

A Shameful Parade - Sons of Celebrated Leaders Who are in Jail or on the Way to Jail

Written by Dr. Barbara Reynolds
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It's hard for me to overlook the shameful parade of sons of celebrated leaders who are in jail or on the way to jail for confessed crimes ranging from bribery, embezzlement and just plain thievery. Their crimes go beyond mere law-breaking.

The latest inductees to the Political Hall of Shame are: Former Washington, D.C. council member Michael A. Brown (D) who this month pled guilty to accepting \$55,000 in illegal funds, some of which were stuffed in a Redskins coffee mug. Former Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr., who is awaiting sentencing after a guilty plea of embezzling \$750,000 from his campaign funds to purchase such things as a Rolex watch, furs and a fedora previously owned by Michael Jackson. And then there's former D.C. Councilman Harry Thomas, Jr. (D- Ward 5) who is serving time after admitting to stealing \$355,000 in city funds that could have gone to make a difference in the lives of city youths.

Just as civil rights victories are celebrated collectively, the spectacles of college educated sons in upper middle class families joining the felons in the prison pipeline have created collective sadness among the rank and file. These men's very ascent to higher office was on the backs of their famous fathers, trailblazers in the political and civil rights struggle. Civil Rights veteran Jesse Jackson Sr. credible runs for president in 1984 and 1988 were jewels in the foundation later polished and perfected by President Obama. Ron Brown, the late commerce secretary and

Democratic National Committee chairman, opened avenues for Black businesses and business development as did the senior Thomas.

One can only wonder what created this downward spiral and what does it say to the next

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generation? What lessons did they learn from their fathers? Is this fathering gone wrong? Were they so busy fathering the community that they did not father in their own homes? Jesse Jr. and Michael Brown grew up as privileged sons fathered into circles of wealth and influence. They grew to manhood at a time when the rhetoric of hard work, integrity and ethical based public service rang in their ears and the doors opened by their famous fathers were present for them to walk through.

Did their successful upbringing evolve into a culture of greed and self indulgence where victories for the masses then became internalized into victories for self which entitled them to desire the biggest symbols of material success: expensive cars, the bling, the swagger, the style? Public service has become the big ticket of self-indulgence, creating a court of youngish, entitled Black privileged princes. In a way, the fruit did not fall far from the tree because in some circles, men like Jackson and Brown performed like Kings of the Hill.

This heir of entitled nobility perhaps explains why Jackson Junior felt the need to use public funds to purchase the fedora that crowned the head of Michael Jackson, the King of Pop. Did Jackson Jr. relish a crown himself? Brown's lawyer explained his client's confessed guilt of accepting \$55,000 in illegal funds to the crashing of the economy. Most district residents are suffering hardships so the example of this public servant is "steal your way out of it?"

My listening ear has picked up many excuses for this behavior. An often heard argument: "Well, these Black men are not doing anything that Whites haven't been doing all along." Granted, theft is an equal right among thieves, but to African-Americans, who represent a group that has been denied resources, seen their children swallowed up by drugs, poor schools and a prison pipeline, public funds in the hands of honest politics could be life-saving; that choice must not be an option.

Like many area residents, I am pained by this sad spectacle because I had personal contact with these fathers. In the early seventies in Chicago I was a neighbor and frequent visitor to the Jackson household, talking to his wife, Jackie. I delighted in carrying the chubby faced Jesse Junior on my shoulders. Throughout his career, I respected him as a brilliant man.

Two weeks before he died in a plane crash, Ron Brown summoned me to his office at the Commerce Department. This had never happened before and I always felt it was an invitation to keep watch over how the past would impact the future. And shortly before Thomas Senior died, I stood shoulder to shoulder with him as we were recognized by Allstate Insurance for public

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service.

Despite their setbacks there is still a future role for these favored sons. Their fathers were not perfect servants but at their very best were public servants. It is not too late for the sons to honor their fathers.

Barbara Reynolds, a former columnist for USA Today, is an author of six books, including Jesse Jackson: America's David: The Man, the Meaning and the Myth.