BLACK THINKERS

A Brief History of Efforts to Convene Black Leadership and Chart a National Agenda

Black Thinkers – the convening of Black leaders, academics, writers, and other professionals, being held in October 2026, in Washington, DC – stands on a long and deep history of Black thought leaders gathering to engage in deliberative dialogue, idea exchange, debate, and attempts to develop a course of action for Black America. Our gathering is not as ambitious as many previous efforts, but we still want to learn from them. Our initial goal is simply to come together, share information, engage in in-depth discussion, and determine if there are clear next steps. Our gathering was directly inspired by "the Thinkers" of the Harlem Renaissance, salons of Black writers, artists, and intellectuals.

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Black American leaders, intellectuals, and organizers have periodically attempted to gather the community's most capable thinkers to diagnose the state of Black America and produce a shared agenda for action. The six efforts summarized below span nearly 130 years — from the American Negro Academy beginning in 1897, to the 1924 Negro "Sanhedrin" of civic organizations, through the intellectual ferment of the Harlem Renaissance, to a 1972 political convention that reshaped Black electoral strategy, to Tavis Smiley's annual State of the Black Union symposia and the Covenant with Black America that grew out of them. Each offers lessons about ambition, coalition, ideology, sustainability, and follow-through.

I. The American Negro Academy (Washington, D.C., 1897–1928)

The American Negro Academy was the first national society of Black scholars, writers, and artists, organized as a standing intellectual body rather than a one-time convention. Alexander Crummell first conceived of an academy of Black intellectuals while a student at Cambridge University, and spent decades refining the idea. In December 1896, he met with four collaborators — educators John Wesley Cromwell and Walter B. Hayson, poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Howard University mathematics professor Kelly Miller — to plan a formal organization. On March 5, 1897, eighteen men convened in Washington, D.C. and founded the American Negro Academy (ANA), adopting a constitution that named five objectives: promoting literature, science, and art; cultivating intellectual taste; fostering higher education; publishing scholarly work; and defending Black Americans against "vicious assaults." Membership was capped at fifty elected men with distinguished records as college graduates, professors, artists, and writers.

The ANA functioned as a standing scholarly society rather than a single convention: it held regular meetings and published a series of "Occasional Papers" through 1924, including Crummell's own addresses ("Civilization: The Primal Need of the Race"), Charles Cook's A Comparative Study of the Negro Problem (1899), and other works of history and social analysis. The Academy is widely credited as the first organization to institutionalize the "Talented Tenth" concept — the idea, later articulated publicly by founding member W.E.B. Du Bois, that a college-educated Black elite bore special responsibility for uplifting the broader race — in contrast to Booker T. Washington's emphasis on vocational and industrial education. Crummell served as founding president until his death in 1898, when Du Bois eventually assumed a leadership role.

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Scholars have long debated the ANA's practical impact: its membership remained a small, male, highly credentialed circle whose scholarly output reached other intellectuals more than it reached the wider Black public. It dissolved in 1928. The ANA is the clearest historical precedent for treating Black intellectuals as a standing resource — an ongoing institution producing scholarship and analysis over decades — rather than convening them once and adjourning.

II. The Negro Sanhedrin (Chicago, 1924)

The idea for a national assembly of Black organizations grew out of frustration after Congress defeated the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in 1922. William Monroe Trotter of the National Equal Rights League is credited with first proposing a national council of Black leaders; the idea was carried forward by NERL president Matthew A. N. Shaw, who invited several like-minded organizations to join. Cyril Briggs, head of the radical African Blood Brotherhood, took the lead in coordinating the gathering — initially calling it a "United Front Negro Conference of Civil Rights Organizations." By March 1923, six organizations, spanning the ideological spectrum from the NAACP to the Brotherhood, had signed on. Howard University Dean Kelly Miller, chosen to head the arrangements committee, gave the gathering its name: "Sanhedrin," after the ancient Hebrew supreme council.

Convening in February 1924, the Sanhedrin brought together a genuinely broad ideological coalition — moderate civic and fraternal organizations alongside Communist-aligned radicals such as the African Blood Brotherhood. More than 250 delegates representing 61 organizations, from 20 states attended the convention.

Miller was elected chairman over the objections of the radical caucus. Radical delegate Lovett Fort-Whiteman pressed for a program ending housing segregation, terminating colonialism in Africa, protecting tenant farmers, abolishing anti-miscegenation laws, and recognizing Soviet Russia. Miller, however, used procedural control — including appointing a Chicago Chamber of Commerce official to head the Labor Committee — to blunt the radical agenda. Resolutions on school segregation, opposition to the Klan, and Soviet recognition all failed; what passed were far milder measures on labor and farm relief.

The Sanhedrin was the first national Black gathering where Communists participated openly, the factional fighting this provoked was deeply resented, and momentum collapsed almost immediately after the Chicago meeting (a planned follow-up in Washington, D.C. excluded the radicals and produced no lasting structure). One scholar called it "a grand opportunity for mainstream Black organizations and Black radicals to set aside their differences and formulate a program of mutual benefit" — an opportunity eventually squandered.

III. "The Thinkers" of the Harlem Renaissance (New York, 1924–1925)

Unlike the other efforts, the Harlem Renaissance did not begin as a political convention but as a literary dinner. Charles S. Johnson, sociologist and editor of the National Urban League's Opportunity magazine, planned a small gathering — originally meant to honor novelist Jessie Redmon Fauset for

her debut novel "There Is Confusion". Johnson recruited Alain Locke, the first Black Rhodes Scholar and a Howard University philosophy professor, to preside, and Locke insisted the evening honor a rising generation of Black writers broadly rather than one author alone. On March 21, 1924, roughly fifty guests — Black writers such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Jean Toomer alongside white publishers, critics, and philanthropists — gathered at Manhattan's Civic Club, one of the few integrated venues of its kind.

The Civic Club dinner is widely cited by historians as the effective launch of the Harlem Renaissance as a self-conscious movement. It produced immediate, tangible results: Harper's editor Frederick Allen secured Countee Cullen's poems on the spot, and Survey Graphic editor Paul Kellogg — present at the dinner — asked Charles Johnson whether an entire issue of his magazine could be devoted to the Harlem literary movement. Kellogg then approached Locke to edit it. The resulting special issue, "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro," appeared in March 1925 and was an immediate sensation. Locke expanded it later that year into The New Negro: An Interpretation, an anthology of fiction, poetry, and essays that became the movement's defining document and a rallying statement of Black cultural self-determination — art and intellectual achievement deployed deliberately as a form of racial advancement and uplift.

Uniting artists, scholars, and patrons around a shared anthology and publication strategy, the Civic Club dinner and The New Negro achieved something the Sanhedrin could not: they translated a room full of talented individuals into a durable, citable body of work that reshaped how Black life and thought were represented nationally.

A recent exhibit on the Harlem Renaissance at the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York City highlighted "The Thinkers" of the period explaining that "Harlem Renaissance artists actively engaged with the period's leading Black writers, performers, and composers. At neighborhood literary salons, they often debated conflicting ideas about how best to portray the modern Black subject. One particularly influential forum was the 306 Group, named after the building on West 141st Street where Aaron Douglas, Charles Henry Alston, Jacob Lawrence, and other artists maintained studios where they hosted open houses and gave classes. Visitors to these events included prominent poets, critics, and philosophers such as Langston Hughes, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Alain Locke as well as the writer-composer James Weldon Johnson and orchestra leader Duke Ellington. Similar circles formed around the art school of Augusta Savage while gatherings in midtown Manhattan drew an interracial mix of artists and kindled enduring collaborations and friendships."

IV. The National Black Economic Development Conference & the Black Manifesto (Detroit, 1969)

In 1967, a small interfaith coalition of religious leaders formed the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO) to raise money from wealthy, largely white denominations to support Black community organizations. Two years later, IFCO convened the National Black Economic Development Conference in Detroit to bring together an unusually broad cross-section of Black

leadership — clergy and businesspeople alongside labor, radical, and community organizers — to plan strategies for Black economic autonomy. On April 25–27, 1969, in Detroit, roughly 500–700 delegates, more than organizers had anticipated, attended the conference. James Forman, by then a prominent figure from SNCC and the Black Panther Party's International Black Workers Congress, arrived with a document already drafted: the Black Manifesto.

Roughly half the delegates backed Forman's proposal to formally adopt the Manifesto, and the conference approved it by a vote of 187 to 63. The 2,500-word document argued that Black labor had built American industrial wealth and that white Christian churches and Jewish synagogues, as beneficiaries of that system, owed reparations; it demanded $500 million (roughly $3 billion in today's dollars) to fund a Southern land bank for Black farmers, Black-owned publishing and media operations in several major cities, a labor strike and defense fund, and a national research center on the problems facing Black communities. Days after the conference, Forman personally delivered the Manifesto's demands by interrupting a Sunday service at Riverside Church in New York on May 4, 1969, and the Manifesto's sixth demand explicitly called for disrupting services at white congregations nationwide to press the claim.

The response split sharply along both racial and generational lines: some mainline denominations, including the Episcopal Church and the National Council of Churches, expressed sympathy but redirected new giving through their own existing programs rather than paying reparations directly, and the effort raised roughly half a million dollars in total (about $200,000 of it from Riverside Church alone) — a small fraction of the demand. Established Black organizations, including the NAACP and the National Baptist Convention, distanced themselves from the reparations framing and argued that any funds should flow through their own institutions instead. The Manifesto may be the most economically radical and confrontational document in this history, and it illustrates both the power and the risk of that approach: it forced a national conversation about reparations decades before the term entered mainstream policy debate, but its confrontational delivery and its lack of buy-in from established Black institutions limited how much of its ambitious economic program was ever actually implemented.

V. The National Black Political Convention – “Gary Convention” (Gary, Indiana, 1972)

By the early 1970s, Black political leaders across the ideological spectrum, from elected officials to Black Power activists, sought a unified forum to translate the civil rights movement's gains into concrete political power. Richard Hatcher, one of the first Black mayors of a major U.S. city (Gary, IN), and Congressman Charles Diggs convened the National Black Political Convention in Gary in March 1972, bringing together nationalists, elected Democrats, and community organizers who rarely shared a stage, let alone an agenda.

The National Black Political Convention was held March 10-12, 1972, with approximately 10,000 Black Americans in attendance, including elected officials, activists, and cultural figures. The convention's stated goals were to increase the number of Black elected officials, expand political representation, and forge “an agenda for fundamental change.” Delegates debated and ultimately issued the Gary Declaration, which held that the American political system was failing Black communities and argued for a shift toward independent Black politics rather than continued reliance on the two-party system.

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The gathering was famously fractious: Black elected officials tied to the Democratic Party clashed with nationalists and separatists over strategy, and disputes over busing, a proposed independent Black political party, and relations with Israel/Palestine exposed real fault lines within Black political thought. Filmmaker William Greaves documented the convention in Nationtime, narrated by Sidney Poitier, later restored in 2020.

The convention led to the creation of the National Black Political Assembly/Convention, which reconvened in subsequent years (notably Little Rock in 1974) but saw participation and unity steadily erode as elected officials drifted back toward conventional party politics and ideological splits widened. Historians have since debated the convention's legacy: some frame it as the high-water mark of independent Black politics, others as a missed opportunity undone by the same tensions between reform and radicalism that had surfaced at the Sanhedrin fifty years earlier. The Gary convention is instructive on two fronts: it shows the mobilizing power of naming a concrete document (the Gary Declaration) as the convention's deliverable, and it shows how quickly a coalition's unity can dissolve once delegates return to their prior institutional homes and incentives — a durable agenda needs a mechanism to survive the trip home.

VI. Tavis Smiley's State of the Black Union & The Covenant with Black America (2000–2009)

Tavis Smiley convened the first State of the Black Union (SOBU) in February 2000, timed each year to follow the President's State of the Union address, on the premise that Black issues were rarely addressed in that speech or in mainstream national media. Held annually during Black History Month and free to the public, SOBU featured recurring voices such as Rep. John Conyers, Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, Minister Louis Farrakhan, and Cornel West, alongside scholars, clergy, and elected officials, in town-hall-style panel discussions broadcast live on C-SPAN. After ten years, 50 million viewers, and roughly $1 million or more in annual production costs, underwritten in part by corporate sponsors such as ExxonMobil — Smiley ended the series in January 2010, citing both the election of Barack Obama as a shift in the national conversation and the proliferation of other media outlets covering Black issues.

The Covenant with Black America (2006)

The most concrete product to emerge from the SOBU gatherings was The Covenant with Black America, published in 2006 and edited/introduced by Smiley, with a statement of purpose by Marian Wright Edelman and commentary by Cornel West and Haki Madhubuti. Built from six years of symposium discussions, the book distilled the community's priorities into ten "covenants" — including health care, public education, criminal justice and community-centered policing, affordable housing, democracy and voting rights, economic development, environmental justice, and technology — each written by a scholar or advocate (contributors included Dr. David Satcher, Wade Henderson, Angela Glover Blackwell, and Marc Morial). Each chapter paired a factual diagnosis with concrete actions individuals and communities could take, plus a "What Works Now" section of real examples. The book became the #1 New York Times bestseller in 2006 — a rare feat for a policy-oriented anthology — and Smiley has said the bestseller status was itself a deliberate goal, intended to force national conversation about the book's contents.

Smiley returned to the project twice more: The Covenant with Black America — Ten Years Later (2016) updated the original ten covenants against a decade of setbacks (from Ferguson to the erosion of Black wealth after the 2008 financial crisis), and a twentieth-anniversary edition revisited the covenants again with a new essay on Black homelessness and an afterword by Nikki Giovanni. Critics have noted that SOBU and the Covenant, for all their visibility, were sometimes better at generating conversation and book sales than at producing measurable policy change.

A Note on Continuity

Read together, these six efforts trace a continuous – if intermittent – tradition: the Sanhedrin's attempt at unifying disparate organizations under one roof; the Harlem Renaissance's demonstration that a shared intellectual and artistic statement can itself reshape a nation's understanding of Black life; Gary's attempt to convert convening into independent political power; and Smiley's demonstration that a recurring public forum can be distilled into a durable, popularly read agenda. Each also shares a common vulnerability – the challenge to sustain unity and follow-through once attendees leave the room.