AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

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AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Principles for Effective Ministry and Community Leadership

Lee N. June, PhD
Christopher C. Mathis Jr., PhD
Editors

Kregel
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LEADERSHIP IN AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCHES: NEW HORIZONS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY[1]

Henry L. Allen

No other ethnic group in history has accomplished more good by overcoming greater odds and opposition than have African Americans. Yet the societal and global populace is rarely aware of this salient fact. African Americans have always lived in perilous times throughout their collective sojourn in the United States of America. As the only ethnic group that has survived the multiple onslaughts of involuntary migration, genocidal oppression, racist dehumanization, slavery, segregation, prejudice, discrimination, poverty, civilized inhumanity, and chronic social injustice *simultaneously*, few experts understand the internal and external consequences of these intergenerational malignancies (Rothenberg 2008).

Few religious or civil authorities (and organizations) have the social capital that provides tangible wisdom for dealing with the ongoing plight of African Americans. While it is extremely popular to engage in historical amnesia or a denial of responsibility, the nation itself has been implicated for

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multiple generations in the degradation of African Americans. Inconsistent, intermittent social progress since the 1960s cannot obviate the lethal radio-active damage accumulated from 1619–1959! Often new immigrants have been treated with more sympathy and provided more systemic, tangible as-sistance than have African Americans whose labors have subsidized the nation's economy, and whose soldiers have died for it across generations. While it is indeed proper to rejoice at the incredible election of President Obama, one must never lose sight of the very complicated problems that transcend his immediate era. African Americans face internalized and ex-ternal threats well beyond other ethnic groups.

Leadership always matters for African American families and com-munities. Authentic biblical leaders require a truthful assessment of our times. Standing in the gap for those created in God's image, these exemplars of spirituality are tangible, living incarnations of God's truth. Given these timeless premises, the gist of this chapter is about developing fresh social, scientific, and organizational innovations for biblical leadership in African American churches during the twenty-first century. What can a new genera-tion of leaders do to address these complications in the African American churches? How might they move God's precious people and new converts beyond the "ball of confusion"? Statistical disparities can illuminate the breadth, depth, and range of African American social experiences, but they fail to probe the deeper human meanings behind the tabulations. Our task in this chapter is to offer up salient perspectives that target the needs of the most disadvantaged.

EMBRACING ETERNAL TEMPLATES

Authentic biblical wisdom always offers redemption and hope for every age and generation. For example, the cosmological prophet Daniel instructs us to discern the acute [though inconspicuous] ideological and global so-cial trends among the nations in order to visualize how the Lord of Hosts is working in any epoch (Daniel 12:3). Generations earlier, in the book of Genesis, the visionary strategic planner Joseph exemplified the sufferings of minority status as he rose in social mobility from a slave to become the prime minister of an ancient Egyptian dynasty. With his strategic vision and planning across more than fourteen years of prosperity and famine, Joseph displayed for succeeding generations how to anticipate God's purposes across multiple conditions and time sequences.

King David was actively and tenaciously engaged in building God's kingdom, in order to celebrate God's holiness and fulfill his everlasting purposes. One can peruse Psalms 145 to observe the nuggets of wisdom that permeated his soul. Moreover, Mordecai, Nehemiah, Joshua, Caleb, Barnabas, Paul, Timothy, Deborah, and Mary provided eternal templates of leadership for God's people. Through his atonement, Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus) left us all an enduring legacy of truth, sacrificial love, and redemption. From snippets of these brief portraits of godliness, we can deduce that authentic, biblical, church-related leadership must have a foundation of incarnational worship (Messiah), sacrificial love (Messiah), redemption (Messiah), multinational vision (Daniel), dedicated struggle (David), and strategic planning (Joseph).

God holds all leaders to a higher standard of responsibility to care for the disadvantaged. In the Pentateuch, Moses included the Year of Jubilee to counteract entrenched levels of social stratification, allowing the disadvantaged the hope of a new start every seven years. In Isaiah 58, the prophet warned leaders not to exploit workers or reject those in need. In Ezekiel 34, God angrily confronts self-indulgent leaders who fail to care for his flock. In Jeremiah 22, God indicts false leaders and false ideas that lead his people astray. In chapters three and five of the New Testament epistle of James, God holds leaders accountable for the impact of their leadership over those under their jurisdiction. Meanwhile, the most blistering remarks ever given by our Messiah were directed at leaders who neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, equity, and mercy (Matthew 23). No ethnic group can escape these biblical principles and ultimately thrive.

Leadership in our times must carefully match innate spiritual dispositions with strategic opportunities, wise decisions, the best scientific expertise, precise timing, and collaborative social networks. Leaders must see ahead, see clearly with integrity, act responsibly, and visualize their role in the biblical agendas of God's unfolding kingdom. Our journey in this chapter will begin by identifying key contextual traits that characterize the emergent twenty-first century. Secondly, we shall identify the territorial gulfs that African American church leaders must face. Thirdly, we will probe core elements needed to produce a collaborative strategic plan. Finally, we suggest ways to move beyond the current intellectual malaise in religion, politics, and society.

DELVING INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Like every other person, African Americans who live in the twenty-first century must engage global, regional, and local spheres of social reality. International events like distant wars, terrorism, foreign policies, interlocking technologies, and multinational markets or organizations frame global domains. Regional domains include proximate governments, confederations, and other forms of consortia. Local spheres revolve around families, schools, communities, churches, and businesses. We must negotiate informal, private interactions and public, formal ceremonies. It is delusional for us to act in a parasitic fashion as others use us to subsidize their interests, markets, and wealth. Far too many of us naively assist those sinister barons who want to rob, kill, and destroy our God-given treasures.

African Americans must operate on the basis of implicit theories about their plight, along with practical policies of survival, at both telescopic and microscopic levels. We must pursue life inexorably within existing social institutions and societal norms. We must take a panoramic view, incorporating short-term and long-term time frames in the national narrative. Astute biblical leadership has to inculcate the above frames of reference in an era of diversity, globalization, inequalities, and contingencies. Leadership matches innate dispositions (or character traits), behavioral experiences, and inspired vision with relevant trends, networks, conditions, and appropriate timing.

I have seen these abstract ideas operate tangibly in multiple roles, up close and personal. For some twenty-seven years, I have taught sociology at predominately White institutions of higher education in Illinois, Minnesota, Michigan, and New York. I have been a consultant on postsecondary educational matters with the National Education Association [an organization with more than three million members] for sixteen years. I have advised major organizations such as the American Bible Society, public school districts, the University of Oxford Round Table, and the FBI National Academy. I have belonged to scientific associations like the New York Academy of Sciences, the Game Theory Society, the American Mathematical Society, the American Academy of Social and Political Science, etc. I have joined the NAACP, the Urban League, and founded the African American Leadership Roundtable (Illinois). For forty-two years, I have been an active member of evangelical-oriented churches, mainly in African American congregations. My research has covered issues related to church denominations, colleges and universities, ethnicity, gender, productivity and work, labor markets, science, and future generations in society.

As a mathematical sociologist, I am especially attuned to the mathematics that typify the hidden network of social relationships that structure and process observable outcomes (Miller and Page, 2007). I am deeply interested in how and why negative outcomes are generated for African Americans and others—along with feedback loops, patterns of social organization and disorganization. Specifically, I watch the construction of norms, roles, and institutions that affect human societies according to their implications for theoretical explanations, methods of evidence, policy matters, and practical concerns across levels involving individuals, groups, social networks, communities or neighborhoods, complex organizations, institutions, markets, industries, and social systems.

These social factors imply that leadership in any African American domain—especially churches—is not at all easy. Even with the best expertise and motives, anyone who aspires to lead must face the insidious temptations of pride and the unpopular pathos of rejection. Leaders must see farther ahead than their followers. They must probe deeper aspects of reality than those they supervise and serve. Table 1.1 below displays the conceptual rubric that should guide twenty-first century leaders in each dimension (formal and informal) of the strategic planning process. The formal dimension pertains to overt or visible phenomena, while the informal dimension captures the invisible features of what goes on behind the scenes. The best leaders must address all these domains, directly or indirectly.

TABLE 1.1. A MATRIX OF SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSES FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING				
Levels	Theory	Methods	Policy	Practice
Social system				
Markets				
Industry				
Organization				
Community				
Social network				
Group				
Individual				

Each column must guide thoughtful deliberations for each level of analysis. Church leaders ought to engage these intersections in their thoughts and plans. Theories account for *why* things occur, including the intersections between the observations we make and the codifications of our assumptions about reality. Methods refer to the techniques we adopt to measure or scrutinize the scope, rigor, and quality of empirical evidence used in making decisions. Policy domains involve the prescriptions or proscriptions we solicit in addressing human problems. Finally, the realm of *practice* depicts how our leadership or plans tangibly affect how people eat, sleep, acquire shelter or healthcare, and remedy other practical needs. Mental and spiritual needs are incorporated, too. Leaders can adapt this intellectual tool or social technology to their own capacities and interests. Beyond this tool, leaders can subsequently popularize their acquired insights for the convenient consumption of their constituencies.

What fresh challenges must a new generation of African American church leaders meet? I remind the reader that Figure 1 pertains to each of these in at least two basic dimensions, notably formal (visible, public) and informal (invisible, private). We must be alert to the impact and role of tipping points, thresholds of complexity, and chaos in our best laid plans (Gladwell 2000). Mere discursive morality and traditional spiritual polemics alone are not sufficient for addressing these challenges. African American leaders in the twenty-first century must be conversant about mathematics and statistics, science and technology, climate change, and population trends. Note the list of items below:

- The glut of information overload in media or World Wide Web (Mastering these electronic technologies helped President Obama win a momentous election.)

- The implications of social intelligence (toxic social relations)

- Allostatic load/catastrophic stress levels (poverty, illiteracy, etc.)

- An organizational underdevelopment crisis

- Disintegration of African American marriages, families, and communities

- Complexities, contingencies, and persistent inequalities in housing, healthcare, education, technology, entrepreneurship, safety and security, immigration, mental health

In these pressured times, all citizens face an information glut exacerbated by a technology gap for many needy African Americans (Wright 2007). Too much information can impede critical judgments or cloud our discernment, thereby inhibiting our discretion. Moreover, many of our neighborhoods are plagued with negative social factors that inhibit healthy identities or relationships (Diamond 2005). Unfortunately, far too many of us have reached salient tipping points in moral turpitude, vulgar sexuality, profane speech, vanity, the incarceration of African American males, and in ignoring the ongoing marital eligibility crisis for African American women. These maladies far too often breed senseless violence against women, children, and youth! Gender wars are frequently concealed among the disadvantaged even as many of our assimilated elites abandon our collective interests. Potential talents and expertise have been siphoned off into tar pits of destruction, often for cheap commercial profit or greedy material indulgence. Many of our church or moral leaders are afraid to expose the vulgarity of many cultural fads and fashions. Some even bring such vanities and delusions into church! They fear being called outdated or facing the backlash of irrelevance.

Our communities lack coherence, as they disintegrate into enclaves of hyper-segregation, economic turmoil, and pathological violence. Economic distress is endemic, a cancer destroying any hopes for sustained, intact African American communities. Much more important than mere faddish concerns with social capital is the organizational and institutional expertise that is needed to survive in the global marketplace (Goleman 2006). For the size of our population, we lack sufficient social institutions that we control (Tobert 2009). Our neighborhoods are chronically underdeveloped outside the typical confines of churches, funeral homes, small businesses, and civil rights associations. This is the burden we inherit from our history in this nation. All these conditions increase allostatic load and render catastrophic stresses for most African Americans, vitiating the patriotic myth of equality of opportunity in education and society (Goleman 2006). We also have the burdens of exposing and ameliorating White privilege (Rothenberg 2008). Statistical data simply bear out the variations and ranges that structure the distributions of these and other variables.

REMEDYING THE GULFS AND CHASMS

How might African Americans remedy the challenges identified above in an age of oversaturated mass media? As a simple scholar, I know that no long-term progress can be made apart from engaging the academic systems that umpire and legitimate the division of labor in society (Newfield 2008). Sociologist Emile Durkheim realized that ideology and solidarity are the outcomes of the division of labor, the structure of occupations and jobs in society. Great scientific and technological advances are rooted in the global competition surrounding mathematics and science (Trefil 2008). There can be no genuine freedom as long as any ethnic group has a pariah status within these intellectual domains. Universities sculpt the leaders of tomorrow. During the twenty-first century, the most innovative African American churches and their leaders must grapple with statistical trends, computer simulations, and the mathematical thinking that fuels the third scientific revolution (Gowers 2008).

TABLE 1.2. A TYPOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LEADERSHIP STYLES	
Transformative Style	
Adversarial Leadership Promotes leader's moral vision Power over and through others	**Democratic, Empowering Leadership** Promotes democracy and social empowerment Power with others
Authoritarian Leadership Promotes maintenance of status quo Power over others	**Facilitative Leadership** Promotes more humane organizational climate and individual empowerment Power through and power over others
Transactional Style	
Source: Adapted from Blase, Joseph and Gary L. Anderson. 1995. *The Micropolitics of Educational Leadership*. New York: Teachers College Press; cited at a workshop on educational issues at the Margaret S. Warner Graduate School of Education, the University of Rochester, Rochester, NY, 1991–1996.	

What are the leadership proclivities of African American leaders? Insights from organizational studies of educational leadership might offer some possibilities as shown in Table 1.2. This profiles four hypothesized styles of leadership on a vertical axis that ranges from *transformative* aims at the top to *transactional* objectives at the bottom. On the horizontal axis, the range—left to right—is from closed patterns to open patterns of collaboration. Four cells are created from the intersection of these two axes. The upper left cell depicts *adversarial leadership*, a style that promotes the leader's moral vision

via power over and power through other human beings. The lower left cell reveals an *authoritarian* style of leadership that promotes the status quo through power over others. Adversarial leaders focus on transforming organizational conditions, while authoritarian leaders maintain existing social transactions. African American church leaders and pastors can conform to each of these patterns, which were indicative of twentieth-century mind-sets.

For the twenty-first century, more open styles of leadership are needed for success. The upper right cell displays *empowering leadership* that promotes democracy and encourages power in collaboration with others. The lower right cell targets leaders that are point guards, those who promote an organizational climate that maximizes the individual potential of all organizational actors: power through and over others in ways that *facilitate* active ownership or engagement. New generations embrace these modalities of leadership, as the election strategies of President Barack Obama in 2008 demonstrated.

Experts realize that twentieth-century patterns of organizational leadership differ appreciably from twentieth-first century leadership patterns (Hickman 1998). Table 1.3 illustrates this:

TABLE 1.3. CHANGES IN LEADERSHIP PATTERNS	
From: Twentieth-Century Leadership Patterns	**To: Twenty-First-Century Leadership Patterns**
Few leaders, mainly at the top	Leaders at every level; fewer managers
Leading by goal-setting (return on investment)	Leading by vision—new directions for long-term business growth
Downsizing, benchmarking for low cost, high quality	Also creating domains of uniqueness, distinctive competencies
Reactive/adaptive to change	Anticipative/futures creative
Designer of hierarchical organizations	Designer of flatter, distributed, more collegial organizations; leader as social architect
Directing and supervising individuals	Empowering and inspiring individuals, but also facilitating teamwork
Information held by a few decision-makers	Information shared with many, both internally and with outside partners
Leaders as boss, controlling processes and behaviors	Leader as coach, creating learning organizations
Leaders as stabilizer, balancing conflicting demands and maintaining the culture	Leader as change agent, creating agenda for change, balancing risks, and evolving the culture and technology base
Leader responsible for developing good managers	Leader also responsible for developing future leaders; serving as leader of leaders
Source: Hickman 1998, 7.	

Anticipating these emerging changes in leadership patterns as the twenty-first century unfolds, one expert (Hickman 1998, 7) writes:

> Since no organization can possibly be all things to all people, the leader will be constantly challenged to forge major alliances and partnerships with others to achieve mutual goals. Thus the role of leader as social architect will be expanded, and skills such as negotiation, technology assessment, and design of organizational cultures could grow in importance for aspiring leaders.

> All these changes will create a need for millions of new leaders in the future. In the end, leaders who succeed best will be those who are best able to (1) set direction during turbulent times, (2) manage change while still providing exceptional customer service and quality; (3) attract resources and forge new alliances to accommodate new constituencies; (4) harness diversity on a global scale; (5) inspire a sense of optimism, enthusiasm, and commitment among their followers; and be a leader of leaders, especially regarding knowledge workers. Leadership in the twenty-first century is not a job for wimps, but then, it never was. President Obama, for example, embodies many of these leadership traits.

FIGURE 1.1. LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

Assess Changes in External Environment

Understand and Incorporate Organizational Context and Requirements

| Leaders Generate | Vision Values Change Shared Power Engagement Conflict-capital | For Oranizational Participants Employees Shareholders Managers Public | In order to Move toward Mission |

Source: Adapted from Hickman, Gill R. 2009.
Leading Organizations: Perspectives for a New Era. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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Leaders must confront the changing social conditions of the twenty-first century. As the diagram above indicates, leaders must examine external environments, understand organizational matters, posit vision and values for all participants, and move toward the organization's mission. They must create viable structures, align goals, frame culture, and build capacity in order to generate organizational contributions to society.

LOOKING AHEAD: TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC VISTAS

African American leaders must be prepared for ecological catastrophes or natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, which are unexpected, ominous threats to natural and social climates (see Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed,* 2005). Government intrusions, the improper surveillance of civilians, police brutality and misconduct, nefarious youth gangs, unemployment crises, criminal justice problems, prison reforms, academic achievement gaps, gaps in wealth, technological gaps, intergenerational turnover, aging populations, the decline of U.S. world dominance, traditional theological controversies, *plus* scientific revolutions in biotechnology, quantum computers, complex systems science, and information technologies likewise deserve the attention of new leaders. The exact details relevant to each of these complications exceed the scope of this general inquiry. One can add these topics to those that noted talk-show host Tavis Smiley and his cadre of leaders have investigated as they have evaluated the status of African Americans in the last decade.

Every extraordinary challenge offers strategic opportunities for faith, innovation, resiliency, and achievement. What an opportunity for transformational leaders in the "Obama era"! We need African American mathematicians, physicists, chemists, biologists, and other scientists, thus moving beyond those disciplines we habitually enter. Imagine a thousand Ben Carsons or Percy Julians! Imagine African Americans as forty or more percent of scholars in the National Academy of Sciences, at California Institute of Technology, at MIT, and other premier universities. Table 1.4 illustrates the extent of our current plight in academia:

As a scholar of the sociology of American higher education, I can attest that there can be no real freedom for any ethnic group on this planet without collectively mastering the intricacies of mathematics. We need a new cadre of leaders in law enforcement: an FBI director, terrorism and crime experts,

criminologists, and prison psychiatrists. We need to explore new vistas in parenting education, solar technologies, community development, and corporate leadership. Branching out beyond roles in movies, sports, and entertainment industries, we need new leaders to refurbish our social networks to include the worst of the poor—motivating them to reach their God-given potential.

TABLE 1.4. PROGRESS OF FULL-TIME BLACK FACULTY AT THE NATION'S HIGHEST UNIVERSITIES				
Institution	1999	2002	2005	Change 1999–2005
Vanderbilt U.	2.2%	3.1%	4.3%	+2.1%
Northwestern U.	2.7%	2.0%	4.4%	+1.7%
UNC-Chapel Hill	4.1%	4.4%	5.7%	+1.6%
Carnegie Mellon	1.7%	1.6%	3.0%	+1.3%
Washington U.	2.6%	3.4%	3.9%	+1.3%
Johns Hopkins U.	2.9%	3.5%	3.9%	+1.0%
Princeton U.	2.0%	2.3%	3.0%	+1.0%
Harvard U.	2.2%	2.7%	3.1%	+0.9%
CalTech	0.6%	0.6%	1.4%	+0.8%
Brown U.	3.3%	3.7%	4.0%	+0.7%
Cornell U.	2.7%	3.3%	3.4%	+0.7%
Stanford U.	2.6%	2.6%	3.2%	+0.6%
U. Penn.	2.6%	3.2%	3.2%	+0.6%
Yale U.	2.7%	2.8%	3.2%	+0.5%
U. Chicago	2.4%	2.7%	2.8%	+0.4%
Duke U.	3.6%	3.7%	3.9%	+0.3%
U. Michigan	4.8%	4.7%	5.1%	+0.3%
Georgetown U.	4.5%	3.7%	4.6%	+0.1%
U. Notre Dame	2.2%	2.8%	2.3%	+0.1%
Dartmouth C.	4.1%	3.2%	4.1%	0.0%
MIT	2.9%	3.0%	2.9%	0.0%
U. Virginia	3.0%	3.2%	3.0%	0.0%
Rice U.	2.0%	2.1%	1.5%	–0.5%
Columbia U.	7.2%	7.2%	6.4%	–0.8%
U. Cal. Berkeley	3.1%	2.9%	2.1%	–1.0%
Emory U.	7.1%	6.9%	5.2%	–1.9%
Source: *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, Summer 2005, No. 48, 79.				

We must accentuate our roots and embrace our legacy, for the Lord has always used our collective suffering to bring civil redemption to this nation. We must innovate beyond the conservative inertia of an insensitive or impotent evangelicalism. We must dream big, much bigger than the obvious dimensions of political institutions. We need to celebrate tradition without being imprisoned by it. Proactive, innovative leaders must move us beyond "churchanity" to spiritual optimality. Invisible ideas—rooted in goodness and truth—always have produced visible benefits. A new generation must postulate fresh vision and robust meanings to move us forward in the twenty-first century. If we pursue these vistas with integrity and excellence, this will be the African American century!

CONCLUSION

We live in an unprecedented age of innovation and opportunity, of poverty amidst great prosperity, of confusion despite an information explosion, of progress and pathos for African Americans. Typically, the United States' general populace suffers from ongoing historical amnesia and moral shortsightedness about the most disadvantaged African Americans amidst the usual pomposity of patriotic fervor. Yet, all is never entirely gloomy. Joy surrounded the inauguration of President Obama in 2009, while the deepest sorrows pervade the lives of poor and struggling families when innocent youth are murdered by senseless violence. Horrific, abominable crimes occur when human beings are treated like animals in the worst segments in our cities.

Technological gadgets and scandals abound. Leaders fall from corruption and the lack of integrity. The goddess of sexual immorality is worshipped via commercials, the Internet, cell phones, and the altars of pornography. AIDS, gangs, teenage pregnancies, violence, and stupidity are sometimes glamorized by materialistic fetishes plus unrealistic vanities as profits fuel mass media, music, and entertainment industries. Generations atrophy. The thief robs, kills, and destroys, while various religious, cultural, civic, and political elites wallow in petty self-indulgence. Delusions of apostasy engulf popular culture and elite society alike. We need a domestic and foreign policy to address the loss of virtue in many of our remaining intact communities. Let us learn assiduously from the successes of Barack Obama, Tony Dungy, Venus and Serena Williams, Ben Carson, Cathy Hughes, Mike Tomlin, Deval Patrick, Corey Booker, David Patterson, Michelle Obama, Linda Johnson-Rice, and other achievers.

Religious officials must revive as well as renew the organizational effectiveness of churches away from antiquated instruction, cultural traditionalism, musical addictions, and petty moralizations. We need a new generation of authentic church leaders whose lives are rooted in integrity and excellence, love, compassion, dignity, diligence, and an incarnational gospel rooted in the African American experience. Responsible church leaders must be organizational, spiritual, and educational innovators who eagerly grasp new horizons in the twenty-first century. They must jettison conservative mind-sets that are rooted in traditions of theological irrelevance and rediscover proactive biblical solutions to the most complicated woes facing humanity. Many unbelievers and agnostics reject "conservative mind-sets" rather than Messiah, mistaking the latter for the former. A new, more courageous generation must arise and shine to show the difference, as Isaiah 60 invites. If we can accomplish the feat of harnessing and controlling the intellectual property that the Lord of hosts has bequeathed to us as African Americans, young and old, get ready for the greatest accumulation of wealth that any oppressed ethnic group has ever experienced in history, even greater than the ascendancy of Barack Obama to the U.S. presidency. On to the African American century!

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