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Sociologist James Jones Dubs Congress America's Last Plantation

By Lawrence Lerner

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While RU-N Assistant Professor James Jones interned as an undergraduate with two members of congress back in 2006 and 2009, he noted a stunning lack of diversity among congressional staff on Capitol Hill, especially those who hire and mentor younger members.

Shortly thereafter Jones entered Columbia University's sociology Ph.D. program and focused his dissertation on the problem, spending several years amassing demographic data on the Senate: He discovered that while people of color compose one-third of the country, they represent only about 7 percent of senior congressional aides.

He published his findings in a report by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies at the end of 2015. Before long, at the ripe old age of 27, Jones and his study were all over the mainstream press, and earlier this year, Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer (D-NY) pledged to adopt some of Jones' recommendations as the Democratic Party rebuilds in the wake of the 2016 presidential election loss.

"Democrats have a lot to gain by holding themselves to a higher standard," says Jones, who teaches in RU-N's Department of African American and African Studies and whose forthcoming book, *The Last Plantation*, will be the first major study of racial inequality in the congressional workplace. "The party made some headway under Sen. Harry Reid. I'm cautiously optimistic that more will be done under Schumer."

The Rooney Rule

Jones' report recommended that the Senate start collecting and analyzing its hiring data, which, amazingly enough, Congress requires of most federal agencies but not of itself. It also urged the chamber to adopt a version of the NFL's "Rooney rule," requiring congressional offices to interview at least one person of color for each senior job vacancy.

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Schumer says he wants to implement both items. He also promised to publish official diversity statistics from Senate offices on the Senate Diversity Initiative website, which hosts a resumé bank for potential Senate staffers of color and will be a clearinghouse for individual Democratic Senate offices looking to put diverse hiring practices in place.

Jones believes demographic data are key. Beltway insiders have long known about the diversity issue, but there have been no stats, he says, and it's the statistics that are most likely to prompt substantive change.

The problem, he says, runs deep.

"I'd be in policy meetings with members of various staffs, talking about social issues pertaining to black men, and

I'd be only person of color in the room," says Jones. "That clearly demonstrated to me that this lack of diversity has impact. You need lived experience in the room to create effective public policy."

Jones' report defines people of color as African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans and Native Americans. His research shows that the lack of diversity is especially glaring among African Americans, who hold a mere 0.9 percent of top staff positions.

It's also pervasive in the offices of senators from states with large black and Hispanic populations. Though the Senate remains a notoriously white male deliberative body, Jones contends that staff diversity should be independent of a senator's racial background and that their staffs should reflect the states they represent.

Lived Experience

Another facet of the problem is captured by Jones' own lived experience on Capitol Hill, from what he and other black staff members call the "nod."

"When walking the halls of Congress, we'd make eye contact and nod to each other, as a way of seeing each other and making us feel visible in a place where we felt invisible," says Jones. "White staffers and members of Congress often consciously avoided eye contact with us—a lack of simple acknowledgment that sociologists call 'civil inattention.' So, the nod was a gesture of solidarity and a way to build power."

As Jones interviewed these black staff members, the "nod" was also a gateway for them to talk about other discrimination they faced: for instance, how they get jobs and whether they're promoted, along with the kind of work they're assigned.

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The “nod,” therefore, ended up being a key that unlocked the broader scope of racial inequality found in Congress. Once this happened, Jones had a much better idea of where he would take his research, which will culminate in *The Last Plantation*.

That book title draws from another kind of nod: the nickname that members of Congress and their staff apply to the federal legislature to highlight how it’s exempt from the very policies and principles it’s tasked to create and implement, including federal workplace laws.

“When Congress actually follows the same laws it creates for the rest of the country, it will be better for it. It will be a better workplace and a more democratic institution when there’s diversity,” says Jones. “The stakes are high, and Washington insiders have known about this problem for a long time, but it needs to be publicized if things are going to change.”



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