

Black Accountability and Achievement

By Phillip Aaron and Errol Smith

Phillip Aaron. Now, let me just talk to you about something all of us have thought about. Let me introduce it with a question: Have you ever wondered why the elevator of African-Americans always seems to be headed toward the basement? We live in the greatest nation on Earth, a nation whose economic system provides the African-Americans with a combined annual income that exceeds \$300 billion. We live in a nation where our colleges and universities offer us the opportunity for the best education that is offered anywhere in the world. And we are part of a society that allows us to rise to whatever height our talent will allow us to rise. If you could line up all the resources of African-Americans and then line them up beside the resources of other nations, you would find that the resources of African-Americans match or exceed those of most nations on Earth.

So then the question is, why is it that, despite all these resources and despite this enormous attention, African-Americans, for the most part, still fail to capture the American dream? Now I know if you're like me, the first answer that comes to mind is racism. And that is the answer that is almost irresistible, because there are so many vestiges of racism in our society. But as we address this question and this answer, I think you will find that racism as an answer is more seductive than real.

In fact, I would venture to say that most of us, most African-Americans, do not know to what extent racism prevents us from doing anything. Now, before you get mad at me, let me explain what I mean. You see, I think the only time we can say that racism prevents us from achieving any goal is after two things occur. First, we must have done everything that we could do to achieve that goal. And then second, after that, the only thing that remains between the goal and where we are is racism. Then and only then do we have the luxury of saying that racism prevents us from achieving. It is simply unproductive and self-destructive to conclude otherwise.

Social Insanity. Now, I believe that African-Americans have all the talents, intellect, and resources to achieve any goal that each one wants to achieve. When we fully acquire access to the pursuit of any goal, the fact is that racism simply becomes irrelevant. So blaming racism for our lack of achievement is, at best, a misplaced focus and is, at worst, what I call social insanity.

Now, let me tell you what I mean by social insanity. If you believe that racism prevents you from achieving any particular goal, then inherent in that belief is the granting of the power to succeed to the partisans of racism. That means that the partisans of racism have the power to grant or deny us success. So, in order to succeed, we must get the partisans of racism to allow us to succeed. Now, in my opinion, there are only two peaceful ways that you can do that. The first way is to show the partisans of racism the evils of racism, and convince them to change their ways and to accept African-Americans. Or, as African-Americans, we can change our ways to such an extent that we become acceptable to the racists. Either way, I'm sure you can see you would be dependent for success on the very agent that you say prevents you from succeeding.

Phillip Aaron is a Seattle-based attorney and author of *The Power to Create*.

Errol Smith is co-founder and chief executive officer of BMA, a marketing and management firm in Glendale, California, and author of *Needs to Know*.

They spoke at The Heritage Foundation on February 13, 1992, as part of a lecture series observing Black History Month.

ISSN 0272-1155. ©1992 by The Heritage Foundation.

That is social insanity. So we should reject racism as a belief that has been an obstacle that prevents us from succeeding, if for no other reason than it just simply does not serve our purpose.

Crab-in-the-Barrel Syndrome. But if racism is not what prevents the African-American from capturing the American dream, then just what is? I believe the greatest impediment to our success is this mechanism that my mother and father and people in that generation called the crab-in-the-barrel syndrome. You know what would happen if you took a group of crabs and put them in a barrel? You would see a very interesting process. Each crab would try to crawl out, but as each one got close to the top, one of the crabs from the bottom would reach up and pull that crab back down. The next one would crawl up to the top and one from the bottom would reach up and pull that crab back down. That process would be repeated over and over and over again until either someone removed the crabs from the barrel or they died in the barrel. It is almost as though there is some instinctive decision made by the crabs that says that they would rather perish together than succeed separately. That is the crab-in-the-barrel syndrome.

When I was growing up, that analogy was applied to the pervasive action among African-Americans who seemed always to sabotage each other. But you know, we don't have to look back to when I was growing up, we can see that still today. If you take an African-American who has the courage to think differently, an African-American who has the courage to reject the liberal approach to civil rights, an African-American who has the courage to take a stand against the traditional, failed black leadership, you will see one who would be subject to the crab-in-the-barrel syndrome. Other members of the African-American community who do not think that way will reach out and attempt to pull him back. And this characteristic is something that we do not like to talk about, but I believe that any problem has to be addressed and exposed as a problem before it can be solved. And my motivation here is not to embarrass any of us, but to present the problem so we can start to solve it.

When this action occurs, it is very easy to say that the crab-in-the-barrel syndrome is a result of the self-hate, the self-destructive nature of African-Americans. It really deserves a much more critical and deeper look than that, because I think if we look at it on a deeper level we will see that there is something here in the nature of this crab-in-the-barrel syndrome that has not altogether bad motivation. It just has a bad result.

False Beliefs. So, let us look at what is going on. First, there are two false beliefs to underlie the crab-in-the-barrel syndrome. The first belief is that we must all live or perish together. And the second belief is that the progress of the African-American race is paramount to, and therefore must precede, the progress of any African-American individual.

Now, the first false belief that we must live or perish together has what at first glance appears to have a fairly noble ring to it. It suggests that we, as African-Americans, do have this internal cohesiveness that assures unity and devotion to each other. That has a very noble ring. But the fact is that this belief creates tremendous disunity; it fosters resentment, anger and bitterness among African-Americans. Here is how it works. If you are ready to move to a different level in life, and you must wait until I am ready to move to that level before you can move, you will resent me for holding you back. On the other hand, if you move anyway and leave me, then I will resent you for having left me and endangered my believed-security. So this notion that we must live or perish together is really a wolf in sheep's clothing, because at first glance it looks like it is supporting unity, when in fact it fosters disunity.

Now, the second false belief is that the progress of the African-American race is paramount to or must precede the progress of the African-American individual. And that belief is something like the first, but there are some subtle differences. It also seems to see the good of the many—that is the masses—as more important than the good of any individual. It even appears to assure

the progress of the race. In fact, that belief along with the other belief is the greatest impediment, in my opinion, to the progress of African-Americans. Now to appreciate fully the absurdity of this belief, think about it this way. If you were to invite a group of people to your house for dinner, but yet you turn away each individual when he comes to your door, then you can see how you will never get the group in your house. That is the same type of absurdity that thinking that the progress of the black race must precede the progress of a black individual. You cannot have progress of a race without having progress of individuals and without allowing for room for the individuals to express their individuality. But this second belief suppresses individuality, and therefore has the effect of doing the opposite of what it purports to do—it inhibits the progress of African-Americans.

So it is these two false beliefs that underlie the crab-in-the-barrel syndrome. But I can tell you happily that there is an absolute cure for this syndrome, and it only takes a slight, subtle shift in how we African-Americans view ourselves and our relationship to the world. The answer to this problem, in my opinion, is the acceptance and embracing of the concept of accountability. Accountability means that we must accept responsibility for the present conditions of our life. It means that we must accept the fact that our life today is the result of choices that we made in the past. Accountability negates this crab-in-the-barrel syndrome because it is the most profound expression of individuality. Accountability, in my opinion, is the foundation of success, and embracing it empowers the embracer. Because when you take full responsibility for your life, you are, in effect, capturing the power to change, modify, or alter that life any way you want. When accountability becomes a part of the prevalent consciousness of African-Americans, then we'll see the elevator stop going down and start going towards the roof.

Errol Smith. First of all, let me say that it is very interesting being here. I am now living in Los Angeles and the thing that fascinates me the most about what I see here is that it's lunch time, and you folks are here in the snow. Now, in California when we talk about doing lunch, this is not exactly what we have in mind.

As most of you know, the program is dedicated to the diversity of African-American thought. So I suspect that Troup Coronado flew me 3,000 miles from Los Angeles, California—a place you all know is most renowned for its “great thinkers”—to give you a taste of just how “diverse” African-American thought can be. Well Troup, I promise you I won't let you down.

In discussing this program today, Troup asked me if I could provide a blueprint for accountability and achievement. And when he first posed the question, I chuckled inside. You see, recently I attended the American Forum where the guest speaker was Dennis Prager. Dennis pointed out that from many years of hosting a radio talk show he had determined that you can tell whether someone is liberal or conservative by the words they use.

You see, achievement and accountability together in the same sentence is a conservative phrase. You will rarely, if ever, hear a liberal talk about accountability and achievement in the same breath. Governments are accountable, administrations are accountable, but people are not accountable. In the liberal mind, those who achieve are the beneficiaries of the system and those who don't are the victims of that same system. So accountability and achievement have very little to do with each other and, therefore, cannot coexist in the liberal mind.

Now accountability is a difficult idea for many of us to grasp, and I think I understand why. You see most people associate accountability with blame. If you're part of a group working on a project and someone asks who is going to be accountable, they usually don't mean who's going to take credit if everything turns out right. They mean, “Who do we blame if this thing takes a

dive?" That's why no one rushes to raise his hand. A businessman was overheard talking to his secretary about a deal that went sour. He said, "Mrs. Hathaway, I have you to blame for this." She said, "But Mr Jones, I wasn't even there." He said, "I know, but it's nice to have you to blame." And this is the kind of buck-passing and assigning of blame that has been raised to the level of an art form in this country.

If you talk to many African-Americans about being accountable or taking responsibility, what they hear you asking them to do is to take the blame. To them, you are "blaming the victim." They believe that we can't be accountable or shouldn't be accountable for conditions we didn't create, which is an interesting philosophical question, but it's now a moot point. You see, the verdict is in. A study of affluent African-Americans by Dr. Craig Polite and Audrey Edwards indicates that there is clearly a link between this "accountability thing and achievement." We don't have to guess anymore. There is enough anecdotal evidence to establish that those African-Americans who are taking responsibility for their lives are succeeding and those who don't are still waiting for the revolution and the rapture; some of those people have been waiting for 25 years. Now, I don't know why, but I am very pragmatic. And as a pragmatic person, I have a very simple personal belief: If you try anything for 25 years and it doesn't work, try something else. I believe that the time has come for African-Americans to try taking responsibility for our lives.

So what would be in a blueprint for accountability and achievement? I believe it should start with three things:

- 1) **A commitment to self-reliance;**
- 2) **A focus on opportunity;**
- 3) **A new vision.**

1) A Commitment to Self-Reliance. A slave owner was quoted as saying to another slave owner that the proper way to treat a slave is to create within that slave a spirit of perfect dependency. It is very clear to me that spirit was created, and I believe that replacing that spirit with a spirit of self-reliance should be at the top of any plan to deal with the problems in our community. In fact, I'd like to see us replace the Civil Rights movement with a self-reliance movement. That doesn't mean that I am anti-civil rights; it means that I believe that the ultimate civil right is the right to take responsibility for your life. So I'd like to see us move in that direction. When I make that statement, it drives some of us crazy. They say, "Why should we take responsibility? Why should we let White America off the hook?" When they say this to me I give them the most profound answer I've been able to come with: Because it works, because it's the most effective and expedient way for black Americans to progress in the country.

Of course, for some of us that's not a good enough answer because some of us would rather get even than get ahead. Some of us are more concerned with guilt and retribution than we are with progress. And I understand that too. You see, guilt worked for a while. Guilt had America bending over backwards to make amends, but that strategy has outlived its effectiveness. Most white Americans are tired of feeling guilty and those who still want to feel guilty can't afford to. So it's time for a new strategy.

I often think of the Gulf War. Whether or not you supported it, you must admit it was well fought. There was a strategy for each phase. It began with diplomacy and when diplomacy had run its course, we shifted to an air war, but when a very successful air campaign began to yield diminishing returns, it became clear that a new strategy, a ground attack, would be necessary for any further progress. Guilt as a strategy for progress has long since reached the point of diminish-

ing returns. If African-Americans are to achieve any further significant progress, it will require a different strategy—a strategy of self-reliance.

2) A Focus on Opportunity. I never cease to be amazed with our preoccupation with equal opportunity. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that equal opportunity is not desirable and good. What I am saying is that even as we fight for equal opportunity, there are abundant opportunities already available to us that we are not using. In trying to understand this phenomenon, I discovered that many of us simply do not see these opportunities, and because we don't see them, we believe they don't exist. But there are immigrants coming to this country every day who are discovering that they do exist. Though some of the paths that immigrants traditionally have travelled to achieve socio-economic mobility have been closed, we are in a dynamic society, and new opportunities are cropping up every day. These opportunities are available to African-Americans as well. I know this because C.J. Walker, America's first black millionaire, found them; John Johnson, who turned \$500 into over \$100 million, found them; Wally "Famous" Amos found them; and Joshua Smith, CEO of Maxima, found them. Most of you know of these black Americans but you probably don't know Ron Johnson, owner of a management health care concept; Stephen Buckley, owner of TBP printing; Leon Higgins, owner of the Seawind Group, a marketing and distribution company; or Barbara Lindsey of Lindsey & Associates.

These men and women have two things in common: 1) They are African-Americans and 2) they see more opportunities in this country than they can handle.

Yes, the opportunities are out there, but we will find it very difficult to overcome the odds as long as we are focused on the odds. You can't find opportunity if you're looking for racism.

The truth is that life is not fair. It never has been, and I suspect it never will be. Those who work to create equal opportunity are needed, but our community will see greater levels of black achievement, if more of us put our attention and energies into making the most of the opportunities that already exists.

3) A New Vision. I think one of the key things we have to do as African-Americans is to change our vision of ourselves. I have been flying around the country sharing my ideas and passing out this pin. It says "Victims" with a circle and a red slash through it. It means no victims, and it is part of a campaign I am working on. I believe it is time for us to rid ourselves of our victim perspective, of that vision of ourselves. Victor Hugo said that "Nothing, not all the armies in the world, can resist an idea whose time has come." And I believe that the time has come for us to reject the vision of ourselves as America's historical victims. I believe that the time has come for us to stop telling ourselves, our sons and daughters, and the world that we have fallen and we can't get up; to stop telling the world that we can't make it. I believe the time has come for us to stop living from our collective memory and start living from our imagination. And I believe that as soon and as quickly as we can rid ourselves of that victim mentality and that victim perspective, we will find ourselves becoming more victorious as a people.

I am happy to be able to be here today and tell you that I am not alone, that I have been traveling all around the country talking to many people, and there are a lot of African-Americans out there who, just like you and I, are sick and tired of wearing that victim label. They are sick and tired of sitting around saying, "I've been rebuked and I've been scorned." They are sick and tired of seeing themselves as poor black people waiting for the revolution and the rapture. And, like Fannie Lou Hammer, they are sick and tired of being sick and tired. So these people have decided the change their vision, to stop seeing themselves as victims and to start seeing themselves

as powerful individuals who have more power over their lives than racism. And I believe that if we, as African-Americans, do nothing else—not one single thing for the rest of the decade—except reject and replace the identity of ourselves as victims, we as a people will take a quantum leap forward.

