

HOW CAN WE SAVE THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN RACE?

Black America is currently mired in a detour, intended by neither blacks nor whites, from the path to the mountaintop that Martin Luther King envisioned. Having been taught to cherish victimhood over action and essentialism over universalism, a great many people of the second black generation after the Civil Rights Movement are being hindered in continuing the struggle our ancestors initiated on our behalf.

Indeed, it is Victimology, Separatism, and Anti-intellectualism that make it a stretch for whites to think of that suburban black corporate manager as a representative "American" even three decades after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, even though there are millions of black managers, and even though in general most black people are not poor. Surely, remnants of racism contribute to this state of affairs. However, today, the ideology that so many black Americans have been steeped in contributes much more to this sense of "black" as "different" and, most importantly, "less." Victimology, the tendency to exaggerate the degree of black oppression regardless of progress, has understandable roots in the Civil Rights Movement freeing a group with a battered self-image. But white people are no more prone than black people (or any others) to dutifully frame all present-tense experience through a fine historical lens. As such, to the younger white person who never knew segregated America, watching middle-class black people depicting themselves as partners with Kosovar Albanians in victimhood because they are occasionally bypassed by a taxi in Manhattan or trailed by a salesclerk looks like paranoia. Separatism starts as a healthy reclamation of identity and is then distorted by Victimology into what is felt to be a necessary battle posture, but to modern white eyes, Separatism is parochial. Anti-intellectualism has been such an inevitable development of Separatism in black America that its failure to shackle the race would be nothing less than surprising, but just as inevitably, to any outsider it can only look like mental inferiority.

Paranoid, parochial, and dumb: This is how much of white America perceives us on some level. It is not our fault, and it is absolutely un-

acceptable. In fact, it was indignation at this perception that led me to write this book. However, the reason they believe this is no longer, in any meaningful sense, good old-fashioned racism—the terrain has changed profoundly since the 1960s. I sincerely and regrettably believe that at this complex juncture in American history, black America has unintentionally become as much the cause of this as the racism that led whites to drag us to these shores and treat us as animals for 350 years. Sure, "They started it." Not only did they bring us here as slaves, but they also kept it going—most ironically—by finally seeing the light and letting us free!

As direct consequences of the abrupt unshackling of a crippled race, Victimology, Separatism, and Anti-intellectualism are a person with his eyes sealed shut still pawing frantically at the air long after his attacker has laid off, driven to frenzy by massive assault. But thank God the attacker did let up. And the unjust fact is that once he has, he walks on unharmed, while it is up to us to stand up, rub our eyes, brush ourselves off, and walk on to do the best work and lead the best lives we can. We do ourselves no favor by collapsing again to the ground, shutting our eyes, and pawing at the air some more for the absolution of letting everyone know what the attacker did, and certainly not by deciding that we are to live our lives in that position as a remembrance of history. Sure, every now and then the attacker is going to traipse back and pop us on the back of the head. But we can take it, can't we? Take one look at the classic picture of a slave ship in cross-section and that question is answered.

In the meantime, to continue swiping madly at the air and indignantly insisting that this is one's right in view of an attack that recedes increasingly into the past makes one look not fearsome, but pathetic, a lesser person. In that light, certainly the last thing the African-American race ought do after having come so far is to nurture the very racism that kept us in chains for 350 years. Yet this is what I fear has become the case.

Common wisdom frames black children of all classes as living under the risk of the depredations of racism, enjoying a brief window of childhood innocence before becoming aware of their status as second-class citizens. I find myself seeing black children as living under a concurrent risk, that of being stunted in their ability to make the best of themselves as they are shepherded into a conviction that regardless of outward appearances, they inhabit a fundamentally hostile, alien nation.

There are two black boys who play in the yard behind my apartment. To describe anyone living in this building as "struggling blue collar"

would be a stretch by any standard. But I wonder how long it will be before they learn the gospel—that most black people are poor, that white people are generally not to be trusted out of earshot, that school is an inherently “white” endeavor that they ought dwell in only for utilitarian reasons. The torch is being passed on independently of external conditions. We cannot let this happen.

We're Past “Talking”

I find it sadly unlikely that dialogue, along the lines of Bill Clinton’s “National Dialogue on Race,” will be of any significant use. The hold of the three currents in thought is so strong that it conditions an assumption among most blacks in power that such a dialogue can only be an occasion for reminding whites that they are racists, and among most whites that their only acceptable participation is to agree.

Indeed, one is forced to conclude that a great many of today’s black leaders are unamenable to any meaningful dialogue on race. A disproportionately influential contingent will maintain to their dying day that most black Americans are poor, that there is a racist at the heart of all whites, and that because of these things, regardless of class or opportunity, no black American is to be held to mainstream standards of morality or academic achievement. There are now roughly two generations of African Americans caught in these thought patterns—those who came of age as the Civil Rights Movement dawned, and now a whole subsequent generation who have spent their lifetimes in a climate which encourages victimhood as an identity rather than as a problem.

This frame of mind is so deeply rooted in these people’s very souls that to let it go would entail a massive sociopsychological dislocation few human beings are capable of or willing to endure. There are many African-American leaders and thinkers who are fighting the good fight, watching our backs and chronicling remnants of racism while acknowledging progress and refusing to settle for allowing the race to be represented by fruitless melodramatics. Examples include economist Glenn Loury, *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert, *Atlanta Constitution* columnist Cynthia Tucker, law professor Randall Kennedy, and essayist Stanley Crouch. These people are often dismissed as sell-outs by many who mistake as Doing the Right Thing figures such as Derrick Bell, June Jordan, Manning Marable, Ralph Wiley, Lani Guinier, Maxine Waters, Al Sharpton, and Carl Rowan. Yet while the emergence of this kind of person served a purpose in getting blacks in the door and to the table, ironically,

this type is now the main agent in keeping blacks from ever getting up from the table and moving on. Maybe it had to be this way. However, what this means is that we cannot look to them to get us out of these holding patterns. The key is what kind of America we set up for the generation of black people to come, and it would be truly unfortunate if that were an America where people of this frame of mind continued to dominate the political and intellectual leadership of the race.

I have two suggestions that I think will get us back on the only track worthy of this, or any other race, which is progress. Both entail that America enter upon what can be regarded as the second phase of the Civil Rights Movement. The first phase was to level the proverbial playing field. This job is nearly accomplished. The second phase is for us to get out there and play, and in order for that to be worthwhile, or even possible, then we must be treated as equals, and we must allow ourselves to be treated as equals.

It seems to be assumed that this was a *fait accompli* once the playing field was leveled. But black American history was run through with too epic an injustice for this alone to accomplish our goal. There remains work no less intimidating, but no less imperative, than that which we have already done.

The Road to True Equality: Combat Victimology Chic

When the process of bringing blacks to equality with whites began in the 1960s, the conception of blacks as a race of victims was logical and appropriate, for the simple reason that it corresponded with reality. Most black people were poor. Those who were not still faced concrete barriers of discrimination in employment, education, and use of public services in all parts of the country. Open bigotry was common and accepted among whites (“Aw, look at the little pickaninny!” a white woman said out loud to her friend about me in 1967—in Philadelphia, not Savannah). Integration was a new idea considered progressive and somewhat quixotic, with most people casually viewing blacks as an eternal servant class.

Today, about a quarter of black Americans are poor. Discrimination is increasingly rare and subtle, shading ever more from racism into classism, which while indefensible itself, is rampant in all human societies and wounds people of all colors. In the general American consciousness, bigotry certainly has not disappeared completely, but is considered a social stain, its expression regularly costing people and organizations mil-

tions of dollars a year in lawsuits. No, things are not perfect—but let's face it: There are millions and millions of people on earth who would kill for the lives of all but a few black Americans today, and there have been untold billions of people who have triumphed amidst conditions unspeakably worse. We sell ourselves short to pretend otherwise.

In short, black Americans are no longer a race of victims *as a whole* in the meaningful sense—i.e., to an extent which extinguishes the potential of a human being. Instead, this is a race a fraction of whom are victims, and victims more as the result of historical than present-day racism—the people who remained behind for various reasons while most of the race moved upward. Surely that fraction is not as small as it must be in order for blacks to be equal with whites. However, a fraction it is, and a small enough fraction that it is no longer logical to conceive of these lives as representative of “the condition of the African-American race.” Not only does such a conception not correspond to reality, but it is a grievous insult to the millions and millions of black people who have achieved comfortable and meaningful lives over the past four decades.

There are three new habits of thinking that I suggest will help us get beyond this self-imposed ideological obstacle to success.

Mantra Number One: Our Successes Are No

Longer “Anecdotes”: They Are the Norm

If there is one misconception that most perniciously distorts our interracial dialogue, it is that most black people are poor, or, as was found among almost half of the blacks surveyed by the Gallup poll mentioned in Chapter 1, that three out of four black people live in the inner city. Black Americans are rightly indignant when whites evidence this misconception, but then are equally given to equating black with “just getting by” when issues like affirmative action and welfare come up. In *The New York Times*, black activist and scholar Manning Marable’s parsing of the state of black America in the late 1990s was that “a segment of the minority population moves into the corporate and political establishment at the same time that *most* are pushed even further down the economic ladder” (emphasis mine). It is time to stop applauding this kind of defeatist rhetoric; it’s poison.

As I write, the two statistics commonly used to define the black condition are that blacks make 61 percent of what whites make and that one in three black men in their twenties are involved with the criminal justice system. We should look to the second statistic to remind us of the work

that remains to be done, but the first one is a myth and needs replacing. I suggest that we replace it with a positive statistic to keep our progress as front and center in our minds as our problems: only one in five black people live in the inner city, and only one in four black families live below the poverty line. That’s not perfect, but progress is being made. Fast.

Because it is unhealthy to turn a blind eye to one’s progress, we must resist enshrining stories of misery and discrimination as “the way it is” while dismissing stories of success or normality as unrepresentative “anecdotes.” Too often, the black person with a beautiful house, nice cars, and children in private school is processed as “an exception” and almost an inconvenience, the idea seeming to be that to pay too much attention to this “B. Smith” kind of person will detract from the grinding horror of life for 99 percent of the race. This, like the “united front” ideology, was once appropriate (when nine out of ten blacks really were poor), but is now obsolete. Quite simply, there are now far too many millions and millions of black people living comfortable lives to be processed as “lucky.” Today such people are nothing less than *normal*; this is exactly the progress that the civil-rights revolution was for, and—most importantly—as I have argued, to acknowledge and even revel in this success does not require leaving poor blacks behind.

Along these lines, for example, my personal recollections are certainly anecdotal; as personal experiences, they could be nothing else. However, today, the recollections of people like Nathan McCall are “anecdotal” as well—Derrick Bell even couches his observations as “stories,” forgoing any pretense of actual reportage. If we are willing to accept these people’s anecdotes as useful and valid, then we must also accept mine: It simply does not follow in the year 2000 that a black person’s Victimologist anecdote is automatically truth while one taking issue with that perspective is simply a fluke.

The truth is that today, all of our anecdotes are valid and representative of the lives of millions of black Americans. I am not “lucky” or “odd” or “different” to have never been barred from a store as a black man in the year 2000—I am ordinary! What all of the anecdotes good and bad spell is the reality—racism is not dead (Nathan McCall, Beverly Daniel Tatum, Patricia Williams), but the situation is strikingly better than it was a few decades ago and is getting better all the time (Orlando Patterson, Glenn Loury, Randall Kennedy). The former view sells more books, fits in with the Victimologist hustle clouding so many eyes, and is a more natural topic for public airing than anecdotes about improvement. But it is only part of the story—and by no means the dominant part.

Mantra Number Two: Occasional Inconvenience Is Not Oppression

The last thing I want to convey is that life is perfect for black people in America. I hope to have shown through my own recollections as well as other observations that I am well aware that this is not the case. However, I do believe that a time comes when drawing some lines, facing the ever challenging but vital issue of degree, becomes not just cordial, not just intelligent, but imperative. This is because to conceive of ourselves today as eternal victims *impedes our progress toward equality*—because there comes a point when refraining from drawing a line between oppression and “occasional inconvenience,” as a black cousin of mine perfectly phrases it, is infantilization. The person who one considers incapable of coping with any hardship whatsoever, who one considers capable of achievement only under ideal conditions, is someone one pities, cares for, and perhaps even likes, but is not someone one respects, and thus is someone one does not truly consider an equal.

An Inappropriate Analogy

In 1987, Guatemalan Mayan activist Rigoberta Menchú wrote an autobiography, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, in which she described an early life of virtual slavery under the rule of European-descended colonials, including seeing family members murdered. The book won a Pulitzer Prize, and became a signature documentation of the horrors of imperialism, widely read in leftist circles and a popular assignment in college courses.

Twelve years later, David Stoll announced in his book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* that Menchú had taken a rather creative approach to truth. Menchú's childhood was in fact a relatively privileged one, sparing her the grinding misery that most of her people knew. She did lose members of her family, but fictionalized or sensationalized some deaths for shock value. Her father's conflict was with his in-laws, not white overlords. Menchú describes the police burning the Spanish embassy when guerrillas hid out inside it, but in fact the guerrillas themselves, who had come to be seen as a scourge by most of the peasantry, started the fire.

Menchú is clearly something of an opportunist, but let's face it, most leaders are, and we cannot help thinking that her personal weaknesses are less important than the larger picture. After all, the Guatemalan peasantry have indeed been tragically oppressed by their overlords; Menchú did suffer to some extent; if the guerrillas overstepped their bounds at times this was inevitable given what the Mayans had suffered;

and a book that carefully presented the situation in all of its ambiguities would have been read by a few hundred intellectuals and Central America hounds but would not have mobilized public support for the Mayans. In the name of creating awareness of the injustices of imperialism in Guatemala and Third World nations in general, perhaps Menchú's tactics were not ideal, but we can suppose that her distortions and self-dramatization did serve a higher cause.

I sense that this is the lens through which many Americans black and white today think that the apocalyptic visions of people like Derrick Bell and Lani Guinier ought be viewed. The idea seems to be that being black in America is still such a crushing burden that it is fitting, “understandable,” for black leaders and intellectuals to downplay the stupendous progress the race has made, square the corners, round the edges, in service to the greater good of fighting the implacable racism that still thwarts a black person at every turn.

This kind of unstated analogy between a situation like the Menchú controversy and black America may have made sense in about 1970. But today it is hopelessly frayed and inappropriate. This is clear from the inherent impossibility that stupendous progress could have been made if being black were still a crushing burden and racism were still implacable. To the white person who dares point out this incompatibility, our current discourse encourages the black person to say “You just don't know,” and the white person is assigned to nod dutifully and then shake his head in pity. But increasingly, if required to explain precisely what the white person “doesn't know,” the black person has nothing to offer that belies the central point that life for blacks in America today would look like an alternate universe to black people just fifty years ago, is getting better rapidly, and shows no signs whatsoever of getting worse.

Acknowledging intermediate points, transitions, and historical layers is nothing more and nothing less than one way of making sense, and while this is considered a *sine qua non* of intelligence in any white person, there is a tragic pretense that black people can somehow be exempt from making sense and yet still be considered equals. This isn't good enough because we all know it is a lie, and there are few grimmer fates for a race to await than to be eternally considered (1) mental lightweights or (2) hothouse flowers that fade and die in the face of anything but ideal life conditions.

“How do I know what these people are going through?” one might ask. It would be helpful if we realized that one thing black America is going through is an ideological plague forced upon us as a by-product of the conditions of the Civil Rights Movement, which granted freedom so

abruptly that it left behind a tragic combination of unprecedented opportunity and a historical inferiority complex. This was not black people's fault, and the Civil Rights Movement was certainly far better than nothing. But in indulging the resultant chronic self-righteous doubletalk, ironically we are now blocking the integration the Civil Rights Movement sought.

Concern for the Victim Versus Becoming a Victim

Menchú's defenders propose that her distortions stem from an Amerindian tradition in which the group's experiences are, in a holistic sense, each individual's. A similar sentiment, albeit unspoken, underlies the affluent young black who has never known hardship or discrimination considering herself "oppressed" and rejecting whitey out of a sense that the one out of five black people in the ghettos are in a holistic sense "her," such that she shares their fates on an abstract level. Now, the last thing we want is for blacks who have made it to reject those who have not as "other." The sense that the ghetto is "cool" is entrenched to an unhealthy degree in black culture, but in contrast to the casually dismissive classism one sees in many subcultures on the rise in both the past and present worldwide, one cannot help but see middle-class black America's refusal to dissociate itself from those less fortunate as, in itself, sophisticated and humane.

However, the fact is that one can maintain concern for the victimized members of one's culture without conceiving of oneself as a victim as well. This is the difference between addressing victimhood as a problem and adopting it as an identity regardless of one's actual circumstances—Victimology. When a black person you know has grown up in a war zone of a neighborhood, lost siblings to gunfights, often gone hungry, suffered through drug addiction, and gone to a school so bad that it left him with reading and writing skills too low to get a decent job, he is a victim—but just because you are the same color as he, it does not make you a victim when you are occasionally trailed in stores. While maintaining compassion for the true victim, for you to frame yourself as equally a victim is neither morally required nor even healthy, because in distorting your experiences as "victimhood" you hinder your own capacities of strength and initiative. This is especially true given that today only a fraction of our population are victims in any meaningful sense.

In contrast, Rigoberta Menchú speaks for a people the vast mass of whom are still living semiliterate under an oppression more concrete and

resolute than anything many of the black people of influence crying "victim" could withstand for longer than about two days. Menchú really is one of the lucky ones who slipped over the wall. But the time has come for us to reconceive the black college professor who sits in the trendy new restaurant emoting about how oppressed he is between forkfuls of gourmet pasta, his free hand alternating languidly between his six-dollar glass of cabernet and his white significant other's knee under the table, and about to catch a twenty-dollar shuttle bus to the airport the next morning to fly to a conference where he will meet dozens of African Americans just like him, most of whom got special attention on their job searches because of their color, and most of whose research has been funded by universities that bend over backwards to shower grants upon as much minority-oriented research as possible. Okay, four years ago this professor was driving through a white neighborhood in his Honda Accord and a policeman pulled him over on a drug check. But why, if "Success Runs in Our Veins," if we survived centuries of slavery, if we are so wonderful, does that episode negate the victory and richness of the rest of this professor's life? What kind of "oppression" is this? One in four black Americans is poor today; you can bet that a heck of a lot more than one Mayan in four is poor in Guatemala, and I shudder to imagine our black college professor offering his manicured hand to Rigoberta Menchú as a partner in "oppression."

An Example

Okay, that one was staged. But here is a real-life example. In her widely read book *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, law professor Patricia Williams recounts a Benetton clerk claiming that the store was closed in midafternoon when she tried to enter, interpreting this as evidence that racism continues to pervade American society decades after 1964, her indignation tacitly colored by the irony of Benetton's vibrantly multiracial advertisements. Let us assume that this clerk really did bar Williams from the store because of the color of her skin. Our question, in our times, is whether this is a typical experience for black people today. In 1960, episodes like this were so common that they barely occasioned comment. However, I can state that never in my life have I been barred entry to a store at two o'clock in the afternoon or indeed at any time of day, and we can be sure that a great many black people could say the same thing. One recent exception was Denny's outlets, discovered to be refusing entry to black groups at night too often across the country to be an accident (although I myself have eaten many a nighttime meal at

Denny's outlets, on both coasts, and as often as not with black people). Yet significantly, because we live in an era where such actions are legally prosecutable, this practice was aired, condemned, and eliminated. This was progress, not reversal or stasis.

Thus Williams's experience certainly shows us that racism is not completely dead yet—but then why would we expect that it would be in an era of *transition*, anymore than we would expect that two hours after we put an ice-cube tray in the freezer, that a couple of the cubes would not still be a little liquid? What Williams's experience in no way indicates is that racism is not receding, or that it will never go away. As such we must question Williams's interpretation of this sad event as evidence that her life's journey is paved with the thorns of a racism appallingly eternal. She, like so many of us, one day in one place stubbed her toe on a remnant of a situation once rife. However, this does not logically require a strong human being to ask "I am a law professor at a prestigious university, but where is the value in that if I was barred entry to a Benetton's?" More properly, an approach to victimhood as a problem rather than as an identity would condition the interpretation "I was barred entry to a Benetton's and this is a disgraceful echo of the past, but in the grand view, I am ultimately a law professor at a prestigious university whereas this would have been impossible just a few decades ago."

Williams's preference for the former approach suggests a sense that to dwell too much upon her success would be to dismiss the suffering of the fraction of the race still mired in true misery, the "authentic" black person being morally required to incorporate the entire race in her self-conception. This ideology, however, has outlived its usefulness. Surely Williams ought neither to lose her concern for the underclass nor discontinue her efforts to help them. Yet it is not only morally acceptable for Williams to distinguish between the degree that racism affects her life versus the degree to which it affects those of the underclass, it is morally imperative—lest she infect her readers, almost all of whom have benefited from the Civil Rights revolution and are poised to continue doing so, with a defeatism dampening their ability to see or take advantage of opportunity.

Mantra Number Three: When a Race Has Urgent Work to Do, People Crying "Wolf" Are Wasting Our Time

Obviously, there are a great many black people who rise above defeatism and are doing their part in moving the race forward by making their way in a tricky, but ever improving interracial landscape. Reading this book,

a person might understandably think "Isn't he exaggerating a little? Are all black people in the United States running around shaking their fists at nonexistent enemies and turning their back on mainstream America?"

Certainly not. Not just some, but *most* black Americans can see that there is much of the huckster in Al Sharpton. The problem, however—and the reason I write about Black America rather than "some" black Americans—is this crucial point: manifestations of Victimology are so widely *accepted* at all levels of the black community rather than rejected, even among the many people who would not propound such views themselves. To continue to accept expressions of this ideology as "on the table," as fundamentally legitimate reflections of the race even if one is open to others as well, is to operate significantly under their influence.

For example, reviewing the evidence in the Tawana Brawley case of 1987, one simply cannot avoid the sad truth that this young woman fabricated a story of rape. The vast discrepancies between her narrative and the evidence (see page 77) are too obvious to admit any other explanation. Yet what Patricia Williams considers important about the case is that "Tawana's terrible story has every black woman's worst fears and experiences wrapped into it. Few will believe a black woman who has been raped by a white man." (Note also the use of her first name alone, connoting a taking of her into our fold, a warm, exculpatory embrace.)

In fact, there is quite a bit wrapped into Williams's position. For one, we must ask whether rape by white, as opposed to black, men has been an urgent problem for black women since several decades ago. To focus upon problems of the past rather than those of the present can solve no current suffering, and is thus celebrating victimhood rather than addressing it. Furthermore, all women have traditionally suffered the indignity of an undue burden of proof in rape cases; only recently have lawyer-scholars like Catharine McKinnon made significant inroads into this injustice—and Williams's mention of McKinnon makes it clear that she is aware of her work. Has this been a black problem or a women's problem in general, and has class played as significant a role as race? For Williams to co-opt the battle to amend rape laws as a race issue is a bold move that would seem to at least demand an explanation or defense. Yet all that she offers in this vein is that it is traditionally thought by whites that "black women whore as a way of being." No one would deny that there has been a stereotype of black women as sexually lascivious. Yet our question is how much this has affected white-on-black rape convictions within recent memory as compared to white-on-white rape cases—and in that light, the literature on women in rape cases is suffused with

a general problem that women of all colors are too often assumed to have "asked for it" (dramaticized usefully in the film *The Accused* with Jodie Foster, which eloquently demonstrated this as a gender issue, not a racial one). Williams's lack of interest in addressing the issue beyond the level of folk conception, as a professor of law, suggests a fundamental desire to cloak the race in the mantle of victimhood at all costs.

Finally, Williams criticizes Sharpton for not allowing Brawley to speak for herself during the media controversy, but not for duping his supporters for years with the case itself. As such, whether or not she considers Al Sharpton a bit of a "character," in absolving him of a callow, mendacious hoodwinking of the public, she is condoning Victimology. Without explicitly saying so, she reveals that she considers Sharpton's tactics excusable, and that she thus considers this professional Victimologist a worthy leader of the race.

To the extent that people like Sharpton and Louis Farrakhan are considered "cool," to the extent that the black man at the party grouching about the "war on blacks" is considered a righteous brother even by moderately-inclined people present, to the extent that Spike Lee complaining that Hollywood does not want to produce movies about the full experience of black people is considered "telling it like it is" by black people who in one year's time have seen *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, *Beloved*, *Down in the Delta*, *Foolish*, and *The Wood*—the black American race is in trouble.

There is a deeply felt sentiment in the black community that we are not to disagree in public, and this is a large part of why on the subject of race and race alone, so many millions of moderately minded black Americans are so naturally inclined to suspend logical engagement and accept barely credible depictions of the modern black condition as "valid opinions." The "united front" strategy was a valuable survival tactic in the old days, but we only maintain it today on pain of holding ourselves back. Cognitive dissonance and unfocused resentment are handicaps to emotional health and being all that one can be, and a race conditioned to process posture over action as a reflection of itself is—regardless of the historical reasons—doomed to remain America's poster-child race apart.

The Road to True Equality: Give Black Students the Gift of Competition

There is in my view no issue as urgent to addressing black Americans' pathway toward true equality with whites as affirmative action. This is

because this policy interacts urgently with something central to the soul of all human beings: reward for effort to forge one's place in the world, and the vital role this plays in self-conception.

Some readers may have justifiably wondered just what my position on affirmative action is. As I noted, I believe that the policy was nothing less than urgent when it was instituted in the 1960s. Where I depart from most black thinkers is that I do not think that the policy ought to be continued until there is no racism whatsoever in the country and black Americans have achieved complete parity with whites.

Affirmative Action: A First Step

I consider affirmative action to have been a necessary emergency measure, which was not the sole step, but one of two necessary steps toward the task the policy was instituted to accomplish: affording a race the ability to compete in the mainstream. In completing that task, all would agree that there comes a time when one must allow the group to compete without any more outside help than is the societal norm. Significantly, however, one cannot, by the dictates of sheer logic, direct a group to compete in a context where there still exists no incentive to reach for the very best. In that vein, the second step in achieving the result affirmative action was intended to bring about is to abandon the policy—*before full parity in performance has been achieved*.

Affirmative Action Where It Is Needed

Of course, instituting the second step is only appropriate when the playing field has been leveled sufficiently to enable the race to successfully compete. For that reason, I support the preservation of affirmative action for the time being in the business realm. Hiring and advancement is based as much on personal contacts and social chemistry as merit. After a mere few decades of desegregation, most African Americans, even when successfully employed by predominantly white organizations, are ultimately more socially comfortable with members of their own race than with whites, and lack the decades-deep networks of contacts that so decisively affect the lives and careers of many whites. It follows from these two facts that left to their own devices, whites will naturally tend to promote other whites more readily than blacks. It is questionable that this is always due to "racism" as much as to a purely human birds-of-a-feather phenomenon. One need not be a bigot to be more inclined to promote someone with whom one feels a certain "click" or who has ties

to people dear to one—any black person choosing whether to promote a black person or an equally qualified white one could feel the same way even in the absence of any particular commitment to “doing the right thing” for a fellow black. And sometimes in some places these days, good old-fashioned racism raises its head through the muck—the struggle isn’t over yet.

However, things are different when it comes to university admissions, in which case one is dealing not with interpersonal dynamics but with application in writing. Here, affirmative action is not justifiable on the basis of the inexorable realities of social chemistry. Indeed, many argue that the playing field is not level in the realm of education nevertheless; namely, that societal conditions make it impossible for most minority students to achieve the grade-point averages and test scores that whites and Asians routinely do. As I have argued in this book, however, this is no longer true. Racism may play a marginal, background role in black students’ academic experiences, but not nearly enough to cause the massive disparities across classes between black and white performance. To argue that less-than-perfect schools or residual teacher bias so decisively cripple a black student’s performance is to beg the question “Why not poor Asian immigrants, or even black Caribbeans, going to the same schools?” Many will answer here “Well, they have a different culture”—and that’s just my answer: the evidence suggests that most of the black-white disparity is today due to a sense of separation from scholarly endeavor internal to African-American culture.

A Thumb on the Scale?

The degree of this disparity tends to get lost in the affirmative-action debate, in favor of a misconception that the policy is used as a mere “thumb on the scale,” choosing the minority student over the white one only in the case of parallel qualifications, or at best, using race only as a small boost.

I once played piano and wrote lyrics for a student production at Stanford introducing freshmen to campus life. It was funded by the administration on the condition that a “diverse” cast be chosen. As a result, some people were cast who most likely would not have been without this directive, casting often being affected by a preset sense of a given character as white, with favoritism tending also to drift to those in the local theater “scene.” Yet the casting choices made with diversity in mind were generally a boon to the show and to the lives of the actors. One black guy was cast who, under other conditions, not being a part of the campus theater community and being a rather contained fellow, would have been an un-

likely choice—in other words, not being “one of the gang” would have worked against his being evaluated solely on his merits. However, not only was he up to the standard level of the other performers, but as it happened, the slightly “black” timing and facial expressions he naturally infused his role with created some of the nicest moments in the show. An Asian male was cast who was not only great, but on the basis of this was cast in subsequent campus productions, was picked up for one of the campus’ leading a cappella groups, and last I heard had toured not only in *Miss Saigon* (where Asian performers have a natural leg up) but in *Rent*. Another Asian required some personal coaching, but ended up being a thoroughly charming presence and developed the confidence to join, and eventually solo in, a campus a cappella group; if she hadn’t been cast in this show she would most likely never have discovered her talent.

Many affirmative-action advocates depict the policy as analogous to this *Nu Stu Revue* (I liked that title!) casting, thereby implying that criticism of such an obviously beneficial and innocent policy must be racist at heart. If the analogy were correct, then criticism of affirmative action would indeed be nipping at best, racist at worst, and usually the latter.

But the analogy is not correct. In real life, affirmative-action policies in admissions at all but the very top schools are as if the staff of the *Nu Stu Revue* had been forced to cast sharply lesser performers, baldly sacrificing merit for diversity. The reality here is unfortunate, but we cannot usefully evaluate the policy—or even understand why one would be necessary—without being aware of it.

As we have seen, the fraction of black students in America each year who make sterling scores on the SAT is a mere few hundred; selective schools typically have admitted black students with scores 150 points or more lower than whites’ and Asians’. Among the twenty-eight schools Bowen and Bok examined in 1989, out of students who scored 1200 to 1249, 60 percent of the blacks were admitted as opposed to just 19 percent of whites; in the 1250–99 bracket, 75 percent of blacks and 24 percent of whites. However one feels about the appropriateness of SATs, those statistics show that we have not been dealing with a mere “thumb on the scale”—and the issue goes deeper than SATs into grades as well. For example, before affirmative action was repealed after the *Hopwood* case at the University of Texas, white students had been drawn from among the very best in the country while black students had had to be drawn from the bottom half of the national pool. At Lowell High School in San Francisco before the fall of 1998, black students constituted 5.6 percent of the student body as the result of an admissions policy which admitted minority students according to lower standards in test scores

and grades. After the admissions committee was barred from using race in its decisions, the proportion of black students admitted fell by more than 50 percent, even despite consideration given to disadvantage and evidence of potential. This was not an unusual case, but a typical one. Bowen and Bok demonstrate through painstaking statistical analysis that to subtract race from the evaluation processes typical of selective schools would send the proportion of blacks and Latinos plunging, and the herculean efforts many universities are putting forth to maintain diversity after racial preferences have been prohibited is further and concrete demonstration that this is the case. Clearly race is hardly merely "one of many factors" in typical affirmative-action admissions policies; it tends strongly to be a factor of disproportionate weight.

The reason that this is the only way good schools can acquire a representative black population is that the culture is shot through so tragically with a wariness of school, but nevertheless the result is that on a great many campuses, the black student population admitted via set-asides are of perceptibly lesser qualification than the students around them.

Thus the question facing us regarding affirmative action in our times is not:

Should we admit black students with top grades and scores over white students with the same credentials, given that racism keeps the numbers of such students low, and given that these students will perform as well as whites once admitted?

Who would have any problem with that? Only the occasional blinkered, hair-splitting letter-of-the-law addict, and surely not even enough of them to matter. However, unfortunately that formulation does not represent the true issue because its facts are wrong. Black students on average do not present grades and scores equivalent to other students; racism plays at best a background role in the disparity; and the students admitted do not generally perform at the level of white ones. Thus the actual question, and the one that I address in this section, is:

Should we admit black students hindered from making top grades and test scores by a tendency to discourage one another from doing so, lent them as a legacy of segregation, with it given that these students will continue their substandard performance for this same reason once admitted?

I believe that the answer to that question is no, for the following four reasons, the last of which is particularly crucial.

The Evils of Affirmative Action

Affirmative Action Creates Private Doubt

White affirmative-action advocates often shrug "What's wrong with it when white students get in because their fathers went there or because they are good athletes?" This misses the point. Nepotism and favors (as well as dumb luck) play a large part in the trajectory of most lives, but these things are distributed randomly throughout the population, and most whites cannot rely upon them. As an *institutionalized* leg up, affirmative action leaves black Americans with the most systematically diluted responsibility for their fate of any group in America. The white student who gets a letter announcing his admission to Duke can go out and celebrate a signal achievement, although the luck of the draw almost always plays some role in a white or Asian person's admission to a school. Can the black middle manager's daughter getting the same letter have the same sense of achievement if her SAT scores and grades would have barred any white or Asian from admission? The truth is no—she can only celebrate having been good enough *among African-American students* to be admitted.

As I have mentioned, minority students often feel no overt stigma from affirmative action. However, the policy nevertheless inherently divests blacks and Latinos of the unalloyed sense of personal, individual responsibility for their accomplishments that other students so often can have. The fact that they tend not to be aware of this follows naturally from the fact that affirmative action bars it from their lives: You don't miss what you never had. However, its absence only nurtures the sense of separation from academic achievement, for the simple reason that so few minorities are allowed to know what it is like to truly attain high credentials and prestigious awards on their own merits. If more minority students were permitted to savor this feeling that we take as the birthright of any white person, then more minorities would likely begin to process quota-based set-asides as the dampeners of initiative that they are.

Affirmative Action Makes Black People Look Unintelligent

With it widely known among a student body that most minority students were admitted with test scores and GPAs which would have barred white and Asian applicants from consideration, it is difficult for many white students to avoid beginning to question the basic mental competence of

black people as a race. This is especially true when most black students are obviously of middle-class background, and even more so when one of the first lessons a white student learns from black students on campus is that it is an insult to assume that all black people grow up with their big brothers chugging forty-ounces of malt liquor in front of the TV set.

A white person need not be a racist to start wondering why black students need affirmative action even when growing up no poorer than they did. Black students could not help wondering the same thing about whites in a situation in which middle-class whites were almost all let in under the bar. Few white students will ever be in a position to key into the subtle cultural dynamics that hinder so many black students from performing at the highest levels on tests and earning the highest grades, especially given the reluctance of affirmative-action advocates to openly discuss such things. This can only leave many young whites with a private suspicion that blacks simply aren't as swift, which will in turn encourage suspicion in black students, and thus perpetuate interracial alienation on campus and undermine the mutual respect that successful integration requires.

Not one but two black friends of mine reported the searing experience of revealing, during one of those late-night freshman-year hallway group discussions, that their test scores and/or GPAs had been lower than the norm for white students, only to have an impolitic white student charge that they had taken someone's place. I could not help noticing that behind the indignation with which they recounted these events was the sad fact that in the end, neither had been able to effectively defend themselves. The old line about alumni children and athletes would only work on the off-chance that the accuser fit into one of these categories (in which case he would be unlikely to open his mouth anyway). Moreover, both of my friends were thoroughly middle class, products of two-parent homes and quality schooling, and thus neither could appeal to classrooms without textbooks or raising three siblings while their single mother cleaned houses. Few undergraduates—or even adults—command the spontaneous rhetorical resources to explain the subtle cultural barriers to scholarly achievement among *middle-class* black children; those with middle-class upbringings are generally barely even aware of these things on a conscious level; and few of those that were would be comfortable directly applying such an analysis to themselves.

Clearly, encounters like these subvert the goal of peaceful integration, and importantly, unexpressed renditions of these encounters lurk underneath interracial contacts campus-wide all year long.

The only way to get rid of the "dumb black" myth is by proving it false. Too often our response is simply to vilify whites as racists for subscribing

to it. This, however, is like someone falsely accused by their spouse of adultery saying "Meanie!" instead of explaining why the charge could not be true. The sad fact is that as often as not these days, black people are left with no better response, because in almost all intellectual endeavors, their participation has been sanctioned on the basis of lesser performance than everyone else's.

Affirmative Action for People Who Have Not Suffered Unique Disadvantage Is Unfair

When affirmative action was aimed at improving the lot of the disenfranchised, then its displacement of some qualified white applicants was thoroughly justifiable in the name of a greater good. However, when aimed at admitting middle-class black children, a great many of whom have suffered on no level any more than a great many white, or especially Asian, students, whites' complaints of reverse discrimination acquire more resonance. The defense that white athletes and children of the wealthy have always been admitted to elite universities under the bar is one thing coming from white people exempt from experiencing the policy themselves, but from black affirmative-action fans it is particularly weak. There is an obvious difference between set-asides for a small sliver of the white undergraduate population and set-asides for the vast majority of the black one—the former addresses certain subsets of the white population while the latter addresses the entire African-American race. Furthermore, the consensus has always held legacy students and substitute athletes with B.A.s in bad odor, and thus to argue that minority students ought be allowed the same privilege does not put us in the best company—two wrongs do not make a right.

Affirmative Action Hinders African Americans from Achieving Parity with Whites

Despite affirmative action having been introduced as a proactive policy aimed at uplifting the race, the fact is that today, it is no longer doing this. The black-white scholastic gap closed steadily until the late 1980s, but since then, black academic performance nationwide, including SAT scores, have plateaued.

The Cause of the Plateau

Many might be tempted to suppose that the reason for this plateau is the persistence of societal racism. However, this point is extremely prob-

lematic. Inner-city schools have gotten worse since the 1980s, but few students from these schools take the SAT. Besides, in searching for an explanation of this plateau, we must also recall that many children with obvious handicaps to success, such as Asian immigrant children, manage to do excellently even in substandard schools. We must also keep in mind that this plateau is composed in part of the vast numbers of black students who continue to do poorly even with all possible support, such as in Shaker Heights or Evanston, Illinois.

I believe that this plateau is evidence that affirmative action has done all that it can to help close the black-white scholastic gap, and constitutes a demonstration that the remainder of the problem lies not in inequity of school funding or societal racism, but elsewhere. In seeking the cause of this plateau, what we seek is a factor that we would expect to disproportionately affect black children of all classes *who go to college*—not simply all black children. That factor is not poor inner-city schools, because that accounts for only a fraction of the black college student population, and it is not racism, because black students continue to lag behind even when there is too little racism in the context to be thought of as a barrier to achievement for a human being with a basic endowment of spiritual resilience.

Along these lines, there is no factor which so obviously fulfills this requirement as the tendency for black students to hold schoolwork at half an arm's length—the Cultural Disconnect discussed in Chapter 3. In this light, what the plateau demonstrates is not racist backlash, but rather that while black students are certainly capable of making a showing, very few feel compelled to reach for the highest bar. This is not a pleasant conclusion, and it is not the one the reigning discourse trains us to give sustained attention to. However, how strongly a devaluation of school permeates black youth culture regardless of class has been so richly documented in academic studies, journalistic investigations, and endless personal anecdotes from black people across the country that one could only dismiss it as a factor—a *central factor*—out of a resistance to any but certain dictated factors as worthy of serious consideration.

A Policy Working Against Itself

In this light, the maintenance of affirmative action nothing less than hinders the completion of the very task it was designed to accomplish, because it deprives black students of a basic incentive to reach for that highest bar. If every black student in the country knows that not even the

most selective schools in the country require the very top grades or test scores of black students, that fine universities just below this level will readily admit them with even a B+/B dossier by virtue of their "leadership qualities" or "spark," and that even just a better-than-decent application file will grant them admission to solid second-tier selective schools, then what incentive is there for any but the occasional highly driven black student to devote his most deeply committed effort to school?

I can attest, for example, that in secondary school I quite deliberately refrained from working to my highest potential because I knew that I would be accepted to even top universities without doing so. Almost any black child knows from an early age that there is something called affirmative action which means that black students are admitted to schools under lower standards than white; I was aware of this at at least the age of ten. And so I was quite satisfied to make B+'s and A-'s rather than the A's and A+'s I could have made with a little extra time and effort. Granted, having the knack for school that I did, I was lucky that my less-than-optimum efforts still put me within reach of fine schools. However, there is no reason that the same sentiment would not operate even in black students who happen to be less nerdy than I was, especially given that a great many black students, just as a great many others, do not plan to attend top schools for financial and other reasons. It is also significant that one study has shown that black students (even middle-class ones) are less concerned that their school performance will affect their later chances in life than white ones. In general, one could think of few better ways to depress a race's propensity for pushing itself to do its best in school than a policy ensuring that less-than-best efforts will have a disproportionately high yield. Imagine telling a Martian who expressed an interest in American educational policy: "We allow whites in only if they have a GPA of 3.7 or above and an SAT of 1300 or above. We let blacks in with a GPA of 3.0 and an SAT of 900. Now, what we have been pondering for years now is why black students continue to submit higher grades and scores than this so rarely." Well, mercy me—what a perplexing problem!

It all comes down to this. Quite often we hear that black students underperform because teachers do not require enough of them. If this is true, then we must ask: Isn't it a direct contradiction of expecting the most of students to permanently exempt them from true competition? A response might be that when not enough has been expected of them, then colleges must adjust by "acknowledging" this. But even here: keep-

ing college entrance requirements lowered is in itself a very part of educating young black children amidst lowered expectations!

Pouring Water on a Drowning Man

I intend no criticism of black students in my argument here. As I have noted, the Anti-intellectual strain in black culture results from a race having spent centuries in poverty and disenfranchisement, all but denied education by the dominant group. This separation from the scholarly/left the culture particularly susceptible to a rejection of school as "other," as Separatist ideology encouraged a focus upon what black culture already had, which unfortunately was only a marginal scholarly tradition, and a wariness of white culture, which unfortunately for us, included school. Hypotenuses, *Little Dorrit*, the opposite of *obfuscate*—to most students of any color these kinds of thing are not exactly comfort food. But to most black students, they are not only "school stuff," but "white stuff." That sentiment, even in a small dose, has a decisive impact.

There is nothing willful about black students' lesser school performance. That being the case, it remains that permanent affirmative action is *particularly* pernicious for a race with this particular history and this particular cultural baggage. Affirmative action has done a fine job of remedying the extent of the problem that was due to societal injustice. However, the increasing number of newspaper articles about middle-class black students clustering in the lowest percentiles of their high schools are telling us something, and it is not that the Klan still lurk behind every tree. What they are telling us is that to run that last mile, black American students need one simple thing, and that is the incentive to do so—especially in the context of the Cultural Disconnect from learning that distinguishes the race affirmative action was designed to help.

It is a general principle in life that in bringing a person up to par, there is a point at which the net must be taken away, because only then is one presented with an incentive vivid enough to spur the development of top-level skill. A parent often teaches a child to ride a bicycle without training wheels by holding the bike up and pushing the child along for a while. This gives the child a sense of the basic lay of the land, but as we all remember, there comes a point when Dad pushes you down the hill to ride by yourself for the first time. Then, and only then, do you master the subtle muscular poise that allows you to stay magically balanced and rolling along. Looking back, you realize that gaining that sense would have been quite impossible without having taken that first plunge; only

when the danger of falling down looms do your mind and body avidly seek the interplay to avoid it. The only way that birds learn to fly is to be nudged gently out of the nest; they keep flapping and learn how to do it right because otherwise they fall. The only way to acquire true fluency in a foreign language is to immerse yourself in a situation where you must speak it all day long, where the only way to have meaningful human contact is to speak well. The level one achieves is lower to the extent that one has the opportunity to revert to one's native language when it becomes necessary to express a thought that requires a bit of effort to render. Along the same lines, black students simply cannot get beyond the average level they post today in a situation where Dad remains trotting alongside holding the bike.

It is for these reasons that affirmative action is best thought of as an emergency measure, doing great harm for the sake of a greater good just as the ravages of chemotherapy and radiation treatment are worth the benefit of killing a tumor. The harms of affirmative action—sowing self-doubt, giving the appearance of dimness, displacing equally qualified whites, and most importantly, the blunting of incentive—were worth giving black students access to earning power and contact with the mainstream in the aftermath of the Civil Rights revolution. However, the harms remain and are extremely unhealthy, and in the meantime, after thirty years, with black access to earning power and contact with the mainstream well established and in no danger of decreasing, affirmative action in university admissions has outlived its usefulness. It now interferes with a goal in the pursuit of equality every bit as important as earning power and interracial contact—closing the black-white scholastic gap.

Benefits from Eliminating Affirmative Action

The demise of affirmative action is particularly crucial to the thesis I have explored in this book because in withdrawing the four evils above, it would be invaluable in working against all of the three currents I have discussed.

Combating Victimology

Victimology is at heart an expression of insecurity, which compensates for inner self-doubt by calling attention to faults in others. At heart, in a context of increasingly marginal victimization, to focus on this more

than, or even as much as, upon progress only conveys satisfaction to a person whose pride is damaged to an extent that makes this more comfortable than active self-realization.

As we have seen, Victimology is particularly prevalent among black leaders, and leaders come disproportionately from the educated population. The elimination of affirmative action could, therefore, help to intercept Victimology at a crucial formative stage in future black leaders' lives. If every black student on a selective college campus were admitted according to the same criteria as other students, it would help to erode lingering feelings of inferiority to whites, and lessen the drive to assuage this by taking refuge in dwelling unduly upon vestiges of victimhood and passing this on to children. Black students often come to a selective campus wary that white students suspect them of being affirmative-action admits and thus not equally qualified. A simple solution would be to eliminate the policy that makes the white students' suspicion—let's face it—usually correct.

Combating Separatism

One of the many harms of affirmative action has always been that it reinforces the black cultural sense that to embrace school for more than utilitarian reasons is a "white" thing to do. Under affirmative action, most black students on a given campus have been admitted with grades and test scores that reflect, to some degree, this sense of separation from The Books. As a result, black communities on these campuses become a realm where high scholarly achievement is, if not devalued completely, weighted perceptibly less than on the rest of the campus. These students then graduate having been immersed in this cultural meme in the vital crucible during which they become adults, with this cultural meme living on even in black people of power and influence. The result is phenomena such as Afrocentric History and the Ebonics controversy.

A black student body where each student had been admitted with qualifications commensurate with other students' would be one where this sense of separation would not rule the day. Year after year of similar black student bodies on dozens of the nation's selective campuses would lead to an ever-growing black leadership class who operated free of this particular cultural baggage. Providing all black high-school students with the incentive to reach for the highest bar would work against the Separatist orientation toward school in general, by establishing a situation where to the extent that one gives in to this tendency, one's chances

of admission to a good school are diminished to the same extent that they are for all students.

Furthermore, black students who have overcome the cultural barrier to school by having to devote themselves to it wholeheartedly are generally those who become less hardened in a sense that mainstream culture is an outside realm. I have known many black students, including myself, who have found it difficult to maintain a foothold in the campus' black community while also participating in mainstream activities like the general campus drama scene (as opposed to just the one or two black plays done each year), writing for the campus newspaper, or any activity outside of the expressly black-oriented realm. Not only is there a subtle pressure within the black community against such participation, but because so few black students take part in these activities, one's social circles gradually change by sheer force of frequency and depth of contact. A campus where black students were more open to a bicultural orientation would be one where this balkanization tendency would be lessened.

Combating Anti-intellectualism

If black students were finally required to submit the same quality of application to selective campuses as everyone else, then this incentive to immerse themselves in their work with the brand of commitment that earns top grades, would usher many of them out of the modes of thought that help to limit the race: a preference for inference based on established truths rather than "out of the box" innovation, and a leanness of precision. Both of these factors are at the very heart of the purpose of education itself, and too often, black students are deprived of the incentive to become comfortable with this kind of thinking.

Claude Steele's work on black students' "stereotype threat," based on a study where black performance on tests suffered when requiring specification of race or when billed as measuring ability, is also pertinent here. This study has attracted a great deal of attention, and although I do not believe that confidence is the key issue here, for those who do, an important question is: What possible solution could there be to that particular problem? Here, for example, is Claude Steele's summation in one paper on "stereotype threat":

To explain African American students' underachievement as a byproduct of either socioeconomic conditions or "black cul-

ture" offers little realistic basis for improving the situation. Our analysis uncovers a social and psychological predicament that is rife in the standardized testing environment, but, as our manipulations illustrate, is amenable to change.

The "manipulations" Steele refers to consist in large part of deemphasizing that the test measures ability (the race aspect of Steele's findings is actually but a fraction of the actual study). The question is how this translates from the realm of the psychological study into practice. In a quest to bring a race to parity with whites—and that is what we are, and must be, engaged in—is it really the most appropriate solution to *disaccustom* its members to competition rather than *accustom* them to it? It is unclear that the way to prepare a group to compete is to shield them from the fact that they are competing, and one cannot help but detect the Separatist sentiment that "black" is cosmically different here, as usual dehumanizing people of massive potential.

The only way to build confidence is to achieve, with no more but no fewer challenges to doing so than one's peers. It would be a relief if there were some other way, but there simply is not. Along those lines, to allow black students to compete would be the single most effective way of combating whatever extent "stereotype threat" holds black students back—for the simple reason that there exists no other way. Even Claude Steele himself agrees "through the back door." In a recent article, he advises that "stereotype threat" be addressed by letting black students know that they are being subjected to high standards and that it is thought that they can reach them. Steele advises this as a specific corrective aimed at nudging black students away from a sense that teachers consider them unintelligent. I do not believe that this factor—i.e., racism—is significant in black students' overall performance, but Steele's proposed solution, regardless of its motivation, is not only the best one but the only one—call it a different path to the mountaintop.

The Liberal Consensus on Affirmative Action:
Back to Three-Fifths of a Man

The Shape of the River Indeed

In my entire lifetime, I have never experienced anything more profoundly vexing than the thesis of William Bowen and Derek Bok's *The*

Shape of the River, namely that affirmative action has been proven to be a good policy worthy of open-ended preservation because most of its beneficiaries are now happy with their lives and content with their jobs. Every smug, fawning review I read of this book was as irritating as an eyelash in my eye, and reading the book I had to pause several times to avoid throwing it across the room.

Bowen and Bok breezily presume that the disadvantages I have mentioned—high-achieving blacks never sure whether they deserve their success and generally assumed not to, blacks looking and feeling stupid, blacks never knowing the test of real competition, blacks having no incentive to put forth their best efforts—are somehow unimportant in view of the fact that their interviewees who were admitted to universities under set-aside policies are now happy campers. Given their intent, however, Bowen and Bok ironically reveal an aspect of racism that does remain in our society, what I call the racism of neglect.

Indeed, only a fundamental sense that black people are somehow not whole, the sense that makes it so hard to imagine any black person representing "the American," can explain the blithe complacency of these authors and their fans in the face of the ills I and many others have described. It's easy to talk about permanent set-asides for people who are not your own. Only a sense that they are not "your own" could keep people from processing the plot, the stain that a policy like affirmative action is when restricted to a particular race, especially one too damaged by a sense of spiritual distance from learning for learning's sake to see the harm of it themselves.

Bowen and Bok, with their careful tables and dutiful acknowledgment of the black grade/score lag camouflaging the profound ideological bias of their approach, cannot imagine how it feels for me to read them telling me that the children I will have by 2020 ought be held to a lower academic standard because my father was not allowed to fly planes in the navy in 1944, because one or two white women will hold their purses closer as they pass, or because the occasional teacher won't call on them as much as they call on the perky white girl sitting next to them. Jews, offered such treatment in 1920, would have been insulted and would have made every effort to prove it unnecessary. Blacks tend not to, for reasons we have seen, but how are we to feel when the brightest, and supposedly most empathetic, of our country's leaders sanction this? Of course they consider their very take on all of this to demonstrate their empathy—but let's face it: A person you excuse from any genuine challenge is a person you do not truly respect.

One wants to ask people like Bowen and Bok: Could they say the same about their own children? Ronald Dworkin, erudite legal scholar, tells us in his review of the book in *The New York Review of Books* that the concerns of an elite minority amidst the group shouldn't matter—i.e., that my discomfort with affirmative action as a black who doesn't need it is unimportant compared to the benefits it offers most blacks. Very nice, but if Jews had been given affirmative action in the 1930s, just imagine having told American-born Jews of letters, chafing under the condescension inherent in affirmative action, that their sense of denigration was not to be heeded because immigrant Jews considered the policy to have "helped them" and made them feel "welcome"! (Interestingly, American-born working-class Jews would not have needed affirmative action to post-representative numbers in good schools, because their history did not condition the emergence of a set of ideologies to turn Jews away from learning.) Dworkin says that even privileged blacks should be recruited under the bar to provide "diversity" even when they have few identifiable black cultural traits—because even this is a lesson for white students. Again, though, what about the meaning of this in the lives of these "diverse" people as individuals, as human beings? The withdrawal of incentive to succeed that this conditions in these "diverse" people? What about how this exemption from competition infects the psychology of a race? Suppose we told Ronald Dworkin that his children were to be admitted to all schools below their standards in order to serve as an object lesson to gentiles?

What Bowen, Bok, and Dworkin fail to address is this simple fact: Content and financially stable though their affirmative-action beneficiaries are, their children are continuing to post the lowest grades and test scores in the United States. Bowen and Bok appear aware that the middle-class status of these children would lead us to expect that they would no longer need the policy that their parents did, but they dwell upon this issue only briefly and consider it of little consequence. To justify the *institution* of affirmative action on the basis of how deeply established racism was in this country in the 1960s, as these authors do, is unexceptionable. However, in failing to even conceive as an issue worthy of address whether or not the policy should continue in an America so vastly different from that of the 1960s reveals nothing less than a concept of black people as essentially less than whole.

Another example of this kind of unintentional but pernicious dehumanization of the black American race is sociologist Nathan Glazer's widely touted *volte-face* on affirmative action in 1998, aired in several publications. Previously notorious for his disapproval of the policy long

before California's Proposition 209 and similar movements this inspired in other states, Glazer announced that he had decided that the policy was justified on the basis that America "owes" black people exemption from serious competition as recompense for centuries of oppression.

To the extent that Glazer implies that most black Americans remain hindered from admission to good schools by concrete barriers of opportunity, he is operating according to the Victimologist perspective: the black America of 1965, a heartbeat away from institutionalized segregation and discrimination, is a place vastly different from the black America of 1998 three generations later. It is not enough to mention that ghettos persist or that more minority students go to poor schools than white ones. One would like to ask Glazer to take a look at the black students at his university, Harvard, and identify precisely what barriers—other than barriers suffered just as often by white students—they have encountered to doing their academic best.

To the extent that Glazer is urging us to impose a policy upon today's black students out of a desire to atone for what was done to their ancestors, he is dehumanizing these students, casting them as mythic victims on the basis of a historical legacy as if we were writing a play, rather than grappling with living, breathing human beings in the present tense. The question is not how we relieve good-thinking people like Glazer of their guilt for the historical misdeeds of their race, but how we bring present-day black people into equality with whites. The guiding mistake of people like Glazer is the misconception that these two things are one and the same. There is no logical guarantee that what accomplishes the former will also accomplish the latter, and given a choice, it is the latter that is our business at hand.

Despite the august credentials and beneficent intentions of scholars like William Bowen, Derek Bok, Ronald Dworkin, and Nathan Glazer, their positions on affirmative action are ultimately informed by what Shelby Steele in *A Dream Deferred* identifies as a drive to redeem themselves rather than help black people. *The Shape of the River* ultimately sounds uncomfortably like Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein telling blacks to be satisfied with being athletes in *The Bell Curve*. Good, concerned white people: Do not turn human beings into pawns in a sociological experiment that will not personally affect any of your nearest and dearest. If you really believe black people are "fellow Americans," treat them as such. To people like William Bowen, Derek Bok, Ronald Dworkin, and Nathan Glazer, I say "Thank you for your concern, but you are selling us short."

Diversity

While my discussion of affirmative action has focused on grade/score disparity and the crucial issue of incentive, on the ground these are generally treated as background issues at best, with the dominant one being "diversity" on campus. Since the "diversity" justification was established with the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* decision in 1978, the affirmative-action issue has been couched so consistently and insistently on these terms that a generation of black students has grown up only dimly aware that the concept was developed as a rather strained apology for lowered standards.

The prioritization of this "Wee Pals" vision of multiethnicity is so deeply felt that, as I noted, the outside observer could easily miss in most public discussions of the issue that there is a performance gap between black and white students at all. However, within a context of evaluating the crucial issue of whether affirmative action is closing the black/white performance gap, this fig-leaf appropriation of a nominally innocent concept becomes a hindrance to intelligent and progressive engagement with the issue. The sad fact is that on top college campuses, "diversity" comes at a price: the levels of "diversity" to which we have become accustomed are impossible without admitting most minority students under the bar.

Many suppose that given a choice between consistent excellence and "diversity," the latter ought to win out. When most blacks faced true barriers to achievement, there was a case for this, and "diversity" helped for about twenty years: the black-white gap is narrower than it was in 1970. However, the gap stopped closing ten years ago, and as such, "diversity" is no longer serving our purpose and has thus fossilized into a manipulative and counterproductive fashion statement. To continue to argue for "diversity" as a *priority* reveals a lack of sincere interest in raising black students to the performance level of whites. It is time now to put excellence rather than headcounts first because exposing black students to serious competition is the only way to start them on the path to closing the black-white gap once and for all.

To be sure, there would be an unpleasant by-product of this approach. The number of minority students admitted to selective universities would at first go down. There is a strong tendency to frantically reject this prospect as "resegregation," but this hyperbole sells minority students short. The black-white scholastic lag is not small, but it is hardly so hideously vast that no minority students, or even just a handful, are eligible for admission to good schools. For example, the total of black students admitted to Berkeley after the ban on preferences took effect

was 43 percent less than the previous year's. That is hardly a wonderful contrast, but it must be noted that the fall was by less than half. What's more, this same year, black admissions *increased* at three second-tier but solid University of California schools (Santa Cruz, Irvine, and Riverside). In general, after the bans on using racial preferences in admissions in California and Texas, minority admissions went down in only six out of seventy-four schools.

In the meantime, we must also avoid the "Yale or jail" myth, under which black students and professors indignantly defend black students' "right" to attend top schools with the implication that their ready admission to solid second-tier schools is a complete nonissue. The black students not admitted to the very top schools would easily be admitted to any number of solid second-tier ones. It is often argued that the top schools are virtually the only path to the most prestigious jobs, but this is not borne out by the facts. One does not wind up in a trailer park or working at Radio Shack because one attended Rutgers instead of Princeton; I, for example, got my B.A. from Rutgers and nevertheless have done pretty well for myself. More concretely, of today's African-American congressmen, army officers, people earning Ph.D.s from 1992 to 1996, MacArthur Foundation genius award winners of 1981 through 1988, and top fifty business officials, none but a sliver attended top-rated selective colleges. Surely Harvard connections do not hurt, but just as surely, such credentials are but one of several factors that determine the position in life one obtains.

What I See: Affirmative Action as an Experience

Bowen and Bok associate affirmative action with the black managers and professionals filling out their questionnaires. Despite how deeply offended I have been by this book and its reception, I do, in my calmer moments, understand how they could feel this way, especially since for them, affirmative action has been a policy rather than an experience.

Affirmative action summons other associations in me, however. It is too easy to lose sight of the human aspect of this policy, so often do we see it discussed via charts, tables, thought experiments, musings on the nature of democracy, and fig-leaf defenses like "diversity." One sad story will illustrate how affirmative action perpetuates the very situation it was designed to address.

Beyond the Checking Account: An Affirmative-Action Case Study

A black graduate student came to a prestigious university department as a visiting student under the wing of a new professor, who he had be-

gun working with at another school. He was soon admitted officially to the department, but his work was consistently so below the standard of the other students' that it became sadly apparent that his admission had been a mistake. The usual practice in such cases was for a student to be asked to leave the program, but this was not done in this case. During the first year or two, there was perhaps a case for giving a black student a longer tether than usual, especially since it is not unheard of for a white graduate student to start slow but gradually blossom. However, the case became more tenuous as the years passed.

For one, his admission to the department had already been a second chance, his having come with the new professor because of having been asked to leave the department at the previous school. In any case, during the student's fifth year (and sixth in the field), while the other students who had come in at the same time were finishing their dissertations, the student was still working on one of the two test-run papers required for even being officially admitted to the stage of writing a dissertation, and a spoken presentation he gave based on the paper was extremely under-researched for someone who had been in the field for such a long time.

Yet at this very point this student was picked up for a tenure-track job in an African-American Studies department before even beginning his dissertation. Since (unlike the other students in his class) he had yet to publish any articles in journals and had yet to make any mark in his area, it was obvious that his hiring was based not on demonstrated ability but simply on his being a black student at a top school—when, recall, even his admission to the top school had itself not been based on having demonstrated ability commensurate with its standards. It is highly unlikely that a white person with so few credentials would be hired for a tenure-track position in any department. This African-American Studies faculty gave a stark demonstration of the sense of separation from the academic inherent to black American culture, which can lead even educated blacks to give academic qualification distinctly low weighting in the name of racial solidarity.

The student did not finish his dissertation until over three years into the professorial post, thus having required ten years to complete the doctoral program where most of the students in his class had required five, and the dissertation was less than half the average length of a dissertation in the field. Furthermore, while most graduate students begin attending conferences in their subfield as a vital part of becoming experts in their topic, this person at this writing has never attended a conference in his subfield, nor published an article about his chosen topic in a journal.

Yet this student was bright, and furthermore there were no indications that cultural conflict was the problem. He was of solidly middle-class background and quite comfortable in white company; in fact, his significant other was white. Neither was there anything in his work of a politically controversial nature which one might expect to skew outside judgments and expectations. However, if there is one thing that academic work requires, it is a brand of obsession with one's topic, and it was clear that what held this student back was simply that he lacked this obsession. One never got the sense that he had a burning interest in his work or a passion for the general subject; one would have been hard put to say of him that he was "crazy about linguistics." It is quite likely that the African-American sense of separation from "the book thing" was a major factor here as well. As I have said, this factor only expresses itself explicitly in the inner city; elsewhere, it exerts a subtler effect, but is often damning all the same. This student obviously had enough interest in the subject to apply to graduate programs; however, when push came to shove, cultural baggage played its hand and eternally tainted his genuine interest in reaching for the top. Indeed, I once heard that his family were not particularly supportive of his career plans. This is hard (members of my extended family weren't crazy about my career choice either), but the die was cast, and the fact remains: there are hundreds of things this person could have done with his life with glittering success, but the particular business of being an academic was obviously just not his bag.

It is white students in just this awkward position who are usually asked to leave graduate programs, and most report feeling, ultimately, relieved at having had an understandably difficult but necessary decision made for them after semesters of private doubt and pain. I strongly suspect this student would have felt similarly. I doubt if there was ever an explicit resolution by the department's faculty to grant this student a doctorate in the name of "diversity," but the sentiment was obviously decisive even if latent—a couple of white students during these years were asked to leave when it was clear that the program was not suited to them. More specifically, it is very likely that these well-intentioned and highly enlightened white people, Carefully Taught the Victimologist message as well as blacks often are, privately felt that to dismiss this student would render them "part of the problem."

As a result, they granted this student the status of being their peer. Yet the benefit of having exempted this student from the evaluation standards of other students in the name of "diversity" is unclear. Partly out of an inevitable sense of scholarly inferiority to the other students, the stu-

dent kept to himself to the point of being a social unknown quantity to the department, never attending talks by invited speakers (another vital part of graduate training) or social gatherings. His work was too sparse and, unfortunately, poor to contribute "another perspective," or indeed any perspective, to the discipline. Furthermore, the low quality of this work cannot be said to have been the best source of ushering the white students in the department, or the white colleagues he will meet today, into accepting African Americans as intellectual equals. In addition, allowing this student to continue on the basis of substandard work prevented him from ever raising the quality of his work to the general standard, and his being nevertheless hired for a professional position before beginning his dissertation took him away from regular tutelage by advisers and thus froze him at this level.

Most seriously, however: As a professor in an African-American Studies department, this person, even with the best of intentions, cannot help but now pass along his level of competence and expectation to new *black* students—reinforcing them in the sense that top-level competence is somehow alien to blackness. Meanwhile, what will he contribute to showing his white and Asian students that black professors are as competent as others?

Of course, if this student's advisors had required suitable work from him before granting him a Ph.D., he would probably not have been up to it. I reiterate that the problem was not innate ability but a lifetime's cultural conditioning. In response, however, many might argue that our job is to "work with" students like this to override the effects of the culture. I would argue, however, that attempts to transform deeply ingrained cultural traits in matured individuals works too rarely to be a realistic social policy. Moreover, as we have seen, the motivation for reaching for the highest bar in college is mitigated in black students by the fact that post-graduate programs stand waiting to snap up any black student who has done better than okay. Our task is to work on the culture from the bottom up. Along these lines, the solution with this student was certainly not to simply grant him a hollow degree. Was the color of this student's skin really worth all of his pain, worth white faculty and students inevitably being reinforced in associating black people with scholarly mediocrity, or worth the fact that this person can now only perpetuate the very cause of the lag in black students' scholarly achievement?

It is extremely unpleasant to tell such a story. Most important, however, far from being static or marginal fallout, this story is by no means an unusual one in the affirmative-action climate in graduate schools

since the late 1960s, as the result of the assumption that the categories of blackness and disadvantage overlap much more than they do, and that disadvantage is the only reason black children fail to excel in school. A great many university professors have similar tales to tell, and I have chosen only one of many I have seen or heard about. At least some such stories must be told for the greater good of assessing affirmative action in admissions with true honesty.

Pulling the Ladder Up After Me?: Affirmative Action in My Life

One of the most damning condemnations of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas's stance against affirmative action is considered to be that he benefited from it himself, but now wants to deny it to blacks who come after him. This has always struck me as a curious argument. Obviously Thomas came to disapprove of the policy as he matured. However, the consensus appears to be that having benefited from this policy somehow makes it immoral to openly give voice to logical conclusions that lead you in later life to question its wisdom, even if your reasons for questioning it are based on a concern for the well-being of the race. This simply does not follow, and what Thomas's detractors are demonstrating is a deafness to the very notion that affirmative action could be questioned; because they see it as a moral absolute, they can only see spitefulness in Thomas's opposition. Nevertheless, in stating my views I open myself to the same charge that I am "pulling the ladder up after me."

In response, I should note that despite my casual attitude toward affirmative action in secondary school, in college I came to feel diminished by the assumption that I had "struggled" thus far, given that I quite simply had not. I have been lucky enough to grow up in the post-Civil Rights Movement era, in a solidly middle-class home, attending excellent private schools. Certainly I have encountered racism here and there, but none that interfered with my advancement any more than any number of things interfered with that of most white people I know. As such, I do not consider myself to have jumped any sociological hurdles worth mentioning, and for this reason, the notion of being granted any position worth having on the basis of my pigment cells rather than my efforts strikes me as an insult. Furthermore, this is not a mere matter of abstract principle along the lines of avoiding eating beef as a protest against how cows are raised and killed. For me it has been a quite spontaneous and visceral sense of injury.

Yet affirmative action is almost impossible for an upwardly mobile black person to avoid, whatever their life circumstances have been. I was accepted into the Stanford linguistics program, for example, with a fellowship. As time went by, I learned that while I had been competitive within the top twenty out of about a hundred prospective students, that my lack of prior experience in the field and imprecise intentions of specialty at the time would have kept me from making the final cut under normal circumstances, and that my making the final cut of eight was due to my color. (I was told this by my black advisor, himself seeing this as healthy and unexceptional.) I also soon found out that my fellowship was a minority fellowship, which had also made the decision to admit me easier. Of course, I did make the top twenty, and that is not nothing at Stanford. However, all of this still meant that I had gotten a leg up in the name of my contribution to a headcount.

Now, of course, the best thing I could say is that once I found out that I had unwittingly allowed myself to be an affirmative-action beneficiary, I should have withdrawn from the department, packed my bags, and moved back across the country. However, at the time my opposition to affirmative action was not principled enough to lead me to weight my discomfort so heavily as to turn me away from such a valuable opportunity. Instead, I went ahead and earned my degree, but I was never able to be as proud of getting into Stanford as my classmates could be. After all, growing up as I did, how much of an achievement can I truly say it was to have been a good enough *black* person to be admitted, while my colleagues had been considered good enough *people* to be admitted?

The omnipresence of affirmative action makes it particularly difficult to avoid when one's livelihood and personal happiness are on the line. When I went out on the job market, prospects were extremely tight. In addition, as a big-city boy I feel helplessly stranded in small towns, and for social reasons, at the time leaving California would have been extremely painful. As it happened, the only life choice available to me that would allow me to combine my career with spiritual contentment was applying for a postdoctoral fellowship at UC Berkeley dedicated to minorities. Especially given the grave thought of not getting any paid position, I went ahead and applied for this, and got it.

The problem here is that I was chosen not as one of the best applicants, but as one of the best minority applicants, and this is inherently a demotion. On paper, the minority fellowships are chosen according to standards as rigorous as the others, the goal being simply to make sure that minorities are proportionately represented among the grantees in-

stead of their numbers having to depend on the vagaries of chance in the general pool, as they would even in the complete absence of racism. However, the very requirement that every year a certain number of grantees be minorities automatically renders the minority fellowship less competitive. In a given year there may well not be a minority application that would make the final cut in a general contest; a special minority fellowship guarantees that if no such application exists, then second-tier ones will be accepted alongside the first-tier ones from the general pool. Sure, this will be true some years, not true in others—but the general conclusion this leads to is that getting the minority fellowship does not require the grade of excellence that getting the general one does, at least not as consistently—and therefore, again, in general, not. Furthermore, competition was also lower within the minority pool simply because there were fewer applications from minorities. What all of this means is that I may well not have gotten a fellowship if I had applied within the general pool.

At this same time, I was also hired by the Linguistics Department at Cornell University (I postponed taking the position for a year while I did the postdoctoral fellowship). Even here, however, affirmative action got me a plum position I would not have gotten otherwise, leaving the ratio of luck to merit much higher in my appointment than it would have been for a white person. The faculty had originally wanted to hire one person, but found themselves split down the middle as to whether to hire me or someone else. Ordinarily they would either have hired no one or had to keep the tense dialogue going until they could finally get a substantial majority in favor of one of us (a mere tie-breaker would not have been sufficient). However, in this case they did not have to do either, because there was a salary fund specially earmarked for minorities. This allowed them to hire two new professors while only paying one salary out of department funds.

The faculty themselves are hardly to be blamed. But the fact that my hiring was made possible by a fund set aside for people of my skin color could not help but give my attainment of the post an air of the consolation prize. Many would tell me that I would not have been hired if I had not been deemed worthy of Cornell. But the fact is that everybody else on the faculty had been hired according to either unanimous, or at least close to unanimous, support from their colleagues. The minority salary fund was beneficial in allowing the faculty to satisfy everybody by hiring two people, but it also meant that I was hired without the usual level of support. In addition, it was obvious that if they had had to make one

choice, the other professor, whose research focus fit theirs perfectly, would certainly have been hired over me, whose work was anticipated as helping add variety to the department's offerings.

True, it can be argued that the faculty's split was due to internal politics over what kind of linguist the department needed at the time rather than my inherent qualifications. But under ordinary circumstances, the person hired by an elite department is the one whose qualifications were deemed not only sufficient in themselves, but of such compelling value to that particular department that one side was committed enough to push their case hard enough to change most of the minds of the other side, and of enough value that those minds could be changed. Tales of how a compelling majority of department members were eventually swayed to vote for a particular professor's hiring are common on university grapevines.

My hiring at Cornell, however, was not one of those stories: Instead, the minority fund allowed me to satisfy the preferences of a subset of the faculty particularly committed to the department embarking on different tracks of the sort my work represented. As it happened, a few months into the school year I found myself in the center of a civil war along the fault line between this subset and the rest of the department, which led to an acrimonious administrative cleavage. My support, it turned out, had been part of a gradual preparation for the founding of a break-off department of questionable philosophical foundation, viewed by most observers in the field as a mistake, and which has since been reincorporated into the Linguistics Department proper. Okay, the people in this subdepartment may have valued me highly; the judgment calls here are rich and subtle. But ultimately, who would you rather be: the professor hired because the heart of an elite department saw him as a natural addition to their ranks, or me, the professor hired because his color allowed him, out of many people qualified, to be hired as a sop to a dissatisfied contingent, preparing to use him as capital in a vitriolic secession? Which one of us two applicants today, as human beings, can take more pride in his accomplishment?

Berkeley's Linguistics Department then hired me on a permanent basis, in a joint appointment with the African-American Studies Department. I can definitely say that my hiring was based on merit rather than the Linguistics Department's desire to have a black face around (there already was one if African counts as "black"), and naturally no such factor played a role in my hiring by the African-American Studies Department. However, the fact remains that the department would have had no

way of coming to know me and my work without my having gotten the postdoctoral appointment.

So there I was in one of the top positions in American linguistics, with the moderate teaching load, vast library facilities, ample extra funding opportunities, summers off, and societal prestige inherent to such a job, and in the gorgeous and culturally rich Bay Area to boot. Meanwhile, I watched my white equivalents having to spend at least a year and often more in temporary positions in locations they would not have chosen, getting jobs with more required teaching and fewer perks than mine, or sometimes never being lucky enough to find a job at all. Everyone I know in linguistics is polite enough to refrain from pointing this out, but the fact is that no matter how you slice it, affirmative action repeatedly saved me from coping with the rigors of the job market.

When I mention my discomfort with these sequences of events, whites always affectionately dismiss this with, "Well, John, your work is certainly the equal of everyone else's." But this is not the point. Regardless of the sincere good intentions behind Stanford's, Cornell's, and Berkeley's affirmative-action policies, the simple fact is that if I were white, I would probably not have my current job. Granted, if I were not "of Berkeley caliber" as it is often put on campus, I would not have gotten the postdoctoral fellowship, and definitely would not have been hired. But there are plenty of white linguists out there of "Berkeley caliber" teaching four English composition classes a day at community colleges. Affirmative action neatly shielded me from at any point being judged *solely* on the basis of my "caliber" until Berkeley hired me permanently—Stanford accepted me as a "diverse" person and funded me with minority set-asides; the Berkeley postdoctoral fellowship separated minorities from the general pool; Cornell hired me along with someone else since I could be paid with minority set-aside funds. And then, Berkeley would never have known I was available to be hired if it were not for the postdoctoral fellowship. As such, affirmative action has spread its tentacles throughout my entire career, dulling my personal responsibility for my achievements by mixing jolly boosts into my life path while everybody else's fate was determined by the usual combination of competence and the eternal caprices of fate.

The racial preference policies that got me my job gave me help I did not deserve, while doing nothing to help black people whose lives really had barred them from doing their best. The very institution and preservation of these set-aside programs shows that racism no longer plays any significant role in admissions, and given that it does not, these policies

needlessly shield black scholars from the highest grades of competition. Despite their beneficial intention, in the end, these policies serve but one purpose: validating the white faculty and administrators who promulgated them in their lack of racial prejudice. Certainly their deliberate intention is to help; I intend no cynicism in making that charge. But what has been lost sight of is that one does not help, but harms, a race by exempting its members from ever knowing the concrete and unalloyed sense of accomplishment that comes from winning as a result of one's best personal efforts.

I am often congratulated on my career, but the sad fact is that as much as I enjoy my job in many ways, I will never get beyond the sense of diminishment in having gotten it to such an extent "through the back door." I got tenure after four and a half years instead of seven, having been rather obsessively productive and having become rather well-known in my specialty. Yet it was perfectly obvious that in the back of most minds was "Of course he got tenure—they wouldn't dare deny tenure to a black person unless he was hopeless," and they were quite right. Especially after Proposition 209, most Berkeley faculty and administrators are devoted passionately to maintaining "minority representation" in all ways possible. This sense of "diversity" under siege cannot help but have played some part in evaluating my tenure file. After Proposition 209, to require anything but basic competence and then some of an African-American professor to give them tenure? Hello? For most young professors, getting tenure is a signal achievement calling for champagne. For me, frankly, it meant a nice raise, because I could have gotten tenure with a lot less work than I did and everybody knows it.

As it happens, I am secure in the fact that in the end I am qualified for my job, although this is something I must generate internally, since my having obtained my position was due so much less to this than it would have been if I were white. At the very least, my department did not hire me in an explicit search for a black professor. And the sad and simple fact is that, as anyone who knows me will attest, I was born to do this job—I cannot imagine what else I would do. However, it will always dampen my sense of accomplishment that my color played as much of a part in my getting here as my abilities. Today, I deeply regret having applied for that minority postdoctoral fellowship, and I consider it my duty to work against tokenism infecting the life trajectories of future members of my race as it has mine.

I am fully aware that my sentiments do not represent those of most black "beneficiaries" of affirmative action. Most middle-class black peo-

ple with experiences similar to mine say that they are content simply knowing that they are competent and do not care what others may think, and perhaps consider their having been given boosts despite not having suffered significant obstacles as appropriate given their membership in a historically oppressed race. However, I submit that this ready acceptance of unnecessary head starts and lack of concern with how one, and one's race, is viewed as a result stem from the culture's ambivalence toward the scholarly, which we have seen even manifests itself in black academics. The issue is not an overt or complete rejection of the world of the book, but a conspicuously lesser weighting of one's competence in this arena as the measure of the (hu)man.

This becomes clear if we imagine how most black people would feel if it were decreed that affirmative action be instituted in realms in which blacks have traditionally excelled. If major-league basketball managers were directed to set aside spots not only for the best players in the country but also for those just short of this mark, or if the most prestigious jazz clubs were required to book not only black musical geniuses but also those a notch or two below them, black basketball players and jazz musicians, with all due compassion for the early life conditions of the runners-up in question, would feel justly insulted, with Jesse Jackson and the NAACP duly decrying the underestimation inherent to such a policy. Of course, this would be because black America has always so regularly produced a representative number of stars in these areas, such that black people are not seen to "need" affirmative action there.

As we have seen, most think that black America does not contribute a representative share of stars when it comes to school because black students are prevented by societal conditions from doing their best. This idea has an air of plausibility when it comes to poor or working-class black students, although I believe it to be mistaken. For example, while one might justifiably suppose that humble circumstances would hinder athletic ability less than scholastic, musical virtuosity requires the same concentration, practice, and attention to detail that schoolwork does, and yet jazz players have regularly come up from the slums (Louis Armstrong grew up in a violent ghetto quarter rife with substance abuse and illegitimacy, and was hardly unusual in this regard among his colleagues). However, for thoroughly middle-class black people who went to solid schools and do not even consider themselves to have suffered any appreciable racism, to feel no condescension in being boosted up academic ladders via set-asides demonstrates vestiges of a sense of the scholarly as a fundamentally separate realm. Most black people basically

do not particularly mind being given set-asides in academia whether they needed them or not, because since the scholarly realm is processed as an area more visited than lived in, hitting the very highest note, and it being clear that one did, is considered less important than having made a decent showing.

As for me, after I submit this manuscript to my publisher, I have decided to take singing lessons and build a new wing onto my life as an opera singer. I have made this decision because the world of opera is one where the color of my skin will have no effect upon how I am judged, sink or swim, and I cannot bear the prospect of my entire life's accomplishments on this earth having been polluted with boosts premised upon the notion that I am fundamentally incapable of competition under any but ideal circumstances.

Revisiting Lyndon Johnson

We have arrived at a point where closing the black-white gap will only be possible by allowing black students to spread their wings and compete with their peers of other races. Trying to accomplish this by letting them in under the bar and reconditioning them in college gives the appearance of being an alternate solution, but thirty years of programs of this kind have shown us conclusively that this will not solve the problem—because the lag persists. As Christopher Jencks has noted:

By the time students apply to college, their minds have developed in particular ways: some neural paths have grown strong and others have atrophied. The mental differences among seventeen-year-olds do not completely determine their future, but neither are they easy to change. Those who have not yet heard any English can still learn to speak the language, but they will almost always speak with an accent, and some will never become fully fluent.

There are certainly strategies to be adopted other than repealing affirmative-action admissions policies. However, these strategies cannot be based upon the misconception that white racism, in its various manifestations, is the main problem to be addressed. To focus upon the fact that minorities are underrepresented in top-quality secondary schools, that some white teachers may be less likely to give top grades to black students, that black students may suffer from lack of confidence based on racist stereotypes, or on vestigial societal racism, are less proposals for

solutions than capitulations, implying that black students simply cannot do their best until the elimination of broad sociological problems unlikely to disappear anytime soon. This would be an acceptable surrender if these problems were truly significant barriers to achievement, but since other students regularly surmount them, we must get out of the understandable habit of looking first to these things—on the pain of casting black people as innately weak and unintelligent.

Our interest, then, must be in helping black students to shed the true shackles of the Cultural Disconnect: a culture-internal wariness of school. In this vein, secondary schools would be well-advised to urge black children to form study groups, as these have been shown to raise minority students' performance via combining strengths, most importantly working against the sense that school is "not black" by immersing black students in situations of extended face-to-face interaction with fellow black students in activities devoted to classwork, with the inherent incentive lent by mutual dependence. Minority students ought also to be given standardized tests on a regular basis in all schools; even in a school with less-than-optimum resources, this alone will raise students' test scores given that one tends to perform better on such tests by learning their quirks as early as possible.

There are also strategies for encouraging "diversity" without reinforcing black students' sense of separation from school. Top universities ought to make some room for top-performing students from high schools that offer few or no advanced placement courses. This does involve taking a chance—as is readily acknowledged when only white and Asian students are in question, advanced placement courses are important in preparing a student for college-level work, and for every student without them who adjusts well in college, there will be another who suffers a permanent handicap. Yet in the interests of addressing the societal inequity of school quality, it is eminently defensible to take this chance, given that blacks are indeed disproportionately represented in such schools. However, although this will inherently increase minority representation, it must be a race-blind policy in itself. The variation some have urged in California—admitting all minority candidates who have done well in such schools but only some of other ethnicities—would return us to a situation where minority students were regularly admitted under lowered bars simply by virtue of the color of their skin rather than their individual circumstances or abilities. To imply that white students from such schools ought to be submitted to quality rankings while black students must not be would bring us back to reinforcing the idea among

both blacks and whites that top-level effort is superhuman for the black student, and implying that black people have been so profoundly broken by their history that modern policy must treat them as eternal cripples.

Along these same lines, some universities also maintain a bias toward top-level high schools in their admissions policies; it would be in the interests of those committed to "diversity" to lessen, if not eliminate, this bias.

Berkeley has instituted the Berkeley Pledge, dedicated to helping minority students in secondary schools prepare for admission to college; other University of California schools have instituted similar programs. These efforts are aimed primarily at heavily minority schools in poorer areas. Predictably, Berkeley administrators are given to supposing that these students essentially embody "minority," but in fact such students are but a fraction of the minority students who apply to schools at Berkeley's level. Nevertheless, any effort that prepares black students to compete, rather than be let in the back door, is laudable because it helps to solve the problem at hand, and other states would benefit from instituting similar outreach policies.

However, none of these things will be as important as the crucial element of the incentive to do one's best, which is impossible in a situation in which there is any way to reach the top other than via one's best efforts. Moreover, maintaining permanently lowered standards at the end of the road will only subvert the intention of all of these bottom-up efforts.

In *The Bell Curve*, Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein told us that we should eliminate affirmative action because black people are simply too dumb to do any better. This, however, will not do: My reason for opposing affirmative action in higher education is proactive. Namely, we must eliminate this obsolete program not for abstruse philosophical reasons, not because it can be rather laboriously interpreted as discrimination, but for a single, concrete reason: *It is obstructing African Americans from showing us that they are as capable as all other people.* The black-white scholastic gap will close, rather than simply sit unchanging, when top performance is required of black students. Under affirmative action, it quite simply is not, regardless of well-meaning but obstructive distractions such as appealing to the benefits of "diversity."

Many suppose that it is unrealistic to expect black children to perform at whites' and Asians' level. However, we must ask why we have come to consider it so otherworldly to expect a black child to do some eighth-grade math, draw some vocabulary analogies, solve a few logic problems in a set amount of time, and yes, do all of these things well. We must also ask why, to the extent that many of us can even begin to conceive of this,

we imagine that it could only be under utopian conditions in which all teachers are utterly devoid of even the subtlest racial bias and all schools are awash in funding and equipment. What are we saying about black children to assume with such confidence that they are incapable of doing what poor Asians, and even Haitians and Jamaicans and Ethiopians are doing right alongside them every day?

I have faith in black American students. This is because I have seen nothing whatsoever in my life suggesting that black students are cognitively incapable of performing as well as anyone else in school, while, on the contrary, I have seen quite conclusively, year after year since I was four years old, that the linchpin of this problem is a cultural sense of separation from school that set-asides can only nurture, and that only concrete incentive can begin to undo.

Affirmative-action advocates are fond of quoting Lyndon Johnson's observation "You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line in a race and then say, 'you are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair." True. But thirty-five years have passed, and America has changed profoundly in ways that would shock Johnson if he were alive to see it. As such, today we must ask when you stop giving this runner a head start.

That time is now. When the person has become nicely muscled and acquires themselves quite nicely, then even if they are not yet at the highest level of musculature as the other runners, we are inclined to stop giving them that head start. After all, if the head start is eternal:

What possible way is there for the runner to finally achieve the capability of the other runners other than having to run the race without a head start?

Why should they try their best anyway?

How would we even know that they had? No matter how fast they run or how big they get, they will always have had that head start to dilute their achievement.

How compelling would we find it to have the runner say that the only way they will feel "welcome" in the race is to be given a head start forever?

If the runner is still not as confident as many of the runners, is giving them the head start forever the way to assuage this?

And finally, we all know in our heart of hearts that we will never feel that this runner is the equal of the other runners—or even the equal of the lesser runners—until they can make a showing without a head start.

Onward and Upward

In the end, the most important thing for America as a whole to realize about the grip of Victimology, Separatism, and Anti-intellectualism upon today's black Americans is that whites cannot solve this problem in any other way but allowing black people the dignity of true competition. Whites have tried for almost forty years to assuage Victimology with their most altruistic efforts, only to see cries of "racism" remain at the same shrieking level. When whites try to bridge the separation between the races by adopting aspects of black culture, they are accused of co-optation; when they try to introduce their culture to blacks they are accused of cultural imperialism. Whites have tried to bring blacks into the academic arena with permanently lowered admissions standards, only to see black scholarly performance freeze at a substandard level, while black college students occupy administrators' offices crying "racism" at the very schools that admitted them with scores that would have barred any white student from admission.

A Different World from the One You Come From

Indeed, as I and many others have noted, some of the resistance among many black Americans toward reaching the finish line stems from an underlying fear of becoming "white," black American cultural identity disappearing altogether with white people the ultimate victors. Of course, the fact is that if black culture did disappear altogether, one concomitant would be that whites and blacks would interbreed to an extent that the default American would be café-au-lait, not Beaver Cleaver pink. Nor would this be a mere matter of pigment—in the process, whites would incorporate a great deal of black culture. As Jim Sleeper notes, already Europeans are known to observe that white Americans walk and talk "black," and this is true. Of course, talk like that raises hackles in some black quarters as being about white cooptation and black cultural dilution. If you ask me, one man's cooptation or dilution is another man's cultural hybridization, and under any name, it is as inevitable as it is marvelous. For those who feel otherwise, though, I can only venture that the coffee-brown ideal that writers like Stanley Crouch sing of is one

that strikes me as something so far in the future as to be more a matter of science fiction than sociology. For our purposes in this moment, despite the fact that we have already traveled a long way in coming together, racial differences are with us to stay. In that vein, it is important for us to realize that African-American culture can maintain a core distinctiveness without the three currents I have addressed.

One of the sweetest television pleasures I have ever experienced was the late, great series *A Different World*. I sat mesmerized through every single episode of this show chronicling the adventures of black students of all walks of life at the fictional all-black college Hillman, because here was depicted the black America of my dreams. Week after week, this marvelous little show kept alive my faith that there can and will be a black America alive with the music of black dialect, a compassionate sense of responsibility for the less fortunate, a spontaneous connection to music and dance, regular commemoration of the struggles and victories of the past, an electric sense of humor, and even a guest appearance by Jesse Jackson, yet combined with a dedication to personal advancement, a disinclination to fixate upon victimhood, an openness to cultural fusion, and a sense of school as an inextricable part of an American life. There is not a logical reason in the world why this could not be black America. We need only take a deep breath and re-examine what we have been conditioned to accept as political, intellectual, and cultural leadership, and allow ourselves to be granted the treasure of self-realization.

Last Words

In this book I have done nothing less than call it as I see it. I'm not in anybody's pocket, and yes, both of my parents were African American. Yet I am quite aware that the response many black people will have to this book is that I am taking the line of the "other side," joining the whites who are "against us." Using the minor hellfire I endured during the Oakland Ebonics controversy as a guide, many will attack my book as "wrong" without seeing the need to actually address my arguments. The few who engage anything specific about what I wrote will refer only to excerpted passages stripped of their context. I will be told that I must think that I'm "too good" for black people; that expressing such opinions is a misuse of my authority as a college professor; that I am taking the white man's side just to make a buck. I will be accused of not being a Christian, and in general the party line will be that my book displays "no love for black people."

These people cannot help this. The stranglehold of Victimology, Separatism, and Anti-intellectualism upon the black community—and the illusion many whites labor under that this is healthy—will keep many from being able to see my book in any other way, for reasons I have shown throughout these pages.

But here in real life it has become increasingly clear to me that I am not alone among black people in seeing the fallacy in the orthodoxy that the black American is eternally mired in a system set against them at every turn. An increasing number of black people are questioning the cognitive dissonance between the vast potential of their lives as post-Civil Rights Movement black Americans and the insistence of so many blacks around them that America remains a racist purgatory in which all black effort is a Sisyphean affair that renders even just keeping one's head above water a victory. There is a tendency in the black community, arising from the human quest for cultural fellowship, to classify people of the latter view as expressing "an alternate viewpoint," or even as "cool." The problem here is that these people are nothing less than an obstacle to the race's progress forward, from the darkest inner city to the poshest boardrooms. In closing, I ask those black Americans who find themselves unable to identify with the self-indulgent theatrics now forced upon us by whites and blacks alike to come out of hiding and start speaking up for real progress.

All of our lives we have seen the best and brightest black Americans, those we are told to emulate as role models, nimbly framing every aspect of American life as veiled racism, telling us that because of this vastly exaggerated scourge black Americans are exempt from criticism for even the most heinous of conduct, and that the good black person only uses school for financial gain or to acquire the credentials to chronicle how racist America was, is, and will be. But this is not the way it has to be. It only looks that way because it is all we have ever seen.

I know—believe me, I know!—that it is not easy to face the incredulous rage that speaking up for the truth arouses in so many of our fellow black Americans. Furthermore, I maintain that we have reached this state of affairs as an unintended result of the Civil Rights Act, which gave a demoralized group the keys to success by fiat rather than through the slow and agonizing avenue of working within the society, gradually eroding stereotypes and social barriers as Jews and the Irish did. We must have compassion for the black Americans who have unwittingly been disabled by this strange by-product of a good thing. However, our compassion must not let us allow this sociological excrescence to continue to condemn this race to eternal second-class status.

If we have true pride, we realize that we deserve better than this. When we hear the next black person say that blacks earn 61 percent of what whites do with the implication that the black manager pulling \$60,000 a year regularly works next door to a white manager making \$100,000, or that most black people live in the ghetto or might as well, or that most black people are being "pushed down the economic ladder," or that the Ancient Greeks stole their civilization from a "black" Egypt, or that black students cannot be expected to turn in top grades unless their parents subscribe to magazines, take this person no more seriously than you would someone who told you that the world was going to end tomorrow. That is, with politeness (because he can't help it), pity (because he is his own worst enemy), and private dismissal (because his message is a fiction with no relevance to our leading productive lives).

While not falling prey to the equally treacherous fiction that we have completely overcome, we must not be tempted by the seductions of underdogism into turning a blind eye to how very close we are to the mountaintop. It is because this progress is so gloriously obvious that there are more and more black people out there with true pride. Not the manufactured pride of a strangely meaningless slogan like Black By Popular Demand; not a pride based on a mythical relationship to an Africa that never existed and that none of us would any longer even recognize as home—but a pride based on our personal achievements right here in our real home, these United States of America.

Inevitably and repeatedly, you will be told that to be truly proud—that is, to refuse to settle for wasting the brief time you are given on this earth playing victim and indulging in the half-assed logic that it requires—is to be "not one of us" or, more to the point, "white." Nothing could better point up that your accuser, driven by currents of history into mistaking an inferiority complex for nobility, lacks true pride herself. You are not "white" to be too proud to settle for this; you are human. Don't let such people's misinformed fury, sad and frightening as it is, mislead you into thinking otherwise.

Let Derrick Bell tell his "stories," but let's not join him at the Bottom of the Well. Pity Ralph Wiley walking down the street slapping at the "nre on his skin," but by no means let him convince you that this is what the rest of us Black People Should Do Now. As proud people, let's stop sitting silent as we are told that the Real Black Person wallows in defeat. Let's stop sitting silent as we are told that the Real Black Person doesn't like the people who will always surround us in the only country that is our home, and today usually mean us no harm. Let's stop sitting silent as we are told that the Real Black Person does not make better than a B+

average and does not dare crack 1000 on the SAT. Let's stop this runaway bus, this tripped-off car alarm, this eternal Passion Play, this self-defeating holding pattern miseducating generation after generation of black Americans into self-doubt and parochialism even when growing up in conditions that would be the envy of most people on earth.

More and more of us are realizing that the enshrinement of victimhood as an identity and a focus upon tribalism over hybridicity has fallen out of step with our historical moment and become an obstacle to progress, and more and more of us are saying this out loud. There will remain those who can only see us as "sell-outs," but as barriers to black achievement continue to fall away by the month, we're going to keep coming, more every year, and I do not mean only a few black academics, but black people from all walks of life. The national dialogue is beginning to change already; indeed, I would not have written this book if I did not feel that I was part of a growing race-wide sentiment. To those black Americans out there who are tired of being told that to be black one must be a provincial, anti-intellectual underdog, I beseech you all to join in reviving the Struggle and getting back to making our way up the last few steps to the mountaintop. Don't be afraid. The ones calling the tune today will be curiosities in the history books tomorrow. We are the future. It's time for us to STAND UP!!!

NOTES

Abbreviated sources:

- BB William G. Bowen and Derek Bok, *The Shape of the River* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
- JP Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, eds., *The Black-White Test Score Gap* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998).
- P John Perazzo, *The Myths That Divide Us* (Briarcliff Manor, NY: World Studies Books, 1998).
- S Fred Siegel, *The Future Once Happened Here* (New York: Free Press, 1997).
- ST Laurence Steinberg, *Beyond the Classroom* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).
- T Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, *America in Black and White* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

INTRODUCTION

Niggardly episode: e.g., "Race Mix-Up Raises Havoc for Capital," *New York Times*, January 29, 1999.

Perception that three in four blacks are poor inner-city residents: *Newsweek* poll, April 26, 1991, cited in T pp. 183-84.

One in five blacks live in inner city: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, pp. 20-471, *The Black Population in the United States: March 1992* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), table 15, cited in T, p. 581.

CHAPTER ONE: THE CULT OF VICTIMOLOGY

Marcus Garvey School incident: S, pp. 110-11.

Black America in 1960 versus 2000: BB, pp. 1-10, except:

New York City mayoral report, S, p. 26; proportion of blacks born in New York in 1964, S, p. 47.

A quarter of blacks are poor: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, P, pp. 60-194, *Poverty in the United States: 1995* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), table C-3, cited in T, p. 233, cf. also Orlando Patterson, *The Ordeal of Integration* (Washington, D.C.: Civitas/Coun-terpoint, 1997), pp. 27-28.

Progress of black middle class: T, p. 196 (derived in part from U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, P, pp. 60-194, *Poverty in the United States: 1995* [Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993], table 2).