

By John McWhorter

THE GIFT OF COMPETITION

Why It's Time for Black America To Stand Up

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 learned to cherish victimhood over action, separatism over universalism, and peer-group acceptance over intellectual achievement, a great many blacks are now being slowed on their path to success. As they are shepherded by black leaders into a conviction that they inhabit a fundamentally hostile, alien nation, today's black children are at grave risk of being stunted in their ability to make the best of themselves.

The first step on the road to true equality should be combating victimology. When the process of bringing blacks to equality with whites began in the 1960s, the conception of blacks as a race of victims was appropriate, because 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.

But today, only about a quarter of black Americans are poor. Discrimination is increasingly rare and subtle, and is considered a social stain. Things are not perfect, but let's face it: There are millions of people on earth who would kill to live as all but a few black Americans do today, and there have been untold millions 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. Instead, ours is a race containing a fraction of victims—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 condi-

tion of the African-American race.” Not only does such a conception not correspond to reality, but it is a grievous insult to the millions of black people who have achieved comfortable, meaningful lives over the past four decades.

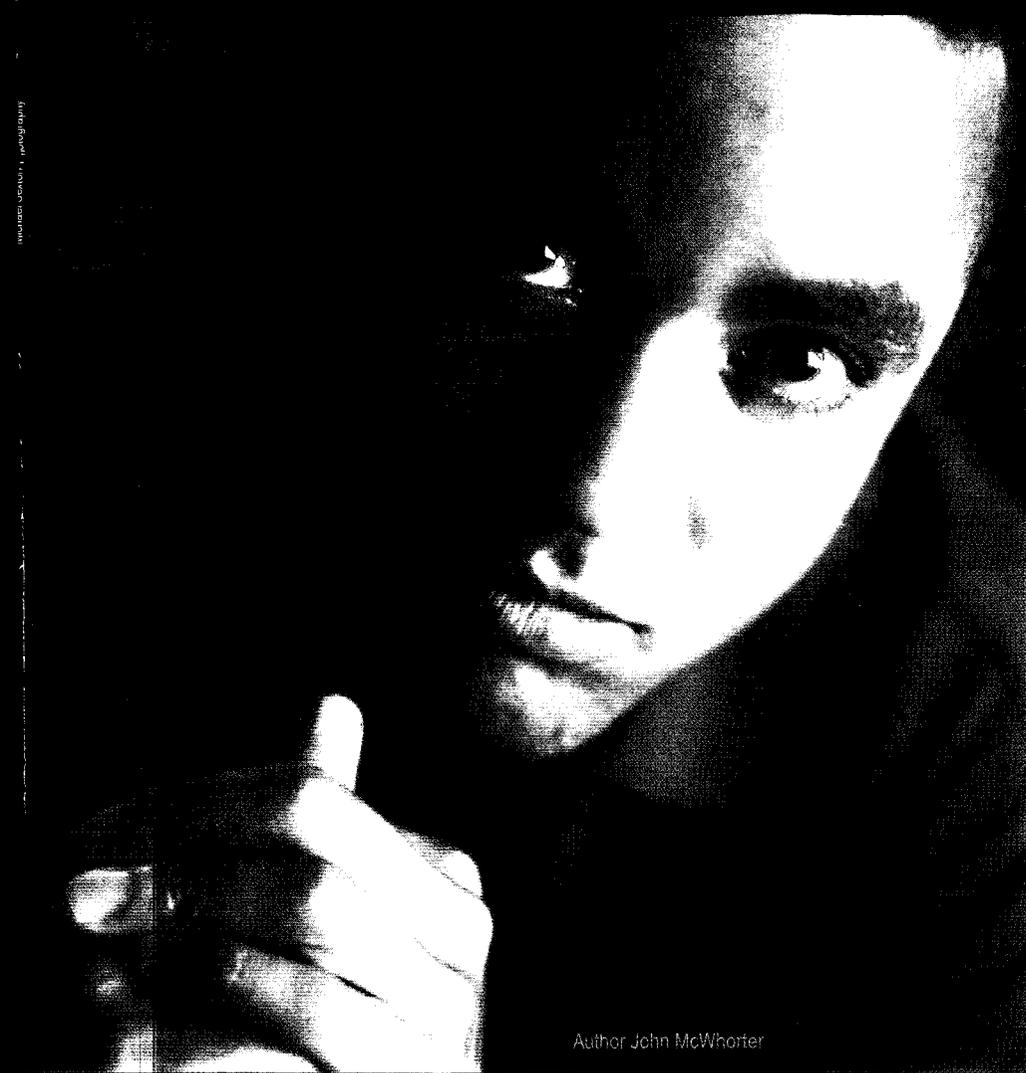
Let me suggest three new habits of thinking that could help black Americans get beyond the self-imposed obstacle of viewing ourselves as abused pawns.

Mantra Number One should be, “Our successes are no longer ‘anecdotes,’ they are the norm.” In polls, almost half of African Americans say they believe three out of four black people in this country live in ghettos. This is mistaken. The number of black people who lived in ghettos in 1995 was a low one in five. The inner cities are, in my view, America's worst problem. But the important fact is, *most black people are neither poor nor close to it.*

The misconception that most black people are poor perniciously distorts our thinking about race. Recently in the *New York Times*, black activist Manning Marable parsed the state of black America: “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.” This kind of defeatist rhetoric is not only inaccurate; it's poison.

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. This is obsolete. Too many millions of blacks live comfortable lives to be processed as “lucky.” Such people are nothing less than normal; this is exactly the progress the civil rights revolution was for.

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Author John McWhorter

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.

The time has come for us to reconceive the black college professor who sits in the trendy 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, just before catching a flight 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. O.K., 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 does that episode negate the victory and richness of the rest of his life? What kind of "oppression" is this?

My second mantra for improving our race thinking is, "Occasional inconvenience is not oppression." The last thing I want to convey is that life is perfect for black people in America. I am well aware it is not, as I discuss at length in my book. However, a time comes when facing the vital issue of degree becomes imperative. Failing to draw a line between oppression and "occasional inconvenience," as a cousin of mine phrases it, is infantile. Nobody on earth faces a life free of setbacks of various sorts. If you treat people as incapable of coping with any hardship whatsoever, and expect them to be capable of achievement only under ideal conditions, you are not respecting them or truly considering them equal.

The fact that many black leaders are feeding this view of African Americans is a kind of ideological plague. By indulging the self-righteous doubletalk of black vulnerability we are, ironically, blocking the full integration of blacks into America that the civil rights movement sought.

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. 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 it left him with reading

My third suggested mantra is, "When there is urgent work to be done, people crying 'Wolf!' are wasting our time." Most black Americans can see there is much of the huckster in someone like Al Sharpton. The problem, however, is that victimology is widely accepted as a valid point of view at all levels of the black community.

Reviewing the evidence in the Tawana Brawley case of 1987, one simply cannot avoid the sad truth that this young woman fabricated a story of rape. Yet what black activist Patricia Williams considers important is that "Tawana's terrible story has every black woman's worst fears and experiences wrapped into it. Few will believe a black woman who has been raped by a white man."

Is rape by white, as opposed to black, men really an urgent problem for black women now? To focus upon problems of the past rather than those of the present will solve nothing. The lack of interest in addressing this issue beyond the level of folk conception shown by Williams—a professor of law—suggests a fundamental desire to cloak her race in the mantle of victimhood at all costs. Williams is excusing Sharpton's mendacious duping of the public in this case, and implicitly accepting a professional victimologist as a legitimate African-American leader and role model.

To the extent people like Sharpton and Louis Farrakhan are considered "cool," to the extent that the black man at the party grouching about the "war on blacks" is considered a righteous brother, to the extent that Spike Lee is considered by black people to be "telling it like it is" when he complains Hollywood won't produce movies about the full experience of black people (in a single year that saw *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, *Beloved*,

John McWhorter is associate professor of linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. This is excerpted from his new book, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* (The Free Press).

Down in the Delta, *Foolish*, and *The Wood* released to theaters), then black America is in trouble.

There is a deeply felt sentiment in the black community that we are not to disagree with one another in public. This is why so many millions of moderate black Americans are inclined to accept barely credible depictions of the modern black condition as valid. The “united front” strategy was a valuable survival tactic in the old days, but we only maintain it today on pain of holding ourselves back. Unfounded and unfocused resentment is a handicap to emotional health and being all that one can be.

So where is the route to true equality? I suggest the single best step we could take would be to give black students the gift of competition. That means dealing with affirmative action.

Affirmative action runs up against something central to the self-conception of all human beings: being rewarded for one’s efforts. I believe that when it was instituted in the 1960s, affirmative action was a necessary emergency measure. It afforded a race damaged by discrimination extraordinary chances to enter the American mainstream. I depart from most black thinkers by not believing the policy ought be continued until there is no racism whatsoever in the country and black Americans have achieved complete parity with whites.

When it comes to university admissions, affirmative action is no longer justifiable. Some claim social conditions make it impossible for minority students to achieve good grades and test scores. This is no longer true. There are now many black students in schools where white and Asian counterparts routinely do good work. Even in lousy urban schools, poor Asian immigrants or even black Caribbeans often perform much better under the same conditions. Many will answer, “Well, they have a different culture”—and that’s my answer: The evidence suggests most black educational failure is due to a sense of separation from scholarly endeavor internal to African-American culture. Tragically, black culture in America today is shot through with a wariness of school.

Only genuine competition can reduce this. There is a misconception that affirmative action is used today merely to give a small boost, choosing the minority student over the white one only in the case of otherwise parallel qualifications. Not true. Under today’s affirmative action policies, colleges regularly admit black students with much lower grade point averages, and SAT scores hundreds of points below the cutoff for whites and Asians. William Bowen and Derek Bok examined 28 selective colleges; among students who scored 1200 to 1249 on the SAT, 60 percent of the blacks were admitted as opposed to 19 percent of whites.

Thus the question facing us is *not*, “Should we admit black students with top grades and scores over white students with the same credentials, since racism keeps the numbers of such black students low, and since these students will perform as well as whites once admitted?” Who would have any problem with that? Unfortunately, average black students do not present grades and scores equivalent to other students; racism plays at

most a background role in the disparity; and the black students admitted do not generally perform at the level of whites. Thus the actual question is, “Should we admit black students hindered from making top grades and test scores by a tendency to discourage one another from doing so, given that these students will continue their substandard performance for this same reason once admitted?”

I believe the answer is no.

As an institutionalized leg up, affirmative action leaves black Americans with the most systematically diluted responsibility for their fate of any group in America. The policy divests blacks and Latinos of the unalloyed sense of personal responsibility for their accomplishments. By separating rewards from academic achievements, quota-based set-asides dampen minority initiative.

Affirmative action also makes black people look unintelligent to others. With it widely known among a student body that most minority students were admitted with test scores and GPAs that would have barred white and Asian applicants, it is difficult for many white students to avoid private suspicions that blacks simply aren’t as swift. This will in turn encourage suspicion in black students, and thus perpetuate interracial alienation on campus and undermine the mutual respect that successful integration requires.

Affirmative action can be especially grating when most of the college students benefiting from it are obviously middle-class, as they are today. When affirmative action aimed at improving the lot of the disenfranchised, its displacement of some better qualified applicants could be justified in the name of a greater good. Preferring middle-class black children who have suffered no more than most white or Asian students, however, is more clearly unfair.

Though affirmative action was introduced as a way to uplift the black race, there is evidence it no longer does so. The black/white scholastic gap closed steadily until the late 1980s. Since then, black academic performance has plateaued. Even in excellent schools like those of Shaker Heights or Evanston, Illinois, large numbers of black students continue to do poorly. I believe this shows affirmative action has done all it can to help close the black/white scholastic gap.

Though content and financially stable, today’s affirmative action beneficiaries are raising children with the lowest grades and test scores in the United States. In seeking the cause of today’s educational plateau, we must look for a factor that disproportionately affects black children who go to college. That factor is not poor inner-city schools, because they account for only a fraction of the black college student population. And it is not racism, because black students continue to lag behind even in contexts where there is little racism.

No factor so obviously fulfills this requirement as the tendency for black students to hold schoolwork at half an arm’s length, a phenomenon I discuss at length in my new book. The plateau demonstrates very few black students feel spontaneously compelled to reach for the highest bar. And affirmative action doesn’t help this situation.

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If every black student knows that not even the most selective schools in the country require the very best grades or test scores of black students, and that fine universities just below this level will readily admit blacks by virtue of their "leadership qualities" or "spark," and that solid second-tier colleges will admit them with even less in their portfolio, what motivation is there for any but the occasional driven student to devote his deepest effort to school?

I can attest, for example, that in secondary school I deliberately refrained from working to my highest potential because I knew I would be accepted to even top universities without doing so. Almost any black child knows from an early age that there is something called affirmative action. I was aware of this from at least the age of ten. And so I was quite satisfied to make B+'s and A-'s rather than the A's and A+'s I could have made with extra time and effort. I was lucky that, thanks to my knack for school, my less-than-optimum efforts still put me within reach of fine colleges. But the same sentiment operates in black students less naturally nerdy than I was.

Studies show that black students (even middle-class ones) are less concerned than whites that weak school performance will affect their chances in life. One could think of few better ways to depress a race's propensity for pushing itself and ultimately succeeding than such a view.

We often hear that black students underperform because teachers do not require enough of them. Isn't permanently exempting black students from true competition also requiring too little? A parent teaches a child to ride a bicycle by offering training wheels for a while. But there comes a point when Dad pushes you down the hill to ride by yourself for the first time. Only then do you master the subtle muscular poise that allows you to stay magically balanced and rolling along. Looking back, you realize your success would have been impossible without taking a plunge; only when the danger of falling down looms do your mind and body avidly seek the interplay to avoid it. Black students simply will not get beyond the average level they post today so long as Dad continues to trot alongside holding the bike.

The harms of affirmative action—sowing self-doubt, giving the appearance of dimness, displacing equally qualified whites, and most importantly the blunting of incentive—were worth bearing in the immediate aftermath of the civil rights revolution. After 30 years, however, the harms remain, damaging health, while black access to the economic and cultural mainstreams are well established and in no danger of decreasing.

Unfortunately, some backers of affirmative action are focused more on past injustices than current realities. Harvard professor Nathan Glazer, for instance, who is white, supports affirmative action out of a desire to atone for what was done to blacks in decades past. But it dehumanizes today's black students to establish policies for them on the basis of what happened to their ancestors. This casts them as mythic victims in a historical play, rather than treating them as living, breathing human beings whose vital needs ought to be addressed in the present tense. Face it: A person you excuse from genuine challenge is a person whose abilities you do not truly respect.

The question is not how we relieve good-thinking people like Glazer of their guilt for the historical misdeeds of their race, but how we bring present-day black people into equality with whites. The guiding mistake of people like Glazer is the misconception that these two things are one and the same. There is no logical guarantee that what accomplishes the former will also accomplish the latter.

Despite their august credentials and beneficent intentions, white scholars like Glazer, Ronald Dworkin, William Bowen, and Derek Bok are driven more by their desire to redeem themselves (as Shelby Steele puts it) than to truly help black people. Concerned white people: Do not turn human beings into pawns in a sociological experiment that will not personally affect any of your nearest and dearest. If you really believe black people are "fellow Americans," treat them as such. I thank you for your concern, but must tell you this: You are selling us short.

Many suppose that given a choice between excellence and "diversity," the latter ought to win out. But it's time to put excellence rather than headcounts first, because exposing black students to serious competition is the only way to start them on the path to closing the black/white gap once and for all.

To be sure, there would be an unpleasant by-product of this approach. The number of minority students admitted to selective universities would at first go down. There is a strong tendency to reject this prospect as "resegregation," but that is hyperbole. The black/white scholastic lag is not small, but it is hardly so vast that no minority students, or even just a handful, are eligible for admission to good schools. For example, the total of black students admitted to Berkeley after the ban on preferences took effect was 43 percent less than the previous year's. That is hardly wonderful, but note that the decline

was less than half. What's more, in the same year, black admissions *increased* at three second-tier but solid University of California schools (Santa Cruz, Irvine, and Riverside). In total, minority admissions in California and Texas went down in only six out of 74 schools after racial preferences were banned.

We must not swallow the "Yale or jail" myth under which activists indignantly defend black students' "right" to attend top schools, with the suggestion that otherwise they'll be prowling the street with weapons. In truth, black students not admitted to the very top schools would easily be admitted to any number of fine second-tier ones. It is said the top schools are virtually the only path to the most prestigious jobs, but this is not borne out by the facts. One does not wind up in a trailer park because one attended Rutgers instead of Princeton. I, for example, received my B.A. from Rutgers and nevertheless have done pretty well. Of today's African-American congressmen, high-ranking army officers, people earning Ph.D.s from 1992-96, MacArthur Foundation award winners of 1981-88, and top 50 business officials, none but a sliver attended top-rated colleges. Surely Harvard connections do not hurt, but just as surely, such credentials are but one of several factors that determine one's position in life.

Whites have tried to bring blacks into the academic arena with permanently lowered admissions standards, only to see black scholarly performance freeze at a substandard level,

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Transcript

WORDS WORTH REPEATING

What I Want from a Jewish Vice President

By Michael Medved

The following is excerpted from a speech given by author Michael Medved at the annual meeting of the national Jewish organization Toward Tradition, held in Washington, D.C.

I have warm personal feelings toward Joe Lieberman, whom I've known for 31 years. When I was far away from Jewish commitment, and very far away from orthodoxy, Joe Lieberman was one of the first Sabbath-observing Jews with whom I had contact. His was a welcoming, sincere, wonderful Jewish home.

Though I am a Republican and enthusiastic supporter of the Bush-Cheney ticket, I believe when all the shouting dies down, and we look at the deeper meaning of what has happened, we will all have reason to feel grateful that the first Jew selected for a national ticket was a serious Jew. We have never in this country's history had a member of Congress anywhere close to the level of Jewish observance that Joe Lieberman has maintained. Regardless of any other issues in this campaign, without question my life as a Sabbath-observing Jew is easier because Joe Lieberman became a candidate for Vice President, and set a very public example of Jewish observance and intensity.

Nonetheless, I could never support the Gore-Lieberman ticket—especially since Lieberman has traded in his core values for Gore values. As I watched this appalling process, I was tempted to paraphrase another vice presidential candidate, "I know Joe Lieberman. Joe Lieberman was a friend of mine. And that guy up there running for Vice President, he's no Joe Lieberman."

As someone who cares about Joe Lieberman and likes the man, I have

found this process heartbreaking and even pathetic. This is a man who voted seven times in the Senate for vouchers in one version or another, but now says, "I was never for vouchers." A man who supported Proposition 209 in California but now says, "I've always supported affirmative action." Then there

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were his tortured distortions of traditional Jewish teaching to justify his own puzzling support for a radical gay rights agenda and partial-birth abortion. The deconstruction of Joe Lieberman is a tragedy. How is Joe going to put his integrity back together after the election?

And how will our community sort out its surprisingly complex response to his nomination? Initially, I was truly amazed at the outpouring of joy among Jews, with people crying emotionally and going crazy—I never expected that. After all, there are ten members of the U.S. Senate who identify themselves as Jewish. We are not lacking in prominence or power in the United States. So why were people so excited over Lieberman's nomination?

The reason, I think, reflects the fact that most American Jews, despite our prominence, still feel marginal in this country. The Lieberman nomination

said to them, "You are not as marginal as you thought; you can be mainstream."

Later I was similarly surprised that organizations like the Anti-Defamation League and numerous prominent Jewish spokesmen criticized Lieberman for too much public emphasis on his own religious faith and his stress on the importance of religious values in politics. Suddenly, the pride of the Jews was supposed to be bad for the Jews because he breached the wall of separation between church (or *shul*) and state. How did that happen? Wasn't he the guy who was supposed to make us all feel less marginal?

Here is the secret to this puzzle, and it is profound: The thing that has marginalized Jews compared to other Americans is not their Jewishness, but rather their atheism, their alienation from religious belief. The Lieberman nomination didn't undo *that* marginalization. In fact, for American Jews who are agnostic or atheist, his selection reinforced their isolation, emphasizing a sense that most Jews occupy a position outside the U.S. mainstream: Here is the most visible Jew in the country, and he is talking about his passionate belief in God. What could make you feel more left out, more like the guest who wasn't invited to the party?

Lieberman was perfectly comfortable speaking in that black Baptist church in Detroit, just as Rabbi Lapin of Toward Tradition is comfortable going to any church across the country to speak. Most secular American Jews would never feel comfortable speaking in such a setting. When Joe Lieberman talks about praying in public and the importance of religion in American life, suddenly many of his kinsmen feel even