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Elected officials aren't only hope



IT IS quite understandable that in a society characterized by widespread feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy that so much attention was given to the absence of most black elected public officials at the recent National Black Political Convention in Little Rock, Ark.

I continue to meet educated individuals—including members of the press—who insist that if certain prominent political and civic leaders are not in command, almost any kind of black collective action is ipso facto doomed to insignificance. That is why I am going to risk dullness by printing selected excerpts from several conventions that occurred before blacks had any elected officials anywhere in America.

THE FOLLOWING notes are from the records of the many black state conventions held in the Southland, in 1865, shortly after the end of the Civil War. They would not be remarkable were it not for the fact that they were declarations of a black people in a period when only one in every 20 blacks could read and write.

● The Colored State Convention of South Carolina, which met Nov. 20-25, 1865, adopted this petition:

"Fellow Citizens: We have here assembled as delegates representing the colored people of the State of South Carolina, in the capacity of a State Convention, to confer together and to deliberate upon our intellectual, moral, industrial, civil, and political condition, and particularly our condition as affected by the great changes which have recently taken place in this state and thruout this whole country, to declare our sentiment, and to devise ways and means which may, thru the blessing of God, tend to our improvement, elevation, and progress . . ."

That opening statement was prepared by some of the most educated blacks in the state, but in many of the following excerpts the writers and delegates were ordinary men new to American citizenship.

● On Aug. 7, 1865, the Tennessee State Convention of Negroes sent a petition to Congress protesting Tennessee's readmission to the Union before

that state had recognized black people as citizens.

"The colored people of the state of Tennessee respectfully and solemnly protest against the congressional delegation being admitted to seats in your honorable bodies until the legislature of this state enacts such laws as shall secure to us our rights as free men."

That meeting held in Nashville reminded the government that during the war it "did not forget to call for our help, and now we think that we have a right to call upon it."

● On June 13, 1865, the black people of Mississippi did not wait until they could achieve elected office, nor did they wait for a prominent leader to meet at Vicksburg and protest President Andrew Johnson's plan to return power to slave owners.

They sent a note to Washington which declared: "We regard such a policy as unjust to the colored citizens, paralyzing to the colored soldier, and most damaging to the early peaceful establishment of the federal supremacy in rebellious territory."

● On June 6, 1865, without the aid of a charismatic messiah, the black freedmen of Petersburg, Va., denounced the "black codes" that were being instituted thruout the state.

They reminded the President and Congress of the heroism of black soldiers during the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Civil War, and then declared:

"Resolved, that representation and taxation go hand in hand, and it is diametrically opposed to republican institutions and that . . . our comparative ignorance is not just reason for our disfranchisement, as we can compare favorably with a large number of our white fellow citizens, both natives and foreigners, in point of intelligence—many of whom can neither read nor write. . . ."

THAT IS the kind of initiative that blacks displayed more than a 100 years ago and it formed a basis that blacks would display on a broader level during the Reconstruction Era.

History is a good teacher for those who want to learn.