

Greetings

FROM TAVIS SMILEY

Welcome to our sixth annual *State of the Black Union*. This year's symposium is unique in that it features two separate topics spread over three panels: *Road to Health*, the kick-off discussion to our 2006 Health Expo, and *Defining the African American Agenda*.

Many have asked why I decided to talk about health this year. Before I rattle off the health statistics facing African Americans, let me say that the choice was both personal and communal.

For the past three years I have been personally committed to healthier living—losing over seventy-five pounds, training for and running the Los Angeles Marathon, and taking more time out of my hectic schedule to de-stress. When I turned 40 last September, I realized that I had reached a significant milestone, and if I wanted to experience another 40 years, I should make my health and well being a priority.

From a more global perspective, African Americans face enormous health disparities. We are leaders where we shouldn't be—49 percent of new HIV cases are African American. African American women are more likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer at a later disease stage than White women. And we fall behind when we ought not—life expectancy for whites exceeds African Americans by 5.4 years. It's time for each of us to make a commitment to healthy living.

The two conversations on *Defining the African American Agenda* are a direct response to the divisions we observed during the most recent Presidential election. Instead of lambasting an administration for not doing what we think is important, it is time for all African Americans to come together—Republican, Democrat, Liberal, Conservative—to set our own priorities and establish a *Contract with Black America*.

This Contract—a quasi-Constitution—will delineate what issues are important to African Americans and how we want them remedied. This will demystify every politician's stance on the issues. All we have to ask is whether he or she signed the contract. But it will also obligate that individual to following through. We must remember our vote is a valuable commodity.

It is my sincere hope that as you listen, take notes, and ask questions of our panelists, you are *enlightened*, *encouraged*, and *empowered* to make healthy changes in your life and take full advantage of our democratic system. Let's make our lives count.

Keep the Faith!

