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Booker T. Washington Was Right

Shelby Steele A professor of English at San Jose State University in California, Shelby Steele is the author of the newly published book, *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America*. In the following, adapted from a conversation with NPQ, Steele argues that taking advantage of educational opportunity and taking responsibility for personal welfare are essential prerequisites for the development of African Americans.

Resources for schools do not follow color; they follow activism and effort. If parents take an interest in how their children are educated they will have a better school system, regardless of the racial or economic makeup of those parents.

Blacks can have no real power in this country without taking responsibility for their own educational and economic development. For blacks, if not for everyone, education has been the only real means to opportunity in the US. To be uneducated, to be unable to read and write well enough to get and keep a job, is to be completely out of the loop.

Unfortunately, the link between education and opportunity has, to a great extent, been broken. Rather than challenging the black community to keep that link alive, much of the white and black leadership has been content to see poor blacks as helpless victims.

If we continue to subscribe to the deterministic point of view that because it is more difficult and unfair for blacks we can't expect anything of them, we will surrender them to a kind of paternalism that ends up weakening rather than strengthening their community.

Indeed, as family structures have deteriorated and drugs have become a profound problem in poor black communities, the tendency has been to rationalize these problems by charging that blacks are victims of an oppressive and racist society that beats them down. That kind of rationalization achieves absolutely nothing. When we see oppression, we can call it that but otherwise, let's assume we have the freedom to take advantage of the opportunities open to us.

When we go to school, we should learn. There is still a public school system in the inner city – even though it is rarely on the level of the

suburban public schools. In those kindergarten, first and second grades, they still teach reading, writing and computation. Certainly, one is influenced by circumstances and environment but one's life is never totally determined by those things. Poor people are not merely rats in a maze. There is always a margin of possibility, even in the most blighted circumstances.

We need to inspire and encourage blacks rather than blame them or others for past failures. This attitude has nothing to do with liberal or conservative politics: It is a very old message in black America that can be traced back to Frederick Douglas and Booker T. Washington, both of whom constantly reminded black people of that slim margin of choice open to them and who challenged blacks to seize any and all opportunity to develop. Further, both men pointed out that education was an obvious and important route to opportunity.

A Matter of Survival | As a simple matter of survival, we must seize all opportunities to develop. Poor blacks must understand that if they don't make the effort to change their circumstances they are going to stay in the underclass. Society will let them stay there. So, if poor parents want to help their children escape poverty, they need to make sure those kids learn how to read and write. They need to turn the television off and the lights on, so their kids can study. And on Saturday morning, when the crack dealers are sleeping, they need to walk to the local library and get some books.

True, often times young girls – children themselves – have children and do not have the maturity to take on the task of preparing their kids for the world. But these girls often live with their 32-year-old mother, and even their 45-year-old grandmother. The level of maturity required for good parenting in extremely difficult situations is not always evident in a 16-year-old. Nevertheless, if the mother isn't ready, then the grandmother needs to assume responsibility for the development of that child.

And where are the men? A quarter of them are in prison or the prison system. They are on drugs or selling drugs. Whatever else they are doing, one thing is certain: They are taking very little responsibility for the raising of their children. Obviously, if someone brings a child into

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this world, they have an obligation to see that that child is well cared for. I am not "blaming the victim" when I call these young fathers irresponsible. Yes, they are victimized, to some extent, but they are also irresponsible.

Again, the answer to the problem of teenage pregnancy and absent fathers is simple: We must inculcate in these young adults the concept of personal responsibility – not as a judgement against them or as a way to evade a social responsibility to the poor, but as a concept that inspires them to overcome their poverty.

Once, we had black leaders who championed the concept of personal responsibility: Martin Luther King Jr., for example. He was very inspirational to poor blacks. If he were alive today and were giving some of his greatest speeches, many people would write him off as a "neoconservative." He certainly addressed the oppression of black people but he also assured them that they contained within them the key to their own success.

Today, black leadership is both self-serving and short-sighted. They are unwilling to see

that the power they have wielded in American society for the last 25 years has been the power of victimization: We are victims and therefore entitled to redress. These leaders are addicted to the power and concessions they have gained by playing to white guilt over past black victimization and do not see the importance of breaking the link between our power and our victimization.

The current black leadership is retrograde, and stands in the way of its own people. Yet, even though this leadership is among our greatest liabilities today, everyone is afraid to confront it for fear of being labeled "racist." Today, one is labeled racist and charged with "blaming the victim" if they say anything even remotely suggestive of black responsibility. We are so straight-jacketed by the fear of being called a racist that we do nothing but sit on our hands and keep our mouths shut.

Great leadership is always difficult. Perhaps it is even more difficult today, when we no longer have the kind of clear-cut moral fights that propelled the Civil Rights movement. Today, we

Attitude, Not Aptitude

Our education crisis has more to do with the breakdown of community than with the breakdown of schools. America's youth are hungry for a sense that they belong to a community. They don't say, "my greatest need is to learn reading, writing and arithmetic." They say, "I'm lonely and scared; I feel worthless; I can't do anything; I don't know if I can make it." Their responses don't imply that reading and writing aren't important to them. But what we are finding out is that our children cannot learn to learn until they learn to live – and to feel good about themselves. The learning process has far more to do with attitude than aptitude.

Very few children in America's urban areas aren't "at risk" today. Drug use, violence, teenage pregnancy, family breakup, and poverty have intensified to the point that education advocates rarely refer to "at-risk children" anymore. They talk about "at-risk schools" and "at-risk communities."

Cities in Schools realizes that a student's "decision" to drop out may be the unwitting result of many factors – family problems, alcohol and other drug abuse, illiteracy, teenage pregnancy, and more. Therefore, we treat each student as a unique individual, and bring together a support system of caring adults who offer the resources that will build a sense of self-worth and guide our students

into a more productive and constructive life.

The goal of CIS is no less than revolutionary. When our kids graduate, we want them to be able to take care of themselves and not be dependent. They may go on to technical school, the armed services or college but they will have the decision-making ability and the confidence to know that they can make their own choices.

CIS was founded to promote public/private partnerships that would address the multiple needs of youth at highest risk of education, social and economic failure. We have worked over the years to engage local communities in collaborative action and to reconnect our students with the people who could meet their needs for education, counseling and employment.

One of the main obstacles to change is the fact that we attempt to solve our social problems in a compartmentalized fashion. We have created a structure of categories: the drug category, the literacy category, the youth unemployment category, but all these are all merely symptoms of the general breakdown of community. CIS tries to bring the pieces together.

William Milliken

President, Cities in Schools, an organization that helps more than 27,000 at-risk students per year stay in school.



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need leaders who will risk turning away from the comforts of moral right and wrong, victim and oppressor, and deal with the real complexities of how to develop a people formed in four hundred years of oppression.

Negative Effects of Affirmative Action | Because black culture was shaped by oppression rather than freedom, we have been conditioned away from all the attitudes and skills required for a people to thrive in a free, competitive society. Worse, because we have been placated by government “preference” programs – affirmative action being among the most pernicious – rather than developing so that we can take advantage of all educational and economic opportunities available to us, we are languishing, falling further behind now in freedom than we were under Jim Crow.

The kind of racial representation achieved through preference programs is not the same thing as racial development, yet preference programs such as affirmative action fosters a confusion of these very different needs. Representation can be manufactured; development is always hard-earned. However, it is the music of power that we hear in affirmative action that causes us to cling to it and to its distracting emphasis on representation. The fact is that after 20 years of racial preferences, the gap between white and black median income is greater than it was in the seventies. None of this is to say that blacks don’t need policies that ensure our

right to equal opportunity, but what we need more is the development that will let us take advantage of society’s efforts to include us.

Give middle-class blacks fairness; give disadvantaged children a better shot at development – better elementary schools, job training, safer neighborhoods, better financial assistance for college. Fewer blacks go to college today than 10 years ago; more black males of college age are in prison than in college. This, despite racial preferences.

We need social policies that are committed to two goals: the education and economic development of disadvantaged people, regardless of race; and the eradication from our society – through close monitoring and sever sanctions – of racial, ethnic, or gender discrimination.

Instead, what we have are preferences, which are used as a way to avoid dealing with the fact that our schools are not up to par. It’s cruel, in a sense, that there is no effort made to prepare blacks for higher education and then when they are admitted – on the basis of preferences – they can’t keep up. Seventy-two percent of the black students who go to college drop out. What purposes do preferences serve if this is the result?

Essentially, preferences are a deflection from the real business of developing blacks to academic parity with whites. We have preferences, so we don’t have to worry about the fact that inner-city schools are terrible.

We can no longer wait for government programs to save us. Of course, our nation should have programs available to people in need, but there are never going to be enough of them to go around, so we are going to have to do the job ourselves.

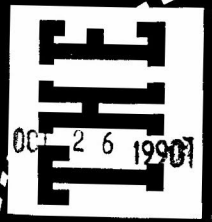
If we are to succeed, we must start at the beginning. Black parents must demand that their children work extremely hard in school. They must make sure their children are well-loved, challenged and rewarded for learning. And they must demand that the school system lives up to the expectations they have of it.

When all this is accomplished, our students still have no guarantees. But if they stay in school and take advantage of all educational opportunities, their choices in life will be much greater.

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