

Neither Right nor Left: Grassroots Black Conservatism in Post- World War II America

by Chanelle Rose

Rowan University



© 2020 by Chanelle Rose



Neither Right nor Left: Grassroots Black Conservatism in Post-World War II America

In the summer of 2018, I was awarded a Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) research stipend to conduct research on my book project, tentatively titled *Neither Right nor Left: Grassroots Black Conservatism in Post-World War II America*. Over the past two decades, the growth of scholarship on the history of modern conservatism and the rise of the New Right has moved this ideology from the margins of American society to mainstream political thought. Much of this work has foregrounded the lives, organizations, and political activity of white conservatives in the U.S. But scholars have begun to pay more serious attention to African Americans and their leadership in the Republican Party during the postwar era. Notwithstanding the significance of this emerging literature, it places a strong national and state focus on the instrumental role of black Republicans who waged an uphill battle to secure the GOP's commitment to civil rights and racial equality. My project adopts a more bottom-up approach to understanding the development of modern black conservatism and its impact on the African American struggle for racial equality, focusing on its evolution in local communities from 1950 to 1985. I contend that even though the important role of black Republicans and conservatives at the national level during this period has begun to receive more attention, the lesser well-known individuals and groups, especially black women, who helped to shape conservative ideas about crime, education, and economic advancement, require further study. In addition, there is a dearth of local studies that examine how ordinary men and women critically influenced conservative ideas about racial uprisings, Black Power, busing, welfare, police brutality, the War on Poverty, gay rights and feminism. I argue that while some African Americans ostensibly appropriated conservative ideas about family, morality, and individualism, others refashioned these ideas to address their racialized experiences.

Leah Wright Riguer's and Joshua Farrington's influential books on black Republicans provide a more nuanced analysis of modern black Republicanism that explore the intersection of race, civil rights, and conservatism.¹ Both authors point out that black Republicans did not fit neatly into the camp of the civil rights establishment or mainstream Republican Party ideology; but they dedicate less attention to the grassroots black organizations and individuals who embraced more conservative views while not fully adopting the political ideologies of a Republican or Democrat. Within the black community, writers, churches, radio talk shows, fraternal organizations, women's auxiliary groups, civic and business leaders, think tanks, and political clubs gave local people an opportunity to advance conservative ideas. In fact, the contested legacies of anticommunism, civil rights and Black Power movements, and President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs, followed by the emergence of an "urban crisis" in postindustrial cities, evoked a wide range of responses to racial inequality from the black community that ranged from conservative to militant.

Conducting research at the RAC has provided a wealth of information on numerous local organizations and people who not only supported Nelson A. Rockefeller's (NAR) gubernatorial reelection campaign but also adopted more conservative views on a variety of problems confronting African Americans during the postwar years. The town meetings that NAR held in various parts of the state gave local people an opportunity to air their grievances and ask Rockefeller specific questions about important issues affecting their neighborhoods or boroughs. Although the transcripts from some of these meetings held in the late 1960s and early 1970s addressed people's complaints about police misconduct or the state's failure to address other forms of racial injustice, they also shed light on conservative responses from the black community. For example, business owner Arnold Johnson of Harlem, NY emphasized the need for more black-owned businesses, and a minister from Queens asked the governor to address the problem of banks not lending money to Puerto Rican or black businesses.² The files on the National Business League, National Bankers Association, National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Clubs, and Interracial Council for Business Opportunity also reveal the names of key individuals, particularly from the black middle class, who often shunned government welfare

relief and promoted economic advancement as the most viable method of achieving economic progress.

Nelson Rockefeller's gubernatorial reelection campaigns often focused heavily on recruiting African American voters who supported the governor's more liberal policies toward civil rights. Jackie Robinson, his close friend and a prominent black Republican, played an instrumental role in garnering votes for Rockefeller in Harlem as part of the campaign's vigorous black outreach efforts. NAR's gubernatorial records include memoranda that identify key members of the Negro Advisory Board and potential Democrats who might switch party affiliations for Rockefeller. Some of the individuals included were Atlanta businessman T.M. Alexander, John Johnson (publisher of *Jet* and *Ebony*), Reverend Sandy Ray, president of the Empire State Baptist Association, and an extremely influential Republican Baptist minister from Brooklyn. Robinson also addressed the importance of luring Attorney Cornelius McDougal, a Democrat; he described him as a highly respected member of Harlem's community, a day-to-day business manager for Upper Manhattan Medical Group, and board chairman of Harlem Teams for Self-Help, an anti-poverty program that was seemingly different from the Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited. Looking more closely at these individuals may offer alternative voices to more liberal ideas about eliminating poverty in black communities.³

In addition, the political canvassing by Nelson Rockefeller's black outreach campaign in 1966 documents some of the Harlem community's main concerns about a variety of issues: poverty, welfare, narcotics, busing, and education. As a special consultant on the black voter, Perkins Curtis reported that, in contrast to NAACP leaders who strongly supported busing or staunch advocates of welfare rights, the majority of those interviewed opposed forced busing while others refused welfare because of its humiliating aspects. In sum, many of them preferred jobs to "welfare handouts" and disagreed with civil rights leaders' position on forced busing.

The archival material on narcotics in NAR's personal papers and gubernatorial records offer more insight into the attitudes of middle- and working-class blacks

in Harlem who sought a variety of ways to address crime and drugs in their neighborhoods.⁴ The Citizens Action for Safer Harlem, United Harlem Drug Fighters, and the anti-crime committee of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) espoused policies that sometimes conflicted with the more liberal agenda of civil rights activists. For example, Reverend Oberia Dempsey, with his support for the controversial Rockefeller Drug Laws in the 1973 NAR Press Conference on Drugs, created a schism within the black community over the most effective way to deal with the drug crisis in Harlem.⁵

In addition to looking at more conservative approaches to tackling crime and drugs in black communities, at the RAC, the Ford Foundation's records and reports on the origins of racial uprisings underscore the range of black attitudes to the Watts riots in 1965. The support of Black Power activists who viewed Watts as an uprising, alongside staunch criticism from reputable civil rights organizations that condemned the riots, is fairly well documented, but the reaction of everyday black men and women has received less attention. With the financial aid and support of the Ford Foundation, Brandeis University's Center for the Study of Violence surveyed attitudes toward the "Negro riots." Some of the categories included "Negro Perceptions of Negro Attitudes," which may provide insights into the more conservative attitudes of African Americans who strongly condemned the riots while reinforcing negative stereotypes of lawlessness or criminality among blacks.⁶

Numerous black organizations sought financial assistance from NAR because of his altruistic contribution to different causes, and his personal papers show that some of these groups adopted a fervent patriotic and Cold War agenda that is often associated with conservative organizations. Under the leadership of the Southern Educational and Recreational Association (SERA), President Jesse Elps sought financial assistance from Rockefeller to support the organization's vocational programs and tutoring services for young school dropouts. In the early 1960s, SERA's focus on citizenship training and "civil living instead of civil rights" distinguished it from many mainstream civil rights groups.⁷

Moreover, the American Negro Emancipation Centennial Authority, Inc., (ANECA) not only requested funding from Nelson Rockefeller for celebratory events but also asked him to accept the position as honorary chairman for New York. Representative leaders of the ANECA New York-New Jersey division included Executive Director Jackie Robinson, honorary member Ralph Bunch, Joe Louis, George Schuyler, and J.A. Rogers. In accordance with the “Century of Negro Progress” theme designated for 1963, the New York-New Jersey division emphasized its mission to celebrate the progress and welfare of Negroes in New York and New Jersey, while promoting the advancement of Negro people. The division organized an American Negro exposition, live theatrical performances, and a two-hour television entertainment spectacular to display the talents of African American artists. It expressed a strong interest in presenting the “true image” of the American Negro and racial progress, which would challenge Soviet communist propaganda that heavily criticized US race relations. The members believed that their efforts would help increase respect for American democracy and potentially gain the support of uncommitted nations during the Cold War. According to the report, “We are confident and equally determined that such a display will not only be educational, but also create goodwill while demonstrating to the worlds we live in a democracy in spite of occasional interruptions.” Characterizing the ubiquity of racial discrimination as “occasional interruptions” definitely deviated from the rhetoric of mainstream civil rights organizations, even during the height of cold war liberalism.⁸

The records relating to Julius A. Adams (fellow alternate-at-large to the Republican National Convention) in Nelson Rockefeller’s personal papers provide a detailed look at the political ideology and organizations of black Republican leaders in New York. During the 1950s, Adams sought Rockefeller’s support for the *Economic Bulletin*, a publication that focused on promoting economic uplift in the black community. Adams’ memorandum to NAR featured a short piece in the *Economic Bulletin* that commended Harlem’s Bowery Savings Bank and its president, Mr. Earl B. Schultz, for erecting a middle-income housing project in the community. As its publisher, Adams emphasized the need for such a magazine and derided the philosophy of certain groups, whom he characterized as “enemies of American Enterprise.” He explained that African Americans belonged to groups

that made them more dependent on government handouts and discouraged business leadership. Like many black Republicans at the national and state level, he stressed the importance of self-help and free enterprise.⁹

Moreover, as part of the GOP task force, Adams helped to prepare a detailed report to make the Republican Party more attractive to black voters, especially during the 1956 presidential campaign. After delivering a crude assessment of the Democratic Party's stronghold on non-political welfare groups and civil rights organizations like the NAACP, Adams chastised black Republican district leaders for their record of "failure, inaction, and apathy." He also attributed the lack of black support for the GOP to the Republican leadership's failure to develop adequate machinery to draw black voters in New York, since they shared similar ideological views with the party. In fact, after traveling to different parts of the country, Adams concluded: "Negroes are not Communists, have no sympathy for them, have no fight on American capitalism, and are philosophically Republicans." This perspective underscores the idea that many African Americans rejected leftist or socially Democratic views that challenged traditional views about capitalism and the government.¹⁰

The archival material on black Republican Hugh Morrow in the NAR gubernatorial records identifies the fractures in the Democratic Party that could have provided a window of opportunity for Republicans to court the African American vote. Morrow, race advisor to President Dwight Eisenhower and campaigner for Richard Nixon, critiqued LBJ's appeal to white votes, support for states' rights, and comments on crime in his 1967 State of the Union address. He referenced prominent black psychologist Kenneth Clark's comments that civil rights had been subordinated to a minor position in LBJ's program to bolster his argument that blacks may return to the Republican party or seek Black Power as an alternative.

The detailed account of the National Economic Growth and Reconstruction Organization (NEGRO), a self-help organization in Jamaica, NY, placed a strong emphasis on self-pride, self-determination, and human dignity. Echoing the rhetoric of Republicans who decried the negative effects of charity or perceived handouts, the report explained, "For too long now Negro Americans have been

shackled—first by the chains of iron, then by the chains of charity.” It even claimed that the “chains of charity” were more damaging than “the chains of iron” because they kept blacks in a crippling position of dependency. Since “paper freedom” was characterized as meaningless in the civil rights movement, only real economic security could address the problems facing social dependents. To avoid the trappings of the dole, NEGRO built on its founder’s principle: “From protest, to production, to partnership.”¹¹

The research conducted at the Rockefeller Archive Center will contribute to my larger book project on black conservatism, as well as a peer-reviewed article.

¹ Leah Wright Rieger, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Joshua Farrington, *Black Republicans and the Transformation of the GOP* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

² “Town Meeting,” January 21, 1969, box 28, folder 573, series 25, Press Office, FA368, Nelson A. Rockefeller (NAR) Gubernatorial Records, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), Sleepy Hollow, NY.

³ “Perkins, Curtis—Special Consultant on Negro Vote, 1966,” box 47, folder 1772, series 5, FA440, NAR Gubernatorial Records, RAC.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Drug Abuse Proposal Materials,” January 22, 1973, box 89, folder 1837, series 25, Press Office, FA368, NAR Gubernatorial Records, RAC.

⁶ “Survey of White and Negro Attitudes towards Race-Related Riots and Demonstrations in Selected Cities,” Brandeis University Grant no. 06600435, Reel 1474, FA732A, Ford Foundation Records, RAC.

⁷ “Southern Educational Recreational Association - January 2, 1964, Race Relations, box 201, folder 2018, series L, FA348, NAR Personal Papers, RAC.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Julius Adams, “Excerpts of Letter of January 25, 1952,” box 201, folder 2019, series L, FA348, NAR Personal Papers, RAC.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “Perkins, Curtis—Special Consultant on Negro Vote, 1966,” box 47, folder 1772, series 5, FA440, NAR Gubernatorial Records, RAC.