Economic growth, full employment-our agenda for the 80s

By Vernon E. Jordan Jr. President The National Urban League

Twenty-five years ago, Brown vs. Board of Education. Even though not all black Americans are seeing the results of that great victory, Brown ushered in a new era. It struck down the institution of segregation. It laid the legal, idealistic, and philosophic basis for the second reconstruction. It engendered realistic prospects that our nation would bring about real racial equality.

The fifteen years that followed Brown justified black people's faith. Real progress was made. Civil rights laws, court decisions and executive orders changed the face of the nation. Yes, Brown inaugurated a new dawn in America. But the day is passed, and black people howl find themselves once again in the dark midnight of persistent disadvantage.

This is not a popular view today. Many people claim that our progress has been sufficient, and that race is no longer a factor of consequence in America today.

The debate on black progress reminds me of the old question "Is the glass half - empty or is it half - full?" The answer depends on your situation. If you are sitting on a shaded lawn next to a well - stocked cooler, the glass is half - full. But if, like the masses of black people today, you are wandering in a parched desert, that glass is not only half - empty, but it is in danger of becoming just another mirage.

Let me say firmly and clearly: There has been progress; there has been tremendous change, and more black people find themselves in better circumstances than at any time in our history. It would be dishonest to claim otherwise. Blacks in high positions have proliferated. Blacks in corporate jobs have sharply increased. Blacks are in jobs never before open to us. Blacks are in schools and colleges that never allowed us through their doors.

Yes, there has been progress — for some of us.

Does that progress justify the claim that our battles are over, that the war is won? Does it justify claims that black problems are now based on class, not race? Does it justify the view that black leadership is not responsive to the changed national climate? And does it justify the claims that affirmative action and minimum wage laws harm rather than help black citizens?

As much as we celebrate the progress black people have made we must insist that the glass of our hopes is half - empty and draining fast.

The myth of black progress is a dangerous illusion used as an excuse to halt further efforts to extend real progress to all of our people. The myth of black progress illustrates the negative attitude toward blacks. It purports to show that blacks have made progress and those who have not have only themselves to blame. It sanctions the vile myth that the poor are really an underclass, incapable of being helped, unwilling to rise out of their poverty.

Let us acknowledge the great progress some of us have made. But at the same time, let us recognize the true plight in which the vast majority of black people find themselves.

Let us start with jobs. Work is the measure of a person's worth in our society. It is the key that opens all other doors. How much progress have we made in employment?

Some of us have done well. Black men and women in both the public and the private sectors are holding job titles and receiving paychecks unheard of for black people a decade or so ago. They are solid symbols of the progress some of us have made.

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VERNON JORDAN

But they would be the first to admit that they are visible only because of their rarity. They are exceptions. They form a small part of the black work force. The masses of black people are still in the worst jobs our society offers. Black workers are twice as likely as whites to be in low - pay, low - skill jobs, and less than half as likely as whites to be in the jobs that count in America.

The black unemployment rate is higher than it was when the Brown decision was handed down, and higher than it was when we marched on Washington for jobs and freedom. Black people are experiencing depression - level unemployment. With the nation now entering a new recession, black people still have not recovered from the last one.

Black youth have become an endangered, lost generation. Unemployment rates for black young people approach sixty percent in our cities. Our neo - conservative critics blame it on the minimum wage. Get rid of the minimum wage laws, they say, and black unemployment will go down.

Why then, has white youth unemployment gone down at the very time the minimum wage has gone up? Why accept the curious thesis that black jobs depend on abandoning the minimum standards of compensation every industrial nation demand? The last time black people enjoyed full employment was in 1963. There were no minimum wage laws under slavery; we'll take our chances with them today.

Income is a basic measure of progress. Some of us have made great strides. A few have reached parity with whites. We are often told about the nine percent of black families in the upper income brackets. But what about the other 91 percent? How are they doing?

A third are poor — three times the white rate. The majority are near poor. They earn less than the government itself says is needed for a minimum adequate living standard. Half a million black people were added to the ranks of the poor in the 1970s. And in this International Year of the Child the majority of black children are growing up in families experiencing severe economic hardship.

The shameful fact this nation must face is that the gap between whites and blacks is growing instead of closing. At the end of the sixties the typical black family income was 61 percent of the typical white family income. Today, it is down to 57 percent.

Education is another basic area. Twenty - five years after Brown more black children attend racially isolated schools than in 1954. The South has integratwd its schools, the North has not. Chicago's schools are more segregated than Jackson, Mississippi's.

In some cities black high school dropouts outnumber graduates. Many school systems program black youth for failure. Many of our children spend twelve years in schools and classrooms indifferent to their fate, and then cannot pass minimum reading and arithmetic requirements.

Yes, more blacks are attending college than ever before. But the majority are in two - year community colleges while the majority of whites are in four - year schools that put them on career ladders denied to blacks. Black enrollments in medical and professional schools are declining while total enrollments rise.

Has there been progress in housing? Some. More black families are living in decent housing, and some are living in suburbs that never saw a black face after the maid's quitting time. But the point is whether black progress is real when measured against standards enjoyed by white Americans.

By that standard, there is still an intolerable gap. One out of five black families lived in housing that the government says is physically deficient. HUD says blacks are three times as likely as whites to live in housing that has serious deficiencies. And blacks are twice as likely as whites to pay more than they can afford to get decent housing.

It is clear that the glass of racial progress is only half - full.$

It is clear that blacks remain disadvantaged.

It is clear that race continues to be a major determining factor in our society.

It is clear that, for all the progress some of us have made, half of all black Americans are boat people without boats, cast adrift in a hostile ocean of discrimination, unemployment and poverty.

Our conference theme is: "Mobilizing for the challenges of the 1980s." It is to the everlasting shame of this nation that the major challenge facing it in the 1980s is the same challenge that faced it in the 1880s — the challenge of racial equality.

DuBois was right when he warned: "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line."

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The color line is still with us. The challenge of the 1980s consists of dismantling the dehumanizing, brutalizing color line that places a ceiling on black opportunities and removes the floor from black security.

Yet, the black agenda for the 1980s is an agenda that is "black" only in the sense that blacks are disproportionately poor. It is an agenda that transcends race, sex and region. It is an agenda directed at helping all of America's poor and deprived citizens. It is an agenda that is in the national interest.

The civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 60s concentrated on securing basic social and political rights. The struggles of the 1970s were defensive, largely limited to preserving the gains we made. Those of the 1980s must be to secure parity between blacks and whites; to remove race once and for all as a factor in determining the rewards and responsibilities in our society.

The black agenda for the 1980s starts with full employment. We reject absolutely any policies that assign poor people and black people to the role of cannon fodder in the war against inflation. We reject any unemployment goal above the bare minimum. We

(Continued on Page 8)

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This is the key to our success in the business world. It means all of us working together, helping each other to reach our fullest potential; it means accepting our weaknesses, but building steadily on our strengths.

We Masons and Eastern Stars have always known what an important role blacks and other minorities play in the economic development of our communities, but we must continue to take on more responsibilities, for a more promising future for us all.

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STATE OF MARYLAND and JURISDICTION ★ 1201 NORTH EUTAW PLACE ★ BALTO., MD. 21217

Jordan on the state of black America

—Our agenda for the 80s

(Continued from Page 2)

insist on federal compliance with the full employment mandates of the Humphrey - Hawkins bill.

There is no ambiguity about our position. We want jobs. We want them now. We prefer them in the private sector. We'll take them in the public sector. And we're not interested in all the excuses people give why we can't have those jobs. The right to work and to earn is a basic human right. It is being denied to disproportionate numbers of black people.

Full employment and black parity in jobs implies another basic item on the black agency: Affirmative action.

The Weber decision removes a major obstacle to voluntary affirmative action plans. Very few government agencies or private corporations can honestly say they give minority workers a fair share of the jobs at all levels of employment. Too few can honestly demonstrate that they've made a maximum effort to do so.

After Weber, there can be no more excuses. The Weber decision clearly states that affirmative action plans can be instituted to eliminate manifest racial imbalances. The court approved numerical goals and timetables. Employers who have been sitting on the fence, praying for a negative decision on Weber, will now have to get off the fence and do something about reversing the discrimination against black workers. If they don't they can expect strong federal action and lawsuits.

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We call on all public and private employers to initiate and to implement broad, vigorous affirmative action plans and to strengthen present programs designed to bring parity to black workers at all levels. If such plans are introduced this year and implemented throughout the next decade, then by 1990 we can celebrate the end of a affirmative action because its goal will have been met.

And those plans must include numbers, even if some people call them quotas. No company inaugurates a marketing program without a clear idea of the sales level it wants to reach. And no company can be serious about an affirmative action plan without a clear, numerical goal.

In addressing the question of affirmative action I have stressed the private sector's role. That is no accident: It is in the private sector that we find — along with enthusiastic compliance — the strongest resistance. Four out of five jobs are in the private sector. Between 1974 and 1977 — even in the midst of a recession and a weak recovery period — the American economy generated over five million new jobs. Seven out of ten were in the private sector.

Black people did not get their fair share of those jobs. In fact there was a loss of private sector jobs for black men in that period. While other groups, including other minorities, were expanding their share of newly created private sector jobs, black men suffered an eleven percent decline. Yes, for every ten black men with private sector jobs in 1974, only nine were employed in 1977. Jobs go up, but our jobs go down.

That's why we must have vigorous affirmative action. That's why affirmative action is at the top of the black agenda for the 1980s.

A humane society must provide for those who cannot work, even in a full employment economy. And in an economy where jobs are few and the jobless are many, a decent, equitable income maintenance system is a necessity.

The present welfare system is an intolerable mess. President Carter is to be commended for his attempts to get even a limited reform measure through a Congress noted for its hostility to the poor. The president's proposal can be supported only as a first step toward development of a comprehensive, federally administered income maintenance system free of punitive elements and available to all in need.

Another key item on our agenda for the 1980s is a national youth development program that would assure our young people of the skills, schooling and services they need to participate fully in our society.

The administration's current review of all federal programs that impact on youth should lead to a comprehensive national youth policy. That policy must go beyond mere coordination of existing programs to deal with the problems facing the nearly ten million black and white poor children in America. Their needs cannot be sacrificed on the altar of the balanced budget.

Health is an issue on everyone's agenda. The nation is in the midst of a debate on health care, a debate that has been personalized by the media. Black people don't care if a plan is labelled Kennedy or Carter, and our view of plans for catastrophic health insurance is that black health today is catastrophic. There is enough evidence that the Surgeon General ought to determine that being black is dangerous to your health.

Black people have limited access to quality health care. A nation concerned that it has too many doctors must realize that black neighborhoods have too few doctors. And the barely adequate public health facilities in many black neighborhoods are being closed down to balance local budgets.

The black agenda for the 1980s includes a national health system that is unified, comprehensive, consumer - oriented, and guarantees total quality health care services for all.

The black agenda also includes decent housing for all. Thirty years ago Congress passed a national housing act with the goal of providing "a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family." It is time to realize that goal — 30 years is long enough.

The first step toward assuring decent housing for all should be taken immediately. We favor immediate passage of the pending amendments to the Fair Housing Act of 1968. The amends would give HUD the right to take positive steps to end housing discrimination. We call for swift passage of this new — and desperately needed — enforcement power.

The agenda for the 1980s also includes other measures such as set - asides for minority contractors, an accurate count of blacks and browns in the crucial 1980 census, and much more. But the basic, core items I have discussed here will be enough for some people to say our agenda for the 1980s is an impossible dream.

We are told this is an "era of limits," an age of "new realities." The era of scarcity is supposed to be upon us. The long lines in front of empty gas pumps are supposed to be the harbinger of the future. That's behind much of the new negativism and selfish privatism that infects our society. The guiding principle seems to be: Those who have, keep what they've got, and those who don't have, will get even less.

Last week President Carter spoke of the crisis of confidence among Americans, and he rightly deplored the selfishness that pervades our society.

He called on the nation to unite in a new patriotic thrust that wages war on the energy crisis. We support the president's call to lick the energy crisis, but we say that energy is not a moral issue. The price of gas or the numbers of barrels of imported oil are not the stuff of which moral crusades are made.

Tapping the latent moral fervor of our nation and rekindling the belief in American ideals needs a worthier subject. It needs an inspiring vision — the vision of racial equality.

That is a moral issue.

It is an issue still unresolved.

It is an issue that tests the moral fiber of a nation.

Our agenda for the 1980s is a battle plan for the war against racial disadvantage and poverty. It is an agenda that promises to revive America's heritage of idealism and its confidence in traditional values of justice, brotherhood and equality.

This agenda for the 1980s is feasible, necessary, and affordable. Yes, affordable, It may even be possible to finance it through better management of available resources.

When it comes to poor people's programs, Congress is quick to cut back. It cries fraud when high food prices mean spending more on food stamps. When affluent doctors rip off Medicaid patients Congress blames the victims. When sharp operators play games with youth jobs programs Congress blames the kids.

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But when the government gets ripped off for billions in military cost overruns, it just goes back and writes a

(Continued on Page 8)

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