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Toward a New Black American Narrative
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The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus could have been speaking of African Americans today when he noted that “you cannot step into the same river twice,” since the river keeps changing and you keep changing. Evolutions in America and in black Americans merit more discussion than they have received. The time may have arrived for a new black American narrative, one that looks forward rather than backward and that acknowledges the growing diversity among blacks in America. More so with each decade that passes, the challenges for America’s blacks are the challenges for America.

America’s increasingly pluralistic and ever-evolving society faces severe problems. Some, like our current economic turmoil, are relatively short-term; others, such as educational inadequacies, diminished employment opportunities and unhealthy economic disparities, are longer term; and some, like deep poverty, seem intractable, for whites and blacks.

Large pockets of persistent and concentrated poverty, in which successive generations of disadvantaged children have diminished “life chances,” are a charge against a society whose founders thought of us as a “city on a hill” and a “light unto the nations.” Ideally, in the 21st century, that society

should provide job opportunities for those individuals prepared to fill them; and their children should have the opportunity to rise as high as their ability, skills and effort permit.

The inner cities of America's north and the rural "hollows" of the south, New Orleans' depressed Lower Ninth Ward and Appalachian Kentucky and West Virginia, and the Yazoo Delta backwaters of Mississippi, the poorest of the 50 states—all have large numbers of those, white and black, trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle of despair, marked by widespread semi-literacy, fatherless children, drug abuse and criminality. This is not a race-specific phenomenon, but the racial discrimination faced by poor blacks adds another dimension to the problem.

In this period of national economic stringency, when "compassion" seems to many a luxury we cannot afford, helping severely disadvantaged young people to escape from poverty and to enter the productive mainstream of American life should be seen as a prudent investment in our national future rather than a questionable expenditure on current consumables. This is not "eating cake today" but investing in our national "seed corn for tomorrow."

The nature of the problem, the resources and the attitude changes required to address it are such that no short term results are likely; but the sooner we begin the better.

Our national challenge is to determine concrete and specific steps that should be taken by people of good will to bring our

national practices into better alignment with our national ideals, dealing with continuing poverty whose causes are both structural and behavioral. A study of blacks in America today may be a fruitful way to begin.

A full and accurate picture of African Americans today presents striking contrasts, with a more complex and multi-faceted social and economic spectrum than is generally realized.

Black astronauts and astrophysicists, college presidents and billionaires, admirals and generals, CEO's of the Fortune 500 and Pulitzer Prize authors, multi-millionaire athletes and leading entertainment celebrities, distinguished intellectuals and innovative entrepreneurs, world-class opera singers and nationally known chefs—all are indicators of dramatic good health, as are increasing numbers of black mayors, governors, congressmen, Cabinet officers and, of course, our President. Annual sales by minority-owned businesses grew to \$1 trillion by 2007; before the current economic crisis, those businesses had been growing at a compound rate of 10% per annum, three times the national average. On college campuses throughout the nation blacks are prominently represented both as students and faculty. Every relevant public opinion poll portrays huge intergenerational positive changes in mindset from old to young (among whites and blacks), on subjects ranging from integrated employment to racial intermarriage.

The “other side of the coin,” however, tells a dramatically different story. Heartbreakingly high numbers of black

school dropouts, a substantial and continuing black/white academic achievement gap and “off the scale” teenage pregnancies, HIV/AIDS cases and criminal incarcerations tell of a segment of society gone off the rails, with painful ramifications not only for the black world but for the nation at large.

Between these extremes, numbers of working class, middle class and immigrant blacks are being absorbed—gradually but steadily—into the American mainstream, increasingly being judged, as Martin Luther King, Jr. wished, not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. But those at the very bottom remain on the “outside” looking “in.”

With the years ahead presenting the prospect of fewer jobs overall and those remaining requiring ever greater training and skills, with automation and globalization posing severe threats to American unskilled labor, the economic prospects for our submerged groups, white and black, are frightening.

Technology is painfully polarizing our society, dividing ever more severely the educated and the less educated. The possibility of economic wastelands (and social despair) in the new information economy must be faced. This is bad for the individuals, bad for the regions and bad for the nation. But lives can be changed, and with appropriate education and productive careers, “tax eaters” can become “taxpayers,” and everyone benefits.

We must recognize our widespread national failure to

acknowledge fully and frankly the existence of such areas of persistent and concentrated poverty, in which millions of our fellow citizens are not really part of our 21st century world. Our reluctance to understand fully and to take effective steps to mitigate the pre-conditions underlying those problems represent the greatest failure of American society today. There is blame enough to go around to indict many players in this disastrous socio-economic game—academics, social leaders, political figures across the spectrum and well intentioned but foggy thinkers of all sorts.

Most social scientists, still cowering from William Ryan's unfounded but devastating attack on Daniel Patrick Moynihan—for discussing the then alarming rise in black single births—have precluded serious discussion on black subjects. Timid academics seem petrified at the thought of being unfairly labeled as “racists.” (William Julius Wilson has led a movement to reappraise Pat Moynihan, pointing out that Moynihan's report, *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*, was “an important and prophetic document.”) That Pat Moynihan was himself a poor, working class child deserted by a father of whom he had no memories and that Moynihan had profound sympathy for fatherless children, never seem to have been widely understood. Far from “blaming the victim” for a “tangle of pathologies,” he wrote in 1965 of the pressing need for additional help for the inner city because “Negroes today are a grievously injured people who in fair and equal competition will by and large lose out.”

In academia today, the subtle interplay of race, social class

and gender, and especially the complex relationship between social culture (behavior) and economics, are avoided like an untouchable “third rail” of American social discourse, with a few notable exceptions. A fear of violent youths by middle class targets—whites, Asians, Latinos and blacks—is a taboo subject. Few observers, black or white, have been willing to acknowledge the complex and thorny problem of high-achieving black students ridiculed or attacked by their black classmates for “forgetting your roots,” thinking like Oreos (black on the outside, white on the inside) and not acting “authentically black,” a phenomenon that has arisen essentially since integration developments of the 1960’s (John Ogbu and Roland Fryer have written thoughtfully about this).

A misguided concept of false “racial pride,” and the fear that open acknowledgment of problems will fuel the fires of prejudice and bias, have stymied constructive discussion by most spokesmen in the black community. “There comes a time when silence is betrayal,” said Martin Luther King, Jr.; and silence can be destructive when people need help and that help is not forthcoming.

Successful African Americans have important and varied roles to play in helping inner city residents rise, but hiding problems is not one of them.

Prominent black demagogues usually look backward, rarely around them, and never forward, deliberately ignoring the remarkable progress that much of the black world has made, and also ignoring the factors that made such progress

possible. Their counter-productive message of victimization and militant despair sends the wrong signals to inner city black youngsters, whose conclusion is “Why try?” when the message should be constructive, pointing the path toward personal progress in a complex new world. Some observers believe that demagogues serve a constructive role by highlighting ills that might still be too easily overlooked; others believe they have a vested interest in keeping alive a sense of hostility and divisiveness. (A hundred years ago Booker T. Washington said: “There is a class of colored people who make a business of keeping the troubles, the wrongs and the hardships of the Negro race before the public. Some of these people do not want the Negro to lose his grievances, because they do not want to lose their jobs.”)

Most of even the more responsible black organization spokesmen today imply that disadvantaged inner city blacks are like corks floating on the waves, unable to play a part in their own advancement and dependent solely on government programs to create viable futures. They seem to feel that it will “give comfort to the enemy” to suggest some of the problems may stem from “inside” rather than “outside.” (Sociologist Orlando Patterson and journalist Bob Herbert are notable exceptions to the “always blame others” school.)

Intolerance, prejudice and bias continue to exist in many quarters in America today, even as “color consciousness” recedes dramatically among the young. Widespread housing discrimination persists, bank borrowing is more difficult for blacks, and what is widely believed to be blatantly discriminatory treatment by police (seen as hostile) is a

continuing source of black outrage. Integration of the workplace has not yet been matched by full social integration; and just as black college students usually eat together (by choice) in college cafeterias, so white country clubs, dinner parties and social gatherings rarely include blacks. (This limits the opportunity for social and professional “networking” so important in today’s world.)

But the story is much more complex than that.

We know that 72% of all black births today (well over 80% in some postal zip codes) are to single mothers, and that children from fatherless homes (white and black) account for 63% of all youth suicides, 90% of all homeless and runaway children, 80% of rapists, 71% of all high school dropouts and 70% of all juveniles in state-operated institutions. Yet when Barack Obama encouraged a black audience to higher standards of parental involvement, Jesse Jackson was heard on tape charging Obama with “talking down to ‘ni----s.” When Bill Cosby famously called on black parents to devote more time and resources to their children, he was widely attacked throughout the black world with a vehemence that continues to this day, with some claiming he “betrayed black America.” Virtually no one objectively and dispassionately addressed the specific points he raised.

Simplistic thinking prevails almost everywhere, with white racism or an unfair lack of black employment cited as “the problems,” with little further discussion.

We know that black women have college graduation rates vastly higher than those of black men and that children of

black immigrants (Caribbean and African) substantially outperform in public schools the children of native born American blacks, but no one asks why, or why 78% of black families had two parents in 1950, but only 38% did in 2010. (Similarly, when discussing Latinos, no one asks why, in New York today, the children of Puerto Ricans perform worse in all respects than do those of Dominicans or Mexicans, or why the suicide rates of young Latinas are so extraordinarily high.)

Levels of educational achievement are rarely factored into discussions of black/white differentials in income or in prison incarceration, but we know that today a young black male science graduate married to a black female science graduate will likely have a total lifetime income roughly comparable to that of his white counterparts. And we know that the prison incarceration rates of black college graduates do not differ markedly from those of white college graduates.

Some 68% of Asian 25-34 year-olds hold more than a high school diploma in America today in contrast to 44% of whites and only 26% of African Americans. Not surprisingly, Asian median income is higher than that of other ethnic groups. What one group can achieve, others can, too. If, as predicted, 80% of future new jobs will require knowledge of math and science, young people must be prepared—or they will suffer. With rising black educational levels, income will follow.

Half a century after Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus, our society has come a long, long way. We obviously still have far to go; but today, academic

achievement, professional excellence and recourse to law are likely to be more productive in achieving economic and social goals than mass demonstrations or civil protest.

Personal preferences in a vast range of tastes and of lifestyles are compatible with the common standards called for in a well-functioning pluralistic society, but those common standards must be observed by those hoping to rise in the mainstream of such a society.

In the 21st century, the hostility, nihilism and alienation of the inner city oppositional culture—now deeply ingrained—is leading down a blind alley, as opposed to the full participation in mainstream American life and civic culture increasingly possible with appropriate education. The social progress America has achieved in the past five decades has been formidable. Our challenge is to extend it far into the future.

Thoughtful observers agree that both structural and cultural (behavioral) forces interact to create group outcomes; their view of the relative importance of each reflects their ideological bias.

Liberals tend to emphasize the structural (primarily economic and racial). Many think of school “tracking” (grouping students by test results) and objective pre-employment tests for police and firefighters as “laissez faire racism.” They attribute low verbal ability of inner city children to segregated neighborhoods rather than to home influences; they dismiss the concept of relatively high black “reservation

wages” (the lowest wage a worker is willing to accept) and its impact on black employment; and they feel that poverty makes for fatherless children rather than the other way around. Some observers feel liberals are excessively protective of dysfunctional teachers and of disruptive students.

Conservatives, while reluctantly acknowledging the structural problems, tend to be more “hard-nosed” and unsympathetic to human failings and problems. They minimize difficulties and handicaps and emphasize individual responsibility for self-improvement in each case, encouraging incentives for effort and rewards for performance. Both sides grope for solutions, but no “quick fix” is in sight.

Constructive discussion should begin with an examination of the problems of employment, education, mass prison incarceration, narcotics in the inner city, social class and social culture, which we will address in reverse order.

A) Social Culture

Ever since Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* appeared in 1904, followed by Edward Banfield’s *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* and Robert Putnam’s *Making Democracy Work* (on cultural differences between Italy’s North and South) and, more recently, Thomas Sowell’s *Race and Culture*, it has been clear that a society’s social culture (beliefs, values, attitudes, etc.) is reflected in its practices regarding hard work, honesty, seriousness and

thrift—both of money and of time—(Weber) and of trust, cooperation, moderation and compromise (Putnam). The lack of looting by the Japanese after their recent devastating earthquake is a clear example of distinctive cultural influence.

The Chinese attribute their relative success, wherever they go, to Confucian values like emphasis on education, diligence, merit and “reflecting well on the family.” Jews traditionally attribute theirs to the high value they place on literacy, family cohesiveness, individual responsibility and a focus on the future.

Conversely, those cultures, like the nomadic Arabian, that focus on the past and present rather than on the future, that show distaste for work, belittle individual initiative and personal savings and have a fatalistic approach to life, do not do well. In oil-rich Saudi Arabia today, the government presses “affirmative action” programs for the hiring of Saudi youth over foreign workers, since Saudi employers complain that young Saudis lack a “work ethic” and a “time sense” and that they display little self-discipline or personal initiative. Nearby Oman, on the other hand, has surged into the 21st century, thanks to a 40-year intensive drive to give modern education to all its children—boys and girls—along with “modern” values.

Cultural relativists today, not wishing to hurt personal feelings or to affront ethnic pride, refuse to acknowledge that some cultural approaches are more effective than others in promoting human well-being.

Other thinkers—viewing our pluralistic society always in flux—understand the importance of inculcating in earliest childhood the outlooks, values and attributes necessary for full and successful participation in a modern globalized, competitive, high tech world. (*Culture Matters*, by Harrison and Huntingdon, should be required reading for all undergraduates.)

The “cool pose” culture of America’s inner cities reflected in the viciously destructive lyrics of “gangsta rap” and the menacing air of defiance of inner city “street youth”; the senseless murder of blacks by blacks in areas with hand guns too easily available; narcotics-burdened inner cities where two parent families and high-achieving students are rare exceptions; an atmosphere of such physical danger and psychological terror that traumatized children in largely segregated and chaotic schools are unable to look ahead or achieve their potential—this is the world in which large numbers (perhaps a third) of black children live today, with diminished “life chances” and relatively few social institutions to help them. (Ironically, prison-inspired clothing styles and thought patterns expressed in “gangsta rap” are working their way into mainstream culture; and graffiti, traditionally considered as “visual vandalism,” is in Los Angeles today considered a “valid form of artistic expression.”)

There is no one, single “way to live” today, no single “proper” code of values, assumptions and conduct. But the disadvantaged children we refer to are not able to

choose other ways of life, and a well-functioning society should make other life choices possible for them.

Obvious socio-economic disparities among blacks increasingly belie the idea of a monolithic black community with similar characteristics and goals and a common agenda, with only two or three designated “spokesmen.” A “black identity” based chiefly on memories of oppression and victimization will be harder to maintain in an increasingly pluralistic and integrated society. (For one example, in Harlem, the epicenter of New York’s black community, census figures show that in the last decade Harlem’s white population has grown from 2% to 9.8% and the black population shrank from 61.2% to 54.4%. For another, well over half the black students in Ivy League colleges are not descended from American slaves, and some 48% of blacks living in Miami today are West Indian. The Pew Research Center reports that 22% of the black men who married in 2008 were married to non-black women, up from 15.7% in 2000 and 7.9% in 1980.)

In time, personal “identity”—how we define ourselves—will increasingly involve more complex factors than skin color or ethnicity. With social culture decoupled from skin color, appropriately educated inner city children will be able to walk through doors increasingly open to them as individuals rather than as stereotypes.

Those “falling between the cracks” will remain a problem to be faced; but they, too, must be encouraged to look forward, not backward, and to envision for themselves satisfying and fulfilling roles in the American mainstream.

B) Social Class

The most useful and practical discussion of social class is Edward Banfield’s brilliant relating of social class to one’s time sense. Those at the very bottom of the social ladder can barely think past the current week. A slightly higher group can think through the end of, say, the fruit-picking season; and the next higher group can think a few years beyond that. Middle class mindsets (regardless of income or ethnicity) understand the values of education, a stable home, a professional career, financial savings and a future for their children. Upper middle class types make provision for their grandchildren, establish family businesses and contribute to charities benefitting a broader public than themselves; and in general they identify with the longer term goals and well-being of their communities. (The relationship between finances and mindset is complex—a semi-literate basketball star worth millions usually has a different value system from a college-trained school teacher married to another teacher.)

Inculcating in children a sense of their promising future, of the values of relating well to others and “following the rules,” of deferring gratification, of respecting

authority and of preparing for an important and satisfying career—that is something that every parent, regardless of income or ethnicity, can and should try to do, difficult as it is in a hostile environment. A school can help, but the primary influence is, overwhelmingly, the parent, in developing a child’s self-control, curiosity or sense of one’s self. Black churches and community leaders (as Barack Obama and Bill Cosby have pointed out), along with black publications and widely-listened-to black radio and black TV, must take the lead in changing inner city child-raising practices, pleading with young girls not to have babies until after they have completed their education, and shaming young men into assuming continuing responsibility for the children they father. Above all, they must help young men understand that by dropping out of school, they are condemning themselves to lives of despair. We must shout from the rooftops to children, “The more years you spend in school, the more you earn!” (And to their parents, that each additional year of high school lessens the chance of prison by 11%.)

Inner city boys must be helped to realize that “manhood” is not defined by joining a gang, fathering multiple children out of marriage, serving time in jail and perhaps dealing in drugs. Young men who feel hated, scorned, feared and ignored must be helped to understand that they can earn the respect they crave by positive, not negative and self-destructive actions. “Real men” earn a living, are responsible fathers and are involved in their community. And this they must

learn at home, ideally from parents. The daughter of a teenage single mother who herself becomes a teenage single mother represents hardships for all involved, and we must help that mother to break the cycle, thereby improving the long term prospects of the family.

We clearly need to call for practical steps such as requiring the legal name of the father on a newborn's birth certificate (as is now the practice in England) and requiring a mother to name the child's father to claim State child-care benefits. A young man may think twice about fathering children for whom he will have continuing legal and financial responsibility.

It may "take a village to raise a child" but that is in addition to, not instead of, an involved and supportive parent. There just is no substitute for a good mother and a good father.

C) Narcotics In the Inner City

Abuse of narcotics is the most destructive force in modern life. Leaders of church, school, community groups and government must make clear that those involved in the drug trade are evil people destroying their young—not heroes because they are "beating the system"; not objects of admiration because of their clothes, cars and jewelry, but evil people whose goods are acquired from the misery of their community and the enslavement of our children.

An aroused and involved public—in a cooperative relationship with the police—should make the elimination of drugs the highest priority of community life.

Much more could and should be done by government. By treating “use” of narcotics as a health problem and “sale” of narcotics as a criminal problem, we can deal more effectively with each. Sweden, for example, with one of the lowest drug usage rates in the western world, invests heavily in prevention and treatment, as well as in strict law enforcement, trying to reduce both supply and demand.

Intensive drug education efforts aimed at the very young; widespread, no-nonsense blood, urine and sweat testing for drugs; low cost treatment for addicts and severe punishment for dealers—all will reduce recruitment to drug abuse, will induce abusers to change, and will reduce the supply of drugs.

Greater police sensitivity in finding drug sellers—working closely with local community leaders to identify dealers (as works well in Boston) rather than conducting random searches that open police to charges of “racial profiling”—would be more effective operationally and more publicly acceptable, helping to heal the breach between the black community and the police.

Unfortunately, the police have failed to make clear that

“crime prevention” is their goal, and that “arrests” are only a means to that end.

Fear and dislike of the police in the inner city is one of our greatest problems, and solving it is one of our greatest challenges. Whites have no idea of the outrage middle class blacks feel when they are arbitrarily stopped by police. DWB—“driving while black”—is how blacks term the non-violations for which police stop them.

Corrupt, brutal or racially discriminatory acts by the relatively few police “bad apples” must be hunted down and eliminated so that public confidence can be restored and necessary police/civilian cooperation encouraged. Black police groups like the Guardians Association and 100 Blacks in Law Enforcement should be invited to be more active and more visible in “spreading the word” that violence and crime hurt everyone and can be opposed.

Horrible and indefensible acts like the brutalizing of Abner Louima set the stage for demagogic distortion of a tragic police error in the case of Amadou Diallo. Automatic weapons in the hands of a nervous plain-clothes squad of the NYPD Street Crimes Unit, confronting what they believed to be an armed marauder, had terrible consequences; and our whole society lost in the encounter. Diallo, an innocent but frightened immigrant reaching for his wallet or cell phone, was mistakenly killed (his family received

\$3,000,000 in settlement); the community was in turmoil, and the Street Crimes Unit was disbanded. The question to be pondered is whether the notoriously crime-ridden Soundview Avenue area of the Bronx is now safer.

“Justice must be done and must be seen to be done,” says English Common Law, and we must find a way to achieve both, with the police and the inner city community on the same wave length. An “oppositional culture” hurts everyone.

D) Mass Prison Incarceration

With imprisonment rates for black youths vastly higher than that of whites, and with almost as many black men in prison as in college, the beleaguered public of our inner cities is crying for help. (13% of the U.S. population is black but 49% of U.S. prisoners.)

Some part of these horrendous numbers is due to the disparate punishment practices for crack cocaine (used by blacks) as opposed to powdered cocaine (used by whites). (The 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act mandated that 5 grams of crack bring the same 5-year prison term as 500 grams of powder cocaine.) How unfair it is for Lindsay Lohan and Paris Hilton to get mild slaps on the wrist for what would send a young black man to prison for years, destroying his future and ruining his family. Recent revisions in the sentencing law will presumably change this.

Decriminalizing marijuana (like alcohol after Prohibition) may or may not be a good idea, but lessening the penalties for possession of small amounts would have a dramatic impact on the incarceration rates of young black men who are caught disproportionately by “stop and frisks” that often ignore white students, drivers, etc.

On the other hand, we know that some 90% of murdered blacks are killed by other blacks, and that although blacks constitute 24% of New York City’s population, we are told (although estimates differ) that blacks committed 68% of all murders, rapes, robberies and assaults in the city last year. Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant lead all New York City precincts in reported rapes.

One question should be how to prevent such crime; a second question should be how to reorient our dehumanizing prison system so as to rehabilitate those prisoners into productive citizens rather than to recycle them into “repeat” hardened criminals unlikely to re-enter the American mainstream. (The recidivism rate in New York State is currently 81%.)

U.S. prisons have become warehouses for our human failures that prevent some crime by isolating potential malefactors but do little to turn our criminals into productive citizens. We do not get good value for the \$70 billion a year America spends on prisons.

Incarceration of juveniles—except for the all-but-hopeless cases—should be in facilities more like schools and hospitals than like zoos to contain animals, in which physical abuse by violent offenders and sometimes by prison guards is routine and where counseling is inadequate. Many juvenile prisoners are low risk young men battling addiction or mental illness who would be better served by community facilities near their homes with counseling services for the child and the family. Experience shows these to have much lower rates of recidivism as well as much lower costs; but this change of practice is fought largely by the politically powerful Public Employees Federation, the union representing rural prison workers fighting for their (counter-productive) jobs. (The State of Missouri’s Juvenile Rehabilitation Program is the most promising in the nation, redirecting troubled lives, averting future crimes and, yes, saving tax dollars. New York would do well to replicate it.)

Among adults, first offenders should be kept apart from hardened criminals and exposed to the education and vocational training that could keep them from returning to jail. Literacy and job training for prisoners is the most fruitful investment our society can make, along with proper treatment for drug addicts. Appropriate vocational training of prisoners for skilled blue collar jobs would be an immense plus for everyone, a true win-win game, since pastry chefs, cabinet makers, plumbers, electricians, TV repair men, etc. are in short

supply, and computer specialists will always be employed.

For all convicts leaving prison, job counseling and appropriate short term economic support would help to reintegrate them into society and keep them from returning to criminal activities that will soon lead them back to prison. (Newark, NJ, with a recent \$2 million federal grant and \$3 million in private funding, is trying imaginative new ways of helping released convicts to readjust successfully to civilian life.)

There is a growing movement in many states to repeal or amend lifetime voting bans for convicted felons. Some five million Americans, mostly black, are disenfranchised, even when they have gone on to lead crime-free lives, and this clearly merits re-examination.

No discussion of crime in America can avoid the subject of the easy availability of handguns. In 2009, 2.4 million pistols and revolvers and 5.4 million guns overall were produced in America, leading to a firearm homicide rate 20 times higher in the U.S. than in other leading countries and 43 times higher for males ages 15 to 24.

Tougher controls on handguns (a quarter of which, police say, are owned by teenagers or younger) must be on everyone's agenda. Pat Moynihan once proposed (perhaps jokingly) prohibitively high taxes on bullets for handguns. We need more such creative thinking.

E) Education

Education is the true Civil Rights issue of our day. It is the great equalizer, the only “magic bullet” we know of to bring submerged groups into the economic and social mainstream. Education does not guarantee a job but it dramatically improves the odds.

Most of our education theorists today focus on “teaching” (what someone does at the blackboard) rather than on “learning” (which takes place in the head of the student). Our schools seek immediate, short term test results rather than encourage the self-motivated, life-long learning habits that produce an educated public. Critical thinking, problem-solving and the ability of students to communicate effectively and to cooperate with peers seem to have gotten lost, as have knowledge of the past and of other cultures. We are not providing our children with the tools they need to compete in the global economy (and to lead full lives after work).

Although Finland and South Korea, for example, spend less on education per child than we do, their children consistently outperform ours in international evaluations. Those nations are proud of their career teachers, who are well prepared both in pedagogics and in subject matter as well. Each of those countries has a longer school day and a longer school year than we do, as well as universal and more intensive preschooling;

and each encourages greater parental involvement in the child's education. Their teachers are regarded as highly-qualified "professionals" rather than protected "workers"; and they are respected because they merit respect. Needless to say, "bad eggs," among teachers and students, are routinely weeded out.

Our current establishment mantra proclaims salvation through higher pay for teachers, smaller classes, better physical school facilities and higher incomes for parents.

Interestingly enough, the only college class in the history of the Nobel Prizes to produce three, yes, three Nobel Laureates in one college class was not from Yale or Harvard, Oxford or Cambridge, but from New York's City College Class of 1937. Their teachers were underpaid, class sizes were large, physical facilities were shabby and most of the parents were sweatshop workers from the Lower East Side. The students, however, were highly motivated young people who valued literacy, thought critically and planned for the future; and their dedicated public school teachers came from the highest, not the lowest, academic percentiles of their own respective college classes. (Higher salaries would be needed today to attract their equivalent.)

To change the results in our inner city schools we must give up looking for a "quick fix" and start focusing on what the educational process really is. To begin with, we must change the mindset of the students by

changing the mindset of their parents. Their parents must be helped to value education and to stimulate their children from birth by speaking with them, reading to them and exposing them to appropriate books, encouraging questions and inculcating high aspirations and a sense of their future. They should encourage their children to spend more time on reading and homework and less on TV and computer games, and they should take an active and encouraging interest in the child's school progress. Every child should be helped to have a public library card and be encouraged to use it, and to become familiar with children's programs at the city's museums and libraries (and learning chess helps, too). Ronald Ferguson's studies of the educational achievement gap has focused attention on the crucial role of the child's home environment.

Parents should be encouraged to demand the highest quality of their children's teachers (regardless of ethnicity), because the issue is not jobs for teachers but effective learning for students. Michelle Rhee achieved remarkable results in Washington, DC by firing incompetent teachers regardless of ethnicity, and history will side with her, not with the teachers' unions who opposed her firings. They also fought against her desire for appropriate credentials and higher pay for teachers of high school math and science, whose current expertise in such subjects is low (and whose ability to inspire their students to pursue science or engineering careers seems nil). "Correlation" is not "causation," of course, but higher teacher science qualifications seem

to relate suspiciously to higher student science achievement.

Inner city children should be encouraged to feel as proud of their academic achievement as of their athletic prowess, helped by the heartfelt praise of parents, teachers, neighbors and successful role models. Far from feeling “disloyal” to their friends for taking school seriously and not acting “cool,” they should be encouraged to feel that their academic success reflects well on themselves, their school, their family and their community—all of which is true.

“Pride” and “shame”—powerful motivators for us all but especially for adolescents—must be harnessed to socially productive, not destructive, goals and actions.

Hours spent on S.A.T. test prep against “hanging out” with friends; following the rules of others against making your own; saving available money against current spending; self-discipline against unfocused freedom; thinking of tomorrow against playing around today—not easy choices for a young person to make, but they determine the long term quality of life, reflecting the shared values of those succeeding in our common civic culture and dramatically improving one’s “life chances.”

Can this be achieved? Successful examples abound—from Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone to the 99 KIPP schools in 20 states across the country to eye-

opening HEAF (the Harlem Educational Activities Fund), 100% of whose Harlem children graduate from high school and well over 90% of whom graduate from four-year colleges, in contrast to a national rate of under 60%. (A third of HEAF students go on to post-graduate education, and HEAF-sponsored inner city chess teams have ranked No. 1 in the United States.) Prominent public school examples are the Davidson Magnet School in Augusta, GA; the Amistad Academy in New Haven, CT; the M Street School in Washington, DC—all are high poverty, high minority, high performing schools whose students rank above the national norms.

All these principals and teachers “talk the talk and walk the walk.” Inspiring and encouraging the best in their students, they have also learned to deal with disruptive ones whose “acting out” keeps others from learning.

It is a brute fact of life (not widely understood by middle class America) that survival in the tough streets of the inner city requires one code of conduct, while entering and rising in the national mainstream requires another. As Elijah Anderson points out in *Code of the Street*, fear, suspicion and present-mindedness reflect one social code; self-confidence, trust and looking ahead, reflect the other. Constant noise, frequent violence and aggression, thin-skinned anger and resentment prevail in one world; quiet, self-restraint and adaptability prevail in the other. Maintaining direct eye contact, normal in the middle class world, is seen in the inner city as a hostile challenge requiring an aggressive

response.

Sensitive and knowledgeable teachers can help students learn the difficult art of functioning in both worlds, using the appropriate code in each when necessary. This is fearfully difficult, and it is easy to see why many children do not succeed in adjusting to life with different value systems. We must help them achieve it. Until they do, they will be seen as interlopers in the mainstream world.

As for the question of public vs. private vs. charter schools, Alexander Pope put it clearly: “For forms of governance let fools contest; whate’er is best administered is best.”

F) Education

A motivated, educated, socialized young person (regardless of ethnicity) will have the tools with which to compete successfully in a competitive, high tech, globalized world. As Nobel Laureate James Heckman points out, by increasing an individual’s “human capital” we increase our society’s “human capital.”

Sadly, the coming retrenchment by government at all levels—federal, state and municipal—will have a serious impact on black employment. Blacks are disproportionately employed by government or by those services such as healthcare that are underwritten by government. Dismissed workers without special skills

may be hard pressed to find replacement employment.

Engineers, chemists and other technically-trained personnel are hired on graduation at high salaries—yet blacks are dramatically under-represented in our technical schools. The military is widely seen as the most “color blind” and meritocratic sector of American life, yet middle class, not inner city, blacks are attracted to it, in part because of the new G.I. Bill college benefits. Small retail activities, a traditional avenue of upward mobility for poor immigrants, have little appeal for black inner city residents. Micro-lending, so effective overseas, could be explored domestically, since inner city would-be entrepreneurs chronically lack “start-up” financing and working capital.

Many call for a new Marshall Plan to help the inner city, but they forget that the original Marshall Plan was successful because the Germans and Japanese at the time were able to make constructive use of our help. America’s Alliance for Progress, the counterpart program for Latin America, achieved little, largely because the culture of the region was not conducive to development. Haiti, for example, which was an economic and social disaster in the past in spite of billions of dollars of U.S. aid, is likely to continue to be one, regardless of future aid. And here at home, Lyndon Johnson’s well-intentioned “War on Poverty” turned out to be not a war but a skirmish, and we didn’t win it; we lost it. Benefits went to “service providers,” not to “service recipients,” leaving those on the bottom

virtually untouched. (In New York City today, an estimated 30% of children are living in poverty.)

Our inner cities need “financial” help, but they need “social” help even more. Our challenge is to help break self-perpetuating cycles of poverty and hopelessness and to assist in replacing them with vistas of upward social and economic mobility made possible by education.

Conclusion:

The classic black American narrative—of reacting to victimization, disenfranchisement and marginalization by angrily pounding on closed doors—is increasingly becoming less a subject of “current events” and more one of “history.”

A new 21st century black narrative—of achievement by taking advantage of unfolding opportunities to walk through now opened doors—may prove to be a constructive “self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean, who come to America voluntarily because of the prospects it offers, tend to take advantage of those opportunities, as do many native-born black Americans. Too many others, profoundly influenced by a heritage of legal servitude, Jim Crow laws and the KKK, will require time and positive experiences before they can accept, and profit from, the new realities.

Most African Americans who play the game according to the

currently accepted color-blind rules are making their way in the American mainstream and are major assets to our society. Those who, for a variety of reasons, are out of phase with our currently accepted civic norms are suffering terribly today and are destined to continue to do so, regardless of traditional governmental programs designed to help.

Fifty years ago, black challenges were largely legal, and they were dealt with by *Brown vs. The Board of Education* and by Voter Registration Acts. From here on, those challenges will be largely cultural, and solutions are more complex.

The civil rights victories of 1964 and 1965 resulted largely from the efforts of literate, articulate, impressive people like Thurgood Marshall, A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Walter White, Roy Wilkins and, of course, Martin Luther King, Jr.—educated people who thought of themselves as members of W.E.B. DuBois’ Talented Tenth, dedicated to the uplift of black America. The later “thugification” of the inner city may be running out of steam, and a possible surge into the middle class by today’s disadvantaged may be in the offing. Stokely Carmichael (“smash everything Western civilization has created”) may be giving way to W.E.B. DuBois (“I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not...arm and arm with Balzac and Dumas...I summon Aristotle and Aurelius.”)

As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has written, “When I was growing up in the fifties, the blackest thing a smart colored boy or girl could be was a doctor or a lawyer, not a baseball player or an entertainer. Far too many of our people have lost their

understanding and grasp of this, the cardinal principle of black success from slavery to freedom.”

With Colin Powell in the past and Barack Obama in the present, let us hope the Cory Bookers and Deval Patricks point the way to a pluralistic future in which talent and skill, motivation and effort—not skin color—determine achievement. The successfully-integrated U.S. military is a model. Harvard Law School Dean Martha Minow writes, “Clear commitments to uncompromising standards of performance, combined with multiple opportunities for education, training and mentoring, are important elements of the army’s success with racial integration.”

Universal experience demonstrates that focusing on the wholesome development of children—giving them hope and indicating realistic paths toward achieving such hopes—is the most effective way to advancement. This can best be achieved by the appropriate, tough-minded involvement of government, public groups and private citizens for the benefit of all our children, regardless of ethnicity. Inculcating in young people a fierce desire to achieve their potential and a willingness to pay the price in whatever personal trade-offs are necessary are first steps in the rise to leadership roles in American society.

Frederick Douglass, born enslaved in 1818, self-educated, and one of the greatest figures America has produced, closed his autobiography (of 1881) with the observation, “If the time shall ever come when we shall possess in the colored people of the United States a class of men noted for enterprise, industry, economy and success, we shall no longer have any

trouble in the matter of civil and political rights.”

No one has said it better.

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