

Preaching and Politics

A reponse to [Beyond the Civil Rights Industry](#)

Peter Dreier

Eva Thorne and Eugene Rivers criticize black civil rights and political leaders for being "out of touch with today's reality," genuflecting to "sacred cows," and showing unquestioning loyalty to the Democratic Party. They call for a new generation of black leaders, particularly those in the church, to address the plight of the black poor. Black politics, they argue, "must move from protest to program, from assertions of identity to demands for action."

Nice rhetoric. What does it mean in practice?

Soon after taking office, President Bush announced a "faith-based" initiative to provide religious organizations with federal funds to address the symptoms of poverty—particularly drugs and crime. At the White House photo-op, widely published in the nation's newspapers, there was Rivers, only a check-length away from the president, endorsing the program. By doing so, he was providing legitimacy to a president who wasted no time forgetting the "compassionate" part of his conservatism.

No doubt, Thorne and Rivers believe that blacks will gain some political leverage by giving Republicans some of their support and forcing both major parties to compete for their votes. Well, if not leverage, at least some federal grants. Under Bush's faith-based initiative, some black churches—like Rivers's Azusa Christian Community in Boston—will find themselves awash in federal funds to feed the hungry and counsel troubled youth. Indeed, many churches are already using federal funds to provide social services as well as to sponsor such effective community development work as building affordable housing and helping to bring businesses into inner-city neighborhoods.

These endeavors are worthwhile, but at current funding levels they will have limited effect on the plight of the poor. What's needed is to expand the federal pie for economic and social assistance, not to slice the existing pie into smaller pieces. Bush can't do that if he cuts taxes for the rich and swells the military budget. Countering Bush's agenda requires organizing, but Thorne and Rivers have no strategy for mobilizing the poor—black and otherwise—for power.

Some basic arithmetic might help here. Blacks represent about 12 percent of the nation's population, a minority in every state and most congressional districts, and some 26 percent—8.3 million out of 32.2 million—of the nation's poor.¹ So any strategy to address the plight of the black poor requires building multiracial political coalitions.

Moreover, despite wide racial disparities in income and wealth, most black adults are *not* poor. They are post office employees, factory workers, baggage handlers, nurses, secretaries, lab technicians, and teachers. We need a broad policy agenda that will help unite Americans who are on the bottom two-thirds of the economic ladder around a common vision of the American

Dream. These Americans—white, black, brown, yellow, and all shades in-between—are the vast majority and did not benefit sufficiently during the nation's recent economic upturn and will certainly suffer during the next downturn of the business cycle.

Thorne and Rivers offer a vague notion that the new black professional class, led by clergy and others, will somehow forge common ground with the black poor. Certainly the poor could use such allies in their struggle for social and economic justice. But Thorne and Rivers propose nothing that will empower poor people, across the racial divide, to build their own organizations, change relations of power, and win improvements in living and working conditions. Nor do they offer a real policy agenda for achieving these goals.

Over the past decade, Rivers has earned a national reputation as both a courageous street minister who works with troubled young people in Boston's Dorchester ghetto and as a self-promoter who aims scattershot attacks on anyone who disagrees with him. He has appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* and the Ford Foundation's magazine for his work with the Ten-Point Coalition, a loose network of black ministers. He's been profiled in the *New York Times*. He's garnered praise from Boston Mayor Tom Menino and Police Commissioner Paul Evans, as well as Harvard sociologist Christopher Winship (in an article in the conservative magazine, *The Public Interest*), for contributing to the city's declining youth crime rate. All this has helped Rivers attract large foundation grants for his base of operations, the Ella Baker House.

Ella Baker would be turning in her grave if she visited the building Rivers named for her. A brilliant behind-the-scenes organizer in the civil rights movement, Baker believed that the real test of leadership was to patiently develop indigenous grassroots leaders and build strong organizations that contest the relations of power. She was a caustic critic of charismatic ministers who speechify but don't mobilize. Rivers fits the profile.

Rivers should remember an important lesson that God taught to Moses about leadership and organizing. Moses complained to God about the burdens of leadership, and about how people didn't appreciate his work on their behalf. God told Moses, "Remember what I have tried to teach you. Call seventy of the elders to come to the Tent of the Presence. Then I will pour some of the spirit of leadership that you have upon them, so they can help in leading the people."

Over the years, Rivers has no doubt aided hundreds of black youth by helping to divert them from the gang subculture. At any given time, a few dozen young people may attend Rivers's Sunday services and participate in Ella Baker House activities. This revolving door kind of social work is surely valuable on an individual level, but it does not train leaders, build organization, or help the poor to lift themselves from poverty.

Faith-based groups can be a powerful force for social justice. In Boston and elsewhere, there *are* community, church, and labor groups engaged in more effective political work among the black poor. The community group ACORN led the fight for Boston's living-wage law. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (a coalition of churches, community groups, and social service agencies) has successfully sponsored both community organizing and economic and housing development in the city's most devastated poverty area. In dramatic contrast to Rivers's approach, the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO), an affiliate of the Industrial Areas

Foundation (IAF) network, is a broad-based, multi-issue, multi-racial organization of about ninety religious congregations from the Boston area. Drawing on the moral and organizational resources of religious congregations, it develops grassroots leaders and builds stable organizations that mobilize large numbers of people to change public policy. Last year, for example, GBIO successfully organized more than 5,000 congregants to meet with and pressure the state legislature to create a \$100 million housing trust fund.

In Texas, the IAF has built powerful multi-racial organizations, based in congregations from different faiths, that have mobilized poor and working class people to challenge corporate and political power on education, job training, infrastructure, and other issues. In Los Angeles, black clergy have joined with their white, Latino, and Asian counterparts (through Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice) to provide support for the successful living-wage campaign and embrace the struggles of striking hotel workers and janitors (most of them Latino immigrants) as well as the union struggles of mostly African American bus drivers and airport baggage-handlers.

In fact, Thorne and Rivers pay no attention to the labor movement as a vehicle for racial and economic justice. Unions have a complex history with regard to race relations. On the one hand, they have often been one of the few institutions where workers of all races have both common interests and somewhat equal footing. Throughout this century, progressive unions have been at the forefront of fighting for racial justice, as well as giving people of color opportunities to develop leadership and political skills. On the other hand, conservative elements were racist both within their own unions and on matters of politics and public policy.

Despite this mixed legacy, civil rights leaders like A. Phillip Randolph, Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, and Jesse Jackson recognized that, for the most part, unions and racial minorities share a common agenda. They understood, too, that appeals to racial pride are a dead end without a larger vision of economic justice that cuts across racial divisions. The labor movement, especially the United Auto Workers, played a key role in organizing (and funding) the March on Washington and in exerting pressure to enact the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. When King was murdered in 1968, he was in Memphis to lead a demonstration of predominantly black sanitation workers who were on strike. Cesar Chavez combined appeals to racial pride, economic justice, and social conscience to build the United Farm Workers union. In contrast to Rivers, Jesse Jackson has spent much of the past decade walking picket lines and preaching the union gospel of class solidarity among white, black, and Latino workers.

Union strength, which reached a peak of 35 percent in the mid-1950s, allowed American workers, especially blue-collar workers, to share in the postwar prosperity and join the middle class. But until the civil rights movement of the 1960s, black Americans did not gain their fair slice of these economic gains. With organized labor as an ally, the civil rights crusade helped many black Americans to gain access to well-paying jobs—in factories, government, and professional sectors—that previously had been off-limits. In unionized firms, the wage gap between black and white workers has narrowed significantly. Whites and blacks not only earn roughly the same wages—they both earn more than do workers without union representation. According to the Economic Policy Institute, unionized blacks earn 15.1 percent more than black

people in comparable non-union jobs; for whites, the union "wage premium" is 14.9 percent; for Latinos, it is 18.7 percent.²

A new cohort of labor leaders at both the national and local levels is now seeking to rekindle the "movement" spirit of activist unionism, in part by focusing on sectors composed disproportionately of women, people of color, and immigrants. AFL-CIO president John Sweeney was elected in 1995 by pledging to lead the American labor movement out of the economic desert by mobilizing a new wave of union organizing and recruiting a new generation of organizers, especially activists who are people of color. Sweeney's goal is not only to expand the number of union members, but also to increase labor's political clout. To the extent that liberal and progressive Democrats have made gains in recent years, at the national and local levels, labor has played a critical role. A key component of this strategy has been increasing voter registration and turnout among union members, the poor, and people of color. In the past few years, overall union membership has inched upward for the first time in decades because of innovative organizing drives. Moreover, unions have forged alliances with community and religious groups around local living-wage campaigns and with student activists in the anti-sweatshop movement.

According to a study by Kate Bronfenbrenner of Cornell University, the unions that have made the most headway in recent years have drawn on the tactics and themes of civil rights crusades and grassroots organizing campaigns—emphasizing dignity and justice and forging alliances with community and church groups. Surveys consistently show that blacks and Latinos/Latinas are more favorably inclined toward unions than whites in similar jobs. Since 1980, Bronfenbrenner found, workplaces with the highest percentage of minority workers are the most likely to win union elections. Workplaces with more than 75 percent people of color vote for union representation 66 percent of the time.

A stronger labor movement, working with allies among community and clergy groups, women's organizations, civil rights groups, and others, is essential if the nation is to mobilize around an agenda of economic prosperity, economic justice, and racial reconciliation.

Thorne and Rivers argue that a new wave of religious leaders is replacing the tired civil rights establishment. They write: "Rather than running for elective office, lobbying for legislation, mounting litigation, or making speeches—the signature strategies of the Civil Rights generation—they are more likely to be counseling youth, policing the streets, running a program for ex-offenders, or training kids to get jobs."

But without a broad progressive agenda—which includes mobilizing people to lobby for legislation and supporting progressive candidates for public office—Rivers's faith-based social work will do little more than put band-aids on the cancer of poverty. Research by economists Richard Freeman and Paul Osterman shows that the most important factor in increasing the employment opportunities of black youth, and helping them escape poverty, is a tight labor market—i.e. full employment.³ When unemployment is low, employers hire workers who have troubles in looser labor markets. Workers with fewer skills and less education, and those with black skins—who, as William Julius Wilson showed in *When Work Disappears*, still face serious job discrimination—get "pulled" into the labor market.

This is exactly what occurred in Boston and other cities during the late 1990s. Aided by a tight labor market and the expansion of the federal Earned Income Tax Credit, the nation's poverty rate dropped to 11.8 percent by 1999—the lowest rate since 1979. In central cities, the poverty rate fell from 21.5 percent in 1993 to 16.4 percent in 1999. For black Americans, the poverty rate dropped to a record low of 23.6 percent.⁴ This trend—more than any changes in police practices or the work of street preachers and social workers—accounts for the decline in violent crime in America's cities during this period.

Thorne and Rivers are silent on the nations rising disparities of wealth and income. Today, the richest 1 percent of the population has a larger share of the nation's wealth than the bottom 90 percent. The most affluent 20 percent of Americans own about 85 percent of all wealth and half of total income.

Even if blacks constituted their fair share of this top tier, it would not significantly change conditions for the black middle class or the ghetto poor—or do much to reduce racism.

If there is one truth about race relations, it is that prejudice, bigotry, and discrimination decline when everyone has basic economic security. It is simplistic to argue that if you give people a decent and steady job, their hearts and minds will follow, but it is certainly true that full employment at decent wages makes interracial cooperation much more likely. In hard times, competition over a shrinking pie leads to resentment, bitterness, and racial tensions. The number of lynchings used to go up whenever the Southern cotton economy declined. More recently, economic hard times are correlated with increases in the murder rate, racial violence, and hate crimes.

The essence of America's troubled race relations can be summarized by the following observation: corporate America has learned to live with affirmative action and laws against racial discrimination, but it steadfastly opposes policies to promote full employment, universal health care, and affordable housing for all.

Thorne and Rivers are also silent on the need for activist government to carry out a progressive agenda for justice. What about a new wave of job-creating public investment in the nation's crumbling infrastructure? Or increasing the minimum wage to the poverty level and indexing it to inflation? Expanding subsidized housing? Universal health insurance? More funds for schools and job training and less for prisons and missiles? Stronger enforcement of workplace safety regulations and reforming labor laws that favor business? Taking corporate money out of political campaigns? Strengthening the Community Reinvestment Act and regulations against corporate polluters that disproportionately emit toxic chemicals in communities of color?

Finally, how to respond to the claim that "blacks now get very little from the Democrats" and that Clinton "did very little for black Americans."

Compared to what?

One doesn't have to blindly support all Democrats to recognize that blacks have made much more progress during Democratic regimes than under Republicans. While the Republican Party

is completely tethered to corporate America, the Democrats are divided between a corporate wing (represented by the Democratic Leadership Council) and a liberal-progressive wing, comprised organized labor, women's, environmental, and civil rights groups, and community organizations.

Bill Clinton came into the White House with an ambitious agenda for universal health insurance, a job-creation through public works, and welfare reform. During Clinton's first two years in office, the corporate wing of his own party, along with the entire GOP, killed the first two initiatives and left us with welfare reform. The Clinton administration could have been bolder. With the economy booming, poverty should have declined even more than it did. But remember that for six years, the Republican right controlled Congress and stymied almost every Clinton initiative.

Who will fight for a progressive agenda? George W. Bush? The congressional Democrats, still shell-shocked by last November's election results, seem paralyzed and demoralized. But the struggle for a progressive future requires pushing the Democrats, not pleasing the Republicans.

Thorne and Rivers claim they are advocating a "new black politics." But when Rev. Rivers breaks bread with President Bush, he's simply another supplicant for crumbs from the Republican table. •

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Return to the forum on [faith in politics](#), with Eva Thorne, Eugene Rivers, and responses.

¹Joseph Dalaker and Bernadette D. Proctor, *Poverty in the United States: 1999* (Washington, D.C.: US Census Bureau, 2000).

²Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and John Schmitt, *The State of Working America: 2000-01* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), Table 2.36.

³Richard B. Freeman, "Employment and Earnings of Disadvantaged Young Men in a Labor Shortage Economy," and Paul Osterman, "Gains from Growth? The Impact of Full Employment on Poverty in Boston," in Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson, eds., *The Urban Underclass* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1991).

⁴Dalaker and Proctor, *Poverty in the United States*.