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Brief Report No. 29

BLACK ATTITUDES TO RONALD REAGAN

Members may be interested to see the article reproduced below from the Washington Post of July 25, 1980. The author, William Raspberry, is a well-known black American columnist.

Although the contest for the Presidency between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan (with John Anderson somewhere in between) is only at an early stage - and much could happen to influence voters' attitudes before the elections on 4 November - this indication of a tentative shift in black attitudes may be a significant straw in the political wind. It not only illustrates the sense of acute disappointment with the Carter Administration on the part of black Americans, of which there are many signs, but also indicates a possible deeper re-thinking of the question of where black interests are best served in the American political process.

Yes, She's Going to Vote for Reagan

William Raspberry

She's one of the brightest, most thoughtful people I know - sophisticated in the ways of the world, a serious pan-Africanist and committed to the point of militancy on the question of improving the lot of black Americans.

And she's voting for Ronald Reagan.

She sidled up to the subject, as though she were afraid I'd think her mad. But she finally got there, and there it was; though it goes against everything she's felt and believed and preached, she'll vote for Reagan.

"I don't know what to make of it," she told me, "but it's not just me. In the past few days, I've talked to friends in other parts of the country - people I know very well - and they are headed in the same direction.

"Just yesterday, I talked to a guy in Ohio, a person I know from the early '60s CORE days. The conversation turned to the presidential election, and he asked me what I was going to do.

"I said, 'Ed, you'd be astounded. I am going to vote for Reagan and Bush.'" But when she launched into an embarrassed explanation of how she had arrived at such a preposterous position, he cut her short with his admission that he had arrived there, too.

The same thing happened, she said, in a recent telephone conversation with an old friend in Memphis. This time, it was the friend who backed into the subject.

"I know what I'm going to do," he said, "but I won't tell you." He told

ber, He'll vote for Reagan.

"I've had the same conversation with friends here in Washington. We were all startled to see where we were. I mean, Reagan?!"

She doesn't anticipate any landslide of closet support for Reagan among black voters. And even her friends who confess they've decided not to go with Jimmy Carter again don't pretend any enthusiasm. Like her, they won't work for the Californian or try to persuade anyone else to vote for him. But as for their own ballot, Reagan has it.

"We've been suckered by nice words from the Democrats for too long," she said. "There was a time when it was important for me to hear those nice words. But now I'm comfortable enough with myself and my people that I don't need to hear these things anymore.

"What I want is some sort of policy that will benefit the masses, and the liberals aren't providing it. They feel pity for the poor, but the only thing they propose is more welfare-type solutions that only serve to cripple people.

"I guess you could say we're making a psychological break. We're saying that maybe these other people won't do anything to help the black masses with their private enterprise ideology and their trickle-down theories. But then again, maybe they will - not because they will set out to help black people but because their commitment to improving the overall economy might be the best chance that black people have.

"In any case, the Carter people certainly have not earned our undying loyalty. I'm not even convinced that Carter is a nicer man, let alone more competent, than Reagan. In fact, I'm more and more convinced he is a small, mean, vengeful man. As somebody put it, if your choice is between two evils, go with the one you haven't tried before."

I told her that my own soundings disclose a willingness among thoughtful, sophisticated blacks to give Reagan a try - except for two things: first, they are uncomfortable with what they perceive as anti-black hostility among Reagan's hard-core supporters and, second, they concede the point that Carter made in his appearance before the recent NAACP convention in Miami: that because the next president will have the opportunity to name a number of federal judges and two or three Supreme Court justices, blacks will be better off with a moderate in the White House. Further appointments of the sort made by Richard Nixon could be devastating to blacks.

"I think about that, too", she said, "but you know Reagan has shown in a number of ways - that business of making major concessions in an effort to get Ford on the ticket, although Ford had come out against him; his willingness to

accept Bush as a running mate in spite of his personal reservations - his ability to compromise.

"Just look at his own family - a daughter living with a rock star, a son who is a dancer, another daughter who's been divorced a couple of times - you know these are things he doesn't like. But he can't be that rigid, or his family would be at each other's throat. I believe he has the capacity to compromise."

She said she thought about voting for John Anderson, but has become persuaded that the independent candidate is too full of "hypocrisy and self-righteousness."

She would have voted for Kennedy, had he been the Democratic nominee, as a sort of last gasp of liberalism. But the Carter presidency has been a disaster for blacks, she believes.

"I'm basically through with liberalism - not liberal positions on the issues, but the liberalism that sees us as objects of pity and that doesn't really respect us. Liberalism was a good thing at one point, but I think its time has passed.

"It may turn out that we're worse off under a Reagan presidency, but if there is a significant black vote for Reagan in this election, it may open up the whole process for years to come."

Jan Smuts House
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