

By Salim Muwakkil

CHICAGO

ON THE EVE OF THE RECENT MAYORAL PRIMARY election here, Jesse Jackson faced the daunting task of convincing thousands of skeptical African-American voters to turn out for incumbent Eugene Sawyer. Taking his case directly to the people, Jackson spent most of that day speaking into microphones at the city's two black talk radio stations.

A few days after the primary, Republican winner Edward Vrdolyak—archfoe of the sainted, late Mayor Harold Washington—made himself available to those same stations in an audacious attempt to garner black support.

These two politically flavored anecdotes illustrate the growing influence of a major new player in the media game: black talk radio. Politicians are among the first to recognize the power of this relatively new for-

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mat, but the cat is now out of the bag. In many major U.S. cities, black talk radio is being monitored by journalists, police departments, advertisers, marketers, demographers, pollsters and hosts of others interested—for reasons good and ill—in the preferences and proclivities of African-Americans.

The talk fad: Talk radio is booming in the general market as well, but its importance is amplified in a community historically denied media access. "We had no idea people would become so attached to our AM station when we took a chance on the talk format eight years ago," explains David Lampel, program director of WLJB-AM in New York City.

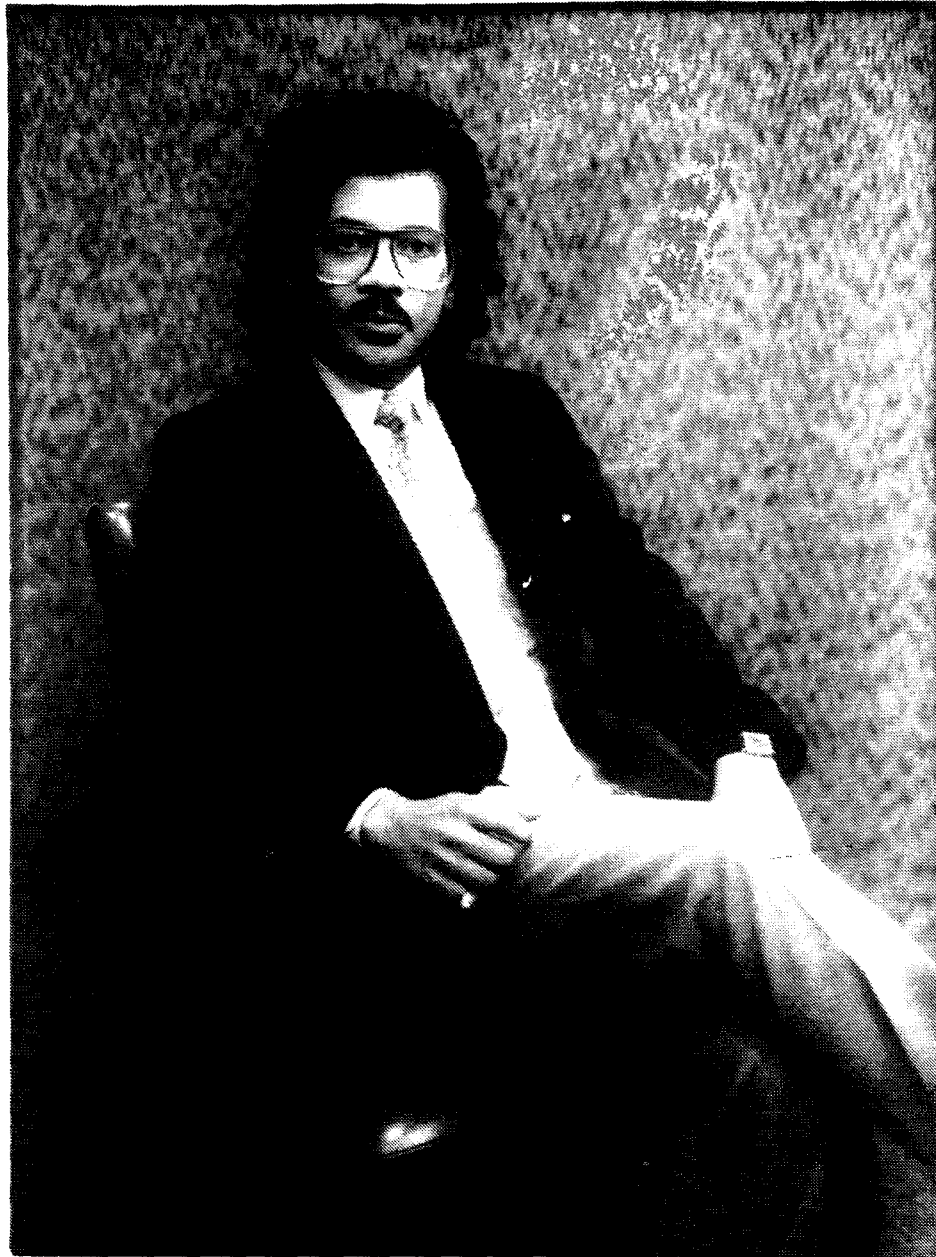
Lampel, who is also a senior vice president of Inner City Broadcasting—the black-run company that owns WLJB and WBLS-FM—says WLJB jumped from "a faint speck to among the highest-rated AM stations in the metropolitan area" on the strength of its talk format. "Actually," he adds, "there's really no point in doing anything else but talk on the AM band. Music belongs to FM [because of FM's technological advantages]." Like most other talk formats, audience call-ins form the basis of the program's content.

The programming change was born of necessity, Lampel concedes, but "we quickly realized how great a need the station filled. The listener response was phenomenal and we've since become an essential part of black New York. And I'm not just blowing our own horn. Many others have credited the station with making a difference in the awareness level of New York's African-American communities." What's more, the format has proven to be a commercial as well as civic success.

A similar transformation has occurred in Chicago. "We went from no ratings to the top 20 after changing to a talk format in March '86," says Hoyett Owens, general manager of Chicago's black-owned WVON-AM. "Talk radio is the savior of black AM radio," Owens maintains. "We may not be able to compete with FM for the entertainment market, but at this point we have the information audience all to ourselves." And, Owens adds, the audience is expanding. "This is one of the very few forums African-American people have to vent their frustrations and express their dreams. So they're very enthusiastic about the medium."

Indeed, many commentators credit the station with forging one of the most purposeful black electorates in the U.S. "Even before

Black talk radio sends powerful, clear signals



Hoyett Owens, general manager of Chicago's WVON-AM: black radio is talking back.

WVON became all-talk, when it just had occasional segments devoted to information, the station helped mobilize the community for Harold Washington's first mayoral campaign," says Lu Palmer, a longtime black organizer and host of one of WVON's more popular programs. "In 1987," he adds, "the station performed beyond and above the call of duty for Harold's cause."

Sincere flattery: The Chicago station's success has spawned a powerful competitor. WGCI-AM, a black-oriented station owned by the Gannett communications chain, switched from music to a black talk format in January 1989. To distinguish itself from its black-owned rival, WGCI-AM is targeting a "more upscale demographic," devoting more resources to the effort and including more talk about entertainment.

Some WVON staffers discern conspiratorial overtones in the Gannett challenge. "It's not farfetched to suggest that the system fears the growing influence of a serious black-owned talk station like us," says one producer. "One way to reduce our influence is to force us off the air through economics." Others welcome the competition. "It's the best thing that could have happened," explains Perri Small, a WVON producer. "First of all, it confirms the economic viability of the concept. Secondly, increased competition will help keep us on the ball."

The market segmentation of black talk radio's audience bespeaks an increasing commercial interest in the format's soaring

popularity. Journalistic interest already is high. "Every day I get calls from the major newspapers and television stations," says WVON's Small. "Most of the time they want to know what guests we have scheduled for various programs, or they want to confirm the quotes of some public figure who's appeared on the station."

The station is also closely monitored by a number of Jewish organizations listening for expressions of anti-Semitism. This practice was implemented last year after an aide to acting Mayor Eugene Sawyer was fired for making statements offensive to Jews (see *In These Times*, May 25, 1988). Many callers to the station denounced the firing. Those expressions of support for the dismissed aide, Steve Cokely, dismayed many Chicagoans, but they also revealed that WVON was a genuine conduit into previously uncharted regions of the city.

Additional evidence of black talk radio's new prominence was provided when New York City's police department revealed it regularly monitored WLJB-AM to get advance word on protest demonstrations or other civil disruptions. A host of black leaders blasted the police for the practice.

Off the quote circuit: Journalists who regularly monitor these shows are afforded rare glimpses into the internal dynamics of the black community. This saves them considerable legwork even as it enhances their coverage of African-American affairs. For example, after a group of black leaders an-

nounced that they thought the term "African-American" best described Americans of African descent and should be used more widely, intrigued journalists tried a new tack.

Instead of following the well-worn pattern—consulting those listed under "black expert" on the Rolodex quote circuit, arranging interviews with uninformed "grass-roots" folk, or seeking, perhaps even provoking, opposing viewpoints—representatives of the mainstream media invaded the studios of black talk radio.

"A lot of news organizations monitored our program when we discussed the issue of 'African-American' as a label for black people," explains Elisa Keys, producer of *Night Talk with Bob Law*, a late-night call-in program produced at station WWRL-AM in New York City and broadcast across the country by the National Black Network. The program is the only nationally syndicated live black talk show.

Chicago's Public Broadcasting Station, WTTW-TV, taped a segment of its piece on the "African-American" story in the studios of WVON as callers offered their varied opinions on the subject. Bruce Dumont, political editor of the Chicago public TV station, is among many local journalists who consider it essential to monitor both of the city's black talk stations.

Civic activators: "There's absolutely no better way to find out the concerns of nearly one-half of Chicago's population," Dumont contends. "It's very much like a black town meeting and the incredible range of viewpoints expressed help us in the mainstream media understand how wrong it is to regard the black community as monolithic."

There is no authoritative survey on the number of stations offering black talk formats, according to an editor at *Black Radio Exclusive*, the unofficial trade journal of black radio. But there is a general agreement that the programming concept is one of the industry's hottest. Talk stations in cities as diverse as Memphis and Washington have gained notoriety for their power as civic activators.

When the *Washington Post* debuted its highly touted magazine in 1986 with a cover story of a black drug dealer, black-owned radio station WOL-AM mobilized and organized a series of large demonstrations to protest the magazine's choice of subjects. Likewise, Memphis station WDAI-AM helped galvanize the black community to successfully demand that the city establish a national memorial at the site where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

As the format continues to prove its commercial viability, there's little doubt that black talk programming will spread into many areas of the country. This is good news for many black activists who believe that talk radio could prove as beneficial to the future of African-Americans as it is for the prospects of AM radio.

"It's difficult now to think of black New York without WLJB," said Utrice Leid, managing editor of the *City Sun*, an aggressive black-owned Brooklyn weekly. "By offering itself as an open forum for issues of concern to African-Americans, the station has made itself indispensable."

Many observers liken the growing influence of black talk radio to that exerted by the black press during its golden era of the early 20th century. The programming format has changed the game of urban politics forever in the cities where it's currently playing. And there's a good chance it will soon be playing in a city near you. □

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By John B. Judis

WASHINGTON, D.C.

AS IN THESE TIMES WENT TO PRESS, THE SENATE was expected to reject Sen. John Tower, George Bush's nominee for secretary of defense. If that happens, the president will have suffered a major defeat at the hands of the Democratic Congress. While his popularity in the country remains high, he is quickly losing his grip on both Congress and the national press corps, whose support he

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needs to govern effectively. Comparisons with Jimmy Carter's ineptitude are rife.

But Bush wasn't the only loser in the rancorous Tower debate. The Democrats, who based their case against Tower on the charge that he had a "drinking problem," may have made some converts among Southern fundamentalists, but they also may have created a precedent that will haunt them if they ever recapture the White House.

Gunned down: Bush clearly made a mistake in nominating the former Texas senator. By selecting Tower, who was already widely known in Washington as a drunk and philanderer, Bush violated his own post-inaugural pledge to "avoid even the appearance of what is wrong." But Bush sealed his nominee's fate by antagonizing the powerful chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Sen. Sam Nunn (D-GA).

When Bush nominated Tower on December 16, he declared that the FBI had given Tower a "clean bill of health," even though he had only received a preliminary summary of the FBI's findings. This summary was subsequently dubbed "chapter one" of what would become a voluminous eight-chapter report. Then Bush and his aides resisted Senate committee requests for the FBI and other documents.

When Nunn requested files about Tower's conduct in Geneva where he was the chief American arms negotiator in 1985-86, the Bush administration sent Nunn a set of papers from which every document mentioning Tower had been excluded. On February 7, after committee protests, the FBI issued a new report. Bush's counsel, C. Boyden Gray, spurned Nunn's attempt at bipartisanship by holding a private briefing on the report for the Republican members of the committee. The president further irritated Nunn and the other Democrats by declaring that the FBI's final report had "gunned down" all the allegations against Tower.

After the Senate committee rejected Tower on February 23 by a vote of 11 to 9, Bush should have withdrawn his nomination. But instead he insisted on carrying the battle to the full Senate—creating the conditions for a bitter debate that poisoned relations between the parties and between congressional Democrats and the White House.

Bush will now face more hostility from a Congress that is already annoyed with the president's budget. Under the guise of a few cosmetic increases in social programs, it slashes spending on housing and education far more deeply than the last Reagan budget. Bush will also face further questions about his lack of direction in foreign policy—dramatized during Bush's recent China trip (see story on page 9) and Secretary of State James Baker's meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze—and his inability to fill cabinet posts. With Tower's defeat, Bush will not have filled any of 44 defense positions.



Bush's Tower of trouble and Democratic dilemma

In the wake of the Tower imbroglio, two Republican columnists—William Safire from *The New York Times* and David Gergen from *U.S. News and World Report*—raised the possibility that Bush is off to the same kind of shaky start as Jimmy Carter. In Bush's March 7 press conference, one reporter asked him whether his administration was suffering from "malaise"—a Washington codeword for the affliction that destroyed Carter's final years.

Drinking problem: The Democrats played their own peculiar game with the Tower nomination. If Bush ignored pre-nomination warnings from Secretary of the Treasury Nicholas Brady about Tower's reputation, Senate Democrats initially pretended that they knew nothing about it: Nunn

endorsed Bush's choice of Tower, and the committee applauded Tower when he testified before it in January. But after new right activist Paul Weyrich denounced Tower's personal behavior in his January 31 testimony before the committee, and the committee itself began to be flooded with stories about Tower's drunkenness and philandering, Nunn and other committee members began to make an issue of Tower's drinking (see accompanying story).

From the beginning Democrats such as Sen. Carl Levin (D-MI) raised questions about the \$1 million that Tower received from four missile-producers immediately after he resigned as head of the U.S. START delegation in 1986. Tower's ties with military

contractors, Levin argued, would make it impossible for him to reform the military procurement process. These concerns were echoed in independent armed forces publications, including *Defense News*, *Army Times*, *Navy Times*, and *Air Force Times*. "Tower is so closely associated with the defense industry that many people will question virtually any statement he makes on defense issues," *Air Force Times* editorialized.

But in explaining his rejection of Tower, Nunn emphasized Tower's alleged drinking problem. Other Democrats, like Sen. J. Bennett Johnston (D-LA) and Sen. Kent Conrad (D-ND), followed suit. As a result, the Senate debate almost entirely focused on Tower's alleged drinking problem. This was unfortunate for several reasons.

No one denied that an unredeemed alcoholic would be unfit to be a secretary of defense, but Nunn and the other Democrats never clearly distinguished between Tower's being a boisterous, obnoxious drunk and an alcoholic. They contented themselves with saying that Tower had a "drinking problem" or "drank excessively." Such a charge left open the question whether they were attacking Tower's moral or mental credentials.

In making these charges, the Democrats also had the disadvantage of relying on reports whose contents they could not make public, but the leaks from the FBI reports did little to buttress their case. At worst, they showed that during the '70s Tower had behaved like a middle-aged frat boy. And several of the leaks turned out to be based on questionable witnesses.

Revenge factor: By emphasizing Tower's alleged drinking problem rather than his complicity with the military-industrial complex, the senators also played into the hands of new right activists like Weyrich and the Rev. Pat Robertson, both of whom want to build a political movement around anti-cosmopolitan small-town morality. In the Senate the Democrats found themselves in the odd position of fighting pro-Bush moderates like Sen. William Cohen (R-ME) or Sen. Arlen Specter (R-PA), while radical rightists like Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC) threatened to join the Democrats in opposing Tower.

By rejecting Tower, the Democrats are establishing criteria for judging cabinet nominees that they might one day regret. The same kind of charges leveled against Tower could be leveled against Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA) or Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-CT) if a Democratic president ever wanted to appoint them to a cabinet position. Nunn claims that his qualms about drinking only pertain to secretaries of defense, but one could certainly imagine a similar case being made against an appointee to secretary of education or health and human services.

The Democrats may have also nurtured a desire for revenge among moderate Republicans. Referring to Senate confirmation of former Sen. Ed Muskie (D-ME) as Carter's secretary of state in 1980, Sen. Ted Stevens (R-AK) asked the Democrats, "Does anyone think that [a future] Ed Muskie is going to be confirmed in three hours if you do this to John Tower?" Such threats are by no means idle. After the Republicans blocked two of Lyndon Johnson's Supreme Court appointments in 1968, the Democrats blocked Richard Nixon's first two court nominees. If the Democrats plan to govern, they are going to have to make amends to the Republican moderates they alienated during the Tower fight.

The right angle on Tower affair

One of the strangest incidents in the three-month drama over John Tower's nomination was the testimony January 31 of new right activist Paul Weyrich. Sen. Sam Nunn (D-GA) and other Democrats on the Senate Armed Services Committee claim that they were caught entirely unaware by Weyrich's charges against Tower, but there is reason to believe that they knew what Weyrich was going to say.

On January 17 Weyrich wrote a letter to committee chairman Nunn asking to testify and saying that he had "questions surrounding [Tower's] moral character." In the past the Armed Services Committee has rarely accepted requests for public testimony, and when it has, staff members have interviewed the witnesses beforehand to see what they planned to say. But in this case the committee promptly accepted Weyrich's request without interviewing him.

In his opening statement to the committee, Weyrich alluded to questions

about Tower's character. "I have made enough personal observations of this man, here in Washington, to have serious reservations about his moral character," Weyrich said. But in his first question to Weyrich, Nunn asked whether he had any "direct knowledge" of Tower's personal behavior. Weyrich then uttered the famous words that speeded Tower's undoing: "Over the course of many years, I have encountered the nominee in a condition—a lack of sobriety—as well as with women to whom he was not married."

Were Nunn and the other Democratic senators really surprised by Weyrich's testimony? Or did Nunn or the committee staff use him to raise an issue that they could not raise themselves because of Senatorial propriety? Did the senators other than Nunn (a notorious teetotaler) think that drunkenness was the real issue or did they use it because they couldn't defeat Tower on his ties to military contractors?

—J.B.J.