

# **Norris Wright Cuney: A Study in Afro-Texas Leadership**

**Speech Given Before the Austin Community College "Leadership Luncheon," February 1999**  
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Please allow me to begin my brief remarks with a quote from the late great Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois who about 100 years ago noted the following: "The purpose of education is not to make men carpenters but to make carpenters men."

What's the point of what Du Bois was saying? Carter G. Woodson said something along those lines about thirty years after Du Bois: "The mere impartation of information is not education."

Successful job placement can and in many cases should be the end result of an education, depending on the field one studies; but one important thing these two great Black thinkers pointed out is the notion that education and knowledge are worthy and worthwhile for their own sake, not simply as a ticket to riches and glory or status. Pointing something like this out may seem somewhat truistic, and perhaps even naive, especially at a college currently hypnotized by the new religion of "workforce development," but please indulge me for the next twenty minutes or so as I briefly discuss the life and career of a great African-American and great Texan who not only was fortunate enough to have the benefit of a first class education at a time when most Black folk couldn't read or write, but who chose to use that education in a positive and progressive way for the betterment of the race. The man's name is Norris Wright Cuney.

Cuney was born on May 12, (which, incidentally, is the day after my birthday, although I didn't pick him as the subject of this talk for that reason) 1846 on a plantation near Hempstead. His father Philip Minor Cuney was one of the most successful white planters in Texas, and his enslaved mother Adeline Stuart was his father's head house slave and bore him 8 children of

which Norris was the fourth. His father sent Cuney to school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania at the George B. Vashon Wylie Street School for Blacks, where he learned to read and write. After graduating from the school in 1859, Cuney worked odd jobs along riverboats, docks and wharves, and settled in Galveston where he eventually came under the influence of another noted Afro-Texan, politician George T. Ruby who was active in Texas Reconstruction politics as a member of the state senate. After studying law and establishing various business enterprises in Galveston, Cuney began a remarkable career as a Texas politician.

Black American politics during this time period were difficult, but as is often the case, they were especially difficult in Texas. No Black man or woman served in a major executive or judicial office in Texas during Reconstruction, and only fourteen held seats in the state legislature, including two in the senate. When one walks into the capital today, on your right hand side you'll find pictures of those senators and house members hanging on the wall to the right as you walk into the front doors of the capital building.

Being a member of the republican party at this time was quite an interesting situation. The republican party was obviously the party of emancipation—the party of Lincoln—the Juneteenth party—but as now, it was top heavy with influential whites, who at the time were anxious to achieve reconciliation with former confederates; needless to say, these people did not necessarily have the best interests of black folks in mind.

Cuney's rise to leadership in the Republican party during the 1870's, '80's, and 90's contains some interesting lessons. His achievement is particularly impressive when one considers the staggering rapidity and force with which Jim Crow/American apartheid was developing in Texas after the defeat of reconstruction governor E.J. Davis in the mid 1870's. Basically, Cuney's formula for achieving power during these difficult times is a formula most

Black politicians in Texas still employ: fight for power, whatever power you can, within the white dominated power structure, while simultaneously working to consolidate your African-American political base.

Cuney's rise was a mixture of success and failure, but his persistence paid off. After joining the Union League (the union league was the grassroots precursor of the Republican party), he quickly rose up the ranks of the republican party and at the height of his career was the most influential and powerful Black politician in the south in his capacity as collector of customs for the port of Galveston during the administration of President Benjamin Harrison. Cuney served as a state delegate to every Republican convention between 1872 and 1892. In 1870 he received his first political appointment as sergeant-at-arms in the state legislature for helping elect E.J. Davis as Texas reconstruction governor, after which he was appointed president of the Galveston Union League in July of 1871. In 1873 he was appointed secretary of the Republican State Executive Committee. He ran for mayor of Galveston in 1875 but lost, and also lost races for the Texas House and Senate in 1876 and 1882.

Cuney only ever held one elected position, alderman on the Galveston City Council from the twelfth district. He represented a mostly white district, a testament to his political skill and shrewdness. He also used his position to produce work for himself and for Galveston's longshoremen by working as a stevedore. He worked to unionize black waterfront workers, attended local, regional, and national black conventions, and became heavily involved with fraternal organizations such as the Prince Hall Masons, the Knights of Pythias, and the Odd Fellows. Cuney served as grand master of the Prince Hall Masons from 1875 to 1877.

Cuney's career as a labor leader is often noted by maritime and labor historians, and because the history of organized labor in Texas involves interesting intersections of race and

class as well as gender, it continues to be of relevance.

Galveston in the 1870's was the country's third largest cotton port and work on the docks, especially during the high season, was plentiful. The only problem was that the waterfront was segregated. Cuney informed William L. Moody, the president of the Galveston cotton exchange that he had a trained and willing African-American workforce available and ready. Utilizing the by now familiar logic that prosperity and growth depended upon the usage of high skilled labor regardless of color, Cuney was able to appeal to Mr. Moody's money-making imagination and was able to secure work for Black longshoremen. This offended white screwmen who had become accustomed to getting the good jobs on the waterfront. But these white workers also miscalculated: when white dockworkers refused to let Black workers into their union, Cuney bought \$2500 worth of tools, called together Black workers and organized them into their own union which went into open competition with the white union. When the white screwmen's union struck the Mallory Steamship line in 1885, for instance, Cuney supplied black workers to take their place.

Of course competition between black and white dockworkers was quite good for business from the shipping company's point of view. It was able to use the racist unwillingness of white workers to allow Black workers into the union to keep wages and terms at a more agreeable level. From the Black perspective, the Black unionization effort was also a success; by being organized they were able to push for access to previously denied jobs, better working conditions, more money (although Cuney's bid to Mallory resulted in them being paid slightly less than their white counterparts) and above all, respect.

Cuney thus was an important political figure in Afro-Texas history. As mentioned, his political strategy is still being utilized to good effect over 100 years later, although it depends on

whom you ask. Cuney was able to gain the confidence of white businessmen by supplying them with surplus labor and he won the respect of black men by getting them jobs, while in the process enriching himself. Black male workers in turn formed his political constituency, which gave him leverage in the Republican party. Although that would change shortly before the turn of the century.

I should also mention that Cuney was a staunch supporter of education. He was appointed a school director of Galveston county in 1871 and supported the Black state college at Prairie View, now known as Prairie View A&M University, and the Deaf, Dumb and Blind Institute for Colored Youth in Austin, which his daughter, Maud Cuney-Hare later served as its musical director. Cuney was a staunch opponent of school segregation and was also an outspoken opponent of lynchings and mob violence. He died on March 3, 1898 in San Antonio and was buried in Lake View Cemetery in Galveston.

### **The Next Part**

Now that I've described the life of Norris Wright Cuney, please allow me the indulgence of making some observations regarding the topic at hand (i.e. leadership). Some of my observations will be based on the narrative that I just discussed, although most of it is based on personal experiences with leadership as both an enlisted man and officer in the U.S. Navy. Although its not mentioned in the bio that's listed in today's program, I did serve in the United States Navy as an enlistee, midshipman, and officer, both active duty and reserves, between 1984 and 1997. While serving as an officer, for much of that time I was the only Black Special Operations Officer on active duty. I am now the only African-American maritime archaeologist in the world (as it currently stands, there are only perhaps six Ph.D. level Black archaeologists in the U.S.). So I am not entirely unfamiliar with the sometimes mysterious features of leadership.

My words of advice and observations are intended to be both practical and analytical, although mostly practical, hence the direct language.

Let me say first that I am in complete agreement with General Norman Schwarzkopf: I learned a great deal more from leaders that I had that were *incompetent* than from leaders who were outstanding, although I learned quite a bit from them too. Successful leadership is a complicated matter, it's both an art and a science. In my opinion, however, it boils down to three fundamental aspects. You hear these things trumpeted all the time, they are truisms. But they are true and will continue to be:

1. To be a successful leader you must be a successful follower. This is something that the Rev. Gomes from Harvard Divinity School noted in a lecture he gave at UT about a year ago. Everybody talks about leadership, that's ostensibly what getting a college education is all about. But nobody ever talks about followership and what its role is. Successful leaders know when to lead and when to follow. They know when to compete and when to cooperate. Most people are not going to be Michael Jordan; most people are not going to be Vernon Jordan. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't try: but it also means that you shouldn't live in a fantasy world either. Success is doing the best that YOU can do and overcoming hardships and obstacles. It's not about figuring out ways to stab people in the back and then taking the credit, although we all know that's what happens far too often. Let me say it again: successful leadership implies successful followership. When the call comes for you to lead, strive to do so with honor, integrity, faith, and conviction. People constantly have leadership crammed down their throats, what most people really ought to be doing is working on their following skills.

2. Never forget where you came from. I think this is extremely important especially for Black folks. Why? Let me give you an example. Much is made about the increasing income

and wealth gap between Blacks and Whites in this country; how the gap between the haves and the have-nots has been widening in this country. And that is true. But what we have got to recognize is that the gap within the African-American community is even higher. During segregation, bourgy light-skinned Black folk like Norris Wright Cuney, even though they often could pass for white, were often brought back into reality extremely fast, and extremely hard if they tried to go too far. Although there are many similarities, times have somewhat changed; the African-American community essentially now has the following socioeconomic make-up: an affluent and nouveau-riche sector driving around in fancy cars and wearing fancy clothes, a shrinking working class sector that is scrambling to get the job skills necessary to survive in the high-tech economy of the next century, and a disproportionately large and left behind urban underclass confined to public housing or section 8 ghettos, high unemployment rates, low educational achievement levels, and no real hope of making it.

*Never forget from where it is that you came.* Have some sense of group solidarity; have an awareness not just of race, but of class and gender as well. Unlike William Julius Wilson, I don't believe that race has "declined" in significance over the past thirty years, but one thing is for sure: there are many more poor Black folks than rich ones. And most rich or educated Black people understand that white folks could turn on them at any time anyway. Remember, the struggle isn't over until every black person is liberated; not just you and your family and friends.

3. Leadership by example. If you asked me what I thought the essence of leadership was in a nutshell, this is the answer I would give you. Leadership by example. What does this mean? Exactly what it says. Don't ask your subordinates to do something you wouldn't yourself do. Don't be a hypocrite; people know exactly what it is you're doing, and they will not respect you if you are one. Another thing to remember is to be aware of the difference between leadership

and management. What is the difference? John Adair once said it nicely: “A leader knows what’s best to do; a manager knows merely how best to do it.” Take a look at our city government for instance. We have a city manager whose day-to-day job is managing the city’s affairs. And he gets compensated nicely for doing that job. But it’s the city council’s job to promulgate policy and to make major decisions. The roles and responsibilities are similar in just about any modern organization. It’s up to YOU to recognize which role you’re in and act accordingly.

One last thing. I’d like to say a word or two about humility. In my experience, the best leaders are also humble leaders. They’re not necessarily quiet leaders, they just know how to inspire and motivate without having to convince or cajole. They’re not into marketing or advertising; what they do is not a sales pitch. What they do is unite a group behind a common goal or purpose. And the people so united believe unconditionally in what they’re doing. A certain measure of humility and sense of purpose--even destiny--is an essential element of successful leadership. Certainly historical African-American figures, from Sojourner Truth to Angela Davis, Toussaint L’Overture to Du Bois, have exhibited this quality to some degree.

Well, that’s it. Those are my remarks. If there’s time, I can answer a few questions if you have any. I’ll be sticking around at a table afterwards if you’re interested in discussing some of the stuff I’ve just mentioned, or if you want to talk about my research on the Texas slave trade, archaeology, maritime history, life, whatever, I’ll be here.

Thank you.