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Sharpston vs. Moynihan.

THE CLASH

By Jim Sleeper

“One night in South Africa, I came home from Nelson Mandela’s inauguration, turned on the T.V. and saw Moynihan in the funeral procession for Richard Nixon,” thundered the Rev. Al Sharpston to the New York State Democratic Convention in Buffalo in June, where he hyped his Senate campaign against Daniel Patrick Moynihan. “He was helping to bury Richard Nixon, while I was helping to bury apartheid. Both of us were where our lives had led us!”

It was classic Sharpston: a political dart laced with racial overtones. Sharpston’s rhetoric blends the language and cunning of a typical American political rogue with an arsenal stocked with centuries of black oppression. It is a fascinating weapon he rarely hesitates to brandish. With the help of New York City’s sensationalist, diversity-crazed media, Sharpston has refined to a martial art the hurling of racially charged japes at liberals who, as he puts it, have betrayed “the left out and the locked out.”

For the moment, Moynihan is his preferred target. “I doubt that Senator Moynihan could have a conversation with a black teenager and, when it was over, either one of them know they were on the same planet,” Sharpston told a state commission on youth crime last fall. That was months before Moynihan suggested that rising numbers of out-of-wedlock births to teenage mothers could lead to what biologists call “speciation.” In July, when Moynihan declined to contest Sharpston’s petition signatures under New York’s byzantine ballot-access laws, the challenger retorted, “Maybe he’ll change his mind now that he’s decided I’m a member of a different species.” No one

recalled that Sharpston had likened Moynihan to an alien.

Beneath his litany of Rainbow Coalition pieties, Sharpston virtually copies, on the left, the perverse racial spitefulness of an Alfonse D’Amato on the right. Indeed, Sharpston, who had endorsed D’Amato for Senate in 1986, smoothed the way for his re-election in 1992 by undermining Democratic nominee Robert Abrams, a civil rights liberal whose misfortune it had been to cross Sharpston as special prosecutor in the Tawana Brawley case. (Black voters who had turned out heavily for Sharpston that year in his primary against Abrams sat on their hands in November.)

Sharpston’s tactics not only helped sink Abrams in 1992; they have Governor Mario Cuomo quaking in his contest against D’Amato’s protégé, likely Republican nominee George Pataki. After lunching with state GOP chief William Powers, Sharpston set about starting an independent, “progressive,” black-led Freedom Party, whose gubernatorial candidate might siphon votes from Cuomo. Though the party didn’t get off the ground, the threat of it brought Cuomo to a Sharpston rally hours after the preacher’s attack on Moynihan at the state convention. Cuomo told the gathering he was “honored” to have been invited by a man “whose voice being raised is a very good thing. . . . I welcome him to the fray.”

Sharpston expects to carry 95 percent of the black vote against Moynihan in the September 13 primary; even without his party, he can “suppress” the black vote against Cuomo in November with a wink and a nod. With support from some Hispanics and the anti-Moynihan left, he may carry 25 percent of Democrats statewide. But Sharpston’s election returns have little to do with his influence as a politician. Like Jesse Jackson, whom he once criticized for being “an airplane with no airport to land in,” Sharpston needn’t win an election. He can be a king-breaker among Democrats simply by corraling black votes—11 percent of the electorate in New York. Already, he is a kind of county leader; his jurisdiction is every black church pulpit from Buffalo to Brooklyn. When the primary and the general election against Republican sofa queen Bernadette Castro are over, Moynihan still will be senator, Cuomo may or may not be governor and Sharpston will control black politics in New York.

New York has five political parties, and Sharpston seemingly embraces and rejects them all, depending on where he happens to be at the moment. In December he was the warm-up act for Louis Farrakhan at the Jacob Javits Convention Center in Manhattan. (“Don’t care who’s mad; we’re glad! We will not be separated!” he preached.) In January came his noises about a third party. In February he announced his Democratic primary campaign, invoking Farrakhan along with Martin Luther King Jr. At lunch with Sharpston recently, I suggested playfully that he even has a streak of Jewish liberalism. “I agree,” he said solemnly. He explained that the Freedom Party was meant to be a “progressive” counterweight to the Liberal Party, which had angered black voters by backing Rudolph Giuliani over David Dinkins in 1993. This year the Liberals are backing Moynihan and Cuomo against the Republicans,

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but Sharpton insists the party's members are patronage hunters who betray true liberal values.

When Cuomo got heat from Jewish political leaders for attending Sharpton's rally, panicky columnists loyal to the governor assured readers that Jesse Jackson and Sharpton (who chairs the Rainbow Coalition's Ministers' Division) would "confront" Farrakhan's separatism at then NAACP President Ben Chavis's Baltimore summit. There was no such confrontation, and, alas for Sharpton's apologists, his National Action Network recently presented Khallid Abdul Muhammad, with a \$1,000 check at a rally in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Sharpton, who was touring Rwanda at the time, returned to declare that he and Jackson would boycott Chavis's second summit, which they did on August 22.

Mightn't nervous Democrats be better off rebuffing Sharpton instead of courting him? The thought seems never to have occurred to Abrams or Cuomo. Though Abrams had prosecuted Sharpton unsuccessfully for tax evasion, he was obsequious in their 1992 Senate primary debates. "I'm afraid I have to disagree with my friend the Rev. Sharpton," Abrams began a rebuttal in a televised debate. "I'm afraid I have to disagree that we're friends," Sharpton interrupted haughtily, winning the round. For his part, Cuomo insists, "I'm trying to do more than win an election; I'm trying to govern. What I try to do with all these people who've attacked me, as Al Sharpton has, is to be less judgmental and more constructive. I say, 'You can be a strong, effective voice.'"

It was Giuliani who showed Democrats a better way. When Sharpton tried to mediate a police incident at a Harlem mosque in January, Giuliani ejected him. Sharpton, a master at being rebuffed, generated a brief media storm—*The New York Times's* Alan Funder profiled the preacher—but Giuliani's firmness worked, and Sharpton faded away.

Moynihan is following Giuliani's precedent by refusing to debate Sharpton. His deep, if unspoken, contempt for his challenger has as much to do with his own per-

sonal history as with political calculation. Unlike Cuomo, Moynihan can win his primary and general election races without black votes. But Moynihan has feelings as well as political interests, and Sharpton offends him because the story of family breakdown that he accuses Moynihan of "telling on blacks" is really Moynihan's own. Both men were abandoned at the age of 10 by their fathers, whom they never saw again. Both fell abruptly from comfortable suburban childhoods to inner-city poverty. "It's not about race, it's about class," Moynihan insists, and, to a point, the evidence backs him up.

The protean Sharpton, a famous "boy preacher,"

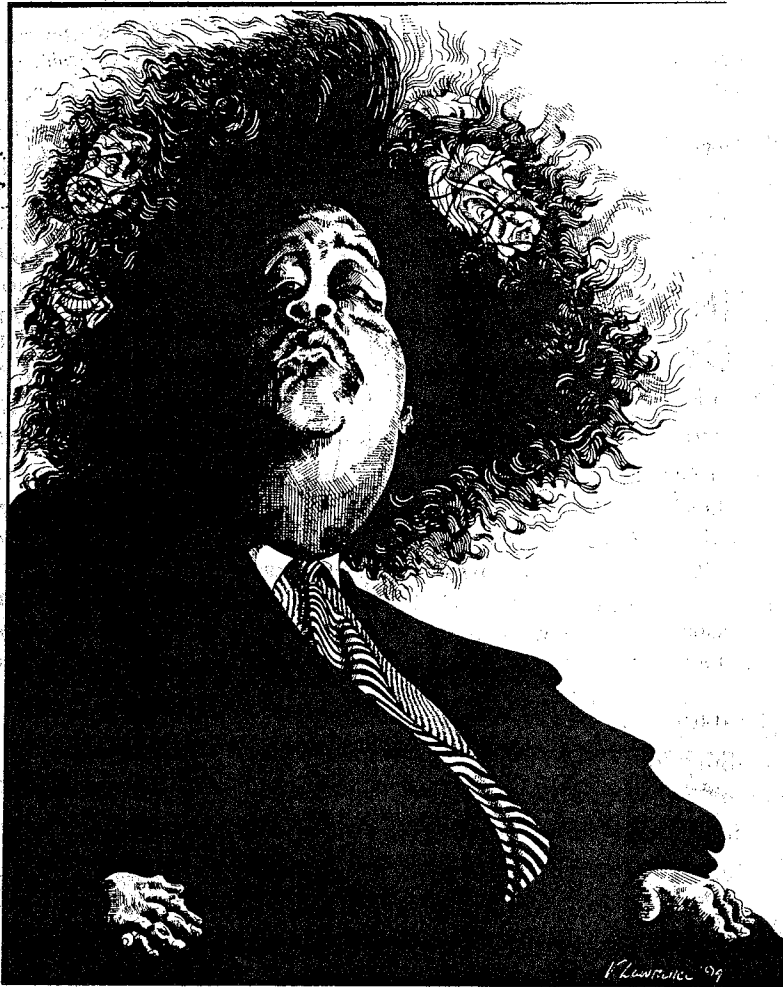
latched on to a series of remarkable mentors: the singer James Brown, politician-entrepreneur Percy Sutton, boxing promoter Don King, the young Jesse Jackson. Moynihan tended bar and shined shoes; last year he told students at his old high school in East Harlem that he learned about Pearl Harbor from a man whose shoes he was shining on Central Park West. He went on to City College, the Navy and, eventually, the London School of Economics courtesy of a Fulbright.

Sharpton told the *Times's* Todd Purdum that Moynihan "rose to fame talking about the black family, while I'm a broken family product." But it is Sharpton who used his gift for "talking" and his blackness to become an ersatz tribune of the

downtrodden; it is Moynihan who shined other men's shoes. Abrams's and Cuomo's childhoods were scarcely less humble, their ascents scarcely less steep. Yet they've let Sharpton's charges of racism cancel their histories and chill their pride. They seem to have forgotten how to insist that it's about class. In that failure of nerve lies the failure of liberal democratic culture itself.

"There's a lot of anger in the black community," Sharpton says. "If I'm able to organize that anger into the political process, that's all to the good." To Sharpton's good, anyway. The angrier white Democrats become over his assaults on Moynihan and other party standard-bearers, the more black supporters love his defiance. They backed his losing bid in 1992 and Dinkins's losing campaign in 1993. If they back Sharpton even more heavily now, and then absent themselves from Cuomo's battle in November, they will only further isolate themselves in a state that neither Sharpton nor the liberals accommodating him will control.

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