

# WHY BLACK AMERICANS SHOULD LOOK TO CONSERVATIVE POLICIES

by Clarence Thomas

Much has been said about blacks and conservatism. Those on the Left smugly assume blacks are monolithic and will by force of circumstances always huddle to the left of the political spectrum. The political Right watches this herd mentality in action, concedes that blacks are monolithic, picks up a few dissidents, and wistfully shrugs at the seemingly unbreakable hold of the liberal Left on black Americans. But even in the face of this, a few dissidents like Tom Sowell and J.A. Parker stand steadfast, refusing to give in to the cult mentality and childish obedience that hypnotize black Americans into a mindless, political trance. I admire them, and only wish I could have a fraction of their courage and strength.

Many pundits have come along in recent years, who claim an understanding of why so many blacks think right and vote left. They offer "the answer" to the problem of blacks failing to respond favorably to conservatism. I, for one, am not certain there is such a thing as "the answer." And, even if there is, I assure you I do not have it.

I have only my experiences and modest observations to offer. First, I may be somewhat of an oddity. I grew up under state-enforced segregation, which is as close to totalitarianism as I would like to get. My household, notwithstanding the myth fabricated by experts, was strong, stable, and conservative. In fact, it was far more conservative than many who fashion themselves conservatives today. God was central. School, discipline, hard work, and knowing right from wrong were of the highest priority. Crime, welfare, slothfulness, and alcohol were enemies. But these were not issues to be debated by keen intellectuals, bellowed about by rousing orators, or dissected by pollsters and researchers. They were a way of life; they marked the path of survival and the escape route from squalor.

**Family Policy, Not Social Policy.** Unlike today, we debated no one about our way of life--we lived it. I must add that my grandparents enforced the no-debate rule. There were a number of concerns I wanted to express. In fact, I did on a number of occasions at a great price. But then, I have always found a way to get in my two cents.

Of course, I thought my grandparents were too rigid and their expectations were too high. I also thought they were mean at times. But one of their often stated goals was to raise us so that we could "do for ourselves," so that we could stand on our "own two feet." This was not their social policy, it was their family policy--for their family, not those nameless families that politicians love to whine

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about. The most compassionate thing they did for us was to teach us to fend for ourselves and to do that in an openly hostile environment. In fact, the hostility made learning the lesson that much more urgent. It made the difference between freedom and incarceration; life and death; alcoholism and sobriety. The evidence of those who failed abounded, and casualties lay everywhere. But there were also many examples of success--all of whom, according to my grandfather, followed the straight and narrow path. I was raised to survive under the totalitarianism of segregation, not only without the active assistance of government but with its active opposition. We were raised to survive in spite of the dark oppressive cloud of governmentally sanctioned bigotry. Self-sufficiency and spiritual and emotional security were our tools to carve out and secure freedom. Those who attempt to capture the daily counseling, oversight, common sense, and vision of my grandparents in a governmental program are engaging in sheer folly. Government cannot develop individual responsibility, but it certainly can refrain from preventing or hindering the development of this responsibility.

**No Prescription for Success.** I am of the view that black Americans will move inexorably and naturally toward conservatism when we stop discouraging them; when they are treated as a diverse group with differing interests; and when conservatives stand up for what they believe in rather than stand against blacks. This is not a prescription for success, but rather an assertion that black Americans know what they want, and it is not timidity and condescension. Nor do I believe gadget ideas such as enterprise zones are of any consequence when blacks who live in blighted areas know that crime, not lack of tax credits, is the problem. Blacks are not stupid. And no matter how good an idea or proposal is, no one is going to give up the comfort of the leftist status quo as long as they view conservatives as antagonistic to their interest, and conservatives do little or nothing to dispel the perception. If blacks hate or fear conservatives, nothing we say will be heard. Let me relate my experience as a designated black/conservative/Republican/Reagan appointee in the civil rights area--our soft underbelly as far as our opponents are concerned.

I begin by noting that there was much that many of us who have been in this Administration since the beginning could and should have done. This is at least as true for me as for anyone else. For example, I believe firmly that I should have taken a more aggressive stand against opponents of free enterprise and opponents of the values that are central to success in this society. For me, even more important, I should have been more aggressive in arguing my points with fellow members of the Administration and with those who shared my political and ideological bent. With that said, let us take a look at my perception of the past six years.

**High Hopes.** In 1980 when Ronald Reagan was elected, I was a staffer for Senator John Danforth of Missouri. After the election, Thomas Sowell called to invite me to a conference in San Francisco, later named the Fairmont Conference. It was his hope, and certainly mine, that this conference would be the beginning of an alternative group--an alternative to the consistently leftist thinking of the civil rights and the black leadership. To my knowledge, it was not intended that this group be an antagonist to anyone, but rather that it bring pluralism to the thinking and to the leadership of black Americans. At the conference at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, there was much fanfare, considerable media coverage, and high

hopes. In retrospect, however, the composition of the conference, the attendees, and their various motives for being there should have been an indication of the problems we would encounter in providing alternative thinking in our society. Some of us went because we felt strongly that black Americans were being fed a steady diet of wrong ideas, wrong thinking, and certainly nothing approaching pluralism. There were some others, however, who appeared there solely to gain strategic political position(s) in the new Administration. This would be the undoing of a great idea. But even so, hopes were high, expectations and spirits were high, and morale was high. For those of us who had wandered in the desert of political and ideological alienation, we had found a home, we had found each other. For me, this was also the beginning of public exposure that would change my life and raise my blood pressure--and anxiety level. After returning from San Francisco, the Washington Post printed a major op-ed article about me and my views at the Fairmont Conference. Essentially, the article listed my opposition to busing and affirmative action as well as my concerns about welfare. The resulting outcry was consistently negative.

**Castigated and Ridiculed.** Many black Republicans with whom I had enjoyed a working and amicable relationship on Capitol Hill were now distant, and some were even hostile. Letters to the Editor castigated and ridiculed me. I was invited to a panel presentation by one organization, "Black Women's Agenda," and scolded by none other than then Congressman Harold Washington of Chicago. Although initially shocked by the treatment I received, my spirits were not dampened. I was quite enthusiastic about the prospects of black Americans with different ideas receiving exposure. It was in this spirit in 1981 that I joined the Administration as an Assistant Secretary in the Department of Education. I had, initially, declined taking the position of Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights simply because my career was not in civil rights and I had no intention of moving into this area. In fact, I was insulted by the initial contact about the position as well as my current position. But policies affecting black Americans had been an all-consuming interest of mine since the age of 16.

I always found it curious that, even though that my background was in energy, taxation, and general corporate regulatory matters, I was not seriously sought after to move into one of those areas. But be that as it may, I was excited about the prospects of influencing change. The early enthusiasm was incredible. We had strategy meetings among blacks who were interested in approaching the problems of minorities in our society in a different way--among blacks who saw the mistakes of the past and who were willing to admit error and redirect their energies in a positive way. There was also considerable interest (among some white organizations) in black Americans who thought differently. But, by and large, it was an opportunity to be excited about the prospects of the future--to be excited about the possibilities of changing the course of history and altering the direction of social and civil rights policies in this country. Of course, for much of the media and for many organizations, we were mere curiosities. One person asked rhetorically, "Why do we need blacks thinking like whites?" I saw the prospects of proselytizing many young blacks who, like myself, had been disenchanted with the Left; disenchanted with the so-called black leaders; and discouraged by the inability to effect change or in any way influence the thinking of black leaders in the Democratic Party.

**Honeymoon Over.** But all good things must come to an end. During my first year in the Administration, it was clear that the honeymoon was over. The emphasis in the area of civil rights and social policies was decidedly negative. In the civil rights arena, we began to argue consistently against affirmative action. We attacked welfare and the welfare mentality. These are positions with which I agree. But, the emphasis was unnecessarily negative. It had been my hope and continues to be my hope that we would espouse principles and policies which by their sheer force would preempt welfare and race-conscious policies.

The winds were not taken out of our sails, however, until early 1982 when we changed positions in the Supreme Court to support a tax exemption for Bob Jones University which had been previously challenged because of certain racial policies. Although the point being made in the argument that the administrative and regulatory arm of government should not make policies through regulations was a valid point, it was lost in the overall perception that the racial policies of Bob Jones University were being defended. In addition, the perception that the Administration did not support an extension of the Voting Rights Act aggravated our problems.

I was intrigued by several events that surrounded both the Bob Jones decision and the handling of the Voting Rights Act. As you probably remember, the decision to change positions in the Bob Jones University was made public on Friday afternoon simultaneously with the AT&T breakup. On the following Monday, I expressed grave concerns in a previously scheduled meeting that this would be the undoing of those of us in the Administration who had hoped for an opportunity to expand the thinking of and about black Americans. A fellow member of the Administration said rather glibly that, in two days, the furor over Bob Jones would end. I responded that we had sounded our death knell with that decision. Unfortunately, I was more right than he was.

With respect to the Voting Rights Act, I always found it intriguing that we consistently claimed credit for extending it. Indeed, the President did sign it. Indeed, the President did support the extension of the Voting Rights Act. But by failing to get out early and positively in front of the effort to extend the Act, we allowed ourselves to be put in the position of opposing a version of the Voting Rights Act that was unacceptable, and hence we allowed the perception to be created that this Administration opposed the Voting Rights Act, not simply a version of it.

**My Friend Attacked.** Needless to say, the harangues to which we were subjected privately, publicly, and in all sorts of forums were considerable after these two policy decisions. There was no place that any of us who were identified as black conservatives, black Republicans, or black members of the Administration could go without being virtually attacked and certainly challenged with respect to those two issues specifically and the Administration generally. I remember a very good friend of mine complaining to me that he had been attacked simply for being my friend. Apparently the attack was so intense he simply left the event he was attending. They also made his date leave.

If that were not enough, there was the appearance within the conservative ranks that blacks were to be tolerated but not necessarily welcomed. There appeared to be a presumption, albeit rebuttable, that blacks could not be conservative. Interestingly, this was the flip side of the liberal assumption that we consistently challenged: that blacks were characteristically leftist in their thinking. As such, there was the constant pressure and apparent expectation that even blacks who were in the Administration and considered conservative publicly had to prove themselves daily. Hence, in challenging either positions or the emphases on policy matters, one had to be careful not to go so far as to lose his conservative credentials--or so it seemed. Certainly, pluralism or different points of view on the merits of these issues was not encouraged or invited--especially from blacks. And, if advice was given, it was often ignored. Dissent bore a price--one I gladly paid. Unfortunately, I would have to characterize the general attitude of conservatives toward black conservatives as indifference--with minor exceptions. It was made clear more than once that, since blacks did not vote right, they were owed nothing. This was exacerbated by the mood that the electoral mandate required a certain exclusivity of membership in the conservative ranks. That is, if you were not with us in 1976, do not bother to apply.

For blacks the litmus test was fairly clear. You must be against affirmative action and against welfare. And your opposition had to be adamant and constant or you would be suspected of being a closet liberal. Again, this must be viewed in the context that the presumption was that no black could be a conservative.

**Caricatures and Sideshows.** Needless to say, in this environment little or no effort was made to proselytize those blacks who were on the fence or who had not made up their minds about the conservative movement. In fact, it was already hard enough for those of us who were convinced and converted to survive. And, our treatment certainly offered no encouragement to prospective converts. It often seemed that to be accepted within the conservative ranks and to be treated with some degree of acceptance, a black was required to become a caricature of sorts, providing sideshows of anti-black quips and attacks. But there was more--much more--to our concerns than merely attacking previous policies and so-called black leaders. The future, not the past, was to be influenced.

It is not surprising, with these attitudes, that there was a general refusal to listen to the opinions of black conservatives. In fact, it appeared often that our white counterparts actually hid from our advice. There was a general sense that we were being avoided and circumvented. Those of us who had been identified as black conservatives were in a rather odd position. This caused me to reflect on my college years. The liberals, or more accurately, those on the Left spent a great of time, energy, and effort recruiting and proselytizing blacks by playing on the ill treatment of black Americans in this country. They would devise all sorts of programs and protests in which we should participate. But having observed and having concluded that these programs and protests were not ours and that they were not in the best interest of black Americans, there was no place to go. There was no effort by conservatives to recruit the same black students. It seemed that those with whom we agreed ideologically were not interested and those with whom we did not agree ideologically persistently wooed us. I, for one, had the nagging suspicion that our black counterparts on the Left knew this all along and just sat by and

waited to see what we would do and how we would respond. They also knew that they could seal off the credibility with black Americans by misstating our views on civil rights and by fanning the flames of fear among blacks. That is precisely what they did.

**Assuring Alienation.** I failed to realize just how deep-seated the animosity of blacks toward black conservatives was. The dual labels of black Republicans and black conservatives drew rave reviews. Unfortunately the raving was at us, not for us. The reaction was negative, to be euphemistic, and generally hostile. Interestingly enough, however, our ideas themselves received very positive reactions, especially among the average working-class and middle-class black American who had no vested or proprietary interest in the social policies that had dominated the political scene for the past 20 years. In fact, I was often amazed with the degree of acceptance. But as soon as Republican or conservative was injected into the conversation, there was a complete about face. The ideas were okay. The Republicans and conservatives, especially the black ones, were not.

Our black counterparts on the Left and in the Democratic Party assured our alienation. Those of us who were identified as conservative were ignored at best. We were treated with disdain, regularly castigated, and mocked; and of course we could be accused of anything without recourse and with impunity. I find it intriguing that there has been a recent chorus of pleas by many of the same people who castigated us, for open-mindedness toward those black Democrats who have been accused of illegalities or improprieties. This open-mindedness was certainly not available when it came to accusing and attacking black conservatives, who merely had different ideas about what was good for black Americans and themselves.

**Ideological Litany.** The flames were further fanned by the media. I often felt that the media assumed that, to be black, one had to espouse leftist ideas and Democratic politics. Any black who deviated from the ideological litany of requisites was an oddity and was to be cut from the herd and attacked. Hence, any disagreement we had with black Democrats or those on the Left was exaggerated. Our character and motives were impugned and challenged by the same reporters who supposedly were writing objective stories. In fact, on numerous occasions, I have found myself debating and arguing with a reporter, who had long since closed his notebook, put away his pen, and turned off his tape recorder. I remember one instance when I first arrived at the Department of Education, a reporter, who happened to be white, came to my office and asked: "What are you all doing to cut back on civil rights enforcement?" I said, "Nothing! In fact, here is a list of all the things we are doing to enforce the law properly and not just play numbers games." He then asked, "You had a very rough life, didn't you?" To this, I responded that I did not; that I did indeed come from very modest circumstances but that I had lived the American dream; and that I was attempting to secure this dream for all Americans, especially those Americans of my race who had been left out of the American dream. Needless to say, he wrote nothing. I have not always been so fortunate.

**Burying Positive News.** There was, indeed, in my view, a complicity and penchant on the part of the media to disseminate indiscriminately whatever negative news there was about black conservatives and ignore or bury the positive news. It

is ironic that six years ago, when we preached self-help, we were attacked ad infinitum. Now it is common among the black Democrats to act as though they have suddenly discovered our historical roots and that self-help is an integral part of our roots. We now have permission to talk about self-help. The media were also recklessly irresponsible in printing unsubstantiated allegations that portrayed us as anti-black and anti-civil rights.

Unfortunately, it must have been apparent to the black liberals and those on the Left that conservatives would not mount a positive (and I underscore positive) civil rights campaign. They were confident that our central civil rights concern would give them an easy victory since it was confined to affirmative action--that is being against affirmative action. They were certain that we would not be champions of civil rights or would not project ourselves as champions of civil rights. Therefore, they had license to roam unfettered in this area claiming that we were against all that was good and just and holy, and that we were hell bent on returning blacks to slavery. They could smirk at us black conservatives because they felt we had no real political or economic support. And, they would simply wait for us to self-destruct or disappear, bringing to an end the flirtation of blacks with conservatism.

Interestingly enough, I had been told within the first month of going to the Department of Education in 1981 that we would be attacked on civil rights and that we would not be allowed to succeed. It was as though there was a conspiracy between opposing ideologies to deny political and ideological choices to black Americans. For their part, the Left exacted the payment of a very high price for any black who decided to venture from the fold. And among conservatives, the message was that there is no room at the inn. And if there is, only under very strict conditions.

**Conservatives Must Open the Door.** It appears that we are welcomed by those who dangled the lure of the wrong approach and we are discouraged by those who, in my view, have the right approach. But conservatives must open the door and lay out the welcome mat if there is ever going to be a chance of attracting black Americans. There need be no ideological concessions, just a major attitudinal change. Conservatives must show that they care. By caring I do not suggest or mean the phony caring and tear-jerking compassion being bandied about today. I, for one, do not see how the government can be compassionate, only people can be compassionate and then only with their own money, their own property, or their own effort, not that of others. Conservatives must understand that it is not enough just to be right.

But what is done is done. Let's be blunt. Why should conservatives care about the number of blacks in the Party? After all, it can be argued that the resources expended to attract black votes could be spent wooing other ethnic groups or other voters to vote Republican.

I cannot resist adding in passing that the RNC, which pays itself hefty bonuses, to blow opportunities can scarcely claim lack of resources.

**Search for Standards.** I believe the question of why black Americans should look toward conservative policies is best addressed as part of the general question, why any American should look toward conservative policies. Conservatism's problem and the problem of the post-Reagan Republican Party, the natural vehicle for conservatism, is making conservatism more attractive to Americans in general. In fact, our approach to blacks has been a paradigm of the Republican Party as a whole. The failure to assert principles--to say what we are "for"--plagued the 1986 campaign. Everyone was treated as part of an interest group.

Blacks just happened to represent an interest group not worth going after. Polls rather than principles appeared to control. We must offer a vision, not vexation. But any vision must impart more than a warm feeling that "everything is just fine--keep thinking the same." We must start by articulating principles of government and standards of goodness. I suggest that we begin the search for standards and principles with the self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence.

Now that even Time magazine has decided to turn ethics into a cover story, there is at least some recognition that a connection exists between natural law standards and constitutional government. Abraham Lincoln made the connection between ethics and politics in his great pre-Civil War speeches. Lincoln was not only talking about the immediate issue of the spread of slavery but also about the whole problem of self-government, of men ruling others by their consent--and the government of oneself. Thus, almost 130 years ago Lincoln felt compelled to correct the erroneous reading set out in the Dred Scott decision:

They [the Founding Fathers] did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact, they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the right, so that the enforcement of it might follow as fact as circumstances should permit. They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and therefore constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.

**Reexamining Natural Law.** We must attempt to recover the moral horizons of these speeches. Equality of rights, not of possessions or entitlements, offered the opportunity to be free, and self-governing.

The need to reexamine the natural law is as current as last month's issue of Time on ethics. Yet it is more venerable than St. Thomas Aquinas. It both transcends and underlies time and place, race and custom. And, until recently, it has been an integral part of the American political tradition. Martin Luther King was the last prominent American political figure to appeal to it. But Heritage Foundation Trustee Lewis Lehrman's recent essay in The American Spectator on the Declaration of Independence and the meaning of the right to life is a splendid example of applying natural law.



Briefly put, the thesis of natural law is that human nature provides the key to how men ought to live their lives. As John Quincy Adams put it:

Our political way of life is by the laws of nature of nature's God, and of course presupposes the existence of God, the moral ruler of the universe, and a rule of right and wrong, of just and unjust, binding upon man, preceding all institutions of human society and of government.

Without such a notion of natural law, the entire American political tradition, from Washington to Lincoln, from Jefferson to Martin Luther King, would be unintelligible. According to our higher law tradition, men must acknowledge each other's freedom, and govern only by the consent of others. All our political institutions presuppose this truth. Natural law of this form is indispensable to decent politics. It is the barrier against the "abolition of man" that C.S. Lewis warned about in his short modern classic.

This approach allows us to reassert the primacy of the individual, and establishes our inherent equality as a God-given right. This inherent equality is the basis for aggressive enforcement of civil rights laws and equal employment opportunity laws designed to protect individual rights. Indeed, defending the individual under these laws should be the hallmark of conservatism rather than its Achilles' Heel. And in no way should this be the issue of those who are antagonistic to individual rights and the proponents of a bigger more intrusive government. Indeed, conservatives should be as adamant about freedom here at home as we are about freedom abroad. We should be at least as incensed about the totalitarianism of drug traffickers and criminals in poor neighborhoods as we are about totalitarianism in Eastern bloc countries. The primacy of individual rights demands that conservatives be the first to protect them.

**Responsibilities of Freedom.** But with the benefits of freedom come responsibilities. Conservatives should be no more timid about asserting the responsibilities of the individual than they should be about protecting individual rights.

This principled approach would, in my view, make it clear to blacks that conservatives are not hostile to their interests but aggressively supportive. This is particularly true to the extent that conservatives are now perceived as anti-civil rights. Unless it is clear that conservative principles protect all individuals, including blacks, there are no programs or arguments, no matter how brilliant, sensible, or logical, that will attract blacks to the conservative ranks. They may take the idea and run, but they will not stay and fraternize without a clear, principled message that they are welcome and well protected.

