
Documentation

ADL strategizes on targeting Farrakhan

The following are excerpts from an ADL memorandum entitled "Mainstreaming Anti-Semitism: The Legitimation of Louis Farrakhan." It was prepared in January by Steven M. Freeman of the Civil Rights Division for an ADL National Executive Committee meeting in Palm Beach, Florida.

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

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

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

The alternatives

I. The hard line approach

This alternative is easy to summarize: Louis Farrakhan is a bigot and an anti-Semite, and we should do nothing which contributes in any way to his campaign for legitimacy. Indeed, it is not enough to question the judgment of those who deal with him or give him legitimacy. ADL has a right to expect and to demand that any organization or individual

genuinely committed to the fight against bigotry and anti-Semitism turn a cold shoulder to Farrakhan. Unless and until they do, there can be no business as usual. . . .

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

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

II. The case-by-case approach

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

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

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

ADL needs to work with mainstream leaders in the black community. We have serious joint interests and joint concerns, and it would be counterproductive to jeopardize those interests and concerns. Furthermore, given all we have said about Farrakhan, no one would be deceived for one moment into thinking that ADL's continuing to work with organizations like the CBC and the NAACP on issues of mutual concern would reflect a softening of the agency's position on Farrakhan. To the contrary . . . refusing to help because of an irritant like Farrakhan would likely be seen by them and by outside observers as a substantial overreaction. ADL has long insisted, and rightly so, that Farrakhan cannot be allowed to define or determine relations between the Jewish and black communities.