

Chapter 12

“The Whole Matter Revolves around the Self-Respect of My People”: Black Conservative Women in the Civil Rights Era

Joshua D. Farrington
Eastern Kentucky University

INTRODUCTION

In response to *Brown v. Board of Education*, the foundational case reflecting decades of hard work by civil rights activists to desegregate public education, famed Black novelist Zora Neale Hurston remarked, “I regard the ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court as insulting.”¹ To her, “the whole matter revolves around the self-respect of my people...I see no tragedy in being too dark to be invited to a White social affair.”² Black schools, run and operated by Black communities, were Hurston’s ideal, and the idea of holding integrated White schools as the standard bearer ran against her deep-seated racial pride. Though Hurston joined many White conservatives in opposing *Brown*, her reasons were altogether different, as was her distinctly Black brand of conservatism. Indeed, it was Black conservatives of the 1950s, not the decade’s mainstream integrationist civil rights leadership, who in many ways were closer to the more militant Black Nationalists of the 1960s in their joint emphasis on Black self-determination and a racial pride that rejected integration as a cure-all.

By focusing on conservative Black women during the civil rights era, this chapter highlights the myriad of political ideologies that have always existed within Black communities. This diversity of political expression, however, has not always been fully

¹ Zora Neale Hurston, “Court Order Can’t Make Races Mix,” *Orlando Sentinel*, August 11, 1955.

² *Ibid.*

delineated by scholars. Almost all of the leading scholarship of the conservative movement that arose in the 1960s ignores Black conservatives completely, and treats conservatism as a lily-white phenomenon.³ Similarly, more specific accounts of conservative women focus exclusively on White women, and the few accounts of Black conservatives since the 1980s have almost exclusively centered on Black men like Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas.⁴

However, as Christopher Alan Bracey, a Black law professor and self-described “liberal,” has noted, “the failure to appreciate Black conservatism as a bona fide intellectual movement has particularly tragic consequences.”⁵ In addition to marginalizing active historical agents, ignoring those on the peripheries of Black thought has the effect of turning Black politics into a monolithic force that minimizes its rich complexities on both the Left and Right. Hanes Walton Jr. notes that this predominant narrative of Black politics “is a static one. It paints Black party supporters as robots, unthinking and under numerous sociopsychological controls.”⁶ By focusing on conservative Black women, we add nuance to the literature on both Black politics and the rise of conservatism during the volatile 1950s and 1960s.

³ Thomas Edsall with Mary Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1991); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Allan Lichtman, *White Protestant Nation: The Rise of the American Conservative Movement* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2008).

⁴ Rebecca Klatch, *Women of the New Right* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987); Marjorie J. Spruill, “Gender and America’s Right Turn,” in Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer, eds., *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Joseph Conti and Brad Stetson, *Challenging the Civil Rights Establishment: Profiles of a New Black Vanguard* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993).

⁵ Christopher Alan Bracey, *Saviors or Sellouts: The Promise and Peril of Black Conservatism, from Booker T. Washington to Condoleezza Rice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), xviii-xix.

⁶ Hanes Walton Jr., *Invisible Politics: Black Political Behavior* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 137.

There have always existed elements of conservatism within Black politics.⁷ Most historians point to Booker T. Washington as the quintessential Black conservative. Rather than directly challenging the rise of segregation in the 1890s South, Washington took up the Jim Crow rhetoric of “separate but equal,” arguing that “in all things purely social” Whites and Blacks “can be as separate as the fingers.” Indeed, to Washington, segregation was a system that Black educators, businessmen, and community leaders could work from the inside for the advancement of Black communities. It was the segregated state of Alabama, after all, that provided state funding for Washington’s Tuskegee Institute (a school run by African Americans for African Americans). It was also segregation that provided a space in almost every Southern city for the formation of thriving Black business districts. As head of both Tuskegee and the National Negro Business League, Washington emphasized a distinctly conservative notion of self-help centered on the middle-class ideals of the value of hard work, individual initiative, personal responsibility (“pull yourself up by your own bootstraps”), capitalism, and entrepreneurship.⁸

Many of Washington’s ideas were taken up by Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in the 1920s. Though not as deferential to Whites in his rhetoric as Washington, Garvey also stressed the importance of Black ownership, joining Washington in deemphasizing integration as the ultimate goal of Black Americans. Firmly committed to free enterprise, the UNIA operated, or helped fund, thousands of small Black-owned businesses across the country. And, rather than supporting integrated public

⁷ Deborah Toler, “Black Conservatives,” in Chip Berlet, ed., *Eyes Right: Challenging the Right Wing Backlash* (Boston: South End Press, 1995), 294; Akwasi B. Assensoh and Yvette Alex-Assensoh, “Black Political Leadership in the Post-Civil Rights Era,” in Ollie A. Johnson III and Karin Stanford, eds., *Black Political Organization in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 200; Peter Eisenstadt, “Introduction,” in Peter Eisenstadt, ed., *Black Conservatism: Essays in Intellectual and Political History* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), xii-xiii; Lewis A. Randolph, “Black Neoconservatives in the United States: Responding with Progressive Coalitions,” in James Jennings, ed., *Race and Politics: New Challenges and Responses for Black Activism* (London: Verso, 1997), 149.

⁸ Robert J. Norrell, *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 125, 229.

school systems in Northern cities, the UNIA urged urban Black families to send their children to Black-operated schools, whose curriculum would focus on Pan-African history and practical vocational training. Unlike integration, which Garvey believed was underpinned by internalized racism that implicitly accepted an inherent superiority of White spaces, a thriving network of Black-owned businesses and schools would foster Black pride and self-determination.⁹

Garvey's brand of Black Nationalism would later be reflected in the Nation of Islam, which similarly emphasized capitalist enterprise and racial pride in its support of Black ownership of businesses and schools. The Nation of Islam also held to a traditionally conservative set of gender and family norms that had clearly delineated roles for men, "breadwinners" and "protectors" of their families, and women, whose role was to support "their man" from inside the home. Labeled by one scholar as "the Negro version of the radical right," the Nation of Islam adamantly rejected abortion rights. Its largest publication, *Muhammad Speaks*, published cartoons of birth control pill bottles marked with a skull and crossbones, and lambasted feminists as proponents of Black "genocide."¹⁰

ZORA NEALE HURSTON AND RADICAL INDIVIDUALISM

Though a well-known author of the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston shifted her focus toward politics in the 1940s. In 1946, she joined actress and singer Etta Moten and

⁹ Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Mattias Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Ula Yvette Taylor, *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); David Riesman, "The Intellectuals and the Discontented Classes: Some Further Reflections—1962," in Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right: The New American Right*, expanded edition (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1963), 118; Loretta J. Ross, "African-American Women and Abortion: 1800-1970," in Stanlie M. James and Abena P.A. Busia, eds., *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 153.

famed pianist May Lou Williams in opposing the re-election of Harlem's Democratic congressman, Adam Clayton Powell. Chief among her decision to endorse the Black Republican candidate, Grant Reynolds, was perceived communist support for Powell. Hurston used her influence and connections in Harlem to secure financial support for Reynolds, and even worked in the trenches licking envelopes and passing out Republican pamphlets. Though Reynolds lost, the election was the closest of Powell's twenty-five year career.¹¹

Like *Pittsburgh Courier* journalist George Schuyler, perhaps the most well-known Black conservative of the 1940s-60s, who wrote multiple anti-communist pieces for the *National Review*, Hurston generally approved of the anti-communism of the early Cold War.¹² Similar to White libertarians Isabel Paterson and Rose Wilder Land, Hurston's writings emphasized an extreme commitment to individualism and self-reliance.¹³ According to Hurston biographer Robert Hemenway, with the rise of anti-communist hysteria in the 1950s, Hurston's "obsessive individualism" morphed into a "mild paranoia" against perceived communist infiltration of American politics. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Hurston criticized government welfare programs and called for the dismantling of the New Deal infrastructure.¹⁴ Hurston's fierce individualism could be seen decades prior in her ground-breaking essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," a celebration of her all-Black, segregated hometown of Eatonville, Florida, and her own feminist identity that flourished despite White society's attempts to define her. Hurston's essay is a celebration of not just her identity as a proud, Black, Southern woman, but of herself as an individual. When White men discriminated against her, she didn't want to protest to make them

¹¹ Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 382-383; Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 303; Carla Kaplan, ed., *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 441; Wil Haygood, *King of the Cats: The Life and Times of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* (New York: Amistad, 2006), 141.

¹² Eisenstadt, "Introduction," xxii.

¹³ David Beito and Linda Royster Beito, "Isabel Paterson, Rose Wilder Land, and Zora Neale Hurston on War, Race, the State and Liberty," *Independent Review*, 12:12 (Spring 2008), 553.

¹⁴ Hemenway, 329.

accept her, but rather it was *they* who were negatively impacted: "How *can* any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me." The ultimate goal of communism, equality, per Hurston, would only bring *her*, "the cosmic Zora," down to earth like everyone else.¹⁵

Hurston allied herself most closely with the archconservative Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, the author of the infamous Taft-Hartley Act that placed unions under federal regulation. During the 1952 Republican primary, she became Taft's most vocal Black supporter, favoring him over the party's moderate favorite, Dwight Eisenhower. After she wrote an anti-communist article featured in the American Legion's monthly magazine, the *Saturday Evening Post* offered Hurston \$1,000 to write an article laying out her conservative politics. In addition to stating her approval of the Taft-Hartley Act, Hurston argued that the New Deal's "relief program was the biggest weapon ever placed in the hands of those who sought power and votes." She continued, claiming that because of such welfare programs, Black men became "dependent upon the Government for their daily bread" and ultimately became servants "to the will of the 'Little White Father.'"¹⁶

Like many White conservatives, Hurston believed that accepting a government "dole" was demeaning toward one's dignity. A product of the radical pride generated by the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston was particularly sensitive to any policy that she believed lessened the dignity and self-respect of African Americans. Her fierce anti-communism stemmed from the same source. While she opposed Jim Crow laws and legalized discrimination—which were affronts to Black dignity—she placed her most vehement hatred on communism, which she believed threatened the individuality and self-reliance that was critical to Black identity. This emphasis on self-determination, with its roots in the early twentieth century in the ideas espoused by Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey, was characteristic of many Black conservatives in the 1950s and 1960s.

¹⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," in Alice Walker, ed., *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing...and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader* (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 1979), 152-155.

¹⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, "A Negro Voter Sizes Up Taft," *Saturday Evening Post*, December 8, 1951, 150-152; Kaplan, 612-613; Boyd, 411; Hemenway, 335; Beito, 570.

This standpoint was also at the root of her opposition to *Brown v. Board of Education*. She believed the court's claim that Black schools were inferior to their White counterparts was a direct attack on the Black community itself. "The whole matter revolves around the self-respect of my people," Hurston wrote in a letter published in the *Orlando Sentinel*. She further stated, "I regard the ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court as insulting," particularly its claim that separating Black children from Whites "generates a feeling of inferiority." Drawing on the ideas of Marcus Garvey, which many Black Nationalists would also later employ in the 1960s, Hurston argued that "there are adequate Negro schools and prepared instructors" in many Black neighborhoods, and to suggest that White schools were inherently superior made the decision "insulting rather than honoring my race." Unlike many White conservatives who opposed the decision on the basis of racist fears of integration, Hurston's racial pride and strict adherence to Black self-help were the driving forces behind her opposition to *Brown*.¹⁷

Hurston was not the only Black conservative woman on the national stage during the 1950s. Thalia Thomas, the assistant chief of the Republican National Committee's Minorities Division, traveled over 100,000 miles across the country touting the virtues of the Grand Old Party throughout the decade.¹⁸ Another was North Carolina Central University professor Helen Edmonds. With a PhD in History from the Ohio State University and as the first Black woman to become dean of a graduate school, Edmonds was one of the most well-known and published Black historians of the 1950s. Like Hurston, Edmonds' scholarship was rooted in her firm belief in Black dignity and self-reliance, and her numerous books emphasized the contributions of Black men and women to the development of American history.¹⁹

¹⁷ Zora Neale Hurston, "Court Order Can't Make Races Mix," *Orlando Sentinel*, August 11, 1955; Kaplan, 611; Boyd, 423-4; Hemenway, 336.

¹⁸ Charles Thomas and Frances Shattuck, *The 1956 Presidential Campaign* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 1960), 239; "Ticker Tape U.S.A.," *Jet*, January 29, 1959, 11.

¹⁹ Helen Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina, 1894-1901* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951); Helen Edmonds, *Black Faces in High Places: Negroes in Government* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971).

BLACK CONSERVATIVE WOMEN IN THE 1950S AND 1960S

Edmonds became the first Black woman to second the nomination of a presidential candidate when she appeared before the Republican National Convention in San Francisco to endorse Eisenhower in 1956.²⁰ The speech was made possible by the diligence of the president's highest ranking Black staffer, E. Frederic Morrow, who convinced his party to place her in a prominent position in the nationally televised convention proceedings.²¹ Though some believed it would help soften the image of the party with Black voters, some White Republicans were vocal in their opposition to the selection. Edmonds' home-state, all-White delegation from North Carolina was adamant in its disapproval, telling Eisenhower officials that it would lead to the defeat of the state's only Republican congressman in the upcoming elections, who needed the votes of racist Whites.²²

After the convention, Edmonds became one of the Republican Party's most demanded Black speakers throughout the rest of the campaign. One field operative told party bosses that the reaction to her speech was so positive that the Republican National Committee (RNC) should request that she conduct tours across the country on behalf of Eisenhower.²³ Over the course of the fall, Edmonds traveled more than 10,000 miles, delivered over fifty speeches, and participated in numerous television and radio

²⁰ Pero Dagbovie, *African American History Reconsidered* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 122-123.

²¹ Morrow Diary, "Republican National Convention 1956," Folder: Diary – E. Frederic Morrow (2), Box 2, E. Frederic Morrow Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library; David Nichols, *A Matter of Justice: Eisenhower and the Beginning of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 136.

²² Drew Pearson, "Washington Merry-Go-Round," *Gadsden Times* (Alabama), August 26, 1956.

²³ "Eight Who Made Seconding Talks Represent Cross-Section of Eisenhower Backers," *New York Times*, August 23, 1956; Letter, Val Washington to Helen Edmonds, 30 August 1956, Folder: Correspondence. Republican Nat'l Committee, 1953-1956 expense accounts and itinerants, Box 2, Helen Edmonds Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

interviews.²⁴ During an October tour of Pennsylvania, she gave eleven speeches, including an appearance before an audience of over 1,000 White women in Bethlehem. For the rest of the month through Election Day, she conducted campaign stops throughout the Midwest and East Coast.²⁵ In light of Edmonds' service to his campaign, Eisenhower appointed her as a United Nations alternate delegate in 1958. During her tenure, which included numerous trips to Europe and Africa, Edmonds' public remarks centered on two issues: anti-communism and Black civil rights.²⁶

Though it ignored African Americans, a 1963 study of the emergence of the "Radical Right" by Seymour Lipset argued that women were "much more likely" to oppose communism than men and that many of the leading organizations active in local anti-communist efforts were led by women.²⁷ While Lipset's focus was exclusively on White America, Black women like Zora Neale Hurston and Helen Edmonds joined other conservative women of the era, like Phyllis Schlafly, in embracing an adamant anti-communist philosophy.²⁸ And while they opposed Jim Crow, communism was an equally unsavory philosophy because it would take away the individuality and self-determination that had long provided a source of strength and dignity to Black communities.

²⁴ Letter, Helen Edmonds to Allen James Low, December 15, 1956, Folder: Correspondence. Republican National Committee. Letter from Rank and File Persons During and Following Dr. Edmonds Campaign Tour, 1956, Box 2, Helen Edmonds Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

²⁵ Letter, Helen Edmonds to Val Washington, October 23, 1956, Folder: Correspondence. Republican Nat'l Committee, 1953-1956 expense accounts and itineraries, Box 2, Helen Edmonds Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

²⁶ Letter, Helen Edmonds to Robert Grey, September 20, 1957, Folder: Correspondence. White House and the Executive Dept. of the U.S. Government, 1957, Box 2, Helen Edmonds Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University; Parker, *The History of The Links*, 24.

²⁷ Seymour Martin Lipset, "The Sources of the 'Radical Right'—1955," in Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right: The New American Right*, expanded edition (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1963), 303.

²⁸ Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 62-3.

In 1960, Edmonds returned to the campaign circuit, becoming North Carolina's co-chair of Women for Nixon-Lodge.²⁹ Her enthusiasm was far less than it had been four years prior. Edmonds complained throughout the fall that Richard Nixon's "stupidly run" campaign failed to make any efforts to utilize Black Republicans such as herself.³⁰ In private correspondence, she argued that Republicans lost because they never created a rival to John F. Kennedy's "window-dressing" division of Civil Rights Advisors.³¹ Edmonds was also critical of the "absence of any relationship whatsoever" between local Black women and the North Carolina State Federation of Republican Women, which she complained was a segregated institution.³² This episode reveals a critical divergence between Black and White conservatives throughout the civil rights era. Though they may have been opposed to New Deal programs or actively participated in the fight against communism, most Black conservatives were not allies with White conservatives.

A series of exchanges between Helen Edmonds and various leaders of the *National Review*, a prominent conservative magazine, is particularly revealing. In the late 1950s, Edmonds received a form letter from the magazine that repeated common racist tropes against civil rights, stating that "every thinking Southerner owes it to the way of life we hold sacred" to subscribe to the "only Northern magazine that *consistently* upholds Southern liberties." It also touted a recent endorsement by the rabid segregationist Alabama congressman, Frank W. Boykin. An outraged Edmonds responded to William F. Buckley Jr., the magazine's publisher and leading conservative ideologue through the

²⁹ "North Carolina," n.d., Folder: Alphabetical Files. Political Material. Addresses, Reports, Memoranda, etc., of the Republican Nat'l Comte, 1960-1961, Box 1, Helen Edmonds Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

³⁰ Letter, Val Washington to Helen Edmonds, December 6, 1960, Folder: Correspondence. Republican Party, 1959-60, Box 2, Helen Edmonds Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

³¹ Letter, Helen Edmonds to "Mrs. Charles Dean Jr.," November 29, 1960, Folder: Correspondence. Republican Party, 1959-60, Box 2, Helen Edmonds Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

³² Letter, Helen Edmonds to Claire Williams, January 24, 1961, Folder: Correspondence. Republican Party, 1961-1976, Box 2, Helen Edmonds Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

1980s, writing that “I cannot wish your magazine success. I wish no instrument of mass communication success which sets one class of citizen apart from another, and grants the majority class rights and privileges solely on the basis of the color of their skin.” The curt and condescending reply from Buckley’s sister, Maureen, simply stated her “deep sadness” over Edmonds’ “emotionalism” and lamented the “impossibility of discussing the segregation issue rationally” with Black women. As a Black woman who supported the end of segregation in the South, Edmonds—regardless of her conservative credentials—was dismissed by a leading conservative ideologue in the same fashion as other, more liberal, African Americans. Indeed, while Edmonds remained a vocal Republican through the 1980s, she was never accepted by the leading intellectual leaders of the emerging White conservative movement.³³

During the late 1960s, Edmonds continued to differ with White conservatives on issues of race. By 1968, in the wake of the increasingly militant responses of young African Americans, White conservatives rallied around the central theme of “law and order.” Phyllis Schlafly, for example, blamed “riots” on “various civil-rights and New Left groups saturated by Communists,” and called for the arrests of Black Nationalists H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael.³⁴ Edmonds, on the other hand, recognized that “crime is a problem everywhere,” but, rather than placing blame on African Americans, she argued that its roots were found in high unemployment. Instead of targeting Black militants, she called for “a sensible program to help ex-convicts find employment.”³⁵

Apart from her opposition to the overtly racist appeals of the White conservative movement, however, Edmonds sometimes mirrored its rhetoric during the 1960s on other issues. Following the uproar over Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s report that blamed many

³³ Charles Randolph to “Friend,” n.d., Letter, Helen Edmonds to William F. Buckley Jr., November 1, 1957, and Maureen Buckley to Helen Edmonds, November 19, 1957, all in Folder: Correspondence. General 1951-1959, Box 1, Edmonds Papers.

³⁴ Carol Felsenthal, *The Sweetheart of the Silent Majority: The Biography of Phyllis Schlafly* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1981), 207-208.

³⁵ Helen Edmonds, *Blacks Have Been Too Long in the Hip-pocket of One Major Political Party*, October 29, 1972, Folder: Alphabetical Files. Political Material. NC Republican Party, 1951-76, Box 1, Helen Edmonds Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

problems in the Black community on the “failure” of the Black family, Edmonds argued that Black “sociologists do not like Momyhan’s [sic] writings and findings but they bear great truth.” Discussing “our Negro unemployed,” she emphasized personal responsibility and self-help, contending that “some are underlings because they do not want to avail themselves of the possibilities of all training which is presently offered.” Moreover, she claimed that Lyndon Johnson’s anti-poverty programs did not do anything but teach young African Americans “to go out into the community and raise the devil.” In further reflection of her conservative, middle class sensibilities, she also believed liberals encouraged activists to “stand on the doorsteps of the mayors’ offices with these non-negotiable demands, organize tenants not to pay rent, or welfare mothers to sustain their demands.”³⁶

It is important to note, however, that her remarks in support of Moynihan’s memo blaming Black unemployment on Blacks themselves were written in a private letter to another Black Republican from North Carolina, Nixon advisor Robert J. Brown. Regarding her *public* remarks on civil rights, law and order, and “the race problem,” Edmonds was always careful not to use the same racially charged rhetoric as her White conservative counterparts. In private conversations with other African Americans, the self-help tradition that informed much of her ideology was more explicit in its criticisms of Blacks themselves. Indeed, introspective critiques of African Americans played a significant role in the rhetoric of Black Nationalists from Marcus Garvey to Malcolm X. Edmonds’ criticisms, however, were never apparent in her public statements or conversations with White conservatives. Maintaining Black dignity tempered her public statements regarding Black life and culture.

Political scientist Lewis A. Randolph suggests that while Black conservatives may have leaned right on matters outside of Jim Crow, most Black conservatives were in the Black mainstream in their embrace of the goals of the civil rights movement. The

³⁶ Letter, Helen Edmonds to Robert Brown, December 4, 1969, Folder: Correspondence. White House and the Executive Dept. of the U.S. Government, 1959-1969, Box 2, Helen Edmonds Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

movement, particularly during its nonviolent, integrationist phase of the 1950s and early 1960s, was predominantly led by the Black middle class, was saturated with traditional religious undertones, and played to middle class moral sensibilities that made it easy for Black conservatives to embrace its goals. Helen Edmonds frequently, and publicly, stated her support for the end of legalized segregation and other forms of overt racism.³⁷

Edmonds' rhetoric against the War on Poverty and denunciations against militants in the mid-to-late 1960s placed her clearly on the right of the political spectrum. However, as her experience with the *National Review* demonstrated, her opposition to legalized racial inequality in the South placed her outside of the emerging White conservative movement. Moreover, unlike many White conservatives, Edmonds refused to partake in anything she viewed as anti-Black. While she remained a conservative throughout the rest of her life, there remained tension between her politics and what she perceived as overt racism within the emerging White conservative movement.

Such was the case with many Black Republicans as the party embraced the father of modern conservatism, Barry Goldwater, in the 1964 presidential election. While a few Black conservatives like George Schuyler joined Goldwater and other White conservatives in opposing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, most split with their party in that year's elections.³⁸ So far had African Americans been driven out of the party, a 1964 RNC pamphlet highlighting the party's Black staff featured only secretaries and mail room/printing office staff.³⁹ Elaine Jenkins, who attended the 1964 Republican convention in San Francisco, recalled that the experience "was lonely and uncomfortable." She

³⁷ Randolph, "Black Neoconservatives in the United States," 150.

³⁸ Schuyler was eventually fired in 1964 after he endorsed Goldwater, and he subsequently joined the John Birch Society. George Schuyler, "Views and Reviews," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, August 1, 1964; George Schuyler, "The Case Against the Civil Rights Bill," in Jeffrey Leak, ed., *Rac[e]jing to the Right: Selected Essays of George S. Schuyler* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 97; Maria Diedrich, "George S. Schuyler's *Black No More*—The Black Conservative's Socialist Past," *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 12:1 (1988), 55.

³⁹ Republican National Committee, "Who is George Lewis?," April 1964, Folder: Republican Party and the South: *Negro Vote*, Box 47, Records of the Democratic National Committee (Series I), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library.

complained that “There was *no* inclusion of Black Republicans,” and that “White staffers treated the few of us present as truly non-existent.”⁴⁰

BLACK CAPITALISM AND CONSERVATIVE STRAINS OF BLACK POWER

Two years after the nomination of Barry Goldwater, Black Power arose as a dominant theme in Black politics. While popular (mis)conceptions today view Black Power as exclusively a movement of the Left, it brought with it a resurgence of conservative Black Nationalism reminiscent of Marcus Garvey.⁴¹ During the mid-to-late 1960s, a new generation of Black conservatives (and Black Leftists) took up the banners of self-determination and self-reliance, and turned away from the prevailing liberal emphasis on integration as the solution to Black advancement.⁴² Floyd McKissick and Roy Innis of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the group that had previously organized the Freedom Rides, were influential in turning the organization toward conservative Black Nationalism. Under their leadership, CORE stressed the need to create Black owned businesses, called for autonomous, Black-run school districts, and called Black men and women to look toward themselves, not the White-dominated federal government, for uplift.⁴³

Surprisingly, some White conservatives also believed that Black Nationalism could be used to make inroads for the Republican Party in traditionally Democratic neighborhoods. The *National Review* declared in 1967 that “hard work and self-discipline” were the keys to Black economic betterment, and praised Booker T. Washington for teaching that “respect and access to jobs must be earned by the Negroes themselves.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Elaine Brown Jenkins, *Jumping Double Dutch: A New Agenda for Blacks and the Republican Party* (Silver Spring, MD: Beckham House Publishers, 1996), 25-26.

⁴¹ Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, eds., *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 373.

⁴² Bracey, 103, 110.

⁴³ Marable and Mullings, 373; Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 277.

⁴⁴ George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 282.

Clarence Townes, head of the RNC's Minorities Division, emphasized to his White colleagues that "never before has the Negro community been more insistent upon self-determination; and the Minorities Division presents the Republican philosophy to the Negro community's leadership in this light."⁴⁵ This notion of "Black capitalism" and self-reliance would also become the centerpiece of Richard Nixon's Black strategy in 1968 and during his subsequent terms in office.

As a presidential candidate in 1968, Nixon led his party to embrace what he termed "Black capitalism." During a campaign radio address Nixon put forth his proposal to increase government support for Black-owned businesses. He attempted to pacify the concerns of White listeners by suggesting that "much of the Black militant talk these days is actually in terms far closer to the doctrines of free enterprise than to those of the welfarist '30s" in their usage of the "terms of 'pride,' 'ownership,' private enterprise,' 'capital,' 'self-assurance,' [and] 'self-respect.'" Nixon further argued that new emphasis should be placed on "Black ownership," and promised a new age of Black Power "in the best...constructive sense of that often misapplied term." If African American communities controlled their own small businesses and had local control of their own schools, then the country would see a "rebirth of pride and individualism and independence." This rhetoric appealed to not only many Whites, including South Carolina's Strom Thurmond, who found comfort in its emphasis on self-reliance and de-emphasis on integration, but it also nearly mirrored the same language used by many Black conservatives. Nixon, according to James Farmer, the former leader of the Freedom Rides who later accepted a position in Nixon's administration, commended the presidential candidate's "supreme act of co-optation" in taking up the banner of Black Nationalism.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Speech by Clarence Townes before the Republican Big City County Chairman's Workshop in Washington, DC, March 23, 1968, Clarence L. Townes Jr. Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

⁴⁶ Nixon for President Committee, "'Bridges to Human Dignity': An Address by Richard M. Nixon on the CBS Radio Network," April 25, 1968, Folder: Nixon, Richard M., 1968 (1), Box 14, Special Name Series, DDE: Post-Presidential Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library; Dean Kotlowski, *Nixon's Civil Rights: Politics, Principle, and Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 38; Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of*

Black capitalism became a policy reality on March 5, 1969, when President Nixon signed Executive Order 11458, establishing the Office of Minority Business Enterprise (OMBE), which had the explicit goal of encouraging and funding Black businesses. Upon signing the order, Nixon proclaimed his hope that these businesses would “encourage pride, dignity, and a sense of independence” throughout Black communities.⁴⁷ Though its initial budget was only \$1.2 million, by 1972 its funding had increased to \$43.5 million, and in 1973 to \$63.5 million.⁴⁸

Civil rights scholar Belinda Robnett has suggested that “the change to a Black Power philosophy also brought the development of a hierarchy and fewer spaces for women’s leadership,” as hypermasculinity and paternalistic gender norms plagued many nationalist organizations.⁴⁹ Tellingly, the first national Black Power conference in Newark (1967) approved an anti-birth control resolution, and the newsletter condemned Planned Parenthood’s support of “Black genocidal politics.”⁵⁰ A closer examination of the conservative faction of Black Nationalism reveals the active participation of many women. For instance, Mary Van Buren, running on a platform centered on Black capitalism, received the endorsement of Indianapolis’s Republican establishment in her 1972 run for state senator.⁵¹ In 1971, the OMBE sponsored its first National Conference on Business

Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North (New York: Random House, 2008), 429-430.

⁴⁷ Robert Weems Jr. with Lewis A. Randolph, *Business in Black and White: American Presidents and Black Entrepreneurs in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 127; Jonathan Bean, *Big Government and Affirmative Action: The Scandalous History of the Small Business Administration* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 72-73; Sugrue, 442-3; Kotlowski, 134.

⁴⁸ Weems, 227.

⁴⁹ Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 180.

⁵⁰ Devin Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power, and the Making of American Politics, 1965-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 235; Ross, 153.

⁵¹ “Prominent GOP Candidate to Attend Minority Women Meet,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, June 10, 1972.

Opportunities for Black women.⁵² Gloria Toote, the granddaughter of Garvey associate Frederick Toote and an economic advisor for Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Reagan, used her influence in all three administrations to promote increased government expenditures for Black businesses.⁵³ Similarly, Elaine Jenkins emphasized that “the root of Black entrepreneurship is in the Black community” and criticized traditional liberal Black leadership for failing to support the development of Black businesses. As an influential member of the Republican National Committee from the 1960s through 1980s, she was adamant in her support for the maintenance of party’s Black capitalism platform.⁵⁴

Jewel Rogers-Lafontant, who was also active in business circles and served in the Nixon administration, vigorously pressed the OMBE to include Black women in its funding. A board member of Trans World Airlines (TWA), Rogers-Lafontant told the Republican Platform Committee in 1972 that “a primary goal” of the party should be to direct funding to women and encourage the “stimulation of minority enterprise.”⁵⁵ Rogers-Lafontant, like many Black conservative women, was from the upper-middle class; her father, Francis Stradford, was one of the wealthiest Black lawyers in America during the 1930s. After becoming the first Black woman admitted to the Chicago Bar Association, Rogers-Lafontant became a partner in her father’s firm by the 1960s and served as the national secretary of the National Bar Association.⁵⁶

⁵² Clipping, “Women’s Confab in Session at Washington, D.C.,” n.d., Folder: Administration Initiatives Receiving Top Coverage in Minority Publications, 11/3/71, Box 1, Stanley S. Scott Papers, Gerald R. Ford Library.

⁵³ Gloria Toote, “Black Political Power,” in J. Clay Smith Jr., ed., *Rebels in Law: Voices in History of Black Women Lawyers* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 169-170; Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, updated edition (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 151; “Gloria E.A. Toote,” in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Women, Book II* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1996), 653.

⁵⁴ Helena Carney Lambeth, “Elaine B. Jenkins,” in Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Women*, 331.

⁵⁵ Andrew Malcolm, “New Face Enters the Boardroom,” *New York Times*, September 10, 1972; “Bring Minorities Into Mainstream, GOP Told,” *Jet*, August 31, 1972, 7.

⁵⁶ “Lady Lawyers,” *Jet*, January 22, 1953, 15; Lawrence Otis Graham, *Our Kind of People: Inside America’s Black Upper-Class* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 194; J. Clay Smith Jr., *Rebels in Law: Voices in History of Black Women Lawyers* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 307.

The membership of The Links Incorporated, a prominent social club headed by Black conservatives Helen Edmonds and Marjorie Parker with chapters across the country, was comprised almost exclusively of middle class Black women. Most Links members were either high-profile college educators or the wives of physicians, attorneys, and businessmen. Per a 1966 report, the average Links member was over fifty years old and had at least four years of college education. Forty-seven percent had master's degrees. According to Parker, who, like Edmonds, was also an influential college professor, The Links was formed in the 1940s to address the "ambivalence toward the Black professional class" from White society. "Many avenues of status, fellowship, and service were closed to women of the class," according to Parker, whose goal was to promote the careers and causes of upper class Black women.⁵⁷ While The Links would advocate some of the same ideals as conservative White women—particularly in its anticommunism and opposition to government welfare—the group's focus was to provide social and political advancement for upper-middle class Black women. Relying on an ideology of self-help reminiscent of Booker T. Washington, many conservative Black women focused on their own advancement through entrepreneurship and expanded business opportunities. Unlike many conservative White women who often opposed the increased presence of women in the workplace, their Black counterparts in The Links wholeheartedly embraced Black capitalism as the means to obtain their goal of self-advancement.

Though celebrated in middle class Black magazines like *Jet* and *Ebony*, the "Black capitalism" initiatives of the late 1960s were widely denounced by the Black Nationalist Left. Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver called the Black bourgeoisie "puppets" of colonialists who promised them a "vested interest in the capitalist system."⁵⁸ The militant publication *Soulbook* referred to conservative Black Nationalism as "cullud nationalism," and concluded that "their seeming militancy...can only be interpreted as 'loud-mouth' conservatism." It further accused them of siding with "right-wing 'Beasts'" when they

⁵⁷ Parker, *The History of The Links*, xv, 18.

⁵⁸ "Eldridge Cleaver Discusses Revolution: An Interview from Exile," October 1969, in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Black Panthers Speak* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 108-109.

praised "Whitey's so-called 'free enterprize [sic],' chiefly in order to bolster their own position in racist, U.S. 'society.'"⁵⁹

Black capitalism also drew little praise from mainstream liberal civil rights leaders, who argued that full economic and social integration, not separation, was the key to Black advancement.⁶⁰ Bayard Rustin complained that Black capitalism's adherents "are not progressive" and "let both the federal government and the White community off the hook" by placing the burden of advancement solely on Blacks themselves.⁶¹ One of the fiercest criticisms of Black (and White) conservative self-help came from Martin Luther King Jr., who in the midst of his 1968 Poor People's Campaign, noted, "It is a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he should lift himself up by his own bootstraps." Conservative emphasis on self-help and Black capitalism ignored fundamental structural inequalities, King pronounced, "it is even worse to tell a man to lift himself up by his own bootstraps when somebody is standing on the boot." And while Black conservatives from Zora Neale Hurston to the Black businesswomen of the 1960s emphasized a fierce individualism that lay at the heart of capitalistic entrepreneurship, King emphasized communal responsibility and his firm belief that "nobody else in this country has lifted themselves by their own bootstraps alone, so why expect the Black man to do it?"⁶²

From OMBE's inception, middle-class business women were involved in promoting, and personally receiving, increased benefits from the program. Every Black woman, according to Elaine Jenkins, "dreams of having all the opportunities that a White man or woman would have," and argued that under President Nixon, "Black business thrived."⁶³ Jenkins, who was deeply involved with the Republican National Committee during the late 1960s and whose father founded the first Black business school at Wilberforce University,

⁵⁹ Ernie Allen, "Black Nationalism on the Right," *Soulbook*, 1:1 (Winter 1964), 8, 13.

⁶⁰ Kotlowski, 132.

⁶¹ Bayard Rustin, "Negroes and the 1968 Elections," in *Down the Line: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 251.

⁶² Martin Luther King Jr., "Local 1199, New York City, March 10, 1968," in Michael K. Honey, ed., *All Labor Has Dignity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011).

⁶³ Carol Morton, "Black Women in Corporate America," *Ebony*, November 1975, 112; Jenkins, *Jumping Double Dutch*, 42.

was herself a beneficiary of Black capitalism. Founded in 1970, Jenkins' business consulting firm, One America, Inc., became one of the top one hundred Black-owned businesses within three years.⁶⁴

As Jenkins' success story illustrates in critical ways, the Left's criticisms of Black capitalists bore truths. Many supporters of Black capitalism were members of the Black bourgeoisie and were more than willing to accept government funding to help develop their own businesses—at the same time they were critical of "welfare dependency" among working class African Americans. On the other hand, because of the lack of capital in Black communities and discrimination by banks in granting loans, government assistance was a needed variable in growing the number of Black-owned businesses. When it served their needs, many Black conservatives were more than willing to embrace a system of government assistance that was essential to the expansion of Black businesses.

Not all Black capitalism supporters, however, relied on government assistance in forming their own business ventures. Cora T. Walker was a prominent conservative Black Nationalist in Harlem during the 1960s who held fast to a strict interpretation of self-determination apart from federal assistance. Walker, who made headlines in the 1940s after she became one of the first Black women admitted to the New York State Bar, was also a lifelong Republican. Running as the party's candidate in a 1964 state senate race, Walker's campaign emphasized self-help and was highly critical of what she described as welfare dependency. Catryna Seymour, a Walker supporter, praised her "courage" for being "outspoken in urging Negroes to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps."⁶⁵ Walker further solidified her conservative credentials by opposing busing, arguing that

⁶⁴ "The Negro: Whether Ward Healer or U.S.," *Ebony*, August 1966, 97; Lambeth, 330-1; Morton, 108.

⁶⁵ "Cora Walker Pushing Bid for 21st Senatorial Seat," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 18, 1964; Catryna Seymour, letter to editor, *New York Times*, November 2, 1964; "Black Profile," *Sacramento Observer*, May 14, 1970; "Cora T. Walker, Pioneering Female New York Attorney, Succumbs at 84," *Jet*, August 7, 2006, 35; "Cora Walker, 84, Dies," *New York Times*, July 20, 2006; Constance Baker Motley, *Equal Justice Under Law: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1999), 206; Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 24.

residents of Harlem should maintain and attend their own separate schools. In 1972 she appeared alongside Senator James L. Buckley, who was recently elected on the Conservative Party ticket, on a slate of Republican National Convention delegates approved by the Manhattan Republican Organization.⁶⁶

Prominently displaying a picture taken of her and Malcolm X in her home, Walker followed his lead as an unflinching advocate of Black self-determination, once telling a reporter that African Americans must “tell the young people that they must own. We must begin to own some of this real estate called Harlem.” Leading by example, Walker started at the most basic level of need in any community. In 1967, she spearheaded the creation and opening of the first Black-owned supermarket in Harlem. The idea was born after she realized that all the grocery stores in Harlem were owned by Whites. According to Walker, “I felt that Black people needed to own a supermarket, too,” and that a Black-owned business “served as an instrument to empowering the Black community.” She wanted Black children who walked by it to say, “My mother and father are part owners of that supermarket.”⁶⁷ Relying on the self-help tradition in its purest sense, Walker’s co-op venture would be funded exclusively by Black investors from Harlem.

In 1968, Walker sold five dollar shares to 2,550 individual shareholders, and opened the 10,000-square-foot Harlem River Cooperative Supermarket. “I even tried to negotiate with the welfare department to allow welfare recipients to buy \$5 shares,” Walker recalled, but the agency refused. At its grand opening, one shopper remarked that the air-conditioned supermarket—which featured automatic doors, soft music, and fluorescent lighting—was “lovely” and that “you don’t find this except in the suburbs.” The store came under immediate attack, however, by Manhattan’s Democratic borough president, Hulan Jack, and Joe Overton of the local food service union, who criticized Walker for hiring outside of the union. Walker argued that the \$1.85 hourly wage paid to her employees was comparable to starting salaries for similar jobs in Harlem, and that

⁶⁶ Thomas Ronan, “Buckley is Named as G.O.P. Delegate,” *New York Times*, April 12, 1972; Biondi, 284.

⁶⁷ “A Great and Mighty Walk for Cora Walker,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 11, 1999.

union labor was too expensive if she wanted to "give quality food at fair prices." Within a year of the store's opening, Overton led an eighteen-month union picket outside the store's front door, in what he claimed was an attempt to unionize the business, not shut it down. Though investors eventually grew to almost 3,500 by 1969, after sustained protests, union boycotts, and numerous broken windows and other incidents of vandalism, the store closed its doors in April 1976.⁶⁸

THE LEGACY OF BLACK CONSERVATIVE WOMEN

As seen in the story of Cora Walker, the legacy of Black capitalism was mixed. From 1970 to 1975, the number of Black-owned banks more than doubled from twenty-one to forty-five.⁶⁹ Moreover, by 1983 sixty-four of the one hundred largest Black corporations had been founded since 1970.⁷⁰ Between 1969 and 1972, the gross income of Black businesses increased from \$4.5 billion to \$7.5 billion. However, during this same period, Black businesses accounted for only 1.7 percent of the total income of all American businesses, and the *combined* total income of the one hundred largest Black-owned businesses still placed it behind 284 of *Fortune 500's* list of America's largest corporations.⁷¹ In many ways, despite the sincerity of the expressed devotion of

⁶⁸ "Residents of Harlem Open Their Own Supermarket," *New York Times*, June 5, 1968; Rudy Johnson, "Harlem Market Thrives as Co-Op," *New York Times*, August 11, 1968; Richard Severo, "Overton, Harlem Leader, Main Figure in Strife at Cooperative Market," *New York Times*, November 13, 1970; "A Great and Mighty Walk for Cora Walker," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 11, 1999; Theodore L. Cross, *Black Capitalism: Strategy for Business in the Ghetto* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 43-44.

⁶⁹ Sean Dennis Cashman, *African-Americans and the Quest for Civil Rights, 1900-1990* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 228-229.

⁷⁰ Thomas D. Boston, *Race, Class and Conservatism* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 36.

⁷¹ Peter Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), 48; Cashman, 229.

conservative Black Nationalists to their community, their critics on the Black Left were correct. Black businessmen and women individually benefited from Black capitalism, but it failed to transform the American economic structure or uplift the Black working class.

Though Black capitalism was the central issue to most Black conservatives of the 1960s, many also advocated educational separatism as well. Cora T. Walker joined CORE in opposing busing in Harlem to achieve racial integration in public schools because—like Zora Neale Hurston’s opposition to *Brown*—she believed it was insulting to suggest that White schools were “better” for Harlem’s Black community. Instead, Walker and CORE endorsed a separate school system run independently by African Americans themselves. Many Black conservatives also played dominant roles in the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), which they saw as a means to promote self-determination. UNCF bolstered two foundational issues to many Black conservatives: Black schools offered Black communities an institution they could claim as their own, while also providing a venue for Black students to develop the skills necessary to contribute to their betterment through self-help. Founded in 1944, UNCF elected its first president, Frederick D. Patterson, who was a Republican and protégé of Booker T. Washington. In 1972, another Republican, Arthur Fletcher, who coined the phrase “a mind is a terrible thing to waste,” became executive director of the organization. Under pressure from his Black conservative supporters, President Nixon nearly doubled federal funding for Black colleges. UNCF was also supported by conservative Black women like Helen Edmonds, who served on its national board, and other professors in The Links during the 1970s. Between 1960 and 1980, the majority of money raised by the organization’s fundraisers was given to UNCF, totaling over \$600,000 in donations.⁷² As in their support for Black capitalism, Edmonds and The Links were driven by a desire to strengthen Black self-determination and racial pride in distinctly Black institutions. As a partial result of the efforts of UNCF, Black conservatives,

⁷² Letter, Helen Edmonds to Gerald Ford, May 24, 1974, Folder: Black Leadership, Box 224, Gerald R. Ford Vice Presidential Papers, Gerald R. Ford Library; Parker, *The History of The Links*, 25, 89.

and the Nixon administration, enrollment in Black colleges grew 50 percent between 1969 and 1977.⁷³

Black conservative women remained active in the party throughout the rest of the 1970s. Ethel Allen, a medical doctor, self-described “ghetto practitioner,” and Republican since the 1950s, was drawn to the GOP’s rigid view of “law and order” in the late 1960s. With her practice in a poor Philadelphia neighborhood, her office was frequently broken into and her primary clients were drug addicts. One day when she was making a house call, four men in the house attempted to mug her, assuming she carried drugs in her black medicine bag. Allen instead pulled out a handgun, forced the men to undress, and ordered the naked would-be robbers to the street before she walked away (her embrace of gun ownership and self-defense is another unexplored link by scholars between Black Nationalists and conservatives). Following this event, Allen ran for a city-wide office on a platform that promised to fight crime and send drug addicts out of the city “to places out West.” After winning the election, she became the city’s first Black councilwoman elected to an at-large seat.⁷⁴

Allen remained a vocal conservative and important state Republican throughout the 1970s. A founding member of the Black Republican Women’s National Alliance, she criticized White feminists for being “more concerned with burning bras, sexual promiscuity and who’s on top in their relationships with men” than caring for “real” women’s issues of economic empowerment.⁷⁵ In denouncing feminism, Allen used the same hyperbolic rhetoric as White conservative women like Phyllis Schlafly; however, like Helen Edmonds, Elaine Jenkins, and other Black conservatives, she wholeheartedly embraced Black capitalism, expanded entrepreneurial opportunities for Black women, and Nixon’s attempts at welfare reform that guaranteed a minimum income. In 1974, she served as

⁷³ Kotlowski, 154-5.

⁷⁴ Lezlie McCoy, “Dr. Ethel Allen: Philadelphia Politician, Physician and Advocate of the People,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, February 18, 2003; “Dr. Allen’s Newest Patient: The City of Philadelphia,” *Ebony*, May 1973, 124, 128; “I’ve Learned to Survive,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Today* section, January 1976.

⁷⁵ “Dr. Allen’s Newest Patient,” 126.

vice chairman of the National Coordinating Council of Black Republicans.⁷⁶ Given her long affiliation with the local and national party, Allen became one of the most powerful Black women (of either party) in the country in 1979 when she was appointed Pennsylvania's Secretary of State. The position earned her a top-ten spot on *Esquire* magazine's list of the nation's most powerful women, a list that featured mostly Whites.⁷⁷

Black conservative women remained a small, but vocal, group within the Republican Party into the 1980s. Inside the Ronald Reagan administration, conservative Black women continued to press their demands to party leaders. Kansas City businesswoman Inez Kaiser urged President Reagan to follow Nixon's example of "helping Black business people to keep money in their own neighborhoods."⁷⁸ Similarly, Elaine Jenkins formed the Council of 100 Black Republicans, a Washington-based organization made up of the upper-middle class that continued to advocate on behalf of Black businesswomen.⁷⁹ Gloria Toote served as a senior advisor for Ronald Reagan in 1980 and as vice chairman of his administration's Advisory Council on Private Sector Initiatives. During the campaign, she praised "Reagan's approach," and noted both she and the conservative icon "talk in terms of entrepreneurship and reducing welfare rolls."⁸⁰ Reagan also appointed Eileen Gardner, who worked for the conservative Heritage Foundation, to a high-ranking post in the Department of Education.⁸¹ As they had in the 1960s and

⁷⁶ Letter, Samuel C. Jackson to Gerald Ford, August 21, 1974, Folder: Black Republican (1), Box 5, Stanley S. Scott Papers, Gerald R. Ford Library.

⁷⁷ "Two States Choose Black Women as Secretaries," *Ebony*, October 1979; "Dr. Ethel Allen Named to Penn. Cabinet Post," *Jet*, January 25, 1979, 78; McCoy, "Dr. Ethel Allen."

⁷⁸ Simeon Booker, "Ticker Tape U.S.A.," *Jet*, August 6, 1981, 11.

⁷⁹ "Black Republicans," *Black Enterprise*, August 1984, 67; "Black Republicans: What Makes Them Tick?," *Ebony*, August 1984, 74.

⁸⁰ James D. Williams, ed., *The State of Black America 1981* (New York: National Urban League, 1981), 299; "Blacks in Reagan's Cabinet?," *Columbus Times* (Georgia), November 13, 1980; "Black Women's Agenda Luncheon," *Washington Informer*, October 2, 1980.

⁸¹ Eileen M. Gardner, ed., *A New Agenda for Education* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 1985).

1970s, these women brought with them a distinctly Black middle-class perspective, especially as it related to Black self-determination and business.

Though there were a number of Black conservatives active throughout the twentieth century, African Americans since the 1930s consistently provided the Democratic Party with one of its most stable voting blocs. On the presidential level, since 1964 African Americans have voted upwards of eighty (and oftentimes ninety) percent for the Democratic candidate. However, scholars are incorrect in their assumptions that “Black conservative politics was relatively inert during the Civil Rights period,” or that “Black conservatives and the ideas they espoused had little demonstrable effect on the trajectory of American politics” during the 1960s.⁸² Black conservatives of the 1960s were directly responsible for the massive federal programs that fell under the umbrella of “Black capitalism,” which was rooted in the Black self-help tradition. By embracing Black capitalism, upper-middle-class Black women embraced a limited, but actualized, window of opportunity for individual advancement. Unlike White conservative women, who were opposed to such “affirmative action” programs designed to assist both African Americans and women, Black conservative women almost unanimously embraced the programs. Virtually no prominent Black conservative of the 1960s joined their White counterparts in calling for women to return to the domestic sphere. Black capitalism was by no means universally successful in advancing all upper-class Black women, let alone the Black community as a whole; rather, it was a vehicle that provided the social and economic advancement that created a small, powerful (and wealthy) cadre of conservative Black businesswomen like Elaine Jenkins and Jewel Rogers-Lafontant.

CONCLUSION

By explicitly ignoring conservative Black women in historical narratives of the 1960s, we implicitly argue against their existence as legitimate and distinct voices within both the Black community and the emerging conservative movement. Women from Zora Neale Hurston to Helen Edmonds to Cora T. Walker demonstrate that conservative thought

⁸² Randolph, “Black Neoconservatives in the United States,” 150; Bracey, ix.

existed throughout the Black community during the civil rights era. These women also demonstrate a counter-voice to the explicitly racist conservatism of the 1960s. While some of their rhetoric aligned with their White counterparts, the positions taken by these women were not simply mirror images of White conservatism; they were distinctly Black in their emphasis and origins. Conservative Black women in the civil rights era and beyond consistently emphasized the importance of Black business, self-determination, and a Booker T. Washingtonian “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” work ethic, as the keys to racial advancement. At a time when conservative White women hearkened back toward a nostalgic past and notion of traditional “motherhood,” conservative Black women supported policies that furthered their presence in the business world. One could argue these women were naïve, that they served only the narrow interests of the Black bourgeoisie, or that they even helped White society preserve structural inequalities. Regardless, though they remained outside of mainstream Black politics and outside the parameters of White conservatism, they were active participants in the debates of their time.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways did Black conservative women and White conservative women differ?
2. What role did education play in the ideology of Black conservative women?
3. Why was Black capitalism so central to Black conservatism?
4. This essay focused on Black conservative definitions of self-determination. How might Black Leftists, such as the Black Panther Party, define the term differently?

Writing Prompt

Discuss the virtues and pitfalls of an integrationist approach to Black uplift versus the separatist approach of self-determination. Research one or two prominent Black conservative women today. In what ways are they similar and different to Black conservative women of the 1950s-1970s?