

The dilemma of African-American leadership

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

ON AUG. 28, Americans will celebrate the 40th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington. Its signature event, Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech stirred the nation.

The anniversary should be a reflective occasion for the black community at a time when it is struggling with a critical decision: whether to follow King's prophetic tradition or to lead from political office.

The prophetic tradition evolved from the black church's desire to maintain its political independence in order to become a conscience for society. Instead of acting via a political party to advance the community, the prophetic leader criticizes the existing order while exhorting the community to adhere to core values of social justice, a personal witness to God's saving grace and the vision of a new world.

Today's black leaders have strayed from the prophetic path by entering partisan politics in increasing numbers. That puts them in the odd position of sometimes being hesitant to criticize the policies of the Bush adminis-

tration, or even the platform of their own party, because of the risk of alienating themselves.

"Popularity" and "political correctness" have replaced the independence, moral certainty and spiritual integrity of the prophetic tradition, also the hallmarks of the civil rights movement.

King's historic speech and the sermonic power with which he delivered it marked the defining moment of the movement. He was near the end of his written speech when he decided to deviate from it and use the echoing phrase, "I have a dream." Extemporaneously, he integrated quotes from the Declaration of Independence, the Old Testament prophet Isaiah and a traditional American patriotic song to share his vision of a new American society.

King then mesmerized the 250,000 marchers with images of "former slaves and former slave owners sitting down together at the table of brotherhood," a society where black children would be judged "not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character," and the unification of "all God's children," regardless of race or creed. He concluded with the



hope that all Americans would one day be able to join hands and sing out, "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Had King not deviated from his prepared text, it is doubtful that the speech would be remembered today. But he used the speech as well as his prophetic leadership as springboards for political change. He urged the Johnson administration to support legislation for integrated public accommodations, voting rights and economic justice — and he went to

jail for his non-violent civil disobedience to secure those goals.

Today's black leaders have lost the independent voice that King so dearly valued. Their actions — or inaction — raise some serious questions about the effectiveness of their own leadership. Few black members of Congress, for example, were willing to publicly question the Bush decision to go to war in Iraq as King did with Johnson in Vietnam.

Similarly, Secretary of State Colin Powell, one of the leading figures in black America today,

finds himself hostage to a conservative Republican Party. He has compromised personal integrity for a future run at the presidency, an office that King repeatedly criticized in his quest for social justice. More disturbing are the decisions of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, who opposes affirmative action as well as many other civil rights measures that King himself fought for.

Even the children of notable civil rights leaders, like Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. of Illinois, have rejected the prophetic tradition for greater rewards in the political arena, something King believed would compromise his integrity as a Christian leader.

The current generation's pattern of opting for political leadership reflects a troubling disconnect with civil-rights struggles of the 1960s. Unless the current leaders are willing to draw from the same dynamic energy, spiritual integrity and compassion of the prophetic tradition, black America will seriously diminish its ability to advance the cause it holds so dear. ★

William C. Kashatus is a regular contributor to this page.