

7 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 doubt, 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

