

Point of View

Editorial

What Blacks Can Do For Themselves

By Robert Woodson

There are important lessons to be drawn from the past about how Blacks achieved in the midst of a hostile racial environment. We know about those who fought against slavery but little about those who fought on the economic battlefield.

In 1863, when more than 1,000 Blacks were fired from the loading docks in Baltimore, they responded by forming the Chesapeake and Maine Railroad and Dry Dock Company. That company operated successfully for 18 years. In Philadelphia, because Blacks were excluded from borrowing money to start their own businesses, they started 10 building and loan associations. Black real estate companies flourished in New York City.

Even if American Society has become more complex, we can still be guided by the spirit that informed our Blacks forebears generations ago.

The first step toward progress for Black Americans is to end the litany of despair from the civil rights establishment that constantly portrays us as a group of helpless victims continually at the mercy of the whim and caprice of Big Daddy government and looks to others to solve our problems.

Black progress has been achieved through creative and innovative responses to racism and oppression. The elitist notion that only people with formal training and professional degrees have legitimate answers must be challenged. J.D. Gaskin, with only a fifth-grade education, became one of America's first Black millionaires. He expressed this idea well when he said, "It is better to say 'I is rich,' than 'I am poor.'"

Rather than accept solutions parachuted in by middle class professional service providers, efforts must be taken to recognize and expand what is already taking place in neighborhoods by indigenous organizations and grassroots leaders. These groups have unique, first-hand knowledge about problems, experience and resources within their communities.

Successful neighborhood efforts flourish today in Black neighborhoods, homes, churches and Masonic organizations. The United House of Prayer of Washington, D.C., has built more low-income housing in the city of Washington than both the city and the federal governments combined.

Its policy is to buy choice inner-city land, stave off gentrification and build low-to-moderate income housing for community residents and church members. The program launches regular "building drives" to collect money for property acquisition and construction. These properties house many low-income families at rents they can afford.

Likewise, Blacks have started more than 300 neighborhood-based, independent schools all across the nation where some pupils are outperforming their public school counterparts. In one local public housing development, residents have made it possible for post-secondary schools where previously only two had continued their education beyond high school. Neighborhood-based ventures have sprung up all over the country in the form of adoption agencies, security businesses, schools computer firms, grocery stores and banks.

Many government social programs are counterproductive because they discourage the work ethic and foster dependency on public assistance. For example, public housing, a \$4 billion a year federal assistance program, has been responsible for herding low-income families into high-rise buildings that breed crime and frustration. As a result, public housing is most often viewed as housing of last resort, riddled with crime, property damage, poverty and illness.

There are, however, many residents who have lived in housing projects their entire lives and remain there by choice. In some cities -- like Washington, Boston, New Orleans, St. Louis and Louisville -- where public housing authorities have allowed residents to manage public housing units, dramatic changes have taken place. Crime rates are down. Teenage

To Be Equal

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION FACES TESTS

By John E. Jacob

The war on affirmative action is heating up, indicating that the next several months will be crucial for the future of such programs.

First the Justice Department charged that the Labor Department uses quotas in affirmative action efforts. Then, the Civil Rights Commission prepared a report attacking federal setaside programs that favor minority contractors. Finally, important affirmative action cases were argued in the Supreme Court and its decisions, expected in June, could alter the terms of debate.

The Justice Department has long argued that goals and timetables are quotas by a different name, but it failed to prove its point.

It could only cite a handful of instances among the more

than 5,000 discrimination cases handled by Labor Department enforcement officials to complain about.



John E. Jacob

And even those were responses to gross failure of government contractors to make good faith efforts to meet their legal obligation to non-discriminatory hiring.

The Administration wants to settle complaints of job discrimination on a case by case basis, ignoring the fact

that discrimination is based on group affiliation. Remedies have to be tailored to that reality.

minority businesses enter the mainstream of America's private sector.

The cases before the

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The goal of affirmative action programs is to bring victimized minorities into the mainstream. That can't be done through individual redress; it requires good-faith efforts, timetables and measureable goals.

Even as it attacks affirmative action programs the Administration decided not to risk the political firestorm that would ensue if the flimsy Civil Rights Commission report was endorsed by the commissioners. The White House publicly reaffirmed its support for minority setasides, which help

Supreme Court will further define the constitutional limits of affirmative action, and the evidence suggests

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Watch what you say!

You catch
a cow by it's
horns
but you catch a man
by his word.

-Jamaican Proverb

pregnancies have declined; in the District of Columbia's Kenilworth/Parkside development they are down 50 percent since 1982.

In the same project, the percentage of welfare recipients have declined 46 percent in the same three-year period; the number of female-headed households have decreased in the resident-managed projects in all of these cities; administrative cost are down, vacancies and evictions are down.

In the Corcoran Plaza project in St. Louis, 330 jobs have been created in the last five years, and in the resident-managed projects in all of these cities, rent collections are up from 30 to 100 percent in the past five years. These successes can be ascribed to the residents assuming responsibility for their own lives.

Inner city resident leaders in the several public housing developments have successfully instituted everything from sound resident management practices to job training, health and day care programs. In at least one instance -- St. Louis -- the residents constructed new housing. In another -- Washington's Kenilworth/Parkside -- seven thriving small businesses were started; they now employ 94 community residents, many of whom had been on public welfare.

True, there are islands of excellence in a vast and turbulent sea. However, our challenge is to remove old-line policies that inhibit self-help efforts and instead appeal creatively to that positive spirit in every human that craves self-sufficiency and independence.

Blacks are at a turning point in history. The era of the great civil rights marches is over. Although Blacks, in fact all Americans, owe a tremendous debt to those whose sacrifices won passage of civil rights legislation and aroused hopes that Blacks would finally enter the mainstream of U.S. society, the old strategies have run their course. New efforts must focus on ending dependence on government and encouraging the growing movement among Blacks to rely on themselves for an improved life.