We set out to rally the community -- Jewish and non-Jewish -- to oppose the official tolerance of a flagrant anti-Semite in a responsible government position. We stood up to hatemongers at meetings and in the media with a unique strong message. We initiated a major public demonstration to force the mayor's hand.

The American Jewish Congress, with other organizations, called national attention to Steven Cokely's city-sanctioned bigotry.

"An apology just doesn't replace the problem," our Chicago executive director told the press. "The man should not be tolerated on the public payroll in this or any other city."

In the end, Cokely was not tolerated on Chicago's public payroll.

But it took Mayor Sawyer a week to act.

And this whole sorry episode showed beyond doubt that there exists in this country today a market for the vile anti-Semitism of the Steve Cokelys, Louis Farrakhans and their ilk.

"People on the street -- the vast majority of blacks do not share these views," observed Sylvia Neil, Chicago Executive Director of the AJCongress. "But history shows these types of lies have to be stood up to."

In this battle against anti-Semitism, we must take the initiative.

Although we succeeded in persuading Mayor Sawyer to remove from public office a profoundly offensive individual, we learned much from the Cokely case about the reluctance of presumably decent people to stand up to anti-Semitic demagogues.

Men like Louis Farrakhan and Steve Cokely are saying in English the same hateful words that Jews have so often heard spoken in languages like German, Russian and Arabic.

The AJCongress will not let them get away with it and intends to move decisively to reopen lines of communication between the Jewish community and the overwhelming majority of black Americans.

Now is the time to end a dangerous trend that can only do harm to both communities.

Now is the time to say to our black fellow citizens that we stand, as always, against racial and religious bigotry of any kind.

And instead of retreating, we intend to reach out confidently to a community with which, when all is said and done, we share some very fundamental values.

That's what the American Jewish Congress is all about.

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