

# THE HERITAGE LECTURES

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**Strengthening the  
Social Pillars  
of the Black  
Community**

*By J. Kenneth Blackwell*



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# Strengthening the Social Pillars of the Black Community

By J. Kenneth Blackwell

I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak before The Heritage Foundation during this unique celebration of Black History Month. As many of you may know, I recently resigned my appointment at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and announced my candidacy for the Congress. Over the weekend, I've been back in the district in Ohio, starting what will be a long – and we hope successful – campaign.

As I turn my thoughts from government to campaigning, the matter of building a bridge between the conservative movement and the black community takes on new importance.

I am conservative. I am black. That makes me a member of two minority groups.

What saddens me is that while conservatives, as a subset of our society, are growing; and blacks, as a subset of our society, are growing; the subset made up of black conservatives isn't growing – at least fast enough!

This forum is a good start toward discovering why that is the case. I believe there are two principal reasons for the failure of conservatism to attract a greater black intellectual following and a greater black popular following.

The first reason has to do with something that people love to talk about here in Washington – appearances. We talk about the appearance of impropriety when it comes to something that might not be unethical, but could be made to seem unethical. We talk about spin when we discuss matters with the media, so that what appears in a television report or newspaper account reflects what we want it to. We talk about perception being reality, in wise voices steeped in the lore of Washington's mysterious rules of power and politics.

**Appearances Over Reality.** We love appearances. We have embraced and accepted appearances, and transported them to a level of conscious importance on a par with – if not above – reality itself.

Yet though we live and die by appearances in Washington, we seem as conservatives to have a tough time facing up to the way we appear to America's blacks.

There is a line by Ralph Waldo Emerson which I think epitomizes our dilemma. "There is always a certain meanness in the argument of conservatism," Emerson said, "joined with a certain superiority in its fact."

How can we be so right, and still not have any bridge to black America? In a decade in which the conservative ideal of individual liberty, individual opportunity, and individual choice have triumphed over totalitarianism – from Czechoslovakia to Nicaragua – why doesn't its light shine more brightly in America's inner cities?

Let us accept for the moment that Emerson's superiority of fact is on our side.

Perhaps the problem is a "certain meanness," to repeat Emerson's phrase.

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Reality – the superiority of facts – might be on conservatism’s side, but we will not succeed as conservatives in building bridges to America’s blacks until appearances are also on our side.

**Unity of a Dream.** Let me mention just one example from the early 1980s – conservative opposition to a national holiday in memory of Dr. Martin Luther King. Whether you believe that civil disobedience is ever justified or not, whether you believe that contemporaries should be honored in the same manner as Founding Fathers or Lincoln, whether you believe that too many holidays cost the economy too much in lost productivity isn’t the issue.

To blacks and to many Americans of many other colors, Dr. King symbolizes the unity of a dream we all embrace: the dream of equal opportunity, a chance to rise to the limits our initiative will take us.

When Dr. King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and told a watching world he had a dream, he was giving voice to the idealism that makes America a beacon to the world. What he offered were profoundly conservative values in the deepest meaning of the word.

Yet in a few weeks of misguided conservative opposition to a holiday commemorating the ideals he died for, we pulled down a lot of bridges that might have spanned the gulf between us as conservatives and black America.

**Words of Despair.** Let us come to the end of the decade. A senator I admire much for his principled conservatism, Barry Goldwater, pens his memoirs. They are, as he put it in his foreword, “straight from the shoulder.”

Yet when he comes to a discussion of the future of the Republican Party, in what he calls a major challenge to the party, he minimizes the GOP’s opportunities with blacks.

“Blacks,” he writes, “seem rockbound to the Democrats.” That will only change, he says, as blacks begin to perceive, in his words, “that their disadvantaged place in society was partly caused by the Big Brother syndrome of the Democrats.”

These are the words of one of conservatism’s 20th-century spiritual fathers. They are words of despair, written in a passive voice.

It is not enough for us as conservatives to sit back and await a black awakening, a disenchantment with the dependency-producing policies of the Democrats.

Yes, that disenchantment might come. Some would say we’ve already seen its glimmerings in the work of a new generation of black intellectuals like Glenn Loury, Robert Woodson, Thomas Sowell, and others.

But let us not forget that although the Democratic social policies intended to foster black economic and social progress have not worked as planned, they nonetheless represented a positive, active agenda for black America.

That is the difference between Goldwater’s resignation when it comes to Republicans and blacks, and the Democrats’ tenacity.

We may wait a very long time for disenchantment to result in bridges being built from the black community to conservatism. We will wait far less time if we as conservatives build bridges to the black community.

We suffer some from the sins of our conservative forebears of the 1980s, who first alienated and then wrote off blacks.

That is the past.

Now let us look at what can be accomplished by making appearances and reality work together.

If we really want conservatism to have greater appeal to blacks, then we need a conservative agenda for black progress.

**“The Other America.”** This is the 26th anniversary of Michael Harrington’s landmark study, “The Other America.” Harrington looked at the economic prosperity of the 1950s and asked how so many were left out. It is a fitting question to ask now as we look back on the 1980s – the longest peacetime economic expansion, with record numbers of jobs created, a non-inflationary economy, a general – but uneven – prosperity.

According to the Census Bureau, in 1987 10 percent of whites lived in poverty – compared to 33 percent of blacks. And that is only one measure of the other America. We could look at infant mortality rates, intact households, incarceration rates for males, the likelihood of suffering violence, the incidence of illnesses like cancer or heart disease that could be treated with early diagnosis, and they will tell us the same thing. The other America – black America and Hispanic America – is hurting.

Black America’s political fate has been hitched to the Democratic ship of state, and now black America is sinking. At a time like that, do you wait for the drowning man to swim to you – or do you throw him a lifeline?

At the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Jack Kemp, with whom I am proud to have served, knows that you throw a lifeline.

Economic empowerment is one agenda item for black America. And don’t fool yourselves about anyone with a good business plan and a good entrepreneurial spirit being able to find capital.

**Seeking A Fair Hearing.** One of my favorite success stories from the 1980s comes from Dr. Ernest Bates. He’s the founder of one of the country’s largest leasing firms for medical diagnostic services. Dr. Bates was typical of many blacks in the 1950s. He worked hard in school and in the Army to become a neurosurgeon. He developed a successful practice in California, earning \$500,000 a year by the 1970s.

But he knew that many hospitals couldn’t afford to purchase expensive new diagnostic technologies like CAT-Scan machinery, so he invested in a business to lease mobile diagnostics to hospitals.

Like many start-up companies, his firm ran into difficulty. But Dr. Bates says that one of the greatest difficulties he had was getting a fair hearing when he went to the Small Business Administration, to venture capitalists, and to investment bankers on Wall Street. Once they saw he was black, interest in his business plan simply evaporated; until he met Michael Milken, then at Drexel Burnham Lambert, who provided American Diagnostic Services with capital to expand. It’s now one of the most successful medical leasing services in America.

If a successful, black neurosurgeon can’t get a fair hearing when he looks for support for a business proposition at this point in 20th century America, where is an undereducated, twenty-year-old black male supposed to turn?

**Programs That Work.** Economic empowerment has to begin in the black community. Strengthening the black middle class is important but broadening the black middle class is more important. And that will only come about as we determinedly seek new ways to lift people from poverty.

It's not enough to say the Democrats' programs have failed. It's incumbent on us to develop programs that will work.

And that requires a little soul-searching on our part. I don't know whether you consider Thomas Hobbes to be a conservative, but his concept of human nature – life as “nasty, brutish, and short,” – is, I think, a sordid view of humanity.

Yet too many seem to share that view when it comes to analyzing poverty. We look for the disincentive that keeps the recipients of poverty aid from working, instead of the incentive we could provide to help them work.

The myth of rugged individualism often blinds us to the reality of social support that has always been so vital in our history. Whether we're talking about barn raisings, field clearings, or quilting bees, Americans have banded together to help one another since frontier days.

We have to recognize that a welfare mother struggling to earn her G.E.D. needs a network of support. We have to recognize that there is no stigma in that need.

In much conservative discussion of the welfare class, we seem to want to make villains out of poverty programs' victims. For every welfare cheat, there are dozens who themselves have been cheated by misspent, misconceived, and mal-administered poverty programs. These people deserve our help in devising better alternatives – not the additional burden of being blamed by us for the disincentive effects of programs they didn't create, don't control, and can't get away from.

In short, we as conservatives need to decide we are more interested in lifting people from poverty instead of blaming them for their circumstances.

**Capacity-Building.** Conservatism has to move away from anecdotes about welfare chiselers and toward alternatives so we can create entrepreneurs. Let's get that “certain meanness” out of our rhetoric, and put our facts up front.

Capacity-building, helping black Americans develop the skills to take advantage of opportunity, is critical. As conservatives, we need to be fiscal realists. We must acknowledge that an agenda for black progress is going to cost money.

In addition to empowerment through capacity building, there are things we can do now to increase economic empowerment and limit dependency. Tenant management in public housing is one such action item for our agenda. So also is expanding the equity stake through home ownership of public housing.

It is time for the second great civil rights movement. Our Constitution guarantees equal rights, but not equal results. If we wish, as conservatives, to build inroads into black America, we can do so by delivering results. By concentrating on business development, business ownership, and home ownership, we can help build black America.

The question for us today is whether we wish to be relevant to black America.

It is a question we must answer soon.



Time is running out on us.

Not because black America will explode, but because we may soon become irrelevant to it.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, America is on its way to a work force crisis. In a study last year, a commission chartered by Secretary Ann McLaughlin to explore America's preparedness for economic competition in the coming decade confirmed that due to demographic trends we are on the way to a labor shortage and a skill shortage in our work force.

Such a skill and worker shortage will force a response. Business and employers will demand it, and government will provide it. But will it be a conservative, Republican response?

Or will it be another Democratic response?

If we choose the way of Senator Goldwater, with all respect, I submit we'll be waiting for the awakening while the Democrats lay some pontoon bridges and race right past us as we stare across the gulf separating us from black Americans and wonder what happened.

I'd like to conclude with some thoughts provoked by a recent interview with James Fallows. Fallows was President Carter's senior speechwriter. He recently returned from living several years in Asia, including Japan, and was interviewed by Ken Adelman for the *Washingtonian*.

What struck me in Fallows's words were his remarks about the naive uniqueness of the American social vision — the concept that many different peoples from all over the world can come together in one country and build a vigorous, successful society.

**Alien Idea.** Fallows notes how alien that idea is to most of the world, especially to Asia. He says that racism in many other societies blinds them to the concept that we take for granted, the notion that men are equal, that people of different heritages can not only live together harmoniously, productively, but in fact with greater accumulated energies and vibrancy of spirit than would be conceivable in a homogenous society.

Fallows has returned to America worried about the fragility of this unique vision. And, befitting a speechwriter who worked for a President who delivered the "Malaise" speech, he is worried about our ability to live up to that unique promise that is America.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is no secret that some in Japan believe their racial homogeneity to be a virtue, and our diversity to be a hindrance. Japanese leaders have said, and apologized for, as much.

The fact is the rest of the world does look on the state of black America with bewilderment about what that says about the soul of this great county, which promises so much, but leaves out so many.

**Essential Premise.** We as conservatives must put at risk our national prestige, our national heritage, and our national competitiveness. With an agenda for black progress, we can not only build bridges that will be to our own political benefit, but we can restore to the world the essential premise of America:

That free people, with economic freedom and limited government,  
will always thrive;

That the human spirit breathes with the same yearning no matter what one's skin color;

That ability and talent deserve nurturing wherever they are found, and not just in the privileged classes, whether defined by party label as with Djilas, or social and economic power.

