

Whitney Young: working from the middle

by Andrew J. Young

Whitney M. Young Jr., 49, executive director of the National Urban League, died suddenly last week while swimming in Lagos, Nigeria. His main effort in the human rights movement was getting jobs for blacks. Andrew J. Young, a minister in the United Church of Christ, was a close assistant of the late Martin Luther King Jr. and worked with Whitney Young throughout the '60s. He is now head of Atlanta's Community Relations Commission.

The more that white folk trust and respect a black leader, the greater the suspicion in the black community. It was inconceivable to alienated blacks that Whitney Young could deal with the big business establishment or government without "selling out." From their bitter perspective, "if you were telling it like it is, you wouldn't be tolerated long."

On the other end, most of the business world greeted Whitney Young with resentment and scorn reserved for those arrogant, uppity "niggers" who dared raise a moral challenge in a world where profits, not prophets, reign supreme. For every Henry Ford, Andrew Heiskell or Mil Batten who concerned himself with Whitney's cries for opportunity and justice, there were hundreds who contributed "tokens" to gain a little "PR" with black consumers and thousands who "couldn't care less" what happened beyond the company gate.

In trying to bring together these two factions—the black community and the white business world—Whitney Young was willing to suffer criticism from both sides. He was in the middle, a part of that segment of America which the pioneer black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier blasted in 1957 as the black bourgeoisie. Frazier saw this sector as an "escapist," conformist caricature of white America, and to some extent this was an accurate indictment. But there is a long legacy of freedom fighters who came from that middle ground between "haves" and "have nots" and nonetheless bound themselves to their impoverished brethren and struggled with them to produce a new day for all. Internationally, Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere of Africa, Gandhi and Nehru of India—all of these men whom we now revere as statesmen and liberators—came from this middle ground and were at some time damned as "compromisers."

The black bourgeoisie in America includes the proud black parents who "ate dirt" if necessary to raise their children out of poverty, and by arming the children with an undying faith, wisdom and education as security against the stresses of racism, prepared them to be leaders of their people. Those sacrificial efforts provided the society with men like Whitney Young, Martin King and others who were able to work with passionate intensity to correct the ills of this nation, yet do so with calculated logic and tactical effectiveness. The leadership style they employed is reminiscent of that of the professional quarterback who lives

under tension and violence and yet must calmly pick apart the defenses of the opposition.

Prior to 1961 when Whitney Young became its executive director, the National Urban League was basically a social welfare agency which subsisted largely on community chest funds. Whitney had the vision and ability to put this well-established and respected organization to work for meaningful reform of our society. Under his leadership the league no longer was a group that simply helped the poor to adjust to a racist and exploitative system; it organized blacks to register to vote and participate in government as a means of providing more representative and less corrupt government in all areas of urban politics.

He called for jobs from industry, a Marshall Plan for the cities and a guaranteed minimum income for all Americans. When these envisioned reforms were put together, they constituted a potential revolution. Power and resources were to be shared with the powerless, and a new life-style would hopefully emerge, one which included all citizens in the blessings of this society.

As the league became more political, some of its past supporters withdrew money. Whitney broadened the funding base of the league, appealing to the business community to support, for its own enlightened self-interest, the inclusion of minorities in the mainstream of American life. Here he really found his niche. He was perfectly suited to function as interpreter of the movement in the board rooms, executive lunch and cocktail hours of America's business world. He had that special knack of being able to stick a moral stiletto into the pompous consciousness of those far removed from the realities of city streets and never change his smile or miss a sip of his martini. It takes a special talent indeed to mobilize the fiddlers to prevent Rome's burning.

In this role Whitney proved a perfect complement to the massive emotional upheaval of the late 1960s. The people were on the march, but marching masses have a frightening rather than enlightening effect on the "upper classes" unless an interpreter translates the passionate demands for justice into statistics—showing, for example,

how the demonstrations linked up with the widening income gap between blacks and whites.

Along with this special mission to the business world he took every possible opportunity to relate to the mass movement. He came to Birmingham, took a leading role in the March on Washington and even marched in Mississippi when the cry of Black Power threatened to divide the movement. He worked hard to maintain his integrity with the action movement, and this demanded of him an agonizing appraisal of every action, for when he moved, 100 branches would feel in their budgets the reverberation of any miscalculation.

No doubt the constant agony of decision intensified and shortened Whitney's life. So, conceivably, did tension brought on by frustration. These past couple of years have contributed more frustration than any man in a creative minority leadership position can bear. Lately, with the cities seemingly quieting, Whitney Young saw much of the support for the Urban League's employment drives and street academies begin to drift away. It was as though black youth had been the problem of the last decade and it was now time to slip back to business as usual. Nothing could have been more frustrating for Whitney Young.

Whitney Young died at the end of an era. The '60s, with all their grandeur, charismatic leadership and great conflict, have given way to a new mood and a new movement. The "new thing" is "political" and it's local. The mass marches of Selma in '65 have led to black sheriffs, county commissioners, probate judges and justices of the peace in several black belt counties of Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina and Virginia. The emotional outbursts of violence in the cities have been channeled by maturing black leadership into a genuine—and increasingly successful—struggle for political power.

In addition to its own involvement in local politics, the Urban League's latest thrust is a good illustration of the new directions in the movement. One of Whitney's final projects was "system changes"—to organize ghetto residents to alter permanently and positively the institutional services which affect their lives. This project involves the league in picketing, selective buying and parapolitical activities to give the poor a greater share of power in the community.

The '70s will continue to bring a strengthening of local politics and community organizations. We know that we must build and support leaders who can continue our drive for dignity and equality. The most militant demand of men like Whitney Young and Martin King was that America live out the true meaning of her creed. If we had listened to these giants of the '60s or even let them live to continue working and speaking, we would be closer to their dream of reaching this goal through cooperative and peaceful democratic means. We should give thanks now that they kept hope alive this long, and get on with the business of building one America.



Whitney M. Young Jr.