

*Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith*

---

# Civil Rights Division Policy Background Report

---

Mainstreaming Anti-Semitism:  
The Legitimation of Louis Farrakhan

## **Mainstreaming Anti-Semitism: The Legitimation of Louis Farrakhan**

Minister Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam (NOI) and long a voice of religious intolerance and racial divisiveness in this country, has recently attained a new level of acceptance among certain mainstream Black organizations and leaders. His "legitimation" has been reflected most notably by his participation last summer in the Parliament of the World's Religions, his obtaining federal funds for NOI's anti-AIDS efforts and the security services it has been providing at several federal housing projects, and his warm reception at the annual legislative meeting of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) last fall.

The Anti-Defamation League is under no illusion that Farrakhan has seen the error of his ways. However, at a time when the black community in this country is wrestling with a desperate crisis situation in our inner cities--and when Farrakhan's NOI is arguably filling a void for that community at the same time it is seizing on the crisis atmosphere to foment anti-Semitism--the question has arisen as to whether ADL should maintain an uncompromising hard line in dealing with those who lend Farrakhan legitimacy, or whether the League should adopt more of a case-by-case approach. Does Farrakhan's acceptance by the mainstream Black community represent a new-found tolerance for anti-Semitism which ADL must fight with every weapon at our disposal? Or are we unnecessarily damaging Black-Jewish relations, underestimating the scope of the crisis in the black community, and playing into Farrakhan's hands by overreacting to him?

This backgrounder has been prepared to assist ADL in assessing the possible consequences of the "legitimation of Louis Farrakhan" and in formulating an appropriate response.

### **Background**

Consideration of the appropriate ADL response to the legitimation of Louis Farrakhan requires that it be placed in context. The necessary context includes an appreciation of some previous Farrakhan activities and ADL responses.

Although ADL's information bank on Louis Farrakhan dates back to his youth when he served under Malcolm X at the Nation of Islam's Harlem Mosque, Farrakhan first entered the consciousness of most American Jews when his anti-Semitic rhetoric prompted a storm of controversy during Jesse Jackson's 1984 campaign for President. Throughout the 1980's and into the 1990's, the leader of the Nation of Islam has continued to spout an obnoxious message laced with anti-Semitism to large gatherings on college campuses, to black audiences in the inner cities, and in NOI's publication "The Final Call." Among his more abhorrent statements have been assertions that "Hitler was a very great man," that "Jews are in control of the mass media," that Judaism is a "gutter religion," that "the presence of a state called Israel is an outlaw act," and that Jews are "sucking the blood of the black community." Predictably, ADL's reaction to Farrakhan's raw anti-Semitism has been to expose and condemn him in a steady stream of letters and reports.

In 1989-90, Farrakhan occasionally toned his rhetoric down, and he intensified other efforts, such as a campaign against drugs and violence, which earned him a measure of respect from some city officials. For example, he received a key to the city of or similar

commendation from a number of small and large cities, including Prairie View, TX, Tacoma, WA, Washington DC, and Philadelphia. Typical of ADL's response was a letter stating to the mayor of Prairie View that the League was appalled at his bestowing an honor on "an avowed racist and anti-Semite." The letter added "we expect much better from the mayor of Prairie View, and believe that an apology is in order."

More recently, in pursuit of its work in the inner cities, Farrakhan's Nation of Islam has also sought and received federal funding to provide security in several violence-prone housing projects. ADL strongly protested the granting of funds to NOI in a series of letters to officials at the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

In Washington, DC, NOI also received one grant of federal money for its anti-AIDS effort, and sought another for AIDS education directed at the black community. ADL objected vigorously, pointing out a July 1993 letter to Washington Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly that:

"the Nation of Islam and Dr. Abdul Alim Muhammad (NOI's Minister of Health) are singularly unqualified to provide a public information campaign on the transmission and causes of AIDS/HIV ... because of their odious theories on the origins and causes of the disease. Dr. Abdul Alim Muhammad has publicly stated that he believes that Jewish doctors infected black babies in Africa with AIDS virus...

The Nation of Islam and its leaders have already launched their public education campaign on AIDS, and it is a conspiracy-laden message of hatred...

The government of our nation's capital should not put its stamp of approval on an organization so extreme and bigoted as the Nation of Islam. Awarding a contract to Dr. Muhammad to provide a mass media campaign on AIDS education would be the equivalent of providing taxpayer monies to David Duke to develop the District's diversity training program..."

At various times in 1993, Farrakhan again started trying to soften his image. In the spring, he even made some overtures (of dubious effectiveness) to the Jewish community, for example by performing a Mendelssohn concerto on his violin at concerts in Winstom-Salem, NC and in Chicago and telling Chicago Sun-Times columnist Irv ("Kup") Kupcinet that he was "trying to undo with music what words have done."

In the summer and fall of 1993, Farrakhan's efforts to win mainstream support met with some success. In August, he participated in the Parliament of the World's Religions which brought thousands of religious leaders from around the world to Chicago. In September, he was warmly welcomed at the annual legislative meeting of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). At the same meeting, he received an apology from the executive director of the NAACP, Benjamin Chavis, because he had not been invited to participate in the 30th anniversary march on Washington the month before.

Has Farrakhan changed? According to an ADL review of his public statements in 1993, Farrakhan's rhetoric continued to reflect anti-Semitism except for those occasions when he was consciously making effort to be conciliatory. For example, around the same time he was participating in the Parliament of the World's Religions, he was telling the Baltimore Jewish Times: "Jews want everyone to bow down to them, and I ain't bowing down to

nothing or nobody but G-d." In interviews, Farrakhan also attributed his exclusion from the 1993 march on Washington to Jewish influence, and blamed Jews for "controlling" black intellectuals, and black politicians.

All the available evidence indicates that Louis Farrakhan has not suddenly renounced his antipathy towards Jews. However, he has become more conscious of his image, and more interested in pressing what the New York Times described as "the bounds of his acceptability."

### **The Dilemma**

ADL's position on Farrakhan has been largely unyielding. As noted above, the League has been a harsh critic of officials who lend him credibility, and has strongly opposed his efforts to receive government funds. ADL, originally a sponsor of the Parliament of the World's Religions, withdrew from that event to protest his participation. While not objecting to Farrakhan's appearance on college campuses, the League has also urged university officials to distance themselves from him, to deny him formal university sponsorship, and to condemn his bigotry.

However, since the Congressional Black Caucus entered its "covenant" with Farrakhan, the picture has become more complicated. ADL's initial reaction to the CBC's action was critical, but unlike the situation with NOI's application for funding to combat AIDS and the Parliament of World's Religions, the League has refrained from a full-fledged attack.

The relationship the Congressional Black Caucus has established with Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam, and Farrakhan's acceptance by the NAACP and other "mainstream" Black leaders, pose fundamental questions for ADL. What does Farrakhan's acceptance by such groups signify for the future of Black-Jewish relations in general? How does the League continue to reject Farrakhan as unacceptable, and yet maintain longstanding and important relationships with the CBC, and NAACP, and other respected leaders in the black community who are no longer willing to ostracize the Nation of Islam? And, a point raised by James Besser, the respected political affairs correspondent for several Anglo-Jewish newspapers: does our relationship to a black community in crisis need to take on "a little more balance, with a little more empathy for the pain of the community, and a little less worrying about Mr. Farrakhan?"

The remaining portion of this backgrounder will use the CBC-Farrakhan relationship as a jumping off point for a discussion of how ADL should react to the legitimation of Louis Farrakhan.

### **Farrakhan and the Congressional Black Caucus**

The setting for the unplanned and apparently unexpected rapprochement between Louis Farrakhan and the Congressional Black Caucus was the CBC's annual legislative meeting--more specifically, a panel discussion on race and politics before 2,000 people in the Washington Convention Center. The Reverend Jesse Jackson described the group's warm welcome for Farrakhan, with whom he said he had been reconciled for some time, as part of a quest for "operational unity" by some of the nation's top black political and civil rights leaders, whom have long been envious of Farrakhan's ability to reach large enthusiastic black audiences.

At the CBC meeting, the NAACP's Ben Chavis raised the subject of Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam, stating "We need to work together. There is no one single answer to our predicament." Chavis sought to smooth his relations with Farrakhan, saying it was "a mistake for the organizers of August's 30th anniversary march on Washington to have excluded him.

To this, Farrakhan responded, to cheers: "A mistake is an unintentional departure from right. An error is an intentional departure from that which is correct. It was more than a mistake. It was an error."

Chavis also expressed interest in meeting privately with the Nation of Islam leader to discuss a statement he published in "The Final Call" denouncing black leaders for "knuckling under to outside forces."

Farrakhan expressed eagerness for the private meeting Chavis proposed, saying:

"When we have this meeting in closed session, may we iron out whatever differences we may have and make a pledge to each other that we can say in public that we will never let somebody outside of our family determine what goes on inside our family. And we will tell those who wish to exclude a member of the family from participating with the family to keep their mouth out of our family business."

Also at the CBC meeting, the CBC's Chairman, Representative Kweisi Mfume (D-MD), announced that the Black Caucus would "enter a covenant" with a number of organizations, including the Nation of Islam. He indicated a willingness to work together with NOI on legislative concerns, saying: "I just don't know how you can bring about change if you don't work with people that you don't agree with as well as those that you do agree with." Then, bringing the audience to its feet, Mfume added: "no longer will we allow people to divide us..."

Referring to emotional exchanges between and among Chavis, Mfume, and Farrakhan and apparently spontaneous and unplanned CBC offer of reconciliation, syndicated columnist William Raspberry wrote: "It was, in fact, a stirring rhetorical moment. The problem, as black leaders acknowledged over the weekend (following the program), is that apart from differences in emphasis and approach for solving common problems, Farrakhan brings with him the baggage of anti-Semitism..."

### **ADL's Initial Reaction**

In crafting a response to the CBC's actions, ADL was well aware that the Caucus, which currently includes 39 members of the U.S. House of Representatives and one U.S. Senator, has a long history of solid support for Israel, and has worked closely with ADL and other Jewish organizations on civil rights and religious liberty issues. Its current Chairman, Congressman Mfume, has longstanding, close ties to the Baltimore Jewish community. Moreover, on many of the items on ADL's current Washington agenda, including support for legislation on hate crimes, religious accommodation, and aid to Israel, members of the CBC are natural allies who have worked closely with the Jewish delegation in Congress.

Immediately following the CBC's meeting at which the covenant with Farrakhan was announced, ADL sent a letter to Representative Mfume asking for a clarification of the Caucus' position and a meeting to discuss the matter "before those who thrive on divisiveness" escalated the situation. In the letter National Chairman Melvin Salberg and National Director Abraham H. Foxman wrote: "while the Caucus has the right to unite with

whomever it pleases, associating with an avowed racist and anti-Semite erodes the moral fiber of your worthy mission."

The ADL letter continued "the Caucus obviously has the right to set its own program and agenda, and your outreach will not deter us from cooperating on issues of mutual concern. However, we do reserve for ourselves, as Jews, the right to determine with whom we will join forces. We believe Minister Farrakhan's message of racial and religious bigotry is incompatible with everything the civil rights community represents."

Shortly after the letter was sent, Mel Salberg, Abraham Foxman, and National Commissioner Barbara Balser, Chairman of ADL's National Community Service Committee, led a delegation which met with Representative Mfume in Washington and conveyed some of the same concerns in person. They indicated that ADL wished to continue to work with the CBC on issues of mutual concern, but would not work in a coalition with Farrakhan. Mfume indicated that the CBC had not actually embraced Farrakhan, but he did feel that there were issues, such as the twin problems of crime and drugs in the inner cities, on which the Nation of Islam had worked effectively and it would be beneficial for the CBC to work with them. Mfume expressed understanding for the League's concerns, and agreed to continue a dialogue.

ADL's response to the CBC-Farrakhan "covenant" reflected neither an uncompromising hard line nor a concession. Rather, it was a nuanced position that took the agency's own priorities into account. However, it has raised some questions which make it an appropriate subject for further consideration. Now that Farrakhan has obtained a measure of legitimacy from the mainstream Black community, he is likely to push for more, and the questions for ADL will not get any easier.

With all of this as necessary back-ground, the issue open for discussion is what strategy ADL should pursue in reacting to the "mainstreaming" of Louis Farrakhan. Should the League continue to react as we did previously in the case of HUD funding, AIDS funding, and the Parliament of the World's Religions, with an uncompromising hard line; or should we take a more nuanced position as we have with regard to the Congressional Black Caucus, and decide on a case-by-case what the appropriated reaction should be?

## **The Alternatives**

### **I. The hard line approach**

This alternative is easy to summarize:

Louis Farrakhan is a bigot and an anti-Semite, and we should do nothing which contributes in any way to his campaign for legitimacy. Indeed, it is not enough to question the judgment of those who deal with him or give him legitimacy. ADL has a right to expect and to demand that any organization or individual genuinely committed to the fight against bigotry and anti-Semitism turn a cold shoulder to Farrakhan. Unless and until they do, there can be no business as usual. Would they not have a similar reaction if we reached out to a Tom Metzger or a David Duke because of a supposed common interest?

Any reaction other than an uncompromising hard line leads down the proverbial slippery slope. Once a message is sent that it is acceptable, under certain limited circumstances or in certain special contexts, to deal with an anti-Semite, the taboo is broken. Society becomes desensitized--it is happening already--and what was once unacceptable becomes commonplace.

When it comes to anti-Semitism and anti-Semites, ADL must be dogmatic. Anti-Semitism is already more acceptable in some quarters today than it was a decade ago, and we simply cannot allow the trend to continue. Perhaps people will react to this position by terming it unrealistic, impractical, even quixotic, but if ADL does not take a stand, who will?

## **II. The case-by-case approach**

The hard line approach may be appealing on a gut level, but is wholly unrealistic. In the real world, as one of this nation's oldest and most prominent civil rights organizations, ADL can and perhaps should ask organizations like the Congressional Black Caucus and the NAACP to abrogate their relationships with Farrakhan and NOI, but we cannot decline all contact with them if they refuse. ADL simply could not function effectively under such circumstances. We would be cutting off our nose to spite our face, and handing Farrakhan a victory by letting him severely restrict our agenda.

ADL is not going to make Farrakhan go away. What we can and should do is impose an obligation on those who deal with him, or, as in the case of universities, give him a platform. In each case, the burden should be on those who give Farrakhan some measure of credibility to insist that he act responsibly, and put a lid on his bigotry and anti-Semitism.

Representative Mfume, the NAACP's Ben Chavis and the other black leaders who have reached out to Farrakhan acknowledge the serious problems the Jewish community has with him, and they do not condone his anti-Semitism. However, they are trying to address what they believe is a desperate, crisis situation in the black community, and their good faith effort to combat a raging epidemic of violence, crime, drug abuse, and AIDS should not be tarred by an association with Farrakhan.

ADL needs to work with mainstream leaders in the black community. We have serious joint interests and joint concerns, and it would be counterproductive to jeopardize those interests and concerns. Furthermore, given all we have said about Farrakhan, no one would be deceived for one moment into thinking that ADL's continuing to work with organizations like the CBC and the NAACP on issues of mutual concern would reflect a softening of the agency's position on Farrakhan. To the contrary, in light of the magnitude of the issues they are trying to come to grips with, refusing to help because of an irritant like Farrakhan cannot be allowed to define or determine relations between the Jewish and black communities.

### **The Decision making Process**

ADL's National Executive Committee will be discussing the legitimization of Farrakhan at the upcoming meeting in Palm Beach. Regional boards and national committees are therefore invited to share their thinking on the subject of this backgrounder in advance of the Palm Beach meeting.

**Prepared January 1994  
Steven M. Freeman**