

NAACP and black officials targeted

by Mel Klenetsky

The appointment of a special independent counsel to investigate Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy, a former congressman and former member of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), together with an indictment against Rep. Walter Tucker III (D-Calif.), a member of the CBC, has caused many in the African-American community to once again ask whether black elected officials are being subjected to a systematic pattern of political targeting.

Add to this the attempts to get National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Director Ben Chavis to step down, and it appears that the African-American community, from its political leaders to its representative organizations, is under a full-scale assault.

Secretary Espy is under investigation for allegedly accepting gifts of football tickets and a corporate jet ride from the nation's largest poultry producer, Tyson's Food, Inc. Espy becomes the second black member of Clinton's cabinet to come under this kind of scrutiny. The first was Commerce Secretary Ron Brown, who was eventually cleared of charges that he had illegally accepted \$700,000 to influence a business deal between an American company and a foreigner.

Dr. Mary Sawyer, author of the "The Dilemma of Black Politics: A Report on the Harassment of Black Elected Officials," told *EIR* that the Espy investigation is typical of the cases that she reviewed in her 1977 report. In that report, which was updated in 1987, Sawyer observed that top black elected officials are especially vulnerable to political harassment. The cases of Clinton cabinet members Espy and Brown certainly hew to that pattern.

She wrote: "It is significant, for example, that the black official considered to be the most powerful or influential in a particular state has in many instances been the target of harassment. . . . Of the hundred persons identified by *Ebony* magazine in 1976 as the 'most influential black Americans,' at least 30 are elected officials. Of those, over 60% have been subjected to some degree of harassment."

Just days after Espy came under investigation, Representative Tucker was indicted on bribery and tax evasion charges stemming from a two-year FBI investigation into Compton, California politics, where Tucker served as mayor during 1991-92. Some believe Tucker was targeted because of his opposition to card casino gambling salons. Tucker himself says: "It's obviously political. It's an election year and I'm up for reelection." He also sees himself as the latest victim

in a "pattern of attacks on African-American politicians."

Perhaps the most telling case is the attacks against Chavis. Chavis has come under criticism because of a job discrimination lawsuit that he settled with a former aide, Mary Stansel, when he became NAACP director. Chavis's critics are calling a special board meeting of the NAACP, where they will push for his resignation, on the grounds that Chavis allegedly mishandled the Stansel case.

Chavis is accused of never reporting the settlement to the NAACP board and mishandling funds. The NAACP has a \$3 million deficit in its \$18 million budget. As this article went to press, the NAACP executive board was scheduled to meet to decide whether Chavis stays on.

Outside forces at work

Chavis insists he will not resign, and is charging that forces outside the African-American community, along with a handful of people inside the NAACP, are behind the campaign to oust him. The "outside forces" prominently include the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which went into a frenzy earlier this year when the CBC mooted opening a dialogue with the Nation of Islam. The ADL frenzy intensified in June, when Chavis hosted a black unity meeting, under the aegis of the NAACP, in which Nation of Islam leader Minister Louis Farrakhan participated, along with CBC leader Rep. Kweisi Mfume (D-Md.), Jesse Jackson, and many other African-American leaders.

The ADL, which issued a report in 1991 charging that black intellectuals posed the greatest danger to Jews, immediately began a stream of public denunciations of Chavis for daring to invite Farrakhan to the meeting, and demands for Chavis's resignation soon began to be heard. The *Wall Street Journal* editorially called for Chavis to step down and threatened withdrawal of corporate support. In mid-August, the Ford Foundation, one of the NAACP's biggest donors, held up a \$250,000 grant to the NAACP, feeding the environment for Chavis's ouster.

The media onslaught against Chavis, led by syndicated columnist Carl Rowan and the *Washington Post*, among others, has tried to argue that it is the Stansel incident and not Chavis's defiance of the ADL and Wall Street, with his overtures to youth and black separatist groups, which lies at the bottom of the efforts to oust him.

Clarence Mitchell III, head of the Center for the Study of Harassment of African-Americans, sees the efforts to oust Chavis as part of the broader pattern of targeting of black elected officials. "I don't believe that the NAACP would remove Chavis," Mitchell told *EIR*. "That would be fatal, at least not now. They will move toward restrictions on spending without board approval, but guidelines should have been in place long before. I fully support Chavis. He is mobilizing people against this outside pressure and, in this context, I believe whatever internal modifications may be made can be positive."