



STATEMENT DI175

Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam: Striking a Responsive Chord in the Black Community

A Muslim, a mobilizer, a musician, a male role model, and in many ways a mystery. His role as organizer of the Million Man March and leader of the Nation of Islam makes Louis Farrakhan one of the best-known African Americans today. Though a 62-year-old grandfather, Farrakhan's healthy countenance and vigorous output allow him to pass for a man 20 years younger. He is a father of nine children and an accomplished violinist with a taste for Mendelssohn, and aides say he can bench press 400 pounds. Born Louis Eugene Walcott in 1933 and converted by Malcolm X in 1955, Louis Farrakhan has led the Nation of Islam (NOI) since 1977. His dynamic speeches strike a responsive chord in tens of thousands of young black men who promote his message with missionary zeal, making the NOI a social force to be reckoned with. The NOI does not release statistics, but informed estimates place its following at 25,000 to 100,000 or more. A well-advertised lecture by Louis Farrakhan can draw 60,000 people.

Farrakhan's following is to be reckoned not simply in numbers but also in its composition. NOI adherents largely come from the margins of society: reclaimed drug addicts, former gang members, and directionless or fatherless men who have found a new identity. According to long-time NOI observer and black pastor Dr. Jerry Buckner, while the traditional black church is about 60 percent female, the NOI's membership is about 80 percent male. Young American blacks are in a crisis today (30 percent will be imprisoned or under court supervision by age 29), and the NOI offers economic and religious solutions.

Early Days. The NOI traces its history to 1930 with the appearance of Wallace (or Wali) D. Fard in the black ghetto of Detroit, Michigan. Claiming to have come from Mecca, Fard taught a small circle of black followers that their problems stemmed from the machinations of a Caucasian-dominated society, and that the whites are "blue-eyed devils" who have used Christianity to enslave them. The true religion of black people, he affirmed, is Islam, and their book is the Holy Qur'an, although Fard actually taught a conflicting blend of Islam, Freemasonry, and his own ideas. After Fard disappeared in June 1934 without explanation, one of his earliest disciples, Elijah Poole (who by then was renamed Elijah Muhammad), took over, strengthening the movement's radical emphasis on black racial pride and teaching that the departed Master Fard was an incarnation of Allah.

Elijah Muhammad reigned until his death in February 1975 of heart failure, nearly 10 years to the day after the death of Malcolm X, whose repudiation of the NOI precipitated his assassination on February 21, 1965. Many blacks (not NOI members) consider *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* required reading for whites who want to understand the black experience or the Nation of Islam. One learns of Malcolm's disillusionment at discovering that Elijah Muhammad had sired children with several of his teenage secretaries and of Malcolm's life-changing pilgrimage to Mecca, where the colorblind character of true Islam deeply moved him.

Formerly the chief spokesman for the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X was considered a Judas for rejecting its racist teachings and openly discussing Elijah's improprieties. Buckner says that upon learning of Malcolm's betrayal, Elijah Muhammad told his followers, "It's time to close that nigger's eyes." In December 1964, the young Louis Farrakhan wrote that Malcolm "was worthy of death" in a NOI newspaper. Two months later three Black Muslim assassins gunned Malcolm X down during a lecture in New York.

Though Farrakhan denies responsibility for Malcolm's death, he acknowledged in 1994 that his rhetoric helped produce the "atmosphere in which our brother was assassinated." Malcolm's widow, Betty Shabazz, however, has often suspected Farrakhan of greater complicity than he has admitted.

Tensions increased in January 1995 when the FBI charged Qubilah Shabazz, Malcolm's daughter, with hiring an informant to kill Farrakhan. Qubilah was four years old and present when her father was assassinated. Though she claimed to have been joking about the murder proposal, tape recordings reveal her fear that Farrakhan might kill her mother for implicating him in Malcolm's

murder. A federal judge suspended the case in May, and Qubilah was required to undergo drug and psychiatric treatment in Texas.

Shortly afterward, Betty Shabazz publicly reconciled with Farrakhan at a fund-raising dinner he had organized to help pay Qubilah's legal fees. "We are both victims of a wider conspiracy," Farrakhan said. The language of conspiracy peppers Farrakhan's rhetoric with frequent references to "the enemy" and "the oppressor" — usually meaning whites or Jews.

Islamic Sectarianism.

Though the NOI embraces some Islamic beliefs and practices, such as abstention from alcohol and pork, theologically it stands outside of traditional Islam. Elijah Muhammad taught — and Louis Farrakhan still believes with modifications — that Allah is a God who appears in human form from time to time, always as a black man. While blacks have lived on earth since antiquity, "a black scientist in rebellion against Allah" named Dr. Yakub allegedly grafted the white race into existence as a perverse breeding experiment six thousand years ago. In breeding out their blackness, Yakub removed their physical, intellectual, and moral virtues as well. With nothing left but treachery, the white race connived to undermine and enslave black people.

The Institute for Islamic Information and Education, a Sunni Muslim group in Chicago, contends that the "Nation of Islam" is a misnomer since the NOI denies essential elements of Islam — the most important being that Allah has never appeared in physical form and cannot be identified in that way with any created being. For example, current editions of the NOI's newspaper state, "WE BELIEVE that Allah (God) appeared in the Person of Master W. Fard Muhammad, July 1930."

Orthodox Muslims also believe in a literal, physical resurrection of the dead to heaven or hell, whereas the NOI claims, "No already physically dead person will be in the Hereafter: that is slavery belief, taught to slaves to keep them under control." Instead, Farrakhan teaches that the resurrection of the dead is a *mental* resurrection (understood as an awakening in one's mind from dead thoughts).

Mainstream Muslims also criticize other NOI practices, which include its beliefs about the origin of the races, the NOI's nonobservance of the five daily prayers, and inadequate emphasis on the *hadith* (traditions) of Muhammad and the pilgrimage to Mecca. Farrakhan's recent statements, however, indicate that the NOI is emphasizing some of these areas more strongly.

Business Ventures. Economic growth for the NOI comes via several channels (apart from donations and sales of their newspaper, *The Final Call*). The NOI owns 1,600 acres of Georgia farmland and plans to acquire 10,000 acres by the end of 1996, according to the *Christian Science Monitor*. The NOI has also started a commercial trucking industry with a handful of tractor-trailer rigs.

Beauty supply stores, bookstores, and restaurants specializing in "bean pies" appear throughout the country. The Salaam Restaurant and Bakery, a fully paid-for \$5 million restaurant, opened in Chicago in March 1995 with much fan fare and with menus for lower-and upper-income patrons.

Amazingly, since 1991 the NOI's largest source of income has been the federal government, which has paid about \$20 million to security services owned or controlled by the NOI. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has awarded contracts to public housing projects in Chicago, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Washington, and other cities to hire NOI-related security firms.

These businesses have brought safety to some housing projects. The *New York Times* reported praise for NOI Security in Baltimore, where tenants protested the cancellation of its contract. On the other hand, an investigative series by the *Chicago Tribune* in March 1995 published tenant complaints in Chicago and Washington of inadequate, absent, or violent security guards. Meanwhile, Farrakhan refused 12 requests for an interview by the *Tribune*.

Phony Cure for AIDS. One focus of the *Tribune* story was the Abundant Life Clinic in Washington, D.C., directed by Dr. Abdul Alim Muhammad, head of NOI's Washington mosque. The doctor claims to have developed a cure for AIDS. In 1988 Farrakhan suggested that the Jews developed AIDS and deliberately gave the disease to black children. Alim Muhammad is also the NOI's Minister of Health and Human Services. In 1992 he told an Atlanta audience that the AIDS virus was "a direct consequence" of a covert policy of genocide against nonwhites, instituted by President Bush.

Both Farrakhan and Alim claim that an African doctor, David Koech of Kenya, has discovered the cure for AIDS — a "miracle drug" called Kemron. Alim Muhammad and Farrakhan's son-in-law incorporated a business to distribute Kemron. At the Million Man March this October, Alim Muhammad presented a man supposedly cured of AIDS in one year and castigated the U.S.

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government for suppressing this discovery in its scheme to reduce the black population. Koech, however, *did not* discover Kemron. In fact, Joseph Cummins, its real founder who holds a patent on it, has found it ineffective against AIDS, and this has been confirmed by 12 controlled tests. Moreover, the World Health Organization, the National Institutes of Health, and the U.S. Public Health Service have rejected this drug as worthless.

Judaism and Slavery. The NOI's obsession with Jewish conspiracies against blacks became evident in the publication (by Latimer Associates) of *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews: Volume One* in 1991, now in its fourth printing. Ascribed to the "Historical Research Department, Nation of Islam," this work singles out Jews as chief agents in the slave trade in the New World from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

Though its 1,275 footnotes offer the appearance of scholarship, critics say its substance is lacking. Winthrop Jordan, chairman of history and African-American studies at the University of Mississippi, dined its anonymous authors for their subterfuge, carelessness, and flawed evidence in the September 1995 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*.

Yet in a curious twist, the NOI, which views slavery as an evil with repercussions that have persisted for generations, has defended African regimes that practice slavery. In February 1995 a series of articles in the *New York City Sun* described ongoing slavery in the African nations of Mauritania (south of Morocco) and Sudan (south of Egypt). The U.S. State Department estimates that Muslims buy and sell 90,000 other Muslims of Mauritania as property, while in Sudan most slaves are Christian women and children who are forced to convert to Islam. Many human rights agencies have also documented chattel slavery in these countries.

The NOI in New York responded by suggesting that Jews working for the American Anti-Slavery Group have made these charges against Sudan. Addressing an Arab and Islamic conference in 1995, Farrakhan mentioned Sudan and Mauritania as being criticized by "the Western press" for practicing slavery. He condemned slavery wherever it occurs, but made no further reference to these two countries.

Perhaps the most persistent criticism against Louis Farrakhan and NOI spokespeople is for racial prejudice and anti-Semitism. Slavery metaphors are always close at hand. Farrakhan reproves blacks who marry whites for "sleeping with the son and daughter of the oppressor." (The NOI opposes interracial marriages.) He also belittles black ministers who have visited the President as Uncle Toms going to the slavemaster's mansion: "As if that [going to the White House] is supposed to make the flock happy, because you was at 'da Big House' with the Big Satan."

Persistent racist statements come from other NOI spokespeople. In 1992 Abdul Alim Muhammad justified the shedding of blood as a "healing" process for oppressed blacks: "When you let [your anger and anxiety] out, there's healing in that. And if in the process, some of your oppressors and slave-masters die, so what? Everybody has to die sometime, don't they? So why shouldn't your slavemaster die now?"

On November 29, 1993, Khalid Abdul Muhammad, then a top aide to Farrakhan, gave an infamous speech at New Jersey's Kean College, calling for the killing of whites, including cripples and children, in South Africa. On February 23, 1994, anti-Semitic remarks by a NOI supporter immediately preceding a speech by Khalid at black-founded Howard University caused its president to resign under the fallout. (Eventually Farrakhan removed Khalid from his position.)

Origins of the Million Man March. Speaking at Union Temple Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., on September 17, 1995, a month before the Million Man March, Farrakhan revealed the genesis of the March. He said that during a vacation in Mexico 10 years earlier, he had gone to the ruins of "a Mayan temple to meditate and pray," when he was taken up into a giant spaceship. He identified the object as the "wheel within a wheel" referred to in Ezekiel 1:15-21. "I heard the voice of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad as you hear my voice," he related, whose shrouded form told Farrakhan that if he could get a million men to come to Washington, "then you can come here again and you can see me face-to-face." The Million Man March would fulfill this decade-old promise.

Farrakhan warned the marchers, "This is a life and death struggle; death is planned for us," beginning at the White House. "The President has tanks right now in the D.C. Armory. It's there for you and for me." He assured the audience, however, that Elijah Muhammad's spaceship would be there to provide protection for the marchers.

Farrakhan said the March will tell America that "we are sober, committed, dedicated." He also said the March will "serve notice to the world that the black man is ready, steady, an able man, full of righteousness, ready to rule."

Ultimately, the Million Man March on October 16, 1995, took on ecumenical dimensions far beyond its founder, making headline news across the world. The National Park Service initially said the rally drew 400,000 people, a contested figure that was later adjusted to about 837,000. Only one arrest occurred that day, as thousands of black men pledged to serve their families and refrain from violence (except in self-defense), and thousands also registered to vote. Farrakhan plans to hold a Million Family March in October 1996.

Buckner, a Southern Baptist pastor in Tiburon, California, told the JOURNAL he believes much of Farrakhan's success can be attributed to his readiness to speak out against discrimination against blacks, and to develop both businesses and a positive self-image among downtrodden black men. Even those raised in Christian homes, he notes, can be drawn to Farrakhan's radical Islamic theology if Christian churches and pastors fail to address the racial and social problems that blacks experience daily. The recent release by the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board of *The Lost Nation*, a video addressing the NOI's theology and agenda, is one example of this sensitivity. However, Buckner says, a video is not an antidote. This, he says, will have to come not from a TV screen but from flesh-and blood Christians displaying real solutions in *agape* love.

— *Eric Pement*

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