

Speech of Cornell William Brooks, President and CEO
NAACP 105th National Convention – Las Vegas, Nevada
July 21, 2014

Opening

I want to extend a heartfelt word, a soul-deep word of appreciation to Ms. Lorraine C. Miller. This appreciation is extended with both hands and both arms. One for an exceedingly gracious, generous, and beautifully sung introduction, and the other for her sacrificial leadership, unrelenting commitment and deep dedication to the NAACP over the course of a lifetime. To our dedicated Chairman Roslyn M. Brock. To the dedicated members of the National Board of Directors. To those of you who were here last evening, who have a pulse, and who heard our Chairman say, “the pressure is rising and the NAACP will prevail.”

And for those who are young and young at heart, you will recall that Chairman Brock reminded us, “Courage does not skip a generation.” To Chairman Emeritus Bond, last evening, my oldest son told me he met Julian Bond. When I asked him what the experience was like he said that it was cool. When I asked what he meant, my son said, “He’s Julian Bond.” Enough said.

To Chairman Proctor and the trustees of the Special Contribution Fund. To the largest, most effective force of state conference leaders, unit leaders, and volunteers in this nation -- the very heart and soul of the NAACP. We without you are like a sail without a ship. With you, we are a ship with a sail headed in the right direction over stormy seas, headed toward the horizon, headed toward hope, headed to where America should be heading.

To you, the loyal members of this great association, the members who work on a volunteer basis, the members who work without compensation, the members who represent our life and legacy, our history and heritage. To our partners and allies. To our honored guests and friends who joined us this morning, and last, but certainly not the least, the most dedicated, sacrificially committed, profoundly skilled and well abled staff in the entire country.

And may I, as a matter of personal privilege, introduce you to my family. My lovely wife of 20 some years, I met her when she was very, very young, Janice Broome Brooks. She's beautiful and brilliant. While we've been married for some time, I like to remind her she is still young enough to be a very pretty girl and just old enough to be a very beautiful woman. To my sons, Cornell and Hamilton, you are "my boys" in every sense of the word; and to my mother, Mrs. Jamee Prioleau Brooks Johnson, who has deposited more wisdom into my head and applied more wisdom to my backside, than any mother should. To my extended family, who came from all across the country, the Brooks-Wineglass-Green family tree. They, like the family of the NAACP, are all in for the NAACP.

My family, if you all wouldn't mind, would you all please stand? My dear brothers and sisters, if you're sitting next to somebody named Brooks they're probably related to me. If they're named Brooks and they don't claim they're related to me, they're probably related to me.

No Ordinary Time

Were you to consult the Gregorian calendar, used in much of the western world, it would remind you this morning is July 21st, 2014 A.D. In the words of historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, it is no ordinary time.

Were you to consult your cellphone, a mobile device, an exquisite chronograph, a moderately expensive timepiece or even a less expensive Timex, you would be reminded this morning that this is no ordinary time. For those of you who have come from the east coast to the west coast and who are getting up at 3:00 and 4:00 and 5:00 each morning, you may be reminded that this day, this morning, is no ordinary time. Astronomers can yet gaze through the Hubble telescope upon the sparkling stars in their courses in that black velvet of midnight sky. Astronomers can yet calculate the age of the universe, and yet this is no ordinary time.

Historians tell us that in this 50th anniversary year of a brave band of young civil rights disciples who ushered in a due season of justice not only across the American South, but also into the uttermost parts of this world. This is no ordinary time. There are people in this room who yet remember those times, know this time, and will understand that it was not an ordinary time then, it is not an ordinary time now. Legal historians will remind us that 50 years ago this year the NAACP breathed the breath of new life into a dry piece of parchment called the American Constitution.

Commemorating the Civil Rights Act in this 50th anniversary year, this is no ordinary time. Sixty years ago, the Supreme Court heeded the prophetic call

of NAACP attorneys by handing down the Brown v. Board of Education decision. That decision stood then and it stands now for the legal proposition that “separate is inherently unequal,” and yet the Brown decision not only stands for the legal proposition that separate is inherently unequal, it also stands for the moral proposition that every child of every hue, of every heritage, from every community has the right to “study to show thyself approved.”

Sixty years later, it is no ordinary time. Yet in this season of anniversaries from freedom summer to Brown to the Civil Rights Act, even at this very moment there are those who pose a rather uncomfortable and unsettling question. They ask the question, is the NAACP relevant? At this time, at this very hour, our critics pose the question, is the NAACP relevant? Even in my young tenure, my embryonic and newborn tenure as the president and CEO of this august civil rights body, I find the question wearisome, not worrisome.

The NAACP And Its Relevance Today

Though the question is wearisome not worrisome, it must be answered. Is the NAACP relevant? As important as the question is to some of our stonehearted critics, and even to some of our half-hearted supporters, I want to answer this question not for the critics.

Let me answer the question for the promising and powerful 600 ACT-SO participants who lit up the stage and yet light up our lives. Let me answer the question for them. Let me answer the question of the relevance of the NAACP for the bold and brilliant 1,200 young people who are here in this

convention, here in this room, standing beside their mothers and fathers, standing beside their aunts and uncles, standing beside their grandmothers and grandfathers, standing as members of the NAACP.

Let me answer the question of relevance for the Moses generation of leaders who are yet teaching, reaching, mentoring, and partnering with the Joshua generation of leaders.

Let me answer the question of relevance – as the father of two African-American sons. Let me answer the question as the father of two black boys, let me answer the question. As the father of two grandsons of the dream, two deeply great heirs of the liberation legacy of the NAACP, let me answer the question of relevance as the father of an older son who's precisely the same precious age of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis when they were killed, 17 vulnerable years of age. Let me answer the question as the father of a younger son who's the same age as Emmett Till when he was slain, 14 equally vulnerable years of age. Let me answer the question.

Let me answer the question of relevance for those both of a proto R&B generation who recall Isaac Hayes, the black Moses, in chains; and for the neo hip-hop generation listening to the rap artist 2 Chainz. Let me answer the question of relevance for the generation that knows Beyoncé as Jay-Z's wife not Destiny's Child – and every generation that knows her as a fierce entertainer and entrepreneur.

The answer to the question may be heard in the basso profundo voice of the past, present, and future of the NAACP. We're one to turn the gilded pages

of the literature and history of social justice. Any discerning reader would come upon the ennobling words of the American Declaration of Independence, the poetic and prescient prose of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, and his “I Have a Dream” speech, the melliflently prophetic and melodic writing of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, but not only that, the plainspoken prose and power of Rosa Parks sitting down that a generation might stand up.

In the literature and history of social justice there is the eloquence of example in the life and death of Medgar Evers, and certainly in the midst of this canon of conscience of the founding documents of the NAACP. There in that literature of social justice, that literature of history, that canon of conscience, are the inaugural issues of the *Crisis* and every one of the resolutions that were passed over the course of the last 105 years. It is there.

For those who question the relevance, I challenge you to listen to the history. If you listen to the history you can yet hear the analytic prose of a report drafted in 1919, tersely entitled “30 Years of Lynching in the United States 1889 to 1918.” For those who question the history, let me share with you that that report which called for an end to the pre-George Zimmerman, proto Michael Dunn, form of racialized violence then known as lynching -- now known as lynching.

If you read the subtext of the criminal code, when you have premeditated racialized violence against people who are doing nothing more than pursuing their American dream, it should be called lynching. Lynching then, lynching now. When we have a young man on the streets of New York subjected to

an illegal choke hold, forced to the ground, a knee placed on his neck, his lungs compressed, stretching and straining for oxygen, it was called lynching then. It could be called lynching now.

As a civil rights lawyer, I've been accused on occasion of being soft-spoken, and it is indeed true -- until it comes to articulating a moral urgency and the prophetic fervor concerning a crime. If it was a crime then, it is a crime now. It must be said and it must be heard. To those questioning the relevance of the NAACP, I have to pose a very simple question: Are you serious?

For mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles, mentors and role models, when you were confronted by the morally befuddling and ethically confused looks of young people asking you to explain the Trayvon Martin verdict, to our critics who pose the question, are you relevant, I then respond with the query: "Are you real? Are you for real?"

The NAACP History is My History

The history of the NAACP is no distant historical abstraction for me. It is a part of my personal narrative and moral DNA. May I remind you in the late 1800s on my Daddy's side of the family, I had two great, great, great grandfathers Jake and Jack Wineglass, enslaved men who fought on the side of the Union Army. Following the Civil War during the period of reconstruction, they struggled to secure their military benefits.

Fast forward many years, there was a young man out of Charleston, South Carolina who came from a family of great moral and spiritual wealth but

modest means. He came out of Burke High School, went on to South Carolina State College, enrolled in ROTC because he wanted to serve his country and he wanted to become a doctor. He became a second lieutenant and a first lieutenant in the United States Army, which is why I was born at an army facility, William Beaumont General Hospital in El Paso, Texas.

The reason he was able to go on to medical school, the reason he was able to serve his country, why? Because the NAACP called on President Truman in 1948 to desegregate America's military. If we can salute our men and women in uniform, we can salute the NAACP.

On my Momma's side of the family, for those of you not from the Deep South, let me translate and to transliterate, that would be my "mother." On my Momma's side of the family, the family tree, the roots extend deep into the history of the NAACP. You see, my Momma, Jamee Prioleau, was the daughter of James Prioleau who ran for Congress after the United States Supreme Court outlawed the all-white Democratic primary. He ran right after that decision, not because the polls told him he could win, not because he consulted Fox News or CNN. He ran because he wanted to enroll and engage and enlist people into the ranks of the NAACP.

The man he ran against, Congressman John L. McMillan from the sixth congressional district of South Carolina, was a prominent member of Congress who had a little committee overseeing the District of Columbia. As long as he was there, home rule was denied to the citizens of the District of Columbia, and as soon as they got that rascal out, the folks in DC got some semblance of democracy.

But we are in the “present age, a calling to fulfill.” We are being faced with the question nearly daily, and nearly hourly: what is the relevance of the NAACP?

Relevant – Now More Than Ever

To those who question our relevance, I simply remind you that when we look at our criminal justice system, it looks like us, much like us, disproportionately like us, unfairly like us, unjustly like us, and seemingly only us. With 2.4 million Americans behind bars, one out of every three young people being arrested by the age of 23, one out of every four Americans having a criminal record, 65 million Americans with a criminal record, the NAACP is relevant and needed.

Relevance? When African Americans who worked so hard to secure the franchise and at this advanced age of this constitutional democracy, we have some of America's most esteemed jurists who've made their way to the U.S. Supreme Court, and who can look at the most effective civil rights statute, otherwise known as the Voting Rights Act, look at the most effective provision of the Voting Rights Act -- and gut it. So much so that we have state after state after state after state pursuing and passing these voter ID laws.

And Mom, forgive me for being personal. I just got to go there. When your daddy fought to secure the right to vote, and you marched in the late '50s you marched when you were well able. Now you're a little less well able in the current age. In Georgia, when threatened with voter ID laws, you've got

to walk around your apartment with a walker trying to find the right form of ID -- that's not right.

You say relevant? Let us talk about America's education system. When we have a system ostensibly of free public education with vast gaps and chasms in quality, when we see beautiful, brilliant black and brown children in ACT-SO in Las Vegas being disserved by their schools in their hometowns, the NAACP is relevant.

Let's make this really clear. When you have young men who are like my sons, same coloration, same broadness of nose, same fullness of lips, same range of the beauty and the breadth of the African-American countenance, everything from beige to black, you have your sons, your grandsons that you know to be brilliant, that you know to be talented, that you know to be capable, that you know to be competent relegated to the bowels AND the basements of the schools they go to, tracked and segregated, ostracized and marginalized in the system of free, public and quality education. The NAACP would be relevant.

When over 30 years ago, the top one percent made eight times more than the folks in the bottom, in 2010, the top one percent earned 33 more times than the folks at the bottom, are you asking me, "is the NAACP relevant?" If you won't read history and you won't read the newspaper, read your paycheck.

This present age, a calling to fulfill, we find ourselves in the nation's largest, strongest, most powerful, best organized, analytically deep civil rights organization and entity in the country, and yet we face some challenges.

There are those who look around in this room and they see the number of people who are of the Moses generation. Based on demographics, they conclude that this is an indication of our irrelevance. I submit that if you marched in the '50s, marched in the '60s, yet marched in the '70s, kept marching in the '80s, kept going in the '90s, the millennium came around, you kept marching, let me say to you that the number of seniors in this room is not an indication of irrelevance. It's a demonstration of our endurance.

There are those who have reached the premature and erroneous and unsubstantiated demographic conclusion that we are insufficiently committed to the youth. I submit you are deeply committed to youth when you have a civil rights organization where 10 percent of the board seats are committed to young people, a record not matched by any foundation, not matched by any Fortune 500 company, not matched by any Fortune 100 company, and not matched to the best of my knowledge and to the best of my research by any other civil rights organization.

Insufficiently committed to the youth? Six hundred ACT-SO participants, 1,200 young people here, 30,000 in the ACT-SO program over the course of a generation, young people called not into membership but into leadership, not to the kiddie table but to the conference board table. We are and will be committed to the next generation.

Emeritus Chairman Bond, I ask your forgiveness before I ask your permission. But if the history books are correct, you entered the civil rights movement a little younger than you are now, and I'd like to believe that the NAACP welcomed young people then and before, and we welcome them

now. And we will welcome them in the future. We will always welcome them, they will always be a part of our program, and they will always be a part of our organization.

Irrelevance? There are those who look at our august history and they arrive at the conclusion that our history is un compelling, our present uncertain and our future unclear. I submit to you that our storied, rich, deeply and profoundly democratic history is a floor and not a ceiling. It is that which we stand on and rise above. It is not a ceiling from which we shrink. We convey to our young people if Julian Bond did it then, you can do it now. If Daisy Banks did it then, you can do it now. If Rosa Parks did it then, you can do it now. If Ms. Roxborough did it then, you can do it now -- because she's still doing it now.

But we come to the future of the NAACP. There's a very thoughtful journalist who posed the question about the NAACP, and it is a thoughtful question. Irrelevance or revolution. Irrelevance or revolution. The journalist suggested that we face a fork in the road, irrelevance or revolution. I want to suggest to you based upon our history, based upon our present struggles, based upon the constitution and character of the NAACP that we've never chosen irrelevance; we've always, always, always chosen revolution.

Now in these burgeoning and beginning days of my newborn presidency, I do not in any way want to offend anyone's civic sensibilities. But revolution is a time-honored American tradition. We had a revolution to bring this country into being. We had a revolution to turn the country around during the days of the modern civil rights movement. There was a beginning of a

revolution during the Reconstruction period, and if you are paying attention, if you're listening, and if your eyes are wide open, you're in the middle of a revolution now.

It's a revolution, premised on who we are and what we stand for. It's a revolution based on the size of our aspirations and the breadth of our moral ambitions. It's a revolution based on our assessment of our ability to transform this country, it's a revolution based on our belief, our convictions, our faith in this American democracy. It's a revolution based on the promises we inherited and we were bequeathed by our founding mothers and founding fathers. We believe in this country and as a consequence, we believe in the revolution of this country, but it is a revolution that must begin from within.

One Million Members Strong

I believe that we can be an NAACP that's a million members strong. A million members strong in every hamlet, in every village, in every city, in every town, from coast to coast, from Alaska to Florida, a million members strong. I believe that not only can we have a million members strong NAACP but we can have a multi-generational NAACP.

When you look at the strongest units and branches all across the country, one of the things that is so heartening and so beautiful and so inspiring to picture, is to see someone who's older and mature and experienced raising up a generation ready to lead. It's inspiring when you see grandmothers raising up granddaughters who don't share their blood and kinship but share membership in the NAACP. But not only that, I believe that the NAACP is

so broad, so powerful that we reached the whole of the country. I believe in a multi-ethnic NAACP.

Somebody may be saying, “wait a minute now, wait a minute Mr. President, don't go too far.” But when I go to the history books, and I read about the March on Washington, emblematically and symbolically I'm reminded that we had a Martin Luther King lifting up mellifluous wisdom. You had a Mahalia Jackson lifting up Gospel truths. You had a multi-ethnic, multi-racial army of supporters behind them.

I believe we're just that big, just that bad, just that strong, just that courageous, just that brave, just ready enough, just big enough for the entire country. As a little boy growing up in South Carolina, I recall going into the fellowship hall of the local AME church and the local Baptist church -- displayed in a place of honor and pride was a life membership certificate hanging on a wall. I believe what's good enough for the Baptist church and the AME church is good enough for synagogue, good enough for mosque, good enough for a temple, good enough for a union hall.

Can I talk to you as a daddy? I believe that the NAACP that's needed by black boys and black girls, is needed by white boys and white girls and Latino boys and Latino girls, and Asian boys and Asian girls. I believe that the NAACP is needed in the Deep South and way up North, out on the West coast and on the East coast, a million members strong and as diverse and as beautiful as the mosaic of America. But not only that, the NAACP has always been a profoundly grassroots organization. We have other folks who are bashful and timid and somewhat squeamish about coming in contact with

the rank and file. We from the beginning have always been about the rank and file.

Equipping, Empowering State Conferences and Branches

But that means we've got to engage and equip and empower the rank and file. That means as much as I love Baltimore, as much as I love Washington, as much as I love New York City, as much as I love the West coast Hollywood Bureau, we've got to divert and allocate resources to the homeland and the bulk of the country. In other words, state conferences and branches need help. They need resources. They need analysis. They need to be equipped and they need to be empowered. Why? Because that's where the battles occur.

When the folks from New Jersey messed around and let this Carolina boy into Newark, one thing I figured out pretty quickly is when you engage in grassroots advocacy at the grassroots level, you need resources. Everybody doesn't have 10 secretaries. Everybody doesn't have 10 researchers. Everybody doesn't have 10 experts, but I promise you that I want to make sure we send resources out to the homeland and to hometowns all across the country.

If we really believe in the analytical capabilities, the intelligence, and the scholarly proclivities of ordinary folks, it presumes that we've got to supply them with the resources they need. When you want to draft a bill, you need help. When you need research to challenge issues, you need help. I believe that there are national funders who understand that all the power in the

United States does not rest in Congress. It rests in state capitals all across the country – and in the hearts and minds of grassroots people.

Revolutionaries of Hope

The future of the NAACP reminds me of a wonderful story in Scripture. The Bible tells us of a widow who found herself destitute and in the throes of desperation. She lost her husband, and the creditors came to take away her sons. This story is not a matter of ancient exegesis unrelated to modern day realities. When we talk about an era of income inequality, when we talk about the fact that the skewing of the American economy means that there are more women who are not only domestic breadwinners, they're also the leading domestic workers in their homes. When we talk about women who are caring for their children, caring for their families without the help and the aid of a husband, they're economic widows then and they're economic widows now.

Hear the story. In the story, the widow loses her husband. Her children are about to be sold away into slavery. She sees a prophet. The prophet tells her, go out and get a few jars, and not a few. She collects these jars as she fills one after another after another after another with oil. The text tells us that she sold the oil and was able to live off the rest. My brothers and sisters in the NAACP let me share something with you. There were jars then and vessels then, there are jars and vessels now.

There are jars. We've got 600 youth willing to be filled with the oil of hope, 1,200 young people here waiting to be filled with the oil of hope. Hundreds of thousands of members all across this great nation waiting to be filled with

the oil of hope. Thousands of branches, units, and conferences waiting to be filled with the oil of hope.

We believe we've arrived at a moment where we have a generation waiting to be filled with the oil of hope. There's somebody from Mississippi waiting to be filled with the oil of hope, somebody from South Carolina waiting to be filled with the oil of hope, somebody from New York and New York State willing to be filled with the oil of hope. Hope.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann wrote eloquently about the theology of hope. Simply stated the present, past and future are tied together on hope. Having “come this far by faith,” we are engaged in a revolution of hope. It's a revolution of hope where we speak to the hopes and aspirations of Americans all across this country. We are revolutionaries of hope.

An Extraordinary Time – NAACP Time

But let me conclude with this thought. For those who pose the question are we relevant. For those who say our best days are behind us, and for those who encourage us to sit down when we should stand up, let me go back to the beginning of this modest little talk and remind you this is no ordinary time. This is not a time to sit down. This is a moment to stand up. This is a moment to stand for our children. This is a moment to stand for our youth. This is a moment to stand for the future. This is a moment to stand for our country. This is a moment to stand against anti-Semitism, against racism, against Islamophobia, against the biases and bigotries of this country.

This is the time for us to stand up and stand for our convictions, to stand up for what we believe, to stand for the best in this country. Now is the time. Now is the time. Now is the time to stand for our children. Now is the time to stand for our seniors. Now is the time to stand for a fairer economy. Now is the time to stand for a criminal justice system that is just. Now is the time to stand for the right to vote and policies worth voting for. Now is the time to stand for healthcare for those unable to stand for themselves. Now is the time to stand for public education that mirrors the excellence we ask from our children. Now is the time to stand for an NAACP one million members strong.

Now, is the time to stand for an NAACP which is multi-generationally diverse, multi-racially diverse, multi-ethnically diverse, diverse in every sense of the word, now is the time.

And if somebody asks you what time are you living in, you just tell them: “It's an extraordinary time. It's NAACP time.”