

# NAACP Ousts Executive Director

## Here Are Hard Questions for the NAACP Board to Answer

**Baltimore Sun Aug. 16, 1994 by Carl T. Rowan (Chicago Sun-Times nationally syndicated columnist)**

WASHINGTON--The national board of directors of the NAACP will hold its most critical meeting in the organization's 85-year history in Baltimore on Saturday. The surface catalyst for this explosive session is a secret \$332,400 settlement to try to silence a former woman employee who claims she was fired after "an adulterous relationship" with NAACP Executive Director Benjamin Chavis, Jr. ended.

But so much more is at stake, including the very survival of the oldest and once most-powerful of the nation's civil rights organizations. The board should deal with these other issues:

- Whether Mr. Chavis and board chairman Dr. William F. Gibson are such incompetent, arrogant leaders that they have brought the NAACP to the brink of self-destruction.
- Whether Dr. Gibson and his board allies have been so ruthless as to make the NAACP board a bickering, incompetent, irrelevant disgrace.
- Whether loose and improper uses of scarce NAACP funds by Mr. Chavis and Dr. Gibson have destroyed the respect and trust of major supporters, such as the Ford Foundation and General Motors, and of even the smallest donors.
- Whether Dr. Gibson is untruthful in saying that he knew nothing about a \$332,400 commitment of hush money to former employee Mary E. Stansel until months after the short-lived deal was cut.

I have been warned by a source in NAACP headquarters that the board may barely get to the real issues on Saturday. The strategy, I am told, is to try to blame the former executive director, Benjamin Hooks, for all the current woes of the NAACP, then assail the media -- and me specifically.

The Gibson plan allegedly is to divert board members from the issue of whether to oust him and Mr. Chavis until half the board members start running to catch planes home and no decision can be made. If such a farce is carried out, NAACP paralysis will continue, with the organization unable to deal with such great issues as a crime bill, health-care reform and welfare reform.

Several prominent national board members have complained repeatedly and futilely to Dr. Gibson that the board, as stacked by the chairman, shows no leadership, direction or vision. Last Feb. 2, Leroy W. Warren, Jr., a national board member from Silver Spring, Md., wrote to Dr. Gibson that, "Black people are facing a very serious crisis in this country at all levels. . . . We as a NAACP National Board are not addressing many relevant issues in an adequate and in-depth manner. You have allowed your close personal friends and/or surrogates to run amok and operate like a Mafia which, by devious actions, continually sets out to destroy those who disagree with your and/or their positions . . . I have come to the conclusion that you and many of your favorite National Board Members are more concerned about staying in power than dealing with substantive issues critically affecting the masses of Black people."

On Monday, Mrs. Medgar Evers, widow of the slain Mississippi civil rights leader, asked me to print her appeal to fellow board members: "This is a fateful meeting at which each board member must ignore threats, or fear of losing some position of power or prestige, and do what we know is necessary to restore the NAACP to its glorious history of integrity and power. We must be selfless and brave and face the issues with courage."

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Some of the few people of intellect and vision who remain on the national board tell me that they will resign if Dr. Gibson and his cronies prevail at the Saturday meeting. That would be the absolute ruin of the once-great NAACP.

**St. Louis Post-Dispatch August 21, 1994, by Gregory Freeman**

BALTIMORE -- The board of directors of the NAACP decided Saturday evening to oust the Rev. Benjamin Chavis as executive director, officially for committing \$332,000 of the organization's money to settle a sexual harassment suit.

But his firing was based on much more than that, and board members - and a crowd of Chavis' supporters assembled outside the NAACP's headquarters, where the meeting was held - knew it.

Chavis' first offense - obviously - was committing funds for the settlement without approval of the board. He was under intense scrutiny following news late last month that he had agreed to settle the suit filed against him and the NAACP by paying the money. The ethics behind Chavis' decision may have been in question, but the procedure that he followed should not have been. In fact, the association's executive director - under current bylaws - has broad powers and has settled suits in the past.

The decision to oust Chavis goes considerably further than that. Some board members were angered that Chavis met with some extremists in Detroit a while back without the board's permission and without notifying Detroit NAACP officials. Others were steamed that he had invited Nation of Islam head Louis Farrakhan to attend an African-American Leadership Summit sponsored by the NAACP in June.

The second such summit, coincidentally, will be held Sunday in Baltimore, and Farrakhan is expected to attend. Such matters angered some board members. "He's terribly arrogant, and he doesn't give this board the respect it deserves," said one board member. "He needs to remember that we are his boss, not the other way around."

Chavis was attempting to take to another plane an organization in danger of becoming irrelevant. Many of those who benefited from the efforts of the organization in its first 70 years or so have now achieved middle-class status. Their need for the NAACP is considerably less than it once was.

Chavis was trying to turn the organization in a direction where he felt it could do the most good - with the poor and the young. His efforts to help young people did not go unnoticed Saturday, as about 150 Chavis supporters waited for a verdict outside the headquarters. Many of them were young people, like David Harding. Harding, 21, is a student at City University of New York. To him, Saturday's meeting made "absolutely no sense. How can they do this to Dr. Chavis after all he's done for the NAACP?" he asked. "It's like the minute a brother tries to reach out and do something good, someone comes along and tries to stop him."

A major question, though, was how many people and corporations would have been willing to "up the money," as questions continued about the association's finances and Chavis' decisions.

"Chavis needs to realize that the NAACP is an old organization, and you've got to move slowly," said Robert Hinton, 43, of Reston, Va. Hinton, who was among the Chavis supporters, said: "Their biggest problem with him, I think, is that he moves too fast. He knows things need changing, and he's jumped right on it. The board wanted him to work up to it."

The ethical questions raised by Chavis' decision to settle a harassment suit that involved him are troubling and should not be minimized. The question remains, however, whether the board did the right thing Saturday. Despite their decision to oust Chavis, even board members must realize that Chavis brought with him significant pluses. His efforts to help the association become relevant again will have to be picked up by board members and whomever they choose to succeed him.

Regardless of its leadership, the NAACP needs a new direction. Whether its board has the insight to realize that may determine the organization's survival into the next century.