*, "The greatest learning I had when I was in prison was that I finally came to grips with the oneness of God and the oneness of humanity." Now there is a lot backing that phrase up. Out of black suffering, you don't desire to see anybody suffer. Out of black slavery, you don't desire to put anyone else as your slave; in fact, you don't want slavery, period. And I think that's why sometimes black people are misunderstood in America or misunderstood in the world.

**MM:** Your election as leader of the NAACP in 1993 created great enthusiasm throughout Black America, and part of the reason was because there were broad sectors of the African-American community, young people, the Hip Hop generation, Black Nationalist-oriented folk, radical folk, who had felt locked out of participation within the organization. We were much amazed that you had emerged as a leader of this formation, and there was a tremendous degree of outpouring of enthusiasm and interest in the NAACP that ranged from Angela Davis to Maulana Karenga and Haki Mahubuti, so that in appealing to such a broad spectrum of opinion, there was a tremendous sense of possibility. Now the controversy surrounding your tenure and departure from the NAACP generates debate within the African-American community. You have talked about that, but I wondered if you could talk about what your expectations were. First of all, why did you decide to offer leadership in the NAACP, what the main successes were in the leadership of the NAACP, and what would you have done dif-

ferently, knowing what you know now in leading that formation?

**BM:** I'll take them in the order in which you raised them. First, the motive. What was the motive for even running for the NAACP position? Dr. Benjamin Hooks, a former executive director and CEO of the NAACP, announced his retirement in 1992. I have a lot of respect for Dr. Benjamin Hooks. He was leaving some big shoes to fill, and in truth when he first announced his retirement, I had a very "safe job" as the CEO of the organization that I had worked for for thirty years, the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. My wife and I were in Cleveland at the church headquarters, and I have a friend named Reginald Lewis, some of you might know, who is the founder of TLC Beatrice, very successful brother. In fact, our first black billionaire. Reginald Lewis called me and asked when was my next trip to New York to see him, and he encouraged me to seek the position although it was pretty clear at that time that Jesse Jackson had the nomination sewed up. They were going to close the nominations for NAACP in November of '92.

On the last day, I submitted an application. I was encouraged by Reginald Lewis, and as Allah would have it, four candidates emerged, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, Jewel Jackson-McCabe, Earl Shinholster, and myself. NAACP has sixty-four board members, and it was not possible to visit all sixty-four of them, so I made a videotape, this is the truth, and sent it to all sixty-four, and on the videotape I said, "If you elect me as the new NAACP executive director, I would go get the young people and bring the organization back to life," because I felt, I said it on the tape, that the organization was not well connected to the growing aspirations of our people. But because of its history, the largest and oldest organization, I really wanted to resur-

rect the Du Bois tradition of the NAACP, and it was like a challenge. On the first ballot, you recall that week of the election in Atlanta, Jesse Jackson withdrew, and so I won on the first ballot, and in 1993 became the youngest person, I think I was forty-five years old at the time, maybe forty-four, to be over the NAACP. I went right to work. In fact, I kept my pledge. The NAACP is headquartered in Baltimore, the election was in Atlanta, I didn't even go to Baltimore after the election, I went straight to South Central Los Angeles; to the South Side [of Chicago].

But the point is, the motive was to help bring the organization out of the isolation, and so that was my motive. I felt that the NAACP could be a freedom-fighting organization. We wanted to start chapters in the Caribbean and Africa. Keep in mind that Nelson Mandela who, he and I used to write each other when I was in prison in North Carolina in the '70s, he was in prison in South Africa. Brother was released from prison, and I wanted the NAACP not to go monitor the election, let's go over there and help him get elected. And that's exactly what we did. It made the board very nervous, because the board said that if you are not an American citizen, you couldn't be in the NAACP, and I said that that doesn't sound right, there are colored people all over the world.

So now your question was what were the accomplishments? If you understand the motive, just list them. When I joined, when I became the executive director, the NAACP's membership was 480,000. When I left, it was 690,000, and of the more than 200,000 who had joined, I would say that 80 percent were young people, thirty-five and under. These are dues-paying members. NAACP has 2,203 branches. I was working myself into bad health, because I really believe in grassroots organizing. I was literally trying to visit every branch, networking and organizing. There were many nights I did not get to sleep, flying



on planes, charter planes. One of the things about being the NAACP executive director, you are like . . . president of Negro America. So everybody invites you, including the President. There were occasions that my wife and I, sitting at a table just like this in the White House, Clinton was right here, my wife, Hillary is over me, check, the band from the Navy is playing violins, it's very nice. But you always have to put a grip on yourself when you are up in the stratosphere of America and when you know the majority of your people are still crying out for freedom and justice, and you now even have people in the White House who say that they are your friend, and . . . it's a lot of contradictions that you have to grapple with.

Another accomplishment was, you remember, the Denny's situation. Here's a restaurant that don't even want to wait on black people. So we took them to task, and I was determined that I was not going to sign nothing with Denny's that did not really mean something for black people. During my tenure, we got the largest reparations from American corporations ever, at one point a \$4 billion agreement with Denny's. So Denny's today, not only will give you your food when you order it, but we have some brothers and sisters own them Denny's restaurants. In fact, some seventy are owned, lock, stock, and barrel, by black people, who are making good money in the inner city. In fact, if you go to the Denny's in South Central Los Angeles, you will find a menu without pork, efficacious for our people. So I am proud that we did not cave in, because a lot of times when you sit down, like the Texaco thing, when you sit down with these corporations, you know, they want to throw some crumbs to you off the table. We gotta stop that. We need to have our own table and don't accept crumbs from somebody else's table. That was an accomplishment, the largest agreement with an American corporation to repent for its

sins. We put it down there hard, financial, legal, so we can hold them accountable.

Another accomplishment was that we exposed the racism in the United States military. I went to Germany and, you know, if you go to, I don't know if there are any veterans in here, but if you go to Germany, there is still a lot of United States forces in Germany. Parts of Frankfurt and Munich look like Mississippi, there are so many brothers and sisters over there, and they bring the whole family. While I was over there, I said, well, let me visit the prison. I want to see the brig, and you know what I found? The United States military prisons abroad, you know what they look like? Just like the prisons here, like Riker's Island. So I'm saying now, I know some white prisoners break the law, why are they not in the brig? And they just basically admitted it, that the commanding officer determines who gets a felony, who gets a misdemeanor, and who gets a pat on the back and who gets long term. I'm talking about brothers and sisters in the brig. I went visiting the prison in Germany, I saw nothing but blacks and Latinos, men and women, locked up. So another accomplishment, we pulled the sheet off the military and got them to sign a consent agreement to stop the discrimination in terms of the enforcement of military law that was disproportionately on blacks and Hispanics.

Another accomplishment was moving the NAACP back to some forefront struggles. I wasn't there that long, eighteen months, but I would say that the crown jewel was the convening of the National African-American Leadership Summit in June of 1994 . . . you were there. Then we had a conference room at the NAACP headquarters that is a little bigger than this room, we got a table, and most people don't know, Manning, but you can try to tell them, you cannot get black leaders to sit down around one table, primarily because most of our organizations are not funded by us. So if somebody else is paying

your salary, somebody else will tell you if you can go to the meeting or not. That is why we have such profound disunity among our leadership. I felt that the NAACP was safe enough to sponsor a summit and then invite everybody to the summit. And that's exactly what we did.

**MM:** Let me intervene on two points here.

**BM:** I would count that as a success. And if I had to do it all over again, your last question, I would tell the whole board about the agreement to settle this sexual harassment suit against the NAACP. Only a small number of board members knew. That was a mistake, and if I had to do it all over again, I would tell the whole board. You know, we all learned hind-sighted knowledge is certainly better because you have a chance to think about it. I realized that I sacrificed myself to save the organization, and I guess that's what a CEO is supposed to do, you protect the organization. I did not want anyone, particularly a former employee, one that I had hired, to sue the NAACP, and I felt that the settlement would have ended the matter, but it did not, because the person in question was really after money, and I made a mistake in assuming that some of us would not do each other in, just for money. Unfortunately, too many of us have a price. We would sell ourselves, our family, sell our people, and that's a tragedy, because everybody ought to draw a line at some point, I'm not going to sell my soul, I'm not going to sell my people, but we live in a capitalist society, and I know that we are going to get into that, where too many of us are susceptible to monetary temptations. Unfortunately, we live in a climate where the politics, I had enemies, and of course, there were very powerful enemies that did not want me to invite the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan into the NAACP to sit around their table.

**MM:** Let me interrupt you, because there are two things that really strike me about what occurred in '93-'94. In August of '93, you might remember this, when the thirtieth anniversary of the March on Washington occurred, Minister Farrakhan was not invited.

**BM:** He was invited and then disinvited . . . because what happened was, there was a conference call of all the civil rights leaders, I was on it, and organized labor took the position that if we let Minister Farrakhan speak, they were going to cut the sound off and dismount the stages. Unfortunately, other civil rights leaders caved in.

**MM:** Was this Bill Lucy?

**BM:** Yes, it was Bill Lucy.

**MM:** So that in effect, labor took the initiative on this?

**BM:** It was labor, Jews, you know, the traditional forces that control the civil rights movement in terms of funding.

**MM:** What was Jesse's position on this?

**BM:** As I recall, Jesse did not oppose Minister Farrakhan being disinvited. Obviously, he did not support it, but he didn't oppose it. Our civil rights organizations are controlled financially outside of our community. So if we really want to support our organizations and make them our organizations, then we have to fund them. If we expect somebody else to pay for our freedom, we are never going to be free. If we expect somebody else to fund our institutions, that's really what I was trying to do at the NAACP, is to get them to the point that they would have their own endowment, which I should say, NAACP never had an endowment until we established the Reginald Lewis Endowment. So it is interesting during my final

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days that they would accuse me of wrecking the organization financially when in fact the organization was in multimillion dollar deficit when they hired me. I was trying to do everything that we could to bring the organization back into the black, but not by begging. The way you get the organization in the black is to get the constituency up, to put the organization back into the constituency's hands and not strengthen the stranglehold that corporate America has on our organizations. It wasn't just organized labor.

**MM:** Let's go back to 1994. Several days before the National African-American Summit, I had lunch with a prominent editor. He told me that you would be gone as head of the NAACP within three months. This is all before any of the controversy came to a head.

**BM:** Now, Manning, I know that you are supposed to ask me the questions, but was this editor Jewish?

**MM:** Well, I'm not sure, but I think that the whether he was Jewish or not is less important than the fact that he would say something specifically about you and that you would be removed from power. The point that I am making here is that there was a controversy around decisions that you made regarding this individual and the suit, but the progressive black community felt that the real issue was the direction that you were taking the NAACP. The real debate was around the whole idea of organizing an event to bring representatives of black leadership across the ideological spectrum, which actually had not been done in this century. I guess the frustrating thing for a lot of progressives was that this was a lost opportunity. How do you feel about this whole thing now?

**BM:** I say it's a blessing in disguise. If it had not been for the way that they treated me, and

you just can't talk about me, it's my family. My wife was pregnant, it was twins at the time, they cut off my income, cut off my insurance, we had to walk around with bullet-proof vests, threats on our lives. Solely because we called a meeting of our brothers and sisters at the table. So that made me feel that we were doing the right thing. We didn't back off. The very night I was fired, the next day, we went to Bethel A.M.E. Church and continued the National African-American Leadership Summit. So, in a sense, I am freer tonight than I have ever been in my life. And I thank Allah and I thank the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan for giving his brother a chance to work, to help our people move forward. And Manning, your presence at the summit and Cornel West's presence and Alvin Poussiant's presence and, you will recall, Betty Shaabazz was there. That was the first time she had been in a room with the minister in a long time.

**MM:** The Million Man March brought more people of African decent together at a public gathering than any event in black history in this country. I wonder if you could talk about your work as a national organizer of the Million Man March, what it accomplished. And secondly, your decision to join the Nation of Islam, which took many people who have known you for a long time by surprise, because of the long personal history that we knew about in your family of Christian ministers.

**BM:** The Million Man March we believe was called by Allah God through the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan. So, in order for me to be the national director, which I was, there first had to be a call that was on time, that resonated among our people. Prior to the Million Man March, the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan went all over the country on Stop the Killing campaigns. The detention



*Atonement. Photo by Phillippe Cheng*

rate among black males was at an all-time high prior to the Million Man March. And when the minister asked me to be their national director, I was honored. But you know, some of the colleagues that were shocked about me joining the Nation were also shocked about me accepting the responsibility of being the national director. Because some of our colleagues, Brother Manning, did not have faith that the Million Man March was even possible, and they said to me in private, oh brother, you have had one failure with the NAACP, and you know that the Million Man March is going to fail, you are just going to be through. I said, well, I believe this call is right. I believe that we can get a million brothers, you know.

We must be more optimistic about our capacity as a people to rise to the occasion in

our interest. When the words came out of Minister Farrakhan's mouth, calling for the Million Man March, Christians, Muslims, Hebrews, even brothers that were agnostic heard that call and many brothers were waiting for a chance to stand up. An opportunity to stand up. After the Million Man March, in the city of Detroit, so many brothers who took the pledge went back to pay their child welfare payments the city had to hire special tellers just to take the money. Sometimes these brothers for the first time went and paid their child support.

So how can an event be that transforming? Before you can change behavior, you had to change attitude. Attitudinal change led to behavioral change, and we believe, and we know, Allah willing, the Million Family March will be likewise transforming. But not just for men:

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men, women, and children, this October, on the fifth anniversary of the Million Man March in Washington. So I was honored and I worked. I wanted to have the opportunity not just to improve myself, but you know, in the Holy Quran, and in the Bible, it says trial and tribulation purify the heart. So I am thankful to even to my enemies for the trial and tribulation, because they helped purify the heart. None of us are perfect. I don't come tonight as a perfect brother, I come as one steady student striving to perfect myself, perfect my family, you know. I don't like to be falsely accused, but the way that you reprove and put your enemies down is go do some good work. Let your work stand. People will come and say anything, but at the end of your day, it's your work, it's what you do in life that counts. And particularly what you do for others that counts.

So my evolution now to Islam. The God that was calling me back in the '60s, that I said I finally answered, it's not a different God, God doesn't call you once, God calls you for a lifetime. The question is, do you answer? And so I answered God in calling me to the Christian ministry. God said, Ben, deepen your faith. Now I'm giving articulation to my understanding. Obviously, my budding growing friendship with the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan had an effect on me. No question about it.

The Million Man March was a glimpse of heaven on earth, and if we could do that one day, what can we do everyday? The Million Man March was the first, it was not only the largest, it was the only motivational where we paid for ourselves. People missed that. The organized labor did not fund the Million Man March. Ford Foundation did not fund the Million Man March. The Rockefeller Foundation, nowhere in sight. It came out of our own pockets. I remember Dick Gregory begged the minister, Brother Minister, please don't have the Million Man March on a Monday, because Brother Diggs said that there is

no history of us sacrificing. And the minister said, that's exactly why we are going to have it on a Monday, that's exactly why we are going to facilitate a sacrifice, pay your own way, you know, do for self, black man. And we learned something. But now the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan is calling for the Million Family March. He is not only calling black families, he's calling all families. Black, brown, red, white, to the Million Family March. Because we understand something about the oneness of God, the oneness of humanity and the struggle for justice. We want freedom, justice, and equality for all.

**Question:** One of the criticisms of the Million Man March came from a sector of black women, particularly black feminists, regarding the patriarchal, if not misogynistic, nature of the Million Man March. What is going to be their voice when it comes to the Black Family March?

**BM:** First of all, thank you for your question. The Million Family March will address the issues between and among black men and black women. Because these issues are fundamental to what we mean by family. Today, 70 percent of all of our children are raised in a home where only the mother is there. There's a father somewhere, but the father is not in the home. Mainly, the father is in prison. The reason why the Million Man March was called was not to put sisters down, in fact, it was to lift sisters up. But not in a paternalistic way, but to take responsibility. It is not right for the mother or for the sister to bear children and to raise children alone. And so the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan gave it to them very straight, brothers, take this pledge. Not go home and beat your wife or beat your loved one or disrespect her, but show some respect.

The Million Family March will deal with these issues. Is there a place for sisters who

consider themselves to be feminist to have voice? Yes. But we also make a place for sisters that are not feminist to have a voice. You see, if we ever get to the point where we can't even talk to each other because we are squaring off based on our understanding of the other's position, which may not be the other's position, it is our understanding or misunderstanding—so yes, in truth, the call for the liberation of our people cannot afford for brothers and sisters to square off on one another. I got a macho masculine perspective, a sister may have a strong feminist perspective. Look, our femininity and our masculinity came from God, and we first have to get right with God. Whatever your spectrum is get by the God. Secondly, we gotta get right with each other. But we are not going to be able to get right with each other if we can't even talk and allow—the thing that I really respect about the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan, despite what people may feel about him, and I have seen him permit opposing views not only to be expressed, but to go without impugning the integrity of your ability to raise the question. My thing is that truth stands on its own.

I remember the day before the Million Man March in the front page of the New York Times, some of our wonderful sisters were raising serious questions. But what was our response? Not to attack them, because then that would have played into the hands of the enemy. We have to be able to sit at a table, even sometimes when we disagree, and rise above whatever the disagreement for the larger cause. And I do not believe that feminism versus whatever the opposite of feminism is should anchor us in a situation where we can't talk. I think that we gotta talk. I'm glad you asked the question because really when the Million Woman March was called, they don't want to ask our permission, it wasn't necessary. And when the minister heard about the Million Woman March in Philadelphia, go give them all the support we could

because their success is our success. Our success is their success. The Million Youth March, no one asked what is this called for? Any way that we can help them be successful, help it be successful. Our young people's success is our success.

Family, I believe that we all can be a part of the family. I think that we are all a family, and this is for men, women, and children, and I think that we have to be inclusive. We want to bring everybody to the table. Nobody has asked me yet, so let me bring it out. Can gays come to the Million Family March? Well, the National Black Gay Association called and asked if they can participate in the Million Man March, and this is my answer, so help me Allah, "Brother, if you want to attend the Million Man March, you are welcome, just understand that it's a Million Man March." No, no, seriously, and some black gays came, and I don't think any of them were attacked. Because we were very clear about what we were calling. And when you are clear what you are doing, you don't have to be unclear by reacting to situations that could be potentially divisive, and this is what we have to avoid. There will be attacks on the Million Family March. We are not going to get ourselves in a point-counterpoint reactionary mode, we are going to keep right working on family.

**Question:** Good evening, Minister Muhammad, my name is Karen Jackson-Weaver, and I am a student of Professor Marable in the history department. In your life experience as a freedom fighter and the gifts that you have as an organizer, what vision do you have for the black community's poor and oppressed people given the systemic institutional racism and sexism within the capitalist regime, what do we do in terms of education and action, not reaction as you alluded to?

**BM:** Yes, sister, that's a good question to end it tonight on, the vision. Is a vision inclusive

**Family, I believe that we all can be a part of the family. I think that we are all a family, and this is for men, women, and children, and I think that we have to be inclusive. We want to bring everybody to the table.**

of all of humanity? We struggle not just for ourselves. Because now Allah has permitted us to have such a reproductive rate, and in spite of AIDS and all of the traumas and all the epidemics they are telling us about, we are all over the world. What is our responsibility as a global family, as a global community? What is our vision of the world? Over sixty years ago, the Most Honorable Elijah Mohammed said that this day would come. That out of our maturity as a people, out of our gaining the knowledge of self, there will be a projection of self on the world stage. There is only one super power left, we live in it. You are in a prestigious educational institution in the most powerful country in the world. So as you get everything you can academically from institutions like Columbia, have in mind now how you are going to apply it, because the forces are stacked against you duplicating yourself. See, but you have to be, this is my recommendation to you, you have to have a plan that you are going to get a hundred more sisters like yourself, a hundred more brothers like the brother that asked the question, not only to get on this campus but get on all the campuses. Not to get a license to leave the people, because the reason why Carl G. Wilson wrote that book, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, is because in 1933 when he wrote that book, he began matriculating to schools of higher learning. And the more we learned, the more we gave up our

land, the more we migrated to illusions, not a vision, to illusions.

And I want to say, dear sister, in all honesty, a vision without acknowledging God is blindness, it's like trying to breathe without oxygen, and when I say that, I am not trying to give you a religious spanking. If all of us say we believe in God, known by many names, God is one, and God is one, tell me, what prevents us from being one? What prevents us from having unity tonight, tomorrow, for the rest of our lives? Our vision, we have to envision unity, but in envisioning unity that frees people, not restrains the mind in the people. Because a lot of times right now, it's like the term "love", we have to redefine what we mean. Freedom, justice, equality, not equal to our oppressor but equal to what God will have us to be, and we have to elevate ourselves out of the reach. You see, I don't believe, dear sister, that you should ever restrain, and I don't think you are, but I am talking about the generation that you represent. You should try to learn everything you can from Professor Marable, and then raise a generation yourself. You should be thinking about marriage. . . .

Why am I saying that? Family without marriage is incomplete. Community without family is incomplete. Nation without community is incomplete, and you know, given the demographics, we have to really put a pin in this disproportional incarceration of our

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brothers, because now the forces that are already against us are so diabolical that they are reducing the opportunities of sisters to even find men. And so what happens, we begin to substitute who we are, and that's not right in the sight of God. So the vision has to be a righteous vision, and when I mean righteous, I'm not talking about some pietistic putting people down, no, no, we gotta to lift people up. There are thousands, Brother Manning, of brothers and sisters who live right here in Harlem who have never set foot on Columbia's university campus. They pass by, so the educational benefit of a campus

like this, we have to exploit it to the community, the benefit.

Number three and lastly, I can tell you what I went through in the '50s and the '60s, but I suspect that there is a weight on the mind and on the life of brothers and sisters today who are younger that's much heavier than the weight that I had on me. So the vision is not only that we go and speak to our people, we gotta listen. And one of the biggest complaints that I hear as I move around the country, the young people say that no one is listening, no one is paying attention.