

Civil Rights: Now and Then

By Julian Bond

The continuing disparity between black and white life chances is not a result of black life choices. It stems from an epidemic of racism and an economic system dependent on class division. Abundant scholarship notwithstanding, there is no other possible explanation. The breakdown of the family, the absence of middle-class values, the lack of education and skills, the absence of role models—these are symptoms of racism.

We must be careful not to define the ideology and practice of white supremacy too narrowly. It is greater than scrawled graffiti and individual indignity, such as the policeman's nightstick, or the job, home, and education denied. It is rooted deeply in the logic of our market system and in the culturally defined and politically enforced prices paid for different units of labor.

The strategies of the 1960s movement were litigation, organization, mobilization and civil disobedience, aimed at creating a national political constituency for civil rights advances. In the 1970s, electoral strategies began to dominate, engendered by the 1965 Voting Rights Act. But as the numbers of locally elected black officials multiplied, political party organization declined and the crucial tasks of registering and turning out the newly enfranchised electorate were left to organizations like the NAACP.

Forgotten in the wave of inaugurations of new black mayors was the plight of blue collar blacks. Just as black workers gained access to industrial jobs, the jobs went offshore and President Nixon's plan to promote black capitalism as a cure for underdeveloped ghettos was embraced by a growing generation of politically-connected black entrepreneurs. Since then, too many have concentrated too much on enriching too few, while vast numbers of working class black Americans have seen their incomes shrink.

The right to decent work at decent pay remains as basic to human freedom as the right to vote. Martin Luther King, who lost his life supporting a garbage workers' strike in Memphis, once said: "Negroes are

almost entirely a working people. There are pitifully few Negro millionaires and few Negro employers."¹

That there are more black millionaires today is a tribute to the movement King led but the fact that proportionately fewer blacks are working today is an indictment of our economic system and a reflection of our failure to keep the movement going.

The Black Condition Today

Though times have changed, the conditions facing black Americans today are just as daunting as the fire hoses and billy clubs of four decades ago. You only have to compare the lives of black and white children. The average black child is:

- one-and-a-half times more likely to grow up in a family whose head did not finish high school.
- twice as likely to be born to a teenage mother and two-and-a-half times more likely to have low birthweight.
- three times more likely to live in a single parent home.
- four times more likely to have a mother who had no prenatal care.
- four-and-a-half times more likely to live with neither parent.
- five times as likely to depend solely on a mother's earnings.
- nine times as likely to be a victim of homicide.

In every way by which life is measured—life chances, life expectancy, median income—black Americans see a deep gulf between the American dream and

the reality of their lives. The only effective tool for advancing entry into the mainstream of American life for the past 30 years has been affirmative action.

Opponents now try to tell us that it doesn't work, or that it used to work but doesn't anymore, or that it only helps people who don't need it. They argue that the beneficiaries of race-centered affirmative action are "profiting" from it. There is never "profit" in receiving right treatment. Access to rights already enjoyed by others is no benefit but the natural order of things in a democratic society.

The Truth about Affirmative Action

Affirmative action is not about preferential treatment for blacks; it is about removing preferential treatment whites have received through history. Nor is it a poverty program and ought not be blamed for the problems it was not designed to solve.

In the late 1960s, the wages of black women in the textile industry tripled.² From 1970 to 1990, black police officers more than doubled, black electricians tripled and black bank tellers quadrupled in number. The percentage of blacks in managerial and technical jobs doubled. And the number of black college students increased from 330,000 in the 1960s to more than a million 18 years later.

These numbers represent the growth and spread of the tiny middle class I knew as a boy, into a stable, productive, and tax-paying group that makes up one-third of all black Americans. Without affirmative action, both white and blue collars around black necks would shrink, with a huge, depressive effect on the black population and the economy.

Those who argue for a return to a color-blind America that never was and justify their opposition to affirmative action as a desire for fairness and equality, are obviously blind to the consequences of being the wrong color in America today.

Affirmative action critics often quote Dr. King's 1963 speech about his children one day being judged by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin. But they never mention his 1967 speech in which he said: "...a society that has done something special against the Negro for hundreds of years must now do something special for him."³

There is a tendency among black Americans to look back on the King years as if that was the only

time in which we were truly able to overcome. But the movement was much more than Dr. King.

Martin Luther King did not march from Selma to Montgomery by himself nor did he speak into a void at the March on Washington. Thousands marched with him and thousands more did the dirty work that preceded that triumphant march.

Besides, black Americans didn't just march into freedom. We worked our way into civil rights through the difficult business of organizing: knocking on doors, one by one; registering voters, one by one; building communities, block by block; financing the cause, dollar by dollar; and creating coalitions, one step at a time.

A Common Cause for All Colors

For too many people today, the fight for equal justice is a spectator sport: a kind of NBA game in which all the players are black and all the spectators, white. But in this true to life sport, the fate of the fans is closely intertwined with that of the players and points scored on the floor are points for all.

Because young black people faced arrest at Southern lunch counters 30 years ago, the law their bodies wrote now protects older Americans from age discrimination, Jews, Moslems, and Christians from religious discrimination, and the disabled from exclusion because of their condition.

It took but one woman's courage to start a movement in Montgomery, and the bravery of four young men in Greensboro to set the South on fire. Surely there are men and women, young and old, who can do the same today.

African-Americans are no longer the nation's largest minority. By the year 2050, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans, together with African-Americans, will make up 50 percent of the population. Where there are others who share our condition, even if they do not share our history, we should make common cause with them. ■

Endnotes

1. King, Dr. M.L. Jr.'s. Address to the Constitutional Convention, AFL-CIO, Bal Harbour, Florida, December 11, 1961.
2. Ezorsky, Gertrude, *Racism and Justice: The Case for Affirmative Action*, Cornell University Press, p 64, 1991.
3. King, Martin Luther, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York 1967.

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