DAILY NEWS

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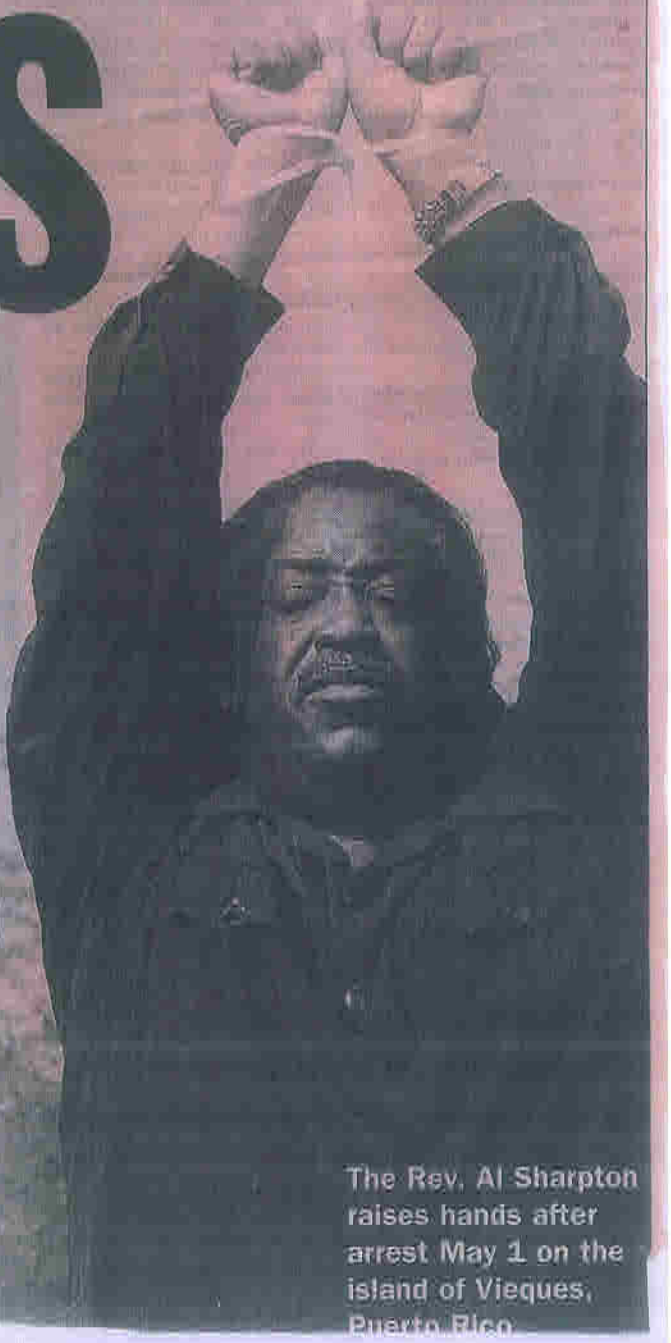
James R. Outlaw

OUTLAW

90 DAYS IN JAIL FOR NAVY PROTEST

VIEQUES JUDGE BOMBS REV. AL



The Rev. Al Sharpton raises hands after arrest May 1 on the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico

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may have been doing in that alley behind Lubavitch World Headquarters, there was no justification for the beating he received.

For many, though, doubts about the "new" Sharpton linger, and old hints of impropriety still resonate. In 1989, he faced a 67-count indictment on charges that he stole $250,000 from charitable donors and cheated on his income taxes. He was ultimately acquitted of all 67 counts. Of three other tax-charges that lingered, two were dropped this month, after he pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of failing to file a tax return in 1986, for which he was fined $5,000.

Even after all that, however, his accounting still seems lax. His $2,200-a-week operation runs on funds from public speaking and cash donations at his weekly Saturday rally for the nonprofit National Action Network, a loose-knit political group of which he is president. Though he retains an accountant and insists that his books are in order, it is hard to see how the funds can be tallied and how he can keep track of his daily expenses. The phrase "cash flow" for him has a literal meaning. As he spins through town, many of his expenses seem to be met with a wad of bills that he pulls from his pocket.

Sharpton answers questions about his taxes, his activism and his rhetoric with barely a shrug. He is calm in the face of a possible jail sentence that still awaits him, after conviction on charges stemming from a 1987 protest. When confronted with questions about his legal troubles, he leans back in his chair and recounts case after case of civil rights leaders being held to a higher standard than white politicians. He volunteers that his stint as an informer for the Federal Bureau of Investigation — he insists he did it only in response to the bureau's attempt to frame him — would be a badge of honor for other politicians, who might cite it as a mark of their respect for law and order.

He waves off his youthful indiscretions, too. Now, he says, he has a higher calling, to reshape black leadership. "The battle of the 60's and 70's was to get blacks into office," he says. "The battle now is to get the right blacks in office. Clarence Thomas got into the Supreme Court. But he is the most reactionary black jurist that I have ever seen."

Cornel West ranks Sharpton with a half dozen or so young men and women who will define black activist politics in coming years. But theirs, he believes, is a delicate challenge: to pressure their elders without either alienating the black establishment or being co-opted by it. "Al Sharpton has been much more critical of the black establishment than the power club has ever been," West says. "He is now one of our most progressive voices. But the best way for him to proceed is to keep some kind of pressure on. Because if he just becomes another insider, his impact will erode and people won't keep listening."

Sharpton in 1978. "I did a lot of on-the-job training with people who are masters," he says of James Brown, Jesse Jackson and Don King.

The risk for Sharpton is clear: how to yell and yet seem reasonable. Some critics doubt that he can do it. "People in Scarsdale and those places see him and say, 'Oh, he is just going to support that one group,' " says one political veteran who spoke on condition that his name be withheld. "That's the problem you have. When you look at the profile of him in whiteAmerica, they say he is just out for black people." Even many blacks, he says, would turn away if Al Sharpton got too close to victory. "He came and spoke and we gave him a standing ovation," he says of ameeting of the city's black leaship. "But don't confuse that with going out and voting for him. I think he ought to stay out there — outside. That is the place for his kind of pot stirring."

Mostly, though, New York's black leaders back Sharpton up, and stiffly reject suggestions that his temper could flare and knock him back. "He was the only one who brought not only humor but substantive issues to the campaign," Rangel says. "When you consider the percentage of the vote that he got, the past has already been answered."

Some of his harshest critics do not care to speak of him at all. Neither Robert Abrams, the Attorney General who faced him down over the Tawana Brawley case, nor Charles J. Hynes, Brooklyn's District Attorney, would comment on his change, or lack of it.

Sharpton, meanwhile, revels in his new prestige. "Now, when I go to talk to Governor Cuomo or anyone at the state level," he said after the election, "I talk to them with an established state constituency. Before, I was talking to them based on the yelling of the crowd or whatever media was covering the issue. That doesn't mean that I'm going to get everything I want, but they can't just dismiss my point of view."

TO UNDERSTAND THAT point of view and its roots, one must look backward at Sharpton's youth, his teachers and his upbringing. Preaching, he says, is where his education started. "I think it was a natural, inborn thing. Like we say in church, your 'call to life.' "

Born in Crown Heights, he found his voice in the church before he could either read or write. He preached his first sermon, "Let not your heart be troubled," at the Washington Temple Church of God in Christ in Brooklyn at the age of 4. Those who remember him from his pre-teens invariably say that he was precocious, demanding and wired, a "groupie" in a dark suit who had a way of charming himselfright into the center of things. "I met Al Sharpton when he was about 12," Jesse Jackson says. "He was a child prodigy. It was obvious that he had special gifts. And he had a will to lead early on."

It was before that meeting, though, that Al Sharpton's life had changed in a way that would inform it always. He grew up in a classic nuclear family rising gradually up the economic ladder. His father, a contractor, moved the family from East New York in Brooklyn to a 10-room house in Hollis, Queens, and did so well that the kids were squired about in twin Cadillacs.

Suddenly, when Sharpton was 10, his father moved away and his world changed. "When he walked out, the money walked out," he says in his spartan Brooklyn office, talking on a cloudy winter afternoon over the constant ringing of a telephone. His mother took work as a domestic helper and moved her son and 13-year-old daughter, Cheryl, into a project. One year later, in 1965, the family moved to what Sharpton remembers as a "five-room ghetto apartment" in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. It was an experience that gave him a lasting sense of life's inequities.

"I knew that the world was better than this," he says. "In the project, I thought: 'No, I don't have to accept this. I know there's a better life. I know there's good schools. I know that the garbage man picks up garbage in some neighborhoods, because I lived in them.' So that really gave me indignation."

At the same time that his personal sense of outrage grew, his understanding of politics was developing at the knees of some of the nation's most prominent black leaders. Today, he unabashedly ticks off a list of men he adopted as surrogate fathers.

The first was Bishop Frederick Douglas Washington, who helped him find his way in the church and encouraged him to read theology. Then, still in his teens, he attatched himself to Representative Adam Clayton Powell Jr., minister of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. In 1973, a year after Powell's death, he found another friend, the soul singer James Brown, whom he met after Brown's son died in an automobile accident. He worked with Brown through the 1970's, helping promote concerts and even styling his hair similarly.

"I did a lot of on-the-job training with people who are masters," he says. "To grow up under people like James Brown, Jesse Jackson and a promoter like Don King, I would have to be either retarded or totally incompetent not to learn something."

As an adult, he has tried to create the family core he lacked in his youth. Though his schedule gives him a seemingly endless string of long days, he talks proudly of his marriage of eight years, of his 5- and 6-year-old daughters and of the fact that his wife worked for years as an Army reservist to help pay the bills for his grass-roots politics. For several years, he and his family have split their time between a Crown Heights apartment and a house in Englewood, N.J., where they spend most weekends. This spring, however, he plans to move the family into a two-bedroom cooperative apartment in Crown Heights. He counsels his children not to follow in his footsteps. "The only advice I ever give my kids," he

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