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# The New REPUBLIC

**WHO KEEPS SHARPTON AND JACKSON POWERFUL? THE WHITE MEDIA.**

**Listen Up!**

by **Dayo Olopade**

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ychal Bell, one of six black students jailed last year in Jena, Louisiana for allegedly beating a white classmate, was discharged from prison almost two weeks ago. His release comes in the thick of renewed discussion about race relations in the U.S. prompted by the 20,000-person strong protest in Jena last month. Bell, who has become the face of the "Jena Six," kissed the sky outside the county prison before he headed home for the first time since December. Beside him was the Reverend Al Sharpton, as easy before the press microphones as Bell seemed dazed. "Upon this young man's shoulders is a symbol of a movement," Sharpton prayed, and the assembled friends, lawyers, cameras, and family said a hushed "Amen." The Jena case may be reaching a hopeful denouement, but Sharpton's camera-ready role in it brings one aspect of American culture into harsh relief: The peculiar cult of the black political celebrity--which may have outlived its usefulness to black America--remains weirdly potent among the white-dominated media.

By now, the Jena story is familiar: according to press accounts, a black student at the local high school sat under the *de facto* 'white tree.' After three nooses were hung from the tree in response, a spate of racialized taunts and tension soon escalated into full-on violence. The white noose-makers were given a short school suspension, while, even with recently-reduced charges, Bell and the five others face a combined 130 years in jail.

At the September rally in Jena, Sharpton and his counterpart, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, were the marquee speakers, calling for the dismissal of all charges and railing against the prison "industry". "Mychal Bell, we know you hear us. Hang on a little while longer," Jackson thundered. But the real story was the crowd, assembled by a flood of black activism on the Internet and on black talk radio. Black blogs like *AfroSpear*, *Mirror On America* and *Prometheus 6* have written reliably on the story for months. As a result, black churches, historically black colleges and universities, and student groups of all stripes were protesting the Jena case as early as **March**. This brand of organizing was faster to focus on Jena, and its effectiveness far outstripped that of established groups like the NAACP, Sharpton's National Action Network, and Jackson's Rainbow/P.U.S.H. Coalition. The Color of Change, an Internet advocacy group sprung from MoveOn in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, generated an online petition to Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco that boasts over 300,000 signatures. In fact, Sharpton admitted to the *Chicago Tribune* last month that his own knowledge about Jena had come from the black netroots.

While the black community was galvanized to action through a multiplicity of new-media sources, Sharpton and Jackson retained their monopoly on major-media attention. The black blogosphere had been shouting about Jena for months, but the

case gained traditional media momentum only after the anointed spokesmen stepped in. Sharpton first visited Jena in the beginning of August, turning the trickle of news on the incident into a firehose stream. Before then, **only a spoonful** of national outlets ran pieces on Jena. Since then, **celebrities** have jumped onboard the cause; and statements from Democratic presidential hopefuls followed--first from Barack Obama, then Hillary Clinton and John Edwards. The GOP had been reliably mute on the case, until President Bush curtly told reporters last month, "the events in Louisiana have saddened me." And after ten months of dawdling, the swelling noise on Jena forced local District Attorney Reed Walters to **account** for his actions and, at the end of September, **drop** his appeal to the state supreme court and release Bell on bail.

Despite the effective e-organizing among blacks, it will be a long haul before the Internet generation makes Sharpton and Jackson's methods totally obsolete. These famous figures present a unique connection to systems of publicity and power. Their loud harangues brought figures like Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, and President Bush into the debate, and brought mainstream media outlets to dutiful--if peripatetic--attention. During a recent *O'Reilly Factor* appearance, for example, Sharpton's rehearsed statements about Jena quickly segued into chatty jibes about the many dinners he and O'Reilly have shared. While Jackson performed better the following night on *O'Reilly*, this piecemeal statesmanship proved the only means for a story like Jena to enter the national conversation. White liberals gasp at what seems like atavism when such standoffs spotlight racial tension in America--yet have made these elder statesmen the only canaries in the mine.

The real blame, therefore, may rest with the media's own 'white tree.' An April Brown University **study** showed that black contributors make up less than one percent of the political blogosphere. As the study notes--and the Jena movement proved--black blogs are successful at spurring black interest groups to action, but they hold little crossover appeal. Progressive blog *Pam's House Blend* pointed out how, even on the day of the march, dozens of widely-read left-wing political sites run by whites continued to sleep on the story. The lack of publicity among non-blacks was evident at the Capitol Hill rally on the Jena Six Day of Action last month. I spoke to a white filmmaker documenting protest in America who said that even she knew nothing about Jena until that week, claiming the story "stayed segregated." DC event organizer Lynetta Carson, who is black, gave the realist perspective while packing up the stage: "All we had was word of mouth, and unfortunately, that's to our family."

The last of the Jena Six who was behind bars now heads home to his family to await retrial. It is a shame to think that with more universal pressure, the steps toward equitable treatment for Bell could have begun months prior. Jackson and Sharpton's soapbox oligarchy and the white media's racial blind spots are more embarrassing than they are malicious--yet both have real consequences. Fifty years after the Little Rock Nine, new and old segregations persist. Last month, Barack Obama preempted any **race-baiters** by correctly casting Jena as "America's problem." Beyond revealing the casual racism of a small town in Louisiana, the case and its aftermath exposed a still-divided national conversation, and a media culture, establishment and blogosphere alike, that's dangerously lazy in its reporting on black America.

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