

Achieving the “Dream”: A Challenge to Liberals and to Conservatives in the Spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr.

by Glenn C. Loury

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders, and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. (Hebrews 12:1, NIV)

The struggle for freedom and equality is the central theme in the black American historical experience. This struggle, in turn, has played a profound role in shaping the contemporary American social and political conscience. The trauma of slavery, the fratricide of the Civil War, the profound legal ramifications of the Reconstruction amendments, the long dark night of post-Reconstruction retreat from the moral and practical implications of black citizenship, the collective redemption of the Civil Rights Movement — these have worked to make us Americans the people we are. Only the massive westward migration and the still continuing flow of immigrants to our shores rival this history of race relations as factors defining the American character.

Beginning in the mid-1950s and culminating a decade later, the Civil Rights Movement wrought a profound change in American race relations. Its goal was to achieve equal citizenship for blacks; it was believed by many that social and economic equality would follow in the wake of this accomplishment. The civil rights revolution largely succeeded in its effort to eliminate legally enforced second class citizenship for blacks. The legislation and court rulings to which it led effected sweeping changes in the American institutions of education, employment, and electoral politics. So broad was the wake of this social upheaval that the rights of women, homosexuals, the elderly, the handicapped were redefined, in large part, as a consequence of it.

Forcing a Redefinition. This social transformation represents a remarkable, unparalleled experience, graphically illustrating the virtue and vitality of our free institutions. In barely the span of a generation, and with comparatively little violence, a despised and largely disenfranchised minority descendant from chattel slaves used the courts, the legislature, the press, and the rights of petition and assembly of our republic to force a redefinition of their citizenship. One can begin to grasp the magnitude of this accomplishment by comparison with the continuing turmoil which besets those many nations around the world suffering under longstanding conflicts among racial and religious groups.

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He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on February 12, 1990, as part of a lecture series observing Black History Month.

ISSN 0272-1155. ©1990 by The Heritage Foundation.

Unfulfilled Hope. Yet, despite this success, hope that the Movement would produce true social and economic equality between the races remains unfulfilled. No compendium of social statistics is needed to see the vast disparities in economic advantage which separate the inner-city black poor from the rest of the nation. No profound talents of social observation are required to notice the continuing tension, anger, and fear that shrouds our public discourse on matters concerning race. When in 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr. declared his "dream" — that we Americans should one day become a society where a citizen's race would be an irrelevancy, where black and white children would walk hand-in-hand, where persons would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character — this seemed to many Americans both a noble and attainable goal. Today, even after having made his birth an occasion for national celebration, his "dream" seems naively utopian — no closer to realization than on that hot August afternoon when those inspiring words were first spoken.

Today black Americans, and the nation, face a crisis different in character though no less severe in degree than that which occasioned the civil rights revolution. It is not a crisis, however, which admits of treatment by use of the strategies that proved so successful in that earlier era. The bottom stratum of the black community has compelling problems which can no longer be blamed solely on white racism, which will not yield to protest marches or court orders, and which force us to confront fundamental failures in lower class black urban society. This crisis is particularly difficult for black leaders and the black middle class. For this profound alienation of the ghetto poor from mainstream American life has continued to grow worse in the years since the triumphs of the civil rights movement, even as the success of that movement has provided the basis for an impressive expansion of economic and political power for the black middle class.

Social Pathologies. There is no way to downplay the social pathologies that afflict the urban underclass, just as it cannot be denied that vast new opportunities have opened for blacks to enter into the mainstream of American life. In big city ghettos, the black youth unemployment rate often exceeds 40 percent. Over one quarter of young black men in the critical ages 20 to 24 years old, according to one recent study, have dropped out of the economy, in the sense that they are not in school, not working, and not actively seeking work. In the inner city, far more than half of all black babies are born out of wedlock. Black girls between the ages of 15 and 19 constitute the most fertile population of that age group in the industrialized world. The families which result are most often not self-supporting. The level of dependency on public assistance for basic economic survival has essentially doubled since 1964; almost one-half of all black children are supported in part by transfers from the state and federal governments. Over half of black children in public primary and secondary schools are concentrated in the nation's twelve largest central city school districts, where the quality of education is poor, and where whites constitute only about a quarter of total enrollment. Only about one black student in seven scores above the 50th percentile on standardized college admissions tests. Blacks, though little more than a tenth of the population, constitute approximately half of the imprisoned felons in the nation. Roughly 40 percent of those murdered in the U.S. are black men killed by other black men. In some big cities black women face a risk of rape which is five times as great as that faced by whites.

These statistics depict an extent of deprivation, a degree of misery, a hopelessness and despair, an alienation which is difficult for most Americans, who do not have direct

experience with this social stratum, to comprehend. They pose an enormous challenge to the leadership of our nation, and to the black leadership. Yet, we seem increasingly unable to conduct a political dialogue out of which might develop a consensus about how to respond to this reality. There are two common, partisan themes which dominate the current debate. One is to blame it all on racism, to declare that this circumstance proves the continued existence of old-type American racial enmity, only in a more subtle, modernized and updated form. This is the view of many civil rights activists. From this perspective the tragedy of the urban underclass is a civil rights problem, curable by civil rights methods. Black youth unemployment represents the refusal of employers to hire competent and industrious young men because of their race. Black welfare dependency is the inescapable consequence of the absence of opportunity. Black academic underperformance reflects racial bias in the provision of public education. Black incarceration rates are the result of the bias of the police and judiciary.

The other theme, characterized by the posture of many on the right in our politics, is to blame it on the failures of "Great Society liberals," to chalk it up to the follies of big government and big spending, to see the problem as the legacy of a tragically misconceived welfare state. A key feature of this view is the apparent absence of any felt need to articulate a "policy" on this new race problem. It is as though those shaping the domestic agenda of this government do not see the explicitly racial character of this problem, as if they do not understand the historical experiences which link, symbolically and sociologically, the current urban underclass to our long, painful legacy of racial trauma. Their response, quite literally, has been to promulgate a de facto doctrine of "benign neglect" on the issue of continuing racial inequality.

Competing Visions. These responses feed on each other. The civil rights leaders, repelled by the Reagan and now Bush Administrations' public vision, see more social spending as the only solution to the problem. They characterize every question raised about the cost effectiveness or appropriateness of a welfare program as evidence of a lack of concern about the black poor; they identify every affirmative action effort, whether it is aimed at attaining skills training for the ghetto poor or securing a fat municipal procurement contract for a black millionaire, as necessary and just recompense in light of our history of racial oppression. Conservatives in and out of government, repelled by the public vision of civil rights advocates and convinced that the programs of the past have failed, when addressing racial issues at all talk in formalistic terms about the principle of "color blind state action." Its civil rights officials absurdly claim that *they* are the true heirs of Martin Luther King's moral legacy, for it is they who remain loyal to his "color blind" ideal — as if King's moral leadership consisted of this and nothing else. Its spokesmen point to the "trickling down" of the benefits of economic growth as the ultimate solution to these problems; it courts the support and responds to the influence of segregationist elements; it remains at this late date without a positive program of action aimed at narrowing the yawning chasm separating the black poor from the rest of the nation.

There is, many would now admit, merit in the conservative criticism of liberal social policy. It is clear that the Great Society approach to the problems of poor blacks has been inadequate. Intellectually honest persons must now concede that it is not nearly as easy to truly help people as the big spenders would suggest. The proper measure of "caring" ought not be the size of budget expenditures on poverty programs, if the result is that the

recipients remain dependent on such programs. Moreover, many Americans have become concerned about the neutrality toward values and behavior which was so characteristic of the Great Society thrust, the aversion to holding persons responsible for those actions which precipitated their own dependence, the feeling that "society" is to blame for all the misfortune in the world. Characterizing the problem of the ghetto poor as due to white racism is one variant of this argument that "society" has caused the problem. It overlooks the extent to which values and behaviors of inner-city black youth are implicated in the difficulty.

Many American, black and white, have also been disgusted with the way in which this dangerous circumstance is exploited for political gain by professional civil rights and poverty advocates. They have watched the minority youth unemployment rate be cited in defense of special admissions programs to elite law schools. They have seen public officials, caught in their illegal indiscretions, use the charge of racism as a cover for their personal failings of character. They have seen themselves pilloried as "racists" by civil rights lobbyists for taking the opposite side of legitimately arguable policy debates.

Ideological Barrier. Yet, none of this excuses (though it may help to explain) the fact that our national government has failed to engage this problem with the seriousness and energy which it requires. It has permitted ideology to stand in the way of the formulation of practical programs which might begin to chip away at this dangerous problem. It has permitted the worthy goals of reducing taxes and limiting growth in the size of government to crowd from the domestic policy agenda the creative reflection which will obviously be needed to formulate a new, non-welfare oriented approach to this problem.

Ironically, each party to this debate has helped to make viable the otherwise problematic posture of the other. The lack of a positive, high priority response from a series of Republican Administrations to what is now a longstanding, continuously worsening social problem has allowed politically marginal and intellectually moribund elements to retain a credibility and force in our political life far beyond that which their accomplishments would otherwise support. Many are reluctant to criticize them because they do not wish to be identified with a Republican Administration's policy on racial matters. Moreover, the shrill, vitriolic, self-serving, and obviously unfair attacks on Administration officials by the civil rights lobby has drained their criticism of much of its legitimacy. The "racist" epithet, like the little boy's cry of "wolf," is a charge so often invoked these days that it has lost its historic moral force.

Political Quagmire. The result of this symbiosis has been to impede the establishment of a political consensus sufficient to support sustained action on the country's most pressing domestic problem. Many whites, chastened by the apparent failures of 1960s-style social engineering but genuinely concerned about the tragedy unfolding in our inner cities, are reluctant to engage this issue. It seems to them a political quagmire in which one is forced to ally oneself with a civil rights establishment no longer able to command broad respect. Many blacks who have begun to have doubts about the effectiveness of liberal social policy are hindered in their articulation of an alternative vision by fear of being too closely linked in the public mind with a policy of indifference to racial concerns.

I can personally attest to the difficulties which this environment has created. I am an acknowledged critic of the civil rights leadership. There are highly partisan policy debates in

which I have gladly joined on the Republican side — on federal enterprise zones, on a youth opportunity wage, on educational vouchers for low-income students, on stimulating ownership among responsible public housing tenants, on requiring work from able-bodied welfare recipients, on dealing sternly with those who violently brutalize their neighbors. I am no enemy of right-to-work laws; I do not despise the institution of private property; I do not trust the capacity of public bureaucracies to substitute for the fruit of private initiative. I am, to my own continuing surprise, philosophically more conservative than the vast majority of my academic peers. And I love, and believe in, this democratic republic.

Needed Commitment. But I am also a black man, a product of Chicago's South Side, a veteran in spirit of the civil rights revolution. I am a partisan on behalf of the inner-city poor. I agonize at the extraordinary waste of human potential which the despair of ghetto America represents. I cannot help but lament, deeply and personally, how little progress we have made in relieving the suffering that goes on there. It is not enough, far from being enough, for me to fault liberals for much that has gone wrong. This is not, for me, a mere contest of ideologies or a competition for electoral votes. And it is because I see this problem as so far from solution, yet so central to my own sense of satisfaction with our public life, that I despair of our governments' lack of commitment to its resolution. I believe that such a commitment, coming from the highest levels of our government, without prejudice with respect to the specific methods to be employed in addressing the issue, but involving a public acknowledgement of the unacceptability of the current state of affairs, is now required. This is not a call for big spending. Nor is it an appeal for a slick public relations campaign to show that George Bush "cares" as much as Jesse Jackson. Rather, it is a plaintive cry for the need to actively engage this problem, for the elevation of concern for racial inequality to a position of priority on our government's domestic affairs agenda.

In some of my speeches and writing on this subject in the past I have placed great weight on the crucial importance to blacks of "self-help." Some may see this current posture as at variance with those arguments. It is not. I have also written critically of blacks' continued reliance on civil rights era protest and legal strategies, and of the propagation of affirmative action throughout our employment and educational institutions. I have urged blacks to move "Beyond Civil Rights." I have spoken of the difference between the "enemy without" — racism — and the "enemy within" the black community — those dysfunctional behaviors of young blacks which perpetuate poverty and dependency. I have spoken of the need for blacks to face squarely the political reality that we now live in the "post-civil rights era"; that claims based on racial justice carry now much less force in American public life than they once did; that it is no longer acceptable to seek benefits for our people in the name of justice, while revealing indifference or hostility to the rights of others. Nothing I have said here should be construed as a retraction of these views. But selling these positions within the black community is made infinitely more difficult when my black critics are able to say: "But your argument plays into the hands of those who are looking for an excuse to abandon the black poor"; and when I am unable credibly to contradict them.

It is for this reason that the deteriorating quality of our public debate about civil rights matters has come to impede the internal realignment of black political strivings which is now so crucial to the interest of the inner-city poor, and the political health of the nation. There is a great, existential challenge facing black America today — the challenge of taking control of our own futures by exerting the requisite moral leadership, making the sacrifices

of time and resources, and building the needed institutions so that black social and economic development may be advanced. No matter how windy the debate becomes among white liberals and conservatives as to what should be done in the public sphere, meeting this self-creating challenge ultimately depends upon black action. It is to make a mockery of the ideal of freedom to hold that, as free men and women, blacks ought nonetheless passively to wait for white Americans, of whatever political persuasion, to come to the rescue. A people who languish in dependency, while the means through which they might work toward their own advancement exist, have surrendered their claim to dignity, and to the respect of their fellow citizens. A truly free people must accept responsibility for their fate, even when it does not lie wholly in their hands.

One Ingredient for Progress. But to say this, which is crucial for blacks to consider at this late date, is not to say that there is not public responsibility. It is obvious that in the areas of education, employment training, enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, and the provision of minimal subsistence to the impoverished, the government must be involved. There are programs — preschool education for one — which cost money, but which seem to pay even greater dividends. It is a tragic error that those of us who make the “self-help” argument in internal dialogue concerning alternative development strategies for black Americans are often construed by the political right as making a public argument for a policy of “benign neglect.” Expanded self-reliance is but one ingredient in the recipe for black progress, distinguished by the fact that it is essential for black dignity, which in turn is a precondition for true equality of the races in this country.

It makes sense to call for greater self-reliance at this time because some of what needs to be done cannot in the nature of the case be undertaken by government. Dealing with behavioral problems, with community values, with the attitudes and beliefs of black youngsters about responsibility, work, family, and schooling is not something government is well suited to do. The teaching of “oughts” properly belongs in the hands of private, voluntary associations — churches, families, neighborhood groups. It is also reasonable to ask those blacks who have benefited from the special minority programs — such as the set-asides for black businesses — to contribute to the alleviation of the suffering of poor blacks, for without the visible ghetto poor, such programs would lack the political support needed for their continuation. Yet, and obviously, such internal efforts cannot be a panacea for the problems of the inner-city. This is truly an American problem; we all have a stake in its alleviation; we all have a responsibility to address it forthrightly.

Permanent Victims. Thus, to begin to make progress on this extremely difficult matter will require enhanced private and public commitment. Yet, to the extent that blacks place too much focus on the public responsibility, we place in danger the attainment of true equality for black Americans. By “true equality” I mean more than an approximately equal material provision to members of the groups. Also crucial, I maintain, is an equality of respect and standing in the eyes of one’s fellow citizens. Yet much of the current advocacy of blacks’ interests seems inconsistent with achieving equal respect for black Americans. Leaders, in the civil rights organizations as well as in the halls of Congress, remain wedded to a conception of the black condition, and a method of appealing to the rest of the polity which undermines the dignity of our people. Theirs is too much the story of discrimination, repression, hopelessness, and frustration; and too little the saga of uplift and the march forward to genuine empowerment whether others cooperate or not. They seek to make

blacks into the conscience of America, even if the price is the loss of our souls. They require blacks to present ourselves to American society as permanent victims, incapable of advance without the state-enforced philanthropy of possibly resentful whites. By evolving past suffering and current deprivations experienced by the ghetto poor, some black leaders seek to feed the guilt, and worse, the pity of the white establishment. But I hold that we blacks ought not to allow ourselves to become ever-ready doomsayers, always alert to exploit black suffering by offering it up to more or less sympathetic whites as a justification for incremental monetary transfers. Such a posture seems to evidence a fundamental lack of confidence in the ability of blacks to make it American, as so many millions of immigrants have done and continue to do. Even if this method were to succeed in gaining the money, it is impossible that true equality of status in American society could lie at the end of such a road.

Much of the current, quite heated, debate over affirmative action reveals a similar lack of confidence in the capabilities of blacks to compete in American society. My concern is with the inconsistency between the broad reliance on quotas by blacks, and the attainment of "true equality." There is a sense in which the demand for quotas, which many see as the only path to equality for blacks, concedes at the outset the impossibility that blacks could ever be truly equal citizens. For, aside from those instances in which hiring goals are ordered by a court subsequent to a finding of illegal discrimination, and with the purpose of providing relief for those discriminated against, the use of differential standards for the hiring of blacks and whites acknowledges the inability of blacks to perform up to the white standard.

Double Standards. So widespread has such practice become that, especially in the elite levels of employment, all blacks must now deal with the perception that without a quota, they would not have their jobs. All blacks, some of our "leaders" seem proud to say, owe their accomplishments to political pressures for diversity. And the effects of such thinking may be seen in our response to almost every instance of racially differential performance. When blacks cannot pass a high school proficiency test as a condition of obtaining a diploma — throw out the test. When black teachers cannot exhibit skills at the same level as whites, the very idea of testing teachers' skills is attacked. If black athletes less frequently achieve the minimal academic standard set for those participating in inter-collegiate sports, then let us promulgate for them a separate, lower standard, even as we accuse of racism those suggesting the need for a standard in the first place. If young black men are arrested more frequently than whites for some criminal offense, then let us decry the probability that police are disproportionately concerned about the crimes which blacks commit. If black suspension rates are higher than whites in a given school district — well, let's investigate that district for racist administrative practice. When black students are unable to gain admission at the same rate as whites to the elite public exam school in Boston, let's ask a federal judge to mandate black excellence.

The inescapable truth of the matter is that no judge can mandate excellence. No selection committee can create distinction in black scholars. No amount of circuitous legal maneuvering can obviate the social reality of inner-city black crime, or of whites' and blacks' fear of that crime. No degree of double standard-setting can make black students competitive or comfortable in the academically exclusive colleges and universities. No amount of political gerrymandering can create genuine sympathy among whites for the

interests and strivings of black people. Yet it is to such double standard-setting, such gerrymandering, such maneuvering that many feel compelled to turn.

Wrongs of the Past. Signs of the intellectual exhaustion, and of the increasing political ineffectiveness of this type of leadership are now evident. Yet we cling to this method because of the way in which the claims of blacks have been most successfully pressed during the civil rights era. These claims have been based, above all else, on the status of blacks as America's historical victims. Maintenance of this claiming status requires constant emphasis on the wrongs of the past and exaggeration of present tribulations. He who leads a group of historical victims, as victims, must never let "them" forget what "they" have done: he must renew the indictment and keep alive the moral asymmetry implicit in the respective positions of victim and victimizer. He is the preeminent architect of what philosopher G.K. Minogue has called "suffering situations." The circumstance of his group as "underdog" becomes his most valuable political asset. Such a posture, especially in the political realm, militates against an emphasis on personal responsibility within the group, and induces those who have been successful to attribute their accomplishments to fortuitous circumstance, and not to their own abilities and character.

It is difficult to overemphasize the self-defeating dynamic at work here. The dictates of political advocacy require that personal inadequacies among blacks be attributed to "the system," and that emphasis by black leaders on self-improvement be denounced as irrelevant, self-serving, dishonest. Individual black men and women simply cannot fail on their own, they must be seen as never having had a chance. But where failure at the personal level is impossible, there can also be no personal successes. For a black to embrace the Horatio Alger myth, to assert as a guide to *personal* action that "there is opportunity in America," becomes a *politically* repugnant act. For each would-be black Horatio Alger indicts as inadequate, or incomplete, the deeply entrenched (and quite useful) notion that individual effort can never overcome the "inheritance of race." Yet where there can be no black Horatio Algers to celebrate, sustaining an ethos of responsibility which might serve to extract minimal effort from the individual in the face of hardship becomes impossible as well.

James Baldwin spoke to this problem with great insight long ago. In his 1949 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin said of the protagonist of Richard Wright's celebrated novel *Native Son*:

Bigger Thomas stands on a Chicago street corner watching air planes flown by white men racing against the sun and 'Goddamn' he says, the bitterness bubbling up like blood, remembering a million indignities, the terrible, rat-infested house, the humiliation of home-relief, the intense, aimless, ugly bickering, hating it; hatred smolders through these pages like sulfur fire. All of Bigger's life is controlled, defined by his hatred and his fear. And later, his fear drives him to murder and his hatred to rape; he dies, having come, through this violence, and we are told, for the first time, to a kind of life, having for the first time redeemed his manhood.

But Baldwin rejected this “redemption through rebellion” thesis as untrue to life and unworthy of art. “Bigger’s tragedy,” he concluded,

is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that *he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth.* But our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult — that is, accept it. The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended (emphasis added).

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy. While Baldwin’s interest was essentially literary, mine is political. In either case, however, our struggle is against the deadening effect which emanates from the belief that, for the black man, “it is his categorization alone which is real and cannot be transcended.” The spheres of politics and of culture intersect in this understanding of what the existence of systemic constraint implies for the possibilities of individual personality. For too many blacks, dedication to the cause of reform has been allowed to supplant the demand for individual accountability; race, and the historic crimes associated with it, has become the single lens through which to view social experience; the infinite potential of real human beings has been surrendered on the altar of protest. In this way does the prophecy of failure, evoked by those who take the fact of racism as barring forever blacks’ access to the rich possibilities of American life, fulfill itself: “Loyalty to the race” in the struggle to be free of oppression requires the sacrifice of a primary instrument through which genuine freedom might be attained.

Moreover, the fact that there has been in the U.S. such a tenuous commitment to social provision to the indigent, independently of race, reinforces the ideological trap. Blacks think we must cling to victim status because it provides the only secure basis upon which to press for attention from the rest of the polity to the problems of our most disadvantaged fellows. It is important to distinguish here between the socio-economic consequences of the claims which are advanced on the basis of the victim status of blacks (such as the pressure for racially preferential treatment), and their symbolic, ideological role. For even though the results of this claiming often accrue to the advantage of better-off blacks, and in no way constitute a solution to the problems of the poor, the desperate plight of the poorest makes it unthinkable that whites could ever be “let off the hook” by relinquishing the historically based claims — that is, by a broad acceptance within the black community of the notion that individual blacks bear personal responsibility for their fate.

Societal Paradox. The dilemmas of the black underclass pose in stark terms the most pressing, unresolved problem of the social and moral sciences: how to reconcile individual and social responsibility. The problem goes back to Kant. The moral and social paradox of society is this: we are on the one hand determined and constrained by social, cultural, not to mention biological, forces. Yet, on the other hand, if society is to work we must believe and behave as if we do indeed determine our actions. Neither of the pat political formulas for dealing with this paradox is adequate by itself. The mother of a homeless family is not simply a victim of forces acting on her; she is, in part, responsible for her plight and that of

her children. But she is also being acted on by forces — social, economic, cultural, political — larger than herself. She is impacted by an environment; she is not an island; she does not have complete freedom to determine her future. It is callous nonsense to insist that she does, just as it is mindlessness to insist that she can do nothing for herself and her children until “society” reforms. In fact, she is responsible for her condition; but we also must help her — that is our responsibility.

“Responsibility Coin.” Now blacks have, in fact, been constrained by a history of racism and limited opportunity. Some of these effects continue to manifest themselves into the current day. Yet, now that greater opportunity exists, taking advantage of it requires that we accept personal responsibility for our own fate, even though the effects of this past remain with us, in part. But emphasis on this personal responsibility of blacks takes the political pressure off of those outside the black community, who also have a responsibility, as citizens of this republic, to be actively engaged in trying to change the structures that constrain all of the poor, including the black poor, in such a way that they can more effectively assume responsibility for themselves and exercise their inherent and morally required capacity to choose. That is, there is an intrinsic link between these two sides of the “responsibility coin” — between acceptance among blacks of personal responsibility for their actions, and acceptance among all Americans of their social responsibilities as citizens. My point to conservatives should be plain. Rather than simply incanting the “personal responsibility” mantra, we must also be engaged in helping these people who so desperately need our help. We are not relieved of our responsibility to do so by the fact that Ted Kennedy and Jesse Jackson are promoting legislation aimed at helping this same population with which we disagree.

My point to blacks should also be plain. What may seem to be an unacceptable political risk is also an absolute moral necessity. This is a dilemma from which I believe blacks can only escape by an act of faith — faith in ourselves, faith in our nation, and ultimately, faith in the God of our forefathers. He has not brought us this far only to abandon us now. As suggested by the citation from the book of Hebrews with which I began, we are indeed “surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses” — the spirits of our forebears who, under much more difficult and hostile conditions, made it possible for us to enjoy the enormous opportunities which we have today. It would be a profound desecration of their memory were we to preach despair to our children when we are in fact so much closer than were our fathers to the cherished goal of full equality. We must believe that our fellow citizens are now truly ready to allow us an equal place in this society. We must believe that we have within ourselves the ability to succeed on a level playing field, if we give it our all. We must be prepared to put the past to rest; to forgive if not forget; to retire the outmoded and inhibiting role of “the victim.”

Profound Tragedy. Embrace of the role of “the victim” has unacceptable costs. It is undignified and demeaning. It leads to a situation where the celebration among blacks of individual success and of the personal traits associated with it comes to be seen, quite literally, as a betrayal of the black poor, because such celebration undermines the legitimacy of their most valuable political asset — their supposed helplessness. There is, hidden in this desperate assertion of victim status by blacks to an increasingly skeptical white polity, an unfolding tragedy of profound proportion. Black leaders, confronting their people’s need and their own impotency, believe they must continue to portray blacks, as

“the conscience of the nation.” Yet the price extracted for playing the role, in incompletely fulfilled lives and unrealized personal potential, amounts to a “loss of our own souls.” As consummate victims we lay ourselves at the feet of our fellows, exhibiting *our* lack of achievement as evidence of *their* failure, hoping to wring from their sense of conscience what we must assume, by the very logic of our claiming, lies beyond our individual capacities to attain, all the while bemoaning how limited that sense of conscience seems to be. This way lies not the “freedom” so long sought by our ancestors, but, instead, a continuing serfdom.

