



NAACP

Derrick Johnson
*President and
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Leon W. Russell
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National Board of Directors*

April 22, 2025

State Bar of Texas
Texas Law Center
1414 Colorado Street
Austin, TX 78701

Attention: Trey Apffel

Dear Mr. Apffel:

As the President and Chief Executive Officer of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the oldest and largest civil rights organization in the nation, I am writing to you to express my deep concern at the unprecedented decision to withdraw your invitation to me to serve as the keynote speaker at the State Bar of Texas (“SBOT”) Annual Meeting, scheduled for June 19, 2025. This withdrawal occurred after several weeks of conversations between SBOT representatives and me to coordinate this event.

Specifically, on April 1, 2025, the Executive Director of the State Bar of Texas (SBOT) informed me that the invitation had been rescinded. This decision was reportedly made in response to the Texas NAACP State Conference’s recent lawsuits challenging the current presidential administration’s unlawful efforts to eliminate the U.S. Department of Education and actions taken that discriminate against Black students. According to SBOT, the current lawsuits and any lawsuit against the current administration are “political”.

Let me be unequivocal: the NAACP’s legal action is not political. It is rooted in our belief that every student deserves a fair and equal opportunity to learn. We are a nonpartisan organization and always operate accordingly. The NAACP—alongside the Texas State Conference and other plaintiffs—filed suit to protect the constitutional and statutory rights of American students. The NAACP’s objective is to protect all students and halt the unlawful dismantling of an agency established by Congress to safeguard educational access, enforce civil rights protections, and provide critical support to students.¹

Before the establishment of the Department of Education in 1979, Black students and other marginalized students in Texas faced significant disparities in receiving equal access to a quality education.² For instance, in 1970, only about 31% of Black adults aged 25 and over in the United States had completed

¹ <https://naacp.org/articles/naacp-and-advocacy-organizations-sue-trump-administration-dismantling-department-education>

² <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/educational-attainment/cps-historical-time-series.html>

high school, compared to 54% of their white counterparts.³ This national trend was reflective of the conditions in Texas, where systemic barriers routinely denied access to quality education for Black students.⁴ The creation of the Department of Education was a pivotal step in addressing these inequities, reinforcing the principles established in *Brown v. Board of Education*—that separate is not equal and that every child, regardless of race, deserves equal educational access.

The NAACP’s continued commitment to educational equity is not new—it is a core principle of our mission. For more than 115 years, the NAACP has been a steadfast guardian of constitutional protections in the United States. From *Sweatt v. Painter* (a Texas higher education case) to *Brown v. Board of Education* to *Shelby County v. Holder*, our legal work has expanded access to the ballot box, desegregated public institutions, dismantled barriers to equal opportunity, and empowered generations of Americans—regardless of race, religion, gender, or background—to claim their rightful place in our democracy. Indeed, the NAACP has always worked within the confines of the law and the United States Constitution to dismantle barriers to equal opportunity in education. We have long sought redress in the courts to challenge unconstitutional laws, discriminatory practices and inequitable educational systems.

It is important to underscore the glaring inconsistency in SBOT’s decision to rescind my invitation to speak at the SBOT Annual Meeting, as evidenced by former U.S. Attorney General William Barr’s appearance as the Annual Meeting keynote speaker in 2023. As you well know, during his time as the Attorney General, Barr faced widespread, bipartisan criticism for politicizing the Department of Justice and undermining public confidence in its independence.⁵ Though his actions were widely regarded as overtly political, they did not prevent Barr from being invited to SBOT’s Annual Meeting, and even after an uproar over his appearance, he was not uninvited.

In fact, in response to objections to Barr’s participation, SBOT then-president Laura Gibson penned a lengthy and passionate defense of the organization’s invitation.

“Over the past weeks, I have heard objections over the choice of former U.S. Attorney General William P. “Bill” Barr to be our keynote speaker at the Bar Leaders Recognition Luncheon. Some have asked that the State Bar cancel his appearance ...

“I personally have disagreed with some of Barr’s statements and positions. But as lawyers we defend basic rights, chief among them, freedom of speech. It is easy to defend the rights of speakers we agree with, but it is essential to the rule of law that we also defend the rights of speakers with whom we disagree.

“In these polarized times, it seems we’re in danger of losing that. As lawyers, we should be in the forefront of protecting unpopular or controversial speech.

“When making decisions about keynote speakers, the Annual Meeting Committee always seeks to invite individuals who have interesting stories to share or who have played

³ <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/1999/compendia/statab/119ed/tables/sec04.pdf>

⁴ <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/98018.pdf>

⁵ <https://naacp.org/resources/impeachment-attorney-general-william-p-barr>

significant roles in events affecting the legal profession. Annual Meetings have featured speakers of various political views, and the selection of a speaker is not and has never been an endorsement of those views.

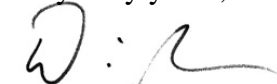
“I thank the committee for arranging the appearance of a speaker with the national prominence of Attorney General Barr. I urge all to attend and to listen respectfully.”⁶

Thus, while Barr, a highly controversial political figure, was welcomed with open arms and staunchly defended by SBOT leadership, I was summarily “uninvited” from the same event on the alleged grounds that the organization I lead is doing exactly what the law and Constitution call on it to do.

My exclusion from the SBOT Annual Meeting sends a troubling message that principled advocacy for civil rights and educational justice is somehow more controversial than political partisanship. SBOT’s rescission of my invitation exposes a double standard that contradicts the legal profession’s commitment to uphold inclusive values the legal community is supposed to represent.

Moreover, SBOT’s action is particularly concerning from a private organization of lawyers who have sworn an oath to uphold the constitutions of the United States and Texas. Publicly attacking a premiere civil rights organization with a long and respected history of working within the law and courts to hold the Constitution to its promise is a direct contradiction of that oath. The NAACP will not be deterred from speaking truth to power. The NAACP, along with the Texas NAACP State Conference, will continue to challenge injustices wherever they arise.

Very truly yours,



Derrick Johnson
President and CEO

⁶ Full letter at:

<https://www.texasbar.com/AM/Template.cfm?Section=articles&ContentID=60516&Template=/CM/HTMLDisplay.cfm>