

## **Black Power in the Boardroom: Corporate America, the Sullivan Principles, and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle**

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On the morning of March 1, 1971, Leon Sullivan dressed in a “new white shirt and black suit,” both “freshly cleaned and pressed,” put on his “uncharacteristically black-shined shoes,” and straightened his “new light gray tie.” He leaned down to kiss his wife, who, while not short by any means, was a good ten inches shorter than her husband, who towered over most people at six feet five inches. He walked out of his room at the Plaza Hotel in New York City and across Fifth Avenue to the General Motors Building, where he was to attend his first board meeting as a GM director.<sup>1</sup>



*Figure 1: Left: General Motors Building at 767 Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, New York City. Right: Leon H. Sullivan*

At the time, Sullivan was among a handful of African Americans serving on the boards of Fortune 500 companies in the United States. Within days of General Motors’ historic

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<sup>1</sup> Sullivan, *Moving Mountains*, 1.

## Black Power in the Boardroom

appointment of Sullivan as the first African American director of a major corporation in early January 1971, the New York Federal Reserve Bank and W.T. Grant Company announced they had appointed National Urban League President Whitney Young and former North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company executive Asa Spaulding to their respective boards.<sup>2</sup> Other companies and financial institutions soon followed suit. Whereas in 1969 there had been only one black American on the board of a *Fortune* 500 company, by the end of 1972, there were fifty-four.<sup>3</sup> Similar increases in the number of black men in other executive, administrative, and managerial positions occurred between 1970 and 1980.<sup>4</sup>

From our current vantage point in 2020, we now know that the appointment of African American and other marginalized people to managerial positions occurred in the context of broader corporate re-structuring, which included the expansion of the proportion of jobs classified as managerial.<sup>5</sup> In many cases, black managers remained subordinate to white men, whose percentage in private sector managerial positions increased between 1966 and 200 from 10.5 to 14.7 percent. Moreover, many black managers were segregated into newly created departments, whereby they were left managing other black men and women.<sup>6</sup> These departments,

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<sup>2</sup> Louis Spade, "Blacks winning top posts in big business," *Chicago Daily Defender*, January 9, 1971: 4.

<sup>3</sup> Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, *Diversity in the Power Elite*, 91-93, 99; Collins, *Black Corporate Executives*.

<sup>4</sup> Reynolds Farley and Walter R. Allen, *The Color Line and the Quality of Life in America* (New York: Russell Sage, 1987); Sharon M. Collins, "Black Mobility in White Corporations: Up the Corporate Ladder but on a Limb," *Social Problems* 44, no. 1 (Feb. 1997): 55-67; The vast majority of black corporate executives appointed during the 1970s were men, testifying to the continued double-burden faced by black women. The first black woman to join a board of a Fortune 500 company was Patricia Robert Harris, former ambassador to Luxembourg. Harris joined the board of Scott Paper and IBM in 1971, and Chase Manhattan in 1972. Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 96.

<sup>5</sup> B. Alex Beasley, *Expert Capital* (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> Kevin Stainback and Donald Tomaskovic-Devey, "Intersections of Power and Privilege: Long-Term Trends in Managerial Representation," *American Sociological Review* 74, no. 5 (2009): 800-820; The vast majority of black managerial appointments during the 1970s went to black men, testifying to the gendered, as well as the racial dynamics at work in corporate management. According to Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey, those black women who did advance into corporate management often were restricted to supervising other black women, while black men supervised both black men and women.

## Black Power in the Boardroom

which went by a variety of names, including Urban Affairs, Public Affairs, Special Markets, and Community Relations, shared a common focus on corporate interactions with black people.<sup>7</sup>

This corporate re-structuring amid, dare I say in response to, the opening up of corporate management would ultimately come to limit the gains made by black directors and managers. Even so, the experiences of black directors and executives during this shift are illustrative with regards to illuminating the mechanisms by which they sought advancement for themselves and the race in the corporation and how corporations deployed racism to limit that goal.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, African American business has always been part of the broader world of American business.<sup>9</sup> The 1970s and 1980s portended new opportunities for African Americans to enter the highest levels of American business, including the corporate board room.

This opportunity was not, as some have argued, the result of white executive benevolence. Nor was it entirely the result of civil rights legislation, which encouraged corporations to adopt fair employment policies and, in some cases promote affirmative action.<sup>10</sup> Rather, the appointment of record numbers of African American corporate directors and managers was directly linked to the ongoing struggle for civil rights and Black Power. Joining

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<sup>7</sup> Collins, “Black Mobility in White Corporations”; Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, *Diversity in the Power Elite*, 90-115.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas C. Holt, “Experience and the Politics of Intellectual Inquiry” in *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice and Persuasion*, edited by James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 388-396; This paper expands on an emerging body of scholarship examining the intersections of African American business and corporate America. Marcia Chatelain, *Franchise: The Golden Arches in Black America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020); Brenna Wynn Greer, *Represented: The Black Imagemakers Who Reimagined African American Citizenship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Jason Chambers, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); All three of these authors cite and build on earlier work by Robert E. Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> N.D.B. Connolly makes this point in his examination of the ties between African American landlords and the broader real estate industry in Miami. N.D.B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Delton, *Racial Integration in Corporate America, 1940-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); For a critique of Delton’s reliance on corporate archives, see Robert E. Weems’ review of Delton’s book in *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 2 (September 2010): 579-580.

## Black Power in the Boardroom

shareholder activists protesting a range of abuses at the world's largest corporation in the spring of 1970, Shirley Chisholm, recently elected the first African American congresswoman representing New York's 12<sup>th</sup> district, stated that American companies like GM had failed to respond "to the needs of black Americans" for too long.<sup>11</sup> Her comments were echoed by Congressman Louis Stokes (D-OH), brother of Cleveland's first black mayor Carl Stokes. The Congressman called for more black managers and black directors to wield real "decision-making [power] in American corporations."<sup>12</sup>

Many of the first black executives and directors struggled to balance their commitment to the movement that propelled them into the corporation with their new responsibilities as executives. In 1972, Harold R. Sims joined Johnson & Johnson as Vice President for Corporate Affairs. Prior to joining Johnson & Johnson Sims served as the Acting Executive Director for the National Urban League and Executive Secretary to Sargent Shriver in the Office of Economic Opportunity. In an internal memo outlining his duties, Sims described his role as "represent[ing] Johnson & Johnson [to] the minority communities."<sup>13</sup> Johnson & Johnson executives later told Sims that they hoped his activities, which included recruiting African Americans and women managers into the company, would reduce chances for "disquiet, company dissension and inflammatory situations" experienced by other companies.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, GM Chairman James Roche praised Sullivan's "distinguished record of service to his community," adding, Sullivan promises to "bring to [the company's] board the benefit of his knowledge and expertise in areas

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<sup>11</sup> Shirley Chisholm quoted in Barbara Gold, "New Protest: GM Undemocratic?" *The Sun*, May 17, 1970: D1.

<sup>12</sup> Louis Stokes quoted in Morton Mintz, "GM Responds to Charges of Job Discrimination," *The Washington Post*, May 2, 1970: A5.

<sup>13</sup> Memo, Vice President Corporate Affairs, Corporate Staff, [circa 1972], Box 11, Sims Papers.

<sup>14</sup> Memo, "Consideration of Women's Discussion Groups and periodic Steering Committee meetings with upper management," September 27, 1974; Meeting Minutes, Special Meeting of the Council of Personnel Directors, November 20, 1972, Sims Papers, Box 11.

## Black Power in the Boardroom

of public concern.”<sup>15</sup> Sullivan, for his part, responded to Roche’s comments by emphasizing his commitment to remaining an activist within the corporation, telling reporters: “I know General Motors is going to use me as a symbol and sample of how liberal it has become, but I am going to use them...I’ll be one voice out of 23...but I’m going to do all I can to help my people—black people, brown people, underprivileged people.”<sup>16</sup> What follows is an exploration of the experiences of Sullivan and other black executives inside the corporation.

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The late 1960s and early 1970s were a watershed moment for black politics. Building on the gains of the last two decades, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, and inspired by calls for Black Power, African Americans pushed open the doors to institutions previously closed to them. This included the corporation. In his keynote address to the 1969 Black Economic Development Conference in Detroit, African American economist Robert S. Browne emphasized the need for black Americans to gain “access to the instruments of power,” including major corporations and the federal government. “Local development projects, small business programs, job training, consumer education, vocational guidance, school improvement, and other community programs” were, according to Brown, useful to black Americans without threatening the national power structure. Real power depended on black people “grasping the levers of control in this society.”<sup>17</sup>

Browne’s call found a receptive audience with a subset of New Left activists eager to take on corporate America. Founded in early 1970 by four Washington-based lawyers, the

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<sup>15</sup> Roche quoted in “General Motors Names a Negro to Board, First Such Appointment in Auto Industry,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 5, 1971: 6.

<sup>16</sup> “Rev. Sullivan has big plans for his GM job,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, January 13, 1971: 11.

<sup>17</sup> Robert S. Brown, “Keynote speech: The need for formulating a Black economic Plan,” Paper presented at the National Black Economic Development Conference, Detroit, MI, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Records of the National Council of Churches, Folder 14, Box 35, Record Group 6.

## Black Power in the Boardroom

Project for Corporate Responsibility (PCR) emerged alongside Ralph Nader's Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) at the center of the movement for corporate social responsibility. The group's first order of action: taking on the world's largest corporation in Campaign GM. In early 1970, PCR organizers took the unconventional step of purchasing shares in GM. At the time, for social activists to strategically invest in a company was quite new. While a significant number of Americans began purchasing stocks in the 1930s as part of a business-led movement to counter widespread anti-corporate sentiment during the Depression, shareholder involvement focused on the business-side of corporate affairs until the late 1960s.<sup>18</sup> Drawing on this popular view of the shareholders' role, GM management rejected PCR's proposition of a shareholder resolution. Management accused PCR of inserting what company officials called 'social issues' into the agenda for the company's annual shareholders meetings. Here, however, GM faced opposition from the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), which overruled GM's petition to block the PCR resolution. The SEC ruling opened the door to a wave of similar shareholder resolutions by political and religious organizations seeking to transform corporate behavior throughout the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>19</sup>

Having won the initial SEC ruling, PCR introduced a shareholder resolution at the spring 1970 meeting of GM. The resolution demanded that the company restrict operations "detrimental to the health, safety, or welfare of [American] citizens" and alter the company's management

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<sup>18</sup> Julia C. Ott, *When Wall Street Met Main Street: The Question for an Investors' Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Heidi J. Welsh, "Shareholder Activism," *Corporate Ethics* 9, no. 12 (December 1988): [http://www.multinationalmonitor.org/hyper/issues/1988/12/mm1288\\_06.html](http://www.multinationalmonitor.org/hyper/issues/1988/12/mm1288_06.html); Stuart L. Gillan and Laura t. Starks, "A Survey of Shareholder Activism: Motivation and Empirical Evidence," *Contemporary Finance Digest* (Autumn 1998), 3, 4, 10-34.

<sup>19</sup> Following the Project for Corporate Responsibility decision, the average number of social issue resolutions filed in the United States per year increased from just under 100 in 1973 to approximately 275 in 1989. Glac, "The Influence of Shareholders on Corporate Social Responsibility"; Welsh, "Shareholder Activism"; Gillan and Starks, "A Survey of Shareholder Activism," 3, 4, 10-34; "Campaign GM Group Plans a Second Joust at Firm's Annual Meeting; 3 Proposals Set," *Wall Street Journal*, November 20, 1970: 5.

## Black Power in the Boardroom

structure to include greater representation from union members, professors, scientists, and people of color.<sup>20</sup> PCR activists subsequently staged an action, where members of the organization accused GM Chairman James Roche of “lying [about the company’s] record of progress,” noting:

You have told the shareholders about 100,000 employees, black employees, of General Motors but you have not said that none of them are in top management positions. You have not told them that none of them are members of GM’s Board of Directors. You have not told them that of 13,000 GM dealerships, ten of them, if that many, are black. Why are there no blacks on GM’s Board of Directors?<sup>21</sup>

Roche did not help the situation when he responded to a question posed by Campaign GM about whether GM was a public corporation by saying: “We are a public corporation owned by free, white...” At this point, some people in the audience gasped, while others laughed. Roche stammered, “ummm...and...and...and black and yellow people all over the world.”<sup>22</sup>

Roche’s gaffe at the autumn shareholder meeting appears to have been the last straw for General Motors executives, who were already facing pressure from labor unrest and government regulators related to racial discrimination.<sup>23</sup> Not long after, they reached out to Sullivan to invite him to join the company’s board of directors.

News of Sullivan’s appointment prompted somewhat different responses in the media. Following a well-rehearsed script that accompanied the appointment of African Americans in government and other areas, the mainstream press framed the appointment as evidence of

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<sup>20</sup> Eileen Shanahan, “13 in House Back Drive to Put Public Members on G.M. Board,” *The New York Times*, May 1, 1970: 13; “‘What’s good for U.S.’ posed at GM annual meeting,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 25, 1970: 14; Barbara Gold, “New Protest: General Motors Undemocratic?” *The Sun*, May 17, 1970: D1.

<sup>21</sup> John Egerton, “Black Executives in Business,” *New Pittsburgh Courier* [Pittsburgh, PA] October 24, 1970: 9.

<sup>22</sup> Exchange quoted in William Serrin, “For Roche of G.M., Happiness Is a 10% Surcharge,” *New York times Magazine*, September 12, 1971, 36-37, 109-25.

<sup>23</sup> Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 103-127; “General Motors hit on 2 job bias counts,” *Afro-American*, November 14, 1970: 6.

## Black Power in the Boardroom

American liberalism.<sup>24</sup> Thus, *The Wall Street Journal* claimed Sullivan's appointment served as proof of "GM['s]...increasing sensitivity to the world in which they do business."<sup>25</sup> African Americans, on the other hand, claimed Sullivan's appointment as a victory for the movement. Writing in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, black journalist Louis Martin described Sullivan, as a model of black masculinity, ready to "[tackle]" the titans of corporate America through his performance of "raw black manpower."<sup>26</sup> Similar accolades appeared in other black newspapers.<sup>27</sup>

Sullivan, for his part, sought to carry some of this activism into the boardroom. At a press conference shortly after his appointment was announced, Sullivan told the media, "I know General Motors is going to use me as a symbol and sample of how liberal it has become, but I am going to use them...I'll be one voice out of 23...but I'm going to do all I can to help my people—black people, brown people, underprivileged people."<sup>28</sup> He soon had his chance to show the world what he meant at the company's spring shareholder meeting in April 1971.

Despite the hopes of the company's other directors and executives that Sullivan's appointment to the board would quash any further criticism, activists continued their efforts combatting racism at the company. This time, the issue was General Motors' business dealings in Apartheid South Africa. Building on earlier protests, including those by the NAACP, the National Negro Congress, and the American Committee on Africa, anti-apartheid activists initiated a wave of shareholder proposals in the 1970s and 1980s deriding American complicity

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<sup>24</sup> James Mateja, "G.M. Offers Blacks Job Aid," *Chicago Tribune*, September 23, 1971: E7; "Black Director of General Motors Makes Big Difference," *Oakland Post*, November 18, 1971: 24; Norman Pearlstine, "GM and Its Critics: Auto Maker Resists Any Radical Overhaul But Heeds Some Pleas: Board Names Black Director, Listens to Outsiders, Too; Market Aims Stay Intact," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 1971: 1, 3.

<sup>25</sup> John C. Bogle, president of Philadelphia's Wellington management Co., quoted in Norman Pearlstine, "GM and Its Critics: Auto Maker Resists Any Radical Overhaul, But Heeds Some Pleas: Board Names Black Director, Listens to Outsiders, Too: market Aims Stay Intact," *The Wall Street Journal* [New York, NY] March 24, 1971: 1.

<sup>26</sup> Louis Martin, "The Big Parade: Rev. Sullivan tackles GM Giants," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, January 23, 1971: 12, 36.

<sup>27</sup> Louis Spade, "Blacks winning top posts in big business," *Chicago Daily Defender*, January 9, 1971: 4.

<sup>28</sup> "Rev. Sullivan has big plans for his GM job," *Chicago Daily Defender*, January 13, 1971: 11.

## Black Power in the Boardroom

in Apartheid and calling for U.S. companies to divest from South Africa. One such petition came from Episcopal Church of the United States President John Elbridge Hines, who in early 1971 sent a letter to GM Chairman Roche on behalf of the church condemning Apartheid in South Africa as immoral. Subsequently, the Church, which owned 12,574 shares of GM stock submitted a shareholder resolution demanding GM proceed with “an orderly winding up of its present manufacturing operations in the Republic of South Africa” in protest of Apartheid.<sup>29</sup> In response, Leon Sullivan voiced his support for the resolution, proclaiming: “[A]partheid...is the most ruthless form of dealing with human beings in the world today. And...General Motors, Chrysler, Ford and 300 other American companies underwrite apartheid by being there,” stated Sullivan. “I hold that General Motors should get out of South Africa.”<sup>30</sup>

Coming on the heels of the company’s battle with PCR activists the previous year, Sullivan’s public declaration in support of divestment caused a public relations nightmare for company executives. One reporter, who covered the GM’s annual shareholder meeting, described Sullivan’s outburst at the meeting as “the first public disagreement within memory on the 23-member G.M. board.”<sup>31</sup> GM Chairman James Roche attempted to downplay the controversy while speaking to the press. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Roche noted that Sullivan, “always an outspoken man...wouldn’t be expected to change just by becoming a General Motors director.”<sup>32</sup> Behind closed doors, however, company executives struck a slightly

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<sup>29</sup> Douglas Robinson, “Episcopal Church Urges G.M. to Close Plants in South Africa,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1971: 1.

<sup>30</sup> Sullivan quoted in “Episcopal Resolution Backed By Dr. Leon Sullivan of GM,” *Oakland Post*, April 28, 1971: 13.

<sup>31</sup> Jerry M. Flint, “A Black Director of G.M. Will Vote Against the Board: Black General Motors Director Plans to Vote Against Board,” *The New York Times*, April 9, 1971:45; Sullivan further ruffled the feathers of GM executives by testifying before the House of Representatives Sub-committee on Africa, where he called for “a total economic, political and social disassociation with South Africa.” “Dr. Leon Sullivan Calls for Boycott of S. Africa Before Sub-Committee,” *Sun Reporter*, May 29, 1971: 11.

<sup>32</sup> Jerry M. Flint, “A Black Director of G.M. Will Vote Against the Board: Black General Motors Director Plans to Vote Against Board,” *The New York Times*, April 9, 1971:45.

## Black Power in the Boardroom

different tone. In a private letter, Chairman of the Board John A. Mayer told Sullivan, “I am disturbed by some of the rhetoric attributed to you in the press [and] feel that it will eventually damage your ability to be an important influence on the G.M. Board, as indeed it would on any other board that I can think of.” The issue, according to Mayer, had less to do with Sullivan’s personal views on Apartheid, which Mayer noted were “agree[able],” if not to be “admire[d].” Rather, Mayer framed the problem as one of public relations. “As a director you [should]...confine your comments to Board meetings where they will be properly considered. *Public* [emphasis added] comments elsewhere [were]”, otherwise considered “inappropriate.”<sup>33</sup>

Mayer’s comments were indicative of the particular pressure placed on black executives to represent themselves, and, more importantly, their corporations favorably in public. To be sure, all employees contended with expectations regarding avoiding statements that might damage a company’s image. As hyper-visible members of the corporation occupying roles specifically designed to mitigate tensions with the community, however, black executives bore a particular responsibility for upholding a positive corporate image.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, elsewhere Mayer noted that Sullivan’s appointment had perhaps led to more media attention than any in the history of corporate boards.<sup>35</sup>

Other black executives less visible than the first black director of a major American corporations reported similar experiences of being scrutinized. One black vice president and company director at a major bank in Chicago recalled that his task was “to promote the visibility

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<sup>33</sup> Letter from John A. Mayer, Chairman of Mellon National Bank and Trust Company to Leon Sullivan, February 22, 1971, Sullivan Papers, Box 1, Folder 4.

<sup>34</sup> Corporate concern for the role played by prominent African Americans in regards to corporate image continues through the present as demonstrated by recent revelations regarding a number of American companies paying Reverend Al Sharpton to refrain from speaking about racism at their companies. Isabel Vincent and Melissa Klein, “How Sharpton gets paid to not cry ‘racism’ at corporations” *New York Post*, January 4, 2015, <http://nypost.com/2015/01/04/how-sharpton-gets-paid-to-not-cry-racism-at-corporations/>.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from John A. Mayer, Chairman of Mellon National Bank and Trust Company to Leon Sullivan, February 22, 1971, Sullivan Papers, Box 1, Folder 4.

## Black Power in the Boardroom

and good name” of his bank to the black community.<sup>36</sup> Another black director of urban affairs noted that his role was to “make [the company] look good.”<sup>37</sup> At times, the pressure of being a black executive developed into full on “paranoia,” according to some black executives. “You feel as though you’re constantly being observed. Your actions are constantly being monitored,” noted one black bank manager.<sup>38</sup> A special issue of “The MBA” magazine, entitled “Black Management” published in April 1970, verbalized the white fears of racial miscegenation that underlay much of the scrutiny of black male managers. The issue included testimony from James Spain, Urban Affairs Director of Allied Chemical, regarding the “sick fear” of corporate leaders that black executives will “somehow insinuate themselves into the world of private clubs and then living rooms, and ultimately...into the sacred confines of the white bedrooms.”<sup>39</sup>

Despite the many obstacles they faced, many black executives remained optimistic about the possibilities of black empowerment via the corporation. Speaking at a 1976 conference in Atlanta honoring the birthday of the late Martin Luther King Jr., Sims stated,

[When] I passed the gavel to Vernon Jordan in 1972 and left the Urban League, making the choice to enter the inner sanctum of corporate power and might...I went forth with the conviction that not only is it possible, but indeed it is critical, that the great economic enterprises of this nation learn how to do good while making money. It was my conviction then and now that the American corporation is the foundation of our economic system and the forerunner of our political system and if we, as a nation and as a struggling people within a nation, were to prevent a repeat of the 1876 compromise which re-enslaved us and sold out democracy, then we must do what we did not, or could not, do then: multiply our presence, magnify our performance, and accelerate our influence and importance, to the responsibilities and reward of economic management and production. We must become producers, controllers, directors, manufacturers and not simply consumers. We must be behind the counter instead of in front of the counter.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Black banking executive quoted in Collins, *Black Corporate Executives*, 58.

<sup>37</sup> Collins, *Black Corporate Executives*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> Anonymous black bank manager quoted in Irons and Moore, *Black Managers*, 82.

<sup>39</sup> Spain quoted in Marilyn Bender, “Blacks Snubbed in Business” *New York Times*, April 19, 1970: 16.

<sup>40</sup> “Corporate Social Responsibility and Full employment: The Under-Exposed Legacy of Martin Luther King,” Speech at the Full Employment Conference Celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s forty-seventh Birthday, Martin Luther King Center, January 14, 1976, Sims Papers, Box 13; Elsewhere, Sims, quoting the late Whitney M. Young, told members of the National Urban League, called for “creative confrontations with White America; we must infiltrate its institutions and create the pressures and alliances that will force it to change, taking advantage of

## Black Power in the Boardroom

Sims not alone. A number of civil rights leaders expressed similar sentiments regarding Sims comments were part of a broader embrace of business as the next stage of the civil rights and black power movements.<sup>41</sup> In 1973, James A. Joseph, who previously organized civil rights groups as a minister in Mississippi, where he received threats from the Ku Klux Klan, accepted a position as Vice President of Corporate Action at Cummins Engine Company headquartered in Columbus, Indiana. As Joseph told *The New York Times*, “I’m interested in the use of power for social change.” “In 1960 the arena for social change was the church and civil rights. Then the focus became the university. Now it’s clear that the center of power and the source of influencing change is the multinational corporation.”<sup>42</sup>

Black managers and executives pursued a number of different strategies for enacting change, many of which overlapping, yet somewhat distinct understandings of black economic power. One of the earliest positions in which African Americans found themselves in supervisory positions was in managing corporate expansion into black markets.<sup>43</sup> Building on the earlier efforts of beverage companies like Pepsi to tap the black consumer market, in November 1973, alcoholic beverage giant Heublein Spirits announced their appointment of George R. Edwards, a native of Grenada and graduate of the City College of New York, who, not coincidentally had worked for Pepsi for ten years, as the company’s Vice President and Director of Marketing for its subsidiary Venture Marketing Company, which oversaw development and

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every opportunity that opens up, and using ever legal mean. The battle for Black Power has to be fought with the power center of White America.” Sims keynote address at the 1975 National Urban League Convention, Atlanta, Georgia, July 26, 1975, Harold R. Sims Papers, Rutgers University Special Collections, Box 13.

<sup>41</sup> Chatelain, *Franchise*; Jessica Ann Levy, “Selling Atlanta”.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph quoted in Marilyn Bender, “Black Executives in New Role,” *New York Times*, October 21, 1973: 4.

<sup>43</sup> Examples of black executives in marketing during the 1970s abound and include people like Albert Stewart, Marketing Manager for rubber chemicals at Union Carbide, Frederick Wilkinson Jr., Vice President and Director of Macy’s Jamaica and E. Frederic Morrow, Vice President of the Bank of America-New York working in international business development.

## **BLACKS IN THE LIQUOR INDUSTRY**

Heublein's **George Edwards** (right) talks marketing with colleague, **Gene Giles**.



Figure 2: *Black Enterprise* (September 1975)

management of new products and accounts.<sup>44</sup> Subsequently, Edwards was placed in charge of the Group's spirits sales division, a newly created position, where was charged with marketing and selling Heublein's products to "opportunity markets." Speaking with *Black Enterprise* magazine, Edwards explained his role in the following terms: "I study and analyze consumer segments (e.g., youth, women, and minority consumers) and try to maximize the responses to our individual brands."<sup>45</sup>

In explaining his decision to join Heublein, Edwards cited both the company's success—in 1974, Heublein accounted for seven per cent of industry sales and forty percent of industry growth—as well as its commitment to attracting black talent as key to his decision to join the company.<sup>46</sup> His comments serve as evidence of how many black executives and managers perceived their success as directly tied to that of other African Americans. This sentiment likewise applied to those black executives in companies where they were the only one. "It's a fact of life that if you are the only one, there are other blacks who are out there saying, 'we want this guy to make it,' and I don't want anybody to say that they gave me a chance and I failed,"

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<sup>44</sup> Gil Scott, "Blacks in the Liquor Industry," *Black Enterprise* (September 1975): 33.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

## Black Power in the Boardroom

said Robert A. Monroe, Vice President at the beverage giant, Joseph E. Seagram & Sons, Inc. “That is a burden, and you assume it yourself. You can call it a Jackie Robinson syndrome.”<sup>47</sup>

Monroe’s reference to Robinson reflected a sense among many early black executives that they were not simply joining the ranks of corporate management. Rather, in doing so, they were fulfilling a broader role as race leaders. This sentiment was evident in the paths taken by many black executives, many of whom came from prominence in other areas to the corporation. In 1963, Robert A. (Bobby) Watkins, Jr. joined Seagram’s management training program, quickly moving up the corporate ladder to occupy the role as National Sales manager for Chivas Regal, the company’s popular premium whisky. Prior to joining Seagram, Watkins was a star football player, recruited by Ohio State University as one of the first African American running backs to play for the school’s legendary football team. Watkins later was the 23<sup>rd</sup> selection in the 1955 NFL Draft, playing three years for the Chicago Bears before ending his football career with the Chicago Cardinals.

Others made their way into corporate America from the world of civic organizing. Like Sims, William A. Ross chose to leave his position with the National Urban League to join the world of corporate management. In 1975, William A. Ross was named operational vice president and manager of the Columbia division of the Ryland Group, Inc. construction company. Prior to joining Ryland, Ross served as executive vice president of the National Urban League Development Foundation.<sup>48</sup> During the 1970s, many others left leadership positions in long-standing civil rights organizations like the Urban League and the NAACP to join the ranks of

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> “Names in the News,” *Black Enterprise* (November 1975): 9; III, 381, National Urban League Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

## Black Power in the Boardroom

corporate management. This included Robert L. Rivers, who became a marketing representative for IBM following a successful career in the Los Angeles Urban League.<sup>49</sup>

As African Americans like Sims and Ross took positions in corporate management, they functioned a bridge between American corporations and civil rights organizations, which worked together on a number of corporate social responsibility and black empowerment programs in the late 1960s and 1970s. Building on earlier partnerships with companies like Gulf Oil, Opportunities Industrialization Centers, Inc. (OIC), a black-run job-training and economic development organization founded by Leon Sullivan, announced a new collaboration with General Motors in September 1971 to train black auto mechanics and dealers.<sup>50</sup> By May 1972, the program had trained 100 black dealers and mechanics with projections to train another 250 in 1973.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Sims used his position at Johnson & Johnson to promote black American business through increasing the company's deposits in black banks.<sup>52</sup> These kinds of partnerships go a long way to explaining why black American executives remained in corporate America despite encounters with racism. They also provide evidence of the work these executives did fusing a black agenda with the ambitions corporate America.

Recent years have witnessed growing scholarship on the post-war rise of American business. Revising older narratives of decline, historians like Jefferson Cowie and Bethany Moreton have demonstrated how U.S. companies navigated the challenges posed by twentieth century political and social movements by re-organizing their operations across state and

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<sup>49</sup> "Names in the News," *Black Enterprise* (August 1976): 10.

<sup>50</sup> James Mateja, "G.M. Offers Blacks Job Aid," *Chicago Tribune*, September 23, 1971: E7; "Black Director of General Motors Makes Big Difference," *Oakland Post*, November 18, 1971: 24.

<sup>51</sup> "Rev. Sullivan: Pushing Hard for Black Economic Progress," *Sacramento Observer*, May 18, 1972: F-9.

<sup>52</sup> Summary Report of Major Accomplishments Against 1975 Stated Goals as of Oct. 15, 1975, Sims Papers, Box 14.

## Black Power in the Boardroom

national boundaries.<sup>53</sup> Hereinto, the history of globalizing American corporations has focused primarily on the actions of white executives and managers. Through following the trajectories of black American executives, however, we gain a better understanding of the ways in which economic globalization intersected and, at times, fostered another kind of internationalism, namely Pan-Africanism.

In January 1972, one year following his initial appointment to GM's board, Sullivan reported on plans to establish GM "plants...in several African countries—*Black* African countries. I can't go any further on this, but it will happen. When it does, I will want to see General Motors get more involved in the communities where their plants are located in terms of housing or educational systems and opportunities, even beyond the public educational systems."<sup>54</sup> Having previously operated assembly plants in South Africa and Egypt since the 1910s, GM executives saw an opportunity to grow their operations in post-independence East Africa in the 1970s. Located at the center of East Africa's rapidly expanding economy and closely allied with the United States, company officials selected Kenya as the ideal site for a new assembly plant.<sup>55</sup> Shortly after joining GM's board, Sullivan met with Kenyan Finance Minister Mwai Kibaki and several other members of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, where he raised the possibility of General Motors establishing a plant outside of Nairobi.<sup>56</sup> After

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<sup>53</sup> Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves*; Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*. See also, B. Alex Beasley, "Service Learning."

<sup>54</sup> "Churchism is Dead! Jim McGraw interview Dr. Leon Sullivan founder of Opportunities Industrialization Centers," *Christianity and Crisis: A Christian Journal of Opinion* XXXI, no. 23, January 10, 1972, LHS Papers, Box 25, Folder Kenya OIC.

<sup>55</sup> During the mid-1970s, Kenya was considered by many Western observers to be one of Africa's most stable and prosperous countries and had close ties to the United States. By 1977, over one hundred American companies, with a total investment of \$185 million, were doing business in Kenya, including Firestone, Esso, and IBM, all of them having moved there since independence. Roger Mann, "Washington's Close Ally in Africa: 'Kenya Is Doing things the Way we Like to See Them Done,'" *Washington Post*, August 17, 1977: A20.

<sup>56</sup> Correspondence, Valfoulaye Diallo to Hon. Mwai Kibaki, Ministry of Finance & Economic Planning, June 22, 1971, OICI Papers, Box 7, Folder 27; Correspondence Valfoulaye Diallo to Mr. H.E. Mbiyu Koinange, June 22, 1971, OICI Papers, box 7, Folder 27.

## Black Power in the Boardroom

several years of negotiations, forth, Sullivan, acting on behalf of the company, signed an agreement in June 1975 establishing a joint venture, General Motors Kenya Limited. In line with local concerns regarding foreign influence, ownership of the joint venture was split, with fifty-one percent owned by the government-owned Kenyan Industrial Commercial Development Corporation and the remaining forty-nine owned by GM.<sup>57</sup> In exchange for helping negotiate the terms of General Motors Kenya Limited, General Motors agreed to partner with OIC Kenya to assist in training a local labor force in collaboration with “local manpower institutions” run by the government.<sup>58</sup>

During his tenure at Johnson & Johnson, Harold Sims likewise involved himself in various efforts promoting corporate social responsibility and black empowerment in Africa, including the Nigerian-American Friendship Society, Near East Foundation, and the African-American Institute. In the case of the latter, a non-profit organization founded by Lincoln University president Horace Mann Bond and Howard University president William Leo Hansberry to provide academic and professional training for Africans, Sims noted, “AAI has been invaluable to me” with regards to Johnson & Johnson’s operations in Zambia, Sims noted. “I am confident that they will be of ever greater value to me and to Johnson & Johnson... as we get more deeply involved in business opportunities and strategies on the African continent.”<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps the best example of a black American executive engaged in melding black internationalism with corporate politics was Carl Ware. Having previously served as a member

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<sup>57</sup> Scope of Work for the OICI Kenya/General Motors Corporation Project, OICI Papers, Box 4; Elsewhere, others have claimed GM’s holding in the company GM Kenya Ltd. were at 57.7% with the Kenyan government holding 38.5%, which was later apportioned out to the Industrial and Commercial Development Corp. (20%) and Centrum Investment Co. Ltd. (17.8%) with Itochu KK having the remainder (4.5%). Louis F. Fourie, *On a Global Mission: The Automobiles of General Motors International: Volume 3: GM Worldwide Review, North American Specifications and Executive Listings* (Victoria: Friesen Press, 2016), 1150-1151.

<sup>58</sup> Scope of Work for the OICI Kenya/General Motors Corporation Project, OICI Papers, Box 4

<sup>59</sup> Support of Special Fund Request from the African-American Institute, March 24, 1976, Sims Papers, Box 10.

## Black Power in the Boardroom

of the Atlanta City Council, Ware joined Coca-Cola as Vice President of Urban Affairs in 1979. Ware's motivations for entering the world of corporate management were similar to that of other black executives. In an interview with the *Atlanta Journal/Constitution* in 1979, Ware stated, "My decision to leave city government was one of the toughest I've ever made in life. However, the difficulty of the decision was lessened when I came to grips with the fact that Public Service is not confined to electoral politics. Many of the same issues and community needs that are addressed by elected officials are also addressed by Corporate America."<sup>60</sup> Ware quickly became involved in Coca-Cola's business dealings in Africa. During the mid-1980s, he played an important role negotiating the company's sale of its bottling plant in South Africa as part of a broader divestment campaign protesting Apartheid. As part of Coke's divestment, Ware helped persuade the company to launch a new Equal Opportunities Fund to aid black economic development in South Africa. He further enlisted several prominent leaders of the South African anti-apartheid Struggle, Reverend Allen Boesak and Reverend Desmond Tutu to serve as trustees of the fund. In a letter to Ware, Tutu stated, "I feel honoured to be serving on this Fund for it is a potent weapon in our struggle to establish a new nonracial and democratic South Africa and we believe that you are performing an important work in that struggle."<sup>61</sup>

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Leon Sullivan retired from GM's board in 1992, following over two decades of service.<sup>62</sup> By that point, the appointment of a new black director or manager to U.S. corporations no longer drew the same kind of media attention that accompanied the first wave of black executives.

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<sup>60</sup> Memo from Carl Ware to Earl T. Leonard, Jr., July 25, 1984, Subj.: Herb Schild, The Atlanta Journal/Constitution, Box 27, Folder 5, Carl Ware Papers, Atlanta University Center.

<sup>61</sup> Correspondence Desmond Tutu to Carl Ware, April 10, 1989, Box 28, Folder 3, Carl Ware Papers, Atlanta University center.

<sup>62</sup> Andrea Ford, "Huge Job-Training Center for Residents of Riot Area Planned," *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 1992: B6.

## Black Power in the Boardroom

While the late twentieth-century witnessed dramatic rise in the number of African Americans in supervisory positions in corporate America, the experiences of those black directors, executives, and managers should serve as a caution against an unequivocal celebration of this development. To be sure, black executives wield far more “decision-making power,” to use Louis Stokes’ words, in corporate America today than they did in 1960. This power has not been used solely for the personal enrichment of black executives and their families. Rather it has often been deployed to pressure companies to adopt social responsibility programs and initiatives, including sponsoring job-training programs for inner-city black youth and black empowerment in South Africa. Over time, a number of black executives and directors came to see these programs as limited. In 1980, Harold Sims left Johnson & Johnson to start his own consulting firm. In private correspondence to a friend, Sims explained his decision to leave Johnson & Johnson as a response to his frustrations at the company’s failure to go far enough on its promotion of black Africans.<sup>63</sup> For Sims, and others, black business ultimately proved a better vehicle for black empowerment than corporate management.

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<sup>63</sup> Sims Papers.