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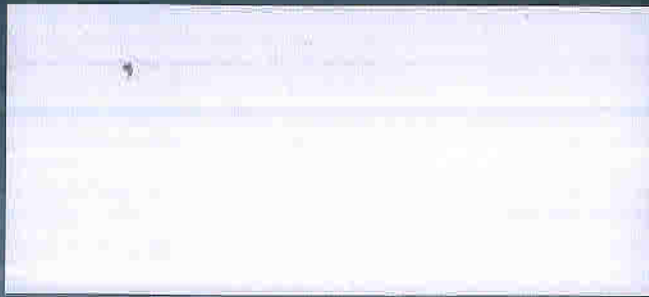
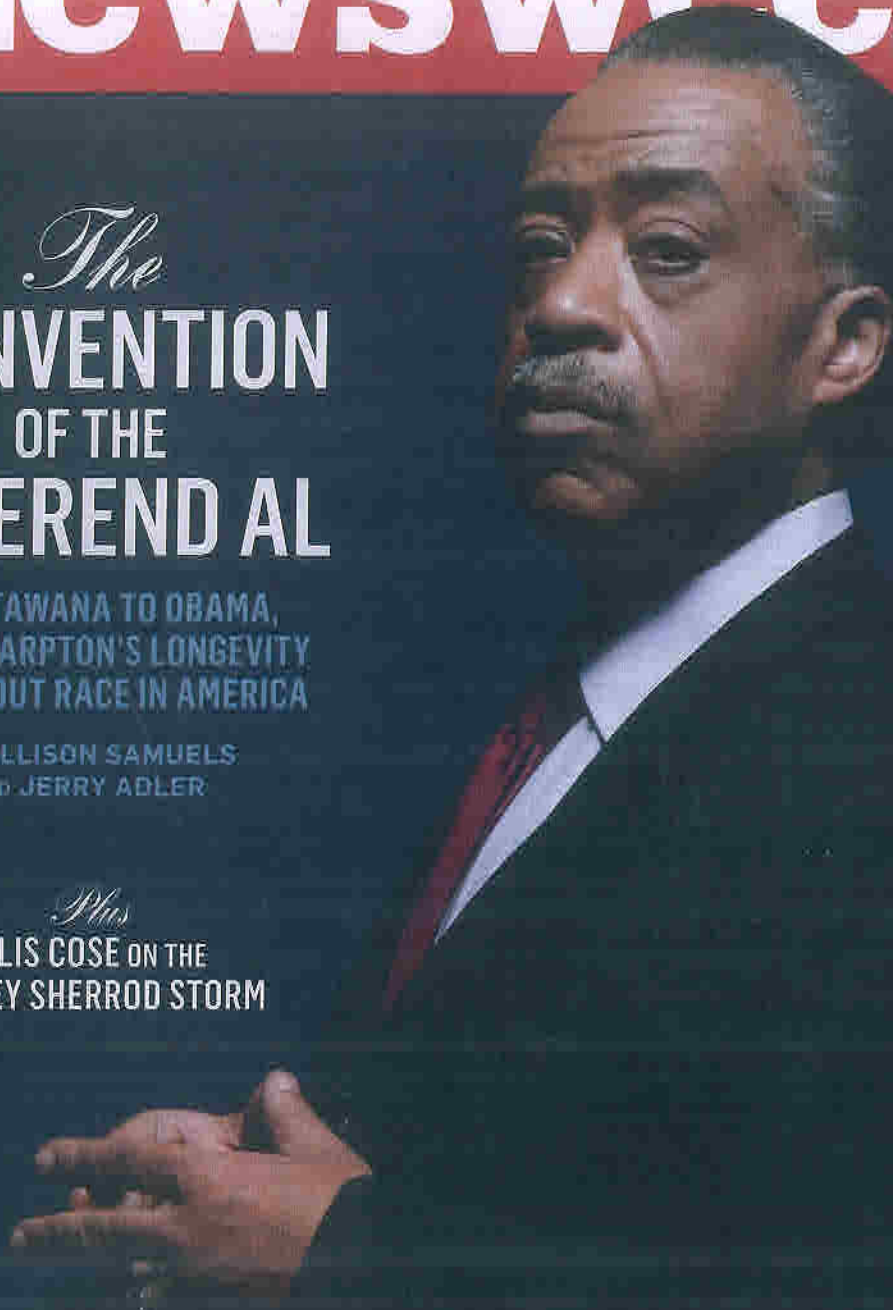
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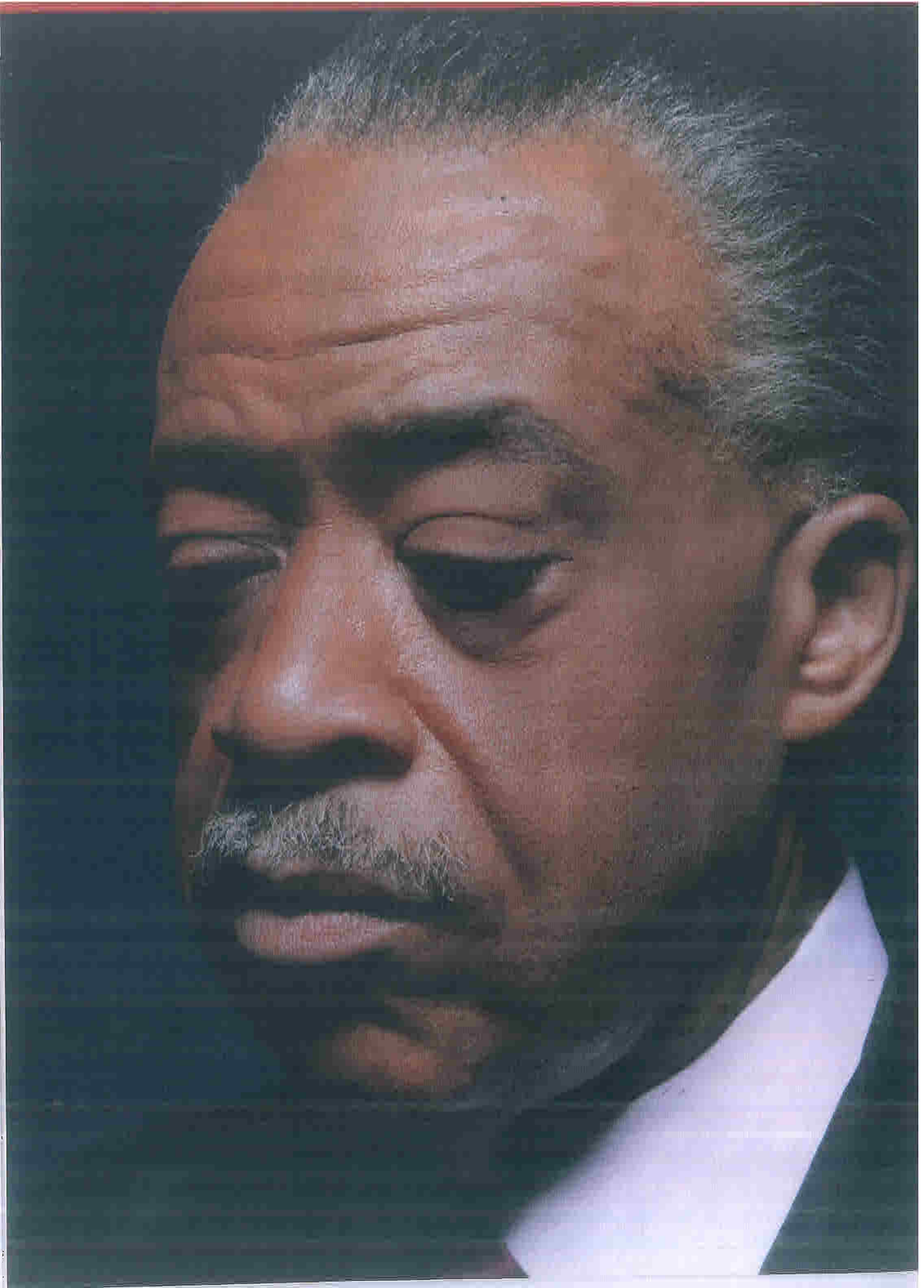
The
**REINVENTION
OF THE
REVEREND AL**

FROM TAWANA TO OBAMA,
WHAT SHARPTON'S LONGEVITY
SAYS ABOUT RACE IN AMERICA

BY ALLISON SAMUELS
AND JERRY ADLER

Plus
ELLIS COSE ON THE
SHIRLEY SHERROD STORM





THE REINVENTION OF THE REVEREND

Why the indefatigable Al Sharpton still has work to do. And what his evolution tells us about race and politics in Obama's America.

BY ALLISON SAMUELS AND JERRY ADLER

IF THE REV. AL SHARPTON DIDN'T EXIST, HE WOULD HAVE HAD TO BE INVENTED. IN fact, the novelist Tom Wolfe has claimed he did invent him, in the character of the Reverend Bacon, a supporting figure in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Each generation of black America gives birth to its own incarnation of the charismatic preacher-activist who confronts the white power structure in the streets and talks circles around it on *Meet the Press*. Just a few months after the fictional Bacon made his appearance in 1987, the real Sharpton burst onto the national stage as the fiery advocate for Tawana Brawley, a New York teenager who claimed to have been raped by a gang of white men, including a policeman. In that incarnation he still haunts the popular imagination: a bulky, bullhorn-toting figure in a neon-hued tracksuit, topped by a preposterously high, wavy pompadour. About all that remains today is a bare suggestion of the pompadour and roughly two thirds of the 300-pound 1980s-vintage Sharpton himself, now typically clad in an impeccable custom-tailored suit. His erstwhile ally, rival, and adversary, former New York City mayor David Dinkins, maintains that of course Sharpton has "grown up and matured, as most people do if they live long enough."

But the interesting question is whether his role is still needed in an era when the man atop the national power structure himself is black, and Sharpton now regularly meets with him—issuing not just demands but advice. If you asked Sharpton himself, he'd undoubtedly reply, are you serious? Blacks still have twice the unemployment rate of Americans overall, and young black men are still being shot by cops under circumstances that

range from tragic to suspicious. The election of Barack Obama has provoked an almost hysterical reaction from the far-right media, which last week claimed as its latest victim an obscure African-American official in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Relaxing with a thick Ashton Churchill in a plush midtown cigar lounge, the once-and-still Reverend Al scoffs at the idea that there is, or ever has been, a new

Sharpton. "My mission, my message, and everything else about me is the same as always," he says. "The country may have changed, but I haven't."

So, taking him at his word, Sharpton—at 55, a half-generation younger than Jesse Jackson and seven years older than Obama—can serve as a marker against which to gauge the shifting river of American race relations. Contacted in May by the family of a 7-year-old girl accidentally killed by Detroit police, Sharpton called no angry press conference and declined to get himself arrested. Instead, he preached an impassioned, but hardly inflammatory, sermon whose message—"we are all responsible for our children's safety"—could have offended no one except Mike Cox, a Republican candidate for governor of Michigan, who pronounced himself "disgusted" that Sharpton would come to his state to preach at a child's funeral.



AS A CHILD, HERE AT 5, HE REHEARSED SERMONS BEFORE HIS SISTER'S DOLLS.

What has changed, though, is the center of gravity of political anger in America. Sharpton's next big project is a march on Washington planned for Aug. 28, the anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Sharpton's "Reclaim the Dream" rally will coincide with a speech by Glenn Beck near the Lincoln Memorial. Sharpton is especially cutting about Beck's "Take Back America" tour with Sarah Palin earlier this year. "The nerve and gall," he expostulates. "Who are they taking America back from, and who are they giving it to?" Reclaim the Dream versus Take Back America.

And if Sharpton's "mission" and "message" haven't changed, his approach surely has. From last week's fast-moving events in Washington—which found Sharpton in Hawaii, delivering a speech to a convention of dentists—

the lesson he drew was about the danger of leaping to conclusions, as both the NAACP and the administration did in disowning Shirley Sherrod, Georgia's director of rural development for the USDA, after a right-wing Web site and Fox News denounced her as a racist based on an excerpt from a months-old speech. So

'I LISTENED TO THE CHILD, AND I BELIEVED HER. I DON'T APOLOGIZE FOR ANYTHING I DID TO HELP [TAWANA BRAWLEY]; JUDGE ME THE WAY YOU WILL.'

outrageous was this charge—in context, her point was clearly about her successful struggle to overcome prejudice—that even Beck came to her defense. But Sharpton knows all too well the temptation to seize the news cycle at its peak and check the facts later; thinking back 25 years, and with the circumstances reversed, it's easy to picture him grabbing a bullhorn and leading a march on the USDA. He regards

that sort of thing now as not just irresponsible but counterproductive. "Shirley Sherrod is an example of what happens when we play the right wing's game: they win. We have to choose our battles wisely."

And Sharpton also symbolizes what hasn't changed in America, the ways in which the respective histories of black and white give rise to unsettlingly divergent world views. To this day he refuses to repudiate Brawley—long after a grand jury concluded that she had invented the rape charge, and after a local prosecutor whose name was dragged into the case won a defamation suit against Sharpton. Sharpton has been right much more often than wrong in his choice of causes, dating back at least to the 1989 murder of Yusuf Hawkins, a black teenager who paid with his life for the mistake of walking down the wrong block in Brooklyn. Many African-Americans will be forever grateful to Sharpton for taking on the thankless task of defending the victims of Bernhard Goetz, who opened fire on four unarmed black teenagers in the subway. But he has also made some grave missteps. In 1991, during a tense confrontation between blacks and Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn, he notably failed to calm tensions with a remark about "the diamond merchants in Crown Heights." In 1995 his reference to "white interlopers," at a protest against the eviction of a popular Harlem music store, was followed by a fatal arson attack on the white-owned business that held the lease. It is his refusal to apologize over Brawley—or to pay the defamation judgment, which was eventually settled by donations from wealthy friends—that still haunts his reputation among white Americans of a certain age. Tempting as it must be to put the matter behind

him, Sharpton still answers questions the same way, without apology, but artfully framing the issue in the way most favorable to him. "I listened to the child, and I believed her," he says. "When I hear that people are still mad at me about this case, I want to ask them, 'Have you ever been asked to help a child that's been hurt?' I don't apologize for anything I did to help her. Judge me the way you will."

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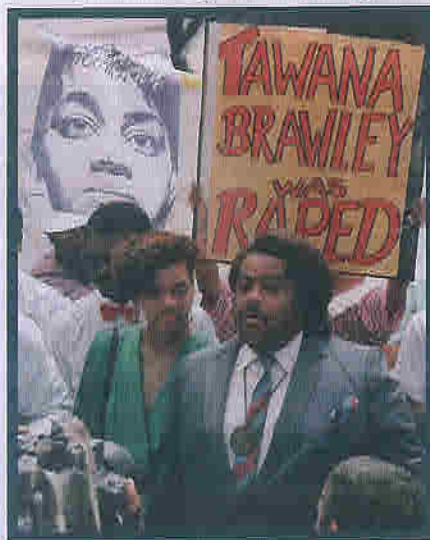
PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHOTOGRAPH BY JAKE CHESSUM; THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF REV. AL SHARPTON, PHOTOGRAPH BY JAKE CHESSUM, NEIL BRAKE—AP



Although Sharpton can give the impression he sprang fully formed from the teeming streets of Brooklyn, he spent his early years in a middle-class neighborhood, the son of a prosperous contractor who deserted the family when Sharpton was 10. Overnight, Sharpton moved with his mother, Ada, and older sister, Cheryl, onto welfare and into a housing project. There he was sustained by his memory of life on the other side of the tracks. His first experience of advocacy was in agitating to improve the dismal conditions prevailing in public housing in minority neighborhoods. "I was the only kid who'd lived somewhere else," he says. "I knew the trash was supposed to be picked up. I had to explain to my friends that this was not the way other people lived." His other sustenance was preaching; he was a mesmerizing speaker from the age of 4, when he gave his first sermon. (He rehearsed before his sister's dolls, gowned in one of his mother's housedresses.) By 7, he was touring with gospel singer Mahalia Jackson; by 10, he'd been ordained in the Pentecostal Church. (He now identifies as a Baptist.) This gave him a unique perspective on outsiders: preaching the

Gospel wasn't exactly a route to peer acceptance for a black teenager in the 1960s.

But it brought him to the attention of some powerful figures, including Jesse



BRAWLEY'S CASE THRUST SHARPTON ONTO THE NATIONAL STAGE IN THE LATE 1980S.

Jackson, who was so impressed by the 15-year-old Sharpton that he named him. New York City youth director for his economic-development program, Operation Breadbasket. Another friend he made

in those years was Teddy Brown, the eldest son of soul singer James Brown. In 1973 Teddy died in a car crash, and the young Sharpton became a kind of substitute son (and, eventually, personal aide and road manager) to the singer. Sharpton took away two things from that experience: his hairstyle, copied from James Brown, which the singer made him promise never to change until after Brown's death, a promise he kept despite the inconvenience of being a prominent black leader with straightened hair; and a wife, Kathy Jordan, a backup singer in Brown's entourage. They had two daughters, Dominique and Ashley. It isn't easy being Al Sharpton's kid, says Dominique, 29: "I see him on television sometimes and I just hold my breath," waiting to see if he will say something brash that can be "twisted around" and used against him. Sharpton and his wife amicably separated in 2004. Sharpton has weathered some minor embarrassments over finances and taxes in his career, but he is one preacher who has managed to negotiate the temptations of fame untouched by sexual scandal.

Sharpton brought remarkable gifts to his career. Jackson in his prime undoubtedly could deliver a more effective set

speech, but in debate no one has a quicker mind or tongue than Sharpton. His political instincts are unmatched, and his personal charisma has been undimmed since high school, when he had to pull off the trick of charming dates whose mothers had seen him preach in church. These have not, though, translated into success as a political candidate. He has run for the U.S. Senate three times, once for mayor, and, memorably, for president, in 2004—never coming very close but occasionally rising above footnote status. He is untroubled by this record of futility because, he insists, it was never his intention to win: "I ran for



IN HIS ICONIC TRACKSUIT IN 1991.

office to change the debate and raise questions about social justice, and I did that."

There has been a longstanding media fascination with Sharpton's income. He has lived an upper-middle-class, although hardly opulent, life in New Jersey and Brooklyn, sending his daughters to private schools (at the suggestion of their godmother Betty Shabazz, Malcolm X's

widow, who worried about their safety in a public school). But at one point in

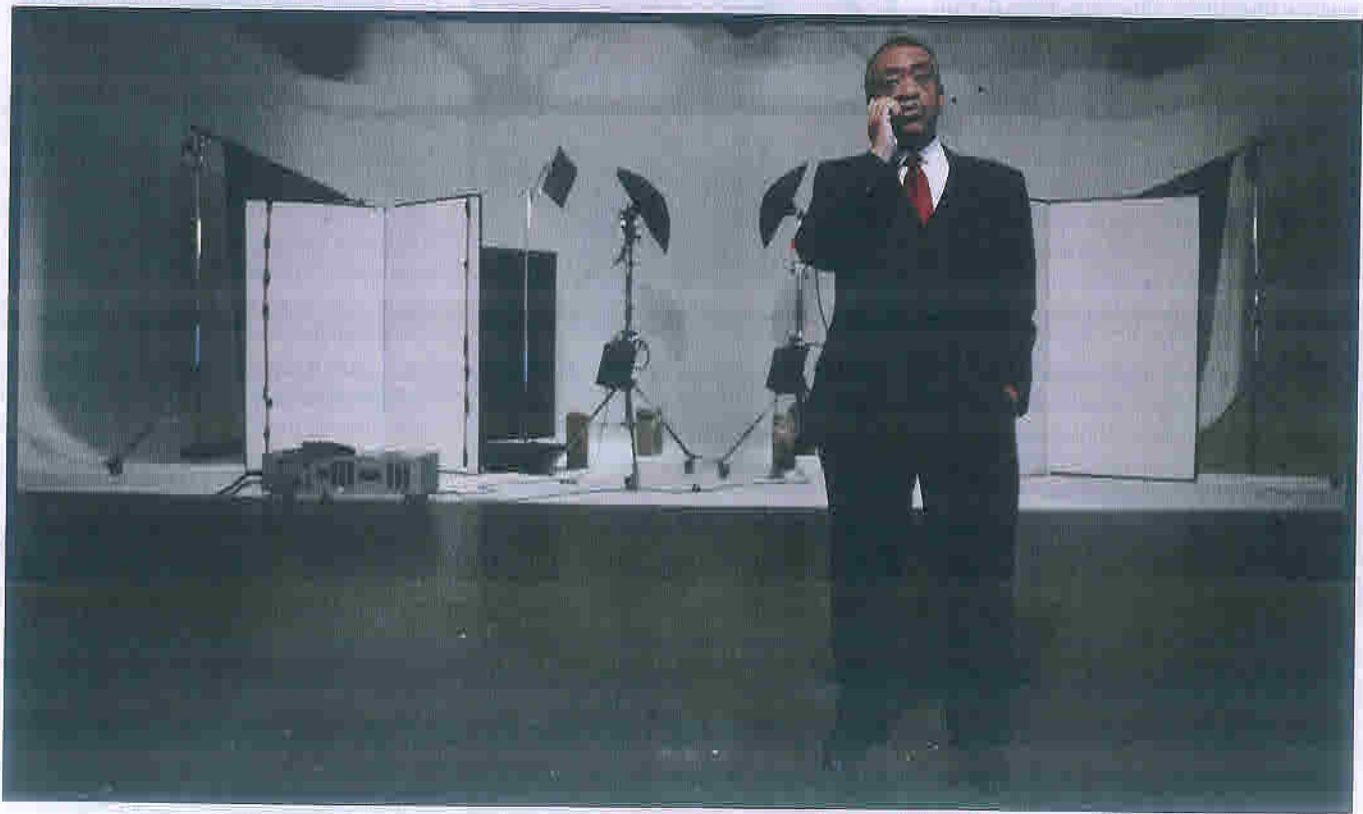
his complicated history with the IRS he claimed to be entirely without assets. Today he supports himself on income from his radio talk show, *Keeping It Real With Al Sharpton*, and from "love offerings" at the sermons he preaches almost every Sunday in churches all around the country. His enemies sometimes charge, bizarrely, that he has chosen a career as a peripatetic community activist for the money. "It's amazing when people call me an opportunist," he says. "Do you know how much money I could have made with a megachurch

like T. D. Jakes or Eddie Long? Don't you think I could have done that?" By the same token, he is too honest to pretend indifference to the ego rewards of fame: "What I do is my passion, but it's also constant work, and if my reward is getting on television, it seems fair to me." There are places where he draws the line on publicity, though, and one is *Dancing With*

the Stars, whose invitation he declined in 2008. "There are enough black people dancing on TV without me," he jokes.

Perhaps inevitably, his career has led him away from his friendship with Jackson. Although no longer close, they speak of each other respectfully, and "they work with each other really well," says Charles Ogletree, a Harvard Law School professor. "There isn't just one black leader. Reverend Sharpton is at the forefront right now, but there are many other names working for equality." While Jackson takes a broad, programmatic view of the civil-rights struggle, Sharpton most often focuses on individual instances of injustice. "It's simple," says Clayborne Carson, director of the Martin Luther King Jr. Institute at Stanford, and a friend of Sharpton's. "If you want policies put forth, you call Obama or [Newark, N.J., Mayor] Cory Booker. But if you get beat up by the police, you'd better call Al Sharpton." The two leaders are working toward the same end, Sharpton says, but "I'm a lot younger than Jesse. I didn't have the experience of sitting in the back of the bus, so we faced different realities, and we see some things differently. Unfortunately, at a certain point that can become a competition."

One area in which the competition played out was the 2008 presidential



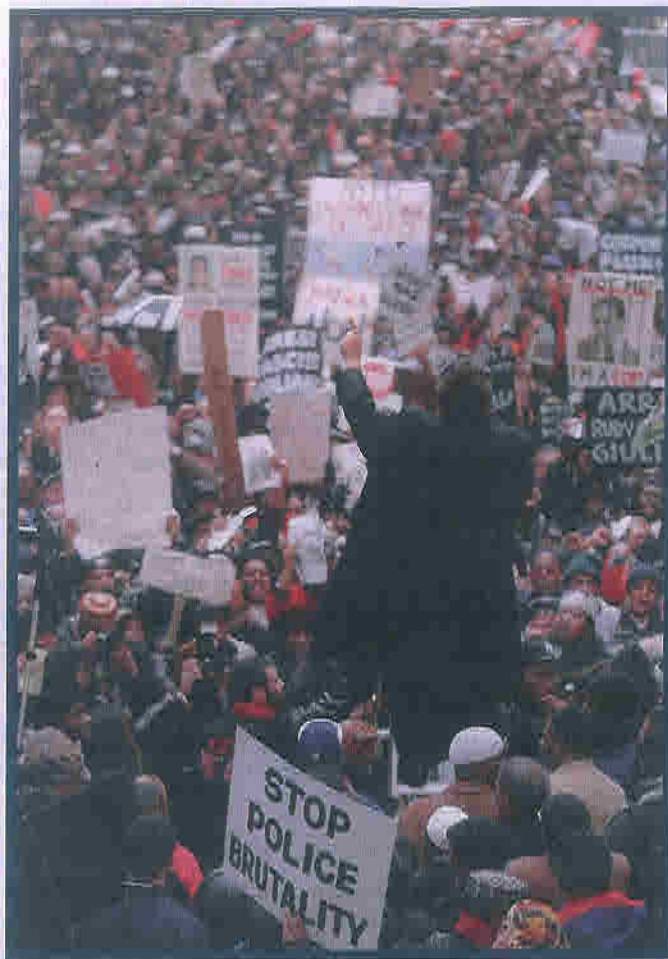
FROM TOP: DAVE PARKER—ALPHA-GLOBE PHOTOS, PHOTOGRAPH BY JANE DHESSIM

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election. Both Jackson and Sharpton backed Obama for the Democratic nomination, but Jackson's endorsement had a distinctly pro forma air. Sharpton, of course, stands on the same side of the generational line as Obama. And he was not troubled, as some other black leaders were, that Obama had no personal or family experience of the civil-rights struggle. Sharpton is descended from a South Carolina slave family, but he has been shaped by his experience in New York, whose black population, compared with those of many other American cities, has a large proportion of Caribbean and African immigrants. Two of Sharpton's highest-profile campaigns in recent years have been on behalf of Amadou Diallo (an African peddler shot to death by police) and Abner Louima (a Haitian immigrant violently assaulted in a police station). "Obama was a community

activist for many years, so our paths had crossed," says Sharpton. "I think I had a better grasp of who he was and what he was doing than some of my peers back then. Unfortunately, there was some resentment towards him by many in leadership positions, and there still is." The two hit it off, but Sharpton shrewdly underplayed his hand, avoiding public appearances with the candidate. Obama's opponents "were looking for anything to discredit him, and I would have been just the ticket," Sharpton says. Since the inauguration, though, Sharpton has been to the White House at least eight times.

Obama's embrace of Sharpton has not been without criticism—but mostly from the left. Commentator Tavis Smiley and Princeton professor Cornel West are among those who believe Obama has failed to deliver on his promises to black



SHARPTON HAS TAKEN UP THE CAUSE OF IMMIGRANTS, SUCH AS THAT OF AMADOU DIALLO, KILLED BY POLICE IN 1999.

Americans, and would prefer to see more agitation from the country's most prominent agitator. Todd Boyd, a professor of African-American studies at USC, sees a cynical ploy by Obama to use Sharpton as a foil to Jackson, embracing, as he puts it, "the lesser of two evils." For

**'WE GET THE FIRST BLACK PRESIDENT
AND WE'RE READY TO KNOCK HIM
DOWN BEFORE HE'S IN THERE 14 MONTHS.
WHAT HAS HE DONE TO HURT US?'**

his part, Sharpton is quick to point out his disagreements with Obama, notably on the war in Afghanistan. "But," Sharpton adds, "[Bill] Clinton passed laws like welfare reform that really hurt us, and all these people were willing to give him a pass. We get the first black president and we're ready to knock him down before he's in there 14 months.

What has he done to hurt us?"

Even Sharpton's most recent campaign, a protest against Arizona's stringent immigration law, has generated controversy. "I think Latino activists who have been fighting this type of thing for years are not happy that Reverend Al is stealing their thunder," says Boyd. "But this is what he tends to do, no matter the issue." Still, Lillian Rodríguez López, president of the Hispanic Federation, is happy to have Sharpton's help: "He went into Arizona with a solid plan to protest without incident or violence, so how can we complain about that?" Sharpton views the march he led in May as a logical extension of his civil-rights work. "I just can't imagine this happening now," he says. "Where does it end? Do they next start stopping all black people to see if we're Haitians here illegally?"

It is, of course, the fate of people like Sharpton to be misunderstood, and his

own tendency to get carried away while addressing a crowd has contributed to it at times. He says, accurately, that the innumerable marches he has held over the years have been almost entirely free of violence, except for the time an enraged onlooker stabbed him in the chest. He is also, he believes, partly a victim of history: Jackson and, before him, Martin Luther King Jr. had much more radical black figures to their left, Louis Farrakhan and Malcolm X, who made them seem moderate by comparison. There has been no one in Sharpton's time to play that role for him. He is out there all alone, still standing on the same principle he first enunciated in his housing project in Brooklyn: poor people have the same rights as rich ones, to justice in the streets and in the courts. If he didn't exist, we might, in fact, need to invent him. □