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Cover Story
Andy Young – The Shameless Son
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Black History Month 2006 ended on a jarring note. Andrew Young, a former member of Dr. King's inner circle at SCLC, who went on to serve three terms in Congress, a stint as UN ambassador and two terms as mayor of Atlanta before cashing out his Freedom Movement chips for a lucrative career as an international "business consultant," decisively spat upon the movement for human rights and economic justice that he spent his early career helping to build. Young announced on February 27, 2006 that he would chair Working Families for Wal-Mart, a media sock-puppet for the ruthless multinational firm. The cynical misuse of his stature as an icon of the Freedom Movement, preacher, former elected official, and honored elder in black America to mask and obscure the crimes of his corporate client marks Mr. Young as nothing more nor less than a corporate whore.

When Atlanta's WAOK-AM radio gave Young several minutes of live air time the morning of the 27th to justify himself to an African American hometown crowd, the response was overwhelmingly negative. How could he do this, one caller after another wondered incredulously. Wal-Mart does more to depress the wages of working people on both sides of the Pacific than any other single player in the game, listeners called in to say. Other callers reminded each other that Wal-Mart relentlessly discriminates against women and minorities, ruthlessly crushes unions, and dumps its health care costs onto the public sector while receiving millions in local government subsidies and tax abatements for each of its thousands of US stores. Andy Young used to walk with Dr. King. He used to be on our side, more than one observed. Why, they asked, is this happening?

To get at the answer we need to understand what an international "business consultant" is. Andy Young is co-founder, with Carlton Masters of Good Works International. Stephen Glass's 1997 New Republic article "The Young and the Feckless" succinctly spells out what Andy Young's firm did for its first client, Nike. Public outrage in the US was building over Nike's outrageous business practices including child labor and

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forcing employees to work as many as 65 hours per week for only \$10. Incensed citizens disrupted the opening of a Nike Town superstore in San Francisco standing in front of the store chanting, "Just don't do it!"

Two days after the San Francisco incident, Nike CEO Phil Knight announced that his company was taking swift – and, it would turn out, savvy – action to shore up its meticulously maintained but suddenly threatened public image. Nike was commissioning an independent investigation of its Asian operations: it would make all facilities and internal documents available to a team of inspectors, and it would then allow the inspectors to make their findings public. "Nike has always been a business about excellence and achievement," Knight proclaimed. And, to prove it, Nike would hire not just any old corporate hack to lead the investigation into its overseas operations, but a man of famous independence and renowned stature – a man who had first gained recognition as a civil rights hero, who had won wide acclaim as the mayor of Atlanta, who had served his country as ambassador to the United Nations and who had co-chaired the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games. The honorable Andrew Young, Knight said, would get to the bottom of this.

...Young had recently founded a firm in Atlanta called GoodWorks International... Nike was GoodWorks's first big client; its first chance to send corporate America evidence that GoodWorks did, from the businessman's point of view, good work. And when, four months after Knight's announcement, Young's firm published its seventy-five-page, full-color report on Nike's Asian operations, the client certainly had reason to feel it had gotten its money's worth. There was, Young had concluded, "no evidence or pattern of widespread or systematic abuse or mistreatment of workers" in the twelve operations he examined. To hammer home the point, GoodWorks packed the report with photographs – many taken by Young himself – of smiling workers playing a guitar on their break and relaxing around a television in their dorm.

As depictions of the actual conditions faced by the real working humans in Nike sweatshops, Andy Young's photos of contented guitar strumming Nike workers on a porch had about as much integrity as pictures of harmonica-playing happy-go-lucky darkies in a 1909 Alabama chain gang or cotton patch. But integrity is not what international "business consultants" do.

Only weeks behind Andy Young's cotton patch tour auditors from the accounting firm Ernst & Young visited some of the same locations, and detailed the unsafe, inhuman and abysmal conditions. This report, promptly leaked by a gutsy company insider with a human conscience flatly contradicted Andy Young's lies.

Still, the Nike job put Andy Young's Good Works International on the map, and over the next few years lucrative contracts walked in the door. Young cynically rented his "civil rights hero" and philanthropist image out to oil and mineral extracting corporations in Africa, to bankers in the Caribbean and other interests on the Asian continent to paper over their atrocities.

In Nigeria, where every sensible person expects the nation's vast treasure of easily extracted oil to be pumped dry in a few decades with little or no lasting benefit to the masses of its people, Good Works International is widely credited with introducing the Nigerian president to thievery, American style. Andy Young and co-founder Carlton Masters helped engineer the creation of the first Nigerian Presidential Library, and one or both sit on its board. Fifty million naira in corporate donations poured in the first day, with Texaco and Chevron thought to be among the major contributors. By early this year the library had netted billions of naira from Nigerian and foreign firms that do business with government, generated a storm of controversy over the ethics of such legalized bribery, and sparked an official investigation by Nigeria's Ethics and Financial Crimes Commission. And along the way, Good Works landed the lobbying contract to represent Nigeria in the US. The motto of Good Works International is after all, to do good by doing well.

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While most callers to the Monday morning Atlanta radio station excoriated Young's willful treachery, the most interesting response came from one of the show's co-hosts who spoke in Young's defense. The man was a civil rights leader, he declared, a former congressman and mayor. Andy is a philanthropist, he went on to say, whose good works help set up scholarship funds, endow university schools of public policy, send kids to summer camp and much, much more. He knows things we don't. He sees things we don't. It's time to shut up, to wait and see if the benefits outweigh the prices. Though Young's defender is dead wrong, his stance reveals the one asset upon which corporate whores like Andy Young can and will always trade. That asset is our slavish and uncritical deference to elected officials, to civil rights icons, to the clergy, to established authorities. This is what Andy Young's clients count on, and it's what Young himself counts on.

As the National Black Peoples Unity Convention in Gary, Indiana, begins this March, we are well served to bear this lesson in mind. When is it time to listen to leaders, to icons, to elected officials? When is it time to ignore or criticize them, or cast them aside altogether? How many more times will other Andys and Amoses of our black business-class leadership betray us in the name of what they say is economic development? Will Gary make a difference at all?

The Gary convention can make a difference, if we don't allow the icons to work their show, for their own benefit. In that sense, every black event can make a difference, if we do not allow ourselves to be hoodwinked and bamboozled by whores like Andrew Young, who have sold us out to the corporate world – but yet expect us to worship at the altar of their own prosperity.

Show up at Gary. Show out at Gary. Get crazy at Gary. Let the luminaries know what you think, and don't allow any of them to get away with the kind of con game that Andrew Young has run on us. Demand action, and refuse to provide a pleasant forum for those who betray us, as Andy has done.

We should never give up on our people. Each venue is another opportunity to correct ourselves. Let us take up the challenge. Raw and blatant betrayal cannot be tolerated, and it is up to us to make it extremely uncomfortable for the betrayers. They cannot sit among us, much less in elevated positions.

Andrew Young voluntarily surrendered that privilege, years ago. We must now take it from him. Cast him out of our house. Let him camp out in Bentonville, Arkansas, with his Wal-Mart benefactors.

For information on the National Black Peoples Unity Convention, call (301) 627-8436 or send email to Pbrock9353@aol.com.

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