

# The Politics of Difference: Diversity or Separatism?

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## INTRODUCTIONS BY:

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## Introduction

**DR. ETZIONI:** Welcome to the George Washington campus. Thank you for joining us. One of the purposes of a University is to have open discussions of exciting, important new ideas -- exactly what this session is dedicated to. How difficult it is to get these discussions sometimes in our society. It often seems that when you speak up -- and it doesn't matter what side of an issue you are coming from -- someone will try to truncate the discussion very quickly by using a buzzword whose purpose is to stop conversation. We are not here to stop conversation; we are here to start and expand and enrich it.

Thank you for coming. I will turn you over to Will Marshall, the president of the Progressive Policy Institute.

**MR. MARSHALL:** Thank you, Amitai, and thanks to George Washington University for hosting today's event.

The Progressive Policy Institute was founded last year on the premise that the conventional liberal- conservative debate has less and less to tell us about the challenges facing this country. Our purpose is to look beyond left and right to a new politics that we think is emerging around the country, a progressive politics that is grounded in mainstream values, not antagonistic to them.

In that spirit, our purpose today is to take a fresh look at racial conflict in our society. It is an issue that is often unspoken, but ever-present in many of the sharpest political and social controversies of our time. Yet the public discussion of race today seems muffled, in part by a white fear of being called insensitive or worse, and in part by a black fear of being accused of breaking racial ranks. The danger in this constricted debate is that the racial climate in America will become further poisoned by a mutual mistrust, anger and bad faith. In effect, our reticence threatens to leave the public square to the David Dukes and the Sonny Carlsons.

With today's symposium, PPI begins a series of "Dialogues on Cultural Politics," intended to bring racial issues into the open where they can be discussed and debated honestly, without fear of censure. It is fitting that we begin this project today on a university campus and with Shelby Steele, the San Jose State English Professor who coined the term "the politics of difference" to describe the racial dramas played out on campuses around this country.

In his book, *The Content of Our Character*, Shelby Steele presents what I think is a brave and often compelling challenge to racial orthodoxy. He argues that black progress today hinges more on individual initiative than on collective action, and that self-doubt is a greater obstacle in this regard than racism. These and other controversial propositions, I hope, will be debated here today.

Let me quickly welcome our other panelists: Cynthia McClain-Hill, a Los Angeles attorney who represents a new generation of leadership in the young black professionals in California. Cynthia, we are grateful that you would come all the way from coast to coast to be with us here today.

Let me also welcome Dr. Ronald Walters of Howard University, a key advisor to Jesse Jackson's 1988 race for the Democratic presidential nomination. I suspect Dr. Walters may take issue with Shelby Steele's critique of affirmative action and other issues.

Rounding out our panel is Joe Klein, political correspondent for *New York* magazine, who has agreed to do double duty as both a moderator and a participant in this symposium. Joe Klein is widely acknowledged as one of our sharpest minds and pens in the American media. He is the author of two books and has also written on politics, national and international affairs for *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone* and other magazines. Joe recently won an award from the *Washington Monthly* magazine for his 1989 *New York* magazine cover story, "Race: The Issue." Joe, without further ado, I turn it over to you.

**MR. KLEIN:** It is always good to start something like this with an anecdote, especially one that is going to emphasize the things that we all have in common, rather than the things that we are going to battle about.

A couple of months ago, I was standing on a New York street corner with a friend of mine, who is black. My friend, a very middle-class fellow, and I were trying to hail a taxicab. In the meantime, we were arguing over whether the Mets should re-sign Darrell Strawberry. My friend had his hand up, trying to hail a cab, and I noticed that there were cabs going by with their lights on. I did not have my hand up; he had his hand up, trying to hail a cab. I looked at him, and said, "The cabs." And he said, "Yeah, the cabs."

One thing we should always remember is that this sort of almost gratuitous racism is the fundamental fact of American life. It is the most enduring, most important, most damaging, most compelling political issue that we have. And I think that we can all agree that it exists. The question is always what, if anything, we can do about it. It is remarkable that an issue that is so important, so central to our very identity as a people -- and I will take the liberty here of describing Americans as "a people" -- has been subject to such triteness, such a lack of insight, to what Shelby Steele describes, on the very first page in his book as a "choreographed debate."

Let me read what he said: "In most debates on race, blacks themselves still had to be seen primarily as racial victims. Whites, on the other hand, had to show both concern and a measure of befuddlement at how other whites could still be racist," which is something that I just did. "There also had to be in whites a clear deference to the greater racial authority of blacks, whose color translated into a certain racial expertise. If it was more than one black, whites usually receded into the role of moderators, while the black experts argued. This is still the standard media formula."

Since this is about trying to break past stereotypes, I am going to break that formula right here and now. I am not going to referee this discussion, I am going to wade in. I am just going to let everybody speak their piece, and then join in the fight. In fact the reason why I was invited was that Will and the people at Progressive Policy Institute assumed that I was not going to stand back and be a passive participant.

One of the major problems in the debate is that whites allowed themselves to be kicked out of the civil rights movement 20 years ago. Since then, there have been two paradigmatic forms of white behavior. One has been very convenient for conservatives especially because they can stand back and say, "Okay, it is not my problem. I am not going to get involved in this. You guys fight it out. I don't care." Liberals, on the other hand, more often than not have deferred to almost anything that any black person says, even the most outrageous, the most extreme, forms of militancy. As a result, the debate is stultified. People have not really looked each other in the eye and talked about it.

## **Race: The Unspoken Issue**

Last year, in the middle of the New York mayoral race, I wrote an article saying what seemed to me pretty obvious, which was that race was the central issue not only in that campaign, but it had also been the great unspoken theme in the presidential campaign of 1988 -- remember Willie Horton -- and, indeed, was the central fact of our lives, of our political lives. What has happened in New York over the past three or four years is not dissimilar to what has happened in Washington. After a quiet period on the racial front, there has been increasing tension. I do not think it is any accident that tension has grown in the years since crack was introduced into the streets of the city. There has been a surge in crime, and white people watch every night a parade into the police station of young black men in manacles after allegedly committing the most outrageous, the most heinous sort of crimes. Their reaction has been one of fear and anger, and in return, the vast majority of black people -- who are not criminals -- sensed this and became angry as well, creating a vicious cycle of racial hate and anger and fear.

At the bottom of this tension is the one issue that politicians in New York and politicians nationally have been most reluctant to address: the existence and the growth of the last 25 years of an alienated, anomic, usually fatherless, underclass of welfare- dependent people.

In New York last year, fifteen thousand babies were born to drug-addicted mothers. And meanwhile, the debate takes place on peripheral issues, on abstractions like multicultural education and on programs that affect only a small slice of the population, like the Civil Rights Act of 1990 or affirmative action. Until we get back to a basic discussion of what has caused the underclass to exist -- the crime wave that exists as a result and the crises in education, health care, and in almost every other service in our cities that is caused by this new phenomenon -- until we include that in the mix of the racial debate, we are not going to be discussing this issue head on.

Now I will fade into the background so each of the other three participants can speak for ten minutes or so. Let's begin with Shelby Steele.

## The Politics of Difference

**DR. STEELE:** I will be happy to allow you to be moderator, Joe, as long as you grant me my greater racial authority.

I have been asked to speak about what I have called the politics of difference. This politics began in the sixties, during the civil rights movement, when victimization became a source of moral power for black Americans. That is a very valid source of power. After all, we had been victimized. We had been oppressed for, by that time, over 300 years. The moral outrage that grew out of that oppression amounted to a sort of power that we used quite rightly, I think, to re-write society's laws and to change the fabric of American life. I often think the civil rights era and the legislation that came out of it are underrated. It seems to me that it is one of the most silent peaceful social revolutions in history, and society is very different today because of it.

There was this hidden dynamic at work, that victimization was a valid source of power. And the reason for that, without getting too elaborate here, is that being a victim delivers to you a certain innocence. After all, you have been wronged, another did it to you, you did not do it to yourself, and so you have a certain innocence. When you have innocence, you are automatically entitled to pursue power and to seek redress in society. So, in that sense, innocence is power, and victimization has been a tremendous source of innocence, and therefore power, for black people. It was used validly in the civil rights era, but now it has become one of our most serious problems.

Another aspect of this dynamic is that racial difference -- that is, being different from the majority -- became a currency of power. It became something that we could barter with, something we could bargain with, in American society. The color black, itself, then became a source of power; we said it openly, "Black Power." All of a sudden, people who had been oppressed terribly for centuries found a source of power in the very quality for which they had been oppressed.

I think this set a new tone in American society. Others also became aware of this source of power, and joined the game. Women began to pursue power through their gender and Hispanics, Asians, and other minorities followed suit. We have evolved a politics of difference whereby groups of people pursue power in the American mainstream based on a single quality that makes them different from the white male. One of my greatest peeves is that the white male is so flattered by this form of politics.

I think that probably there are many things that we could all agree upon which are good about the politics of difference. It certainly has, I think, heightened our consciousness and our sensitivity to racial and cultural differences.

On the other hand, I think there is a downside to it. In order to play this game, in order to play the politics of difference,

one has to stake a claim on one's victimization. Victimization gives your difference power and the white male, again, has no power in this particular game because he cannot tie his difference to victimization and therefore it has no currency in the politics of difference.

This situation developed throughout the seventies and eighties, as more groups became involved. Particularly in the black community, we made the unfortunate mistake of developing an identity that was grounded in our history of victimization. Most groups organized their identity, at least to some extent, around the source of their power. And for blacks, ironically, that meant organizing our identity around our victimization so that the poor black became the true black. As one became better off and moved up into the middle class, one, in effect, became less and less black, more marginally black.

I was in New York last week and I heard a whole new series of wonderful names: blacks who are middle-class are often called "Afrosaxons," or "Afropeans"; my favorite is "Incognegro." Again, one of the downsides is that you create a dynamic in which people are rewarded with their identity because of their failure, and they are punished as they succeed. This is obviously a very self-defeating form of identity that does us a great deal of damage.

Are these groups victims? The answer is certainly yes, probably to a lesser extent today than before, but they still are victimized, and so why not use one's victimization as a source of power? Again, I think the problem with the politics of difference is that it rewards victimization. It sets up a reward system in which, in order to accept the entitlements that come to you because you are a victim, you to continue to escalate your claims of victimization. You get more and more tied into a victim-focused identity and so, even as you enjoy the benefits of society, your screams of victimization grow louder.

## **Racial Politics on Campus**

This is probably more evident on college campuses today than it is anywhere else, but it also clearly is very much at work in the larger society. In many ways the new focus on multiculturalism and diversity and pluralism is wonderful. The canon in universities, I think, needs to be integrated. It has been a pet peeve of mine for years, as a professor, that the official core curriculum is so narrow and so exclusive. Novels like Jean Toomer's *Cane* are virtually out of print half the time because they are not ordered. That novel that is an American masterpiece. It should be taught beside Hemingway and Fitzgerald. I support that aspect of multiculturalism, and I try to bring quality work from other cultures into the mainstream and integrate the curriculum in that sense.

On the other hand, multiculturalism can become a kind of cover for the politics of difference, where it becomes the euphemism that we use to rationalize our vying for power within the society and, in this case, within the campus. Multiculturalism can, in some cases, amount to a sanction of separatism on campuses. I think we see today a kind of new segregation, a new separatism on many campuses, where black students are given black theme dorms, black student unions, black student lounges, black houses -- or "Afro houses" as they are often called -- black yearbooks, separate black homecoming dances, separate black graduation ceremonies. A study at the University of Michigan indicates that 70 percent of the black students there have never even had a white acquaintance.

In the name of multiculturalism and good intentions, we have engineered a new separatism. We have re-drawn the lines of segregation on campuses. I cannot really believe that is what we mean when we talk about multiculturalism: a sort of geopolitics where I have got to have my territory, and women's studies has to have its building, and black studies, and Asian studies, and Hispanic studies. We build these little enclaves, all, ultimately, under the notion of victimization.

It is ironic that many students who protest apartheid in South Africa fight to recreate apartheid on their own campuses. The new Afrocentric/Eurocentric debate seems to me to be another aspect of the politics of difference. It is very rare that people actually explain what they mean by Afrocentric or Eurocentric, what themes it would involve, what the substance of it would be. It becomes a way in which one can vie for power based on difference, which only serves to legitimize one's difference from others and, therefore, keeps one's power base solid and intact.

I will tell you what my friend Stanley Crouch tells his students when they talk about an Afrocentric perspective. He says he is going to take them to an Afrocentric dentist who does not use novocaine or the latest in painless equipment, but uses instead a little hammer and a little pick, but don't worry about it, it is Afrocentric.

Knowledge and culture are cumulative. Races and cultures have always shared back and forth, and to try now to artificially separate human culture in this way seems to be a move for power, for maintaining power within an environment.

## White Guilt: The Selfishness of Good Intentions

The entire politics of difference and the power that comes to us from it depends on one thing and one alone, and that is white guilt. Without white guilt, there would be no politics of difference because victimization would have no currency. Whites often say, "Well, I don't really feel guilty. I didn't do anything. I was never in a lynch mob. I was never around. I never used the word 'nigger' around my dinner table, so how can I feel guilty?"

I define white guilt as knowledge of an ill-gotten advantage: Guilt is knowledge, innocence is ignorance. Whites in a sense, even though their hearts may be utterly clean of racism, know that they have a certain advantage in American life due to the fact that they are white and due also to the fact that blacks have been subjugated in the past.

I think there is a conditional guilt that whites carry without regard to their feelings regarding blacks or other minorities. It is not something that whites go around beating their breasts about all the time, but it is a conditional vulnerability. It is something that can be tapped and that certainly blacks have the credentials to tap; more, probably, than anyone else, or certainly as much as others.

The problem with white guilt, and guilt in general, is that when we feel guilty, the first reflexive response to it is self-preoccupation. We become more preoccupied with our image of our own innocence than we are with those who make us feel guilty. There is a tremendous element of selfishness in guilt, in white guilt.

And I believe this explains why white administrators capitulate so quickly, so readily, to the wildest of black student demands for separate this, separate that, separate so on and so forth. You can always tell it is white guilt when whites betray the standards they believe in out of their selfish need for an image of goodness. White administrators would never, ever say, "We are going to have a white student lounge. Only whites can live in this dormitory, or only whites can be in this yearbook or go to this dance," because they would know it would be wrong. But when white guilt is at work, selfishness is at work, and the concern is really with the image. All those standards and beliefs go out the window and black students are granted all of these essentially racist, separatist, segregationist demands. The politics of difference goes on, white guilt in coalition with black power.

## The Real Issue: Development

While all of this is happening, the real issues are being completely overlooked. The fact, for example, that black students have by far the lowest grade point of any student group in the United States and also by far, the highest dropout rate. Over 70 percent of black students drop out of college in America today. A full six years after admission to college, only 24 percent graduate. Reality becomes absolutely invisible. What good is a student lounge or student union going to do against a dropout rate like that, a grade level performance like that?

The primary issue, it seems to me, not only for black students, but blacks in general, is development. We are not developed; we are underdeveloped. We are educationally behind, economically behind and we are not moving ahead. We are declining in relation to whites. We are farther behind them today than we were in the 1950s, before the civil rights era.

It seems to me that development is ignored. Two other aspects of white guilt are escapism and blindness, where you are so preoccupied with your own innocence that you don't see the people who are making you feel the guilt. You become blind to them and you give them something to escape the anxiety of feeling guilty. So: "Here is a black student dorm. Here is a student union." And, you don't even see that the primary overwhelming problem these students are having is that academically they are not performing up to par. And so, while we are talking about everything else under the sun, this poor performance level remains completely unaddressed.

Another startling statistic -- my brother, a social psychologist, feeds me these statistics -- is that in the 1950s, black students on white college campuses had higher grade point averages than white students did. They were clearly in a hostile environment, unsupported by any special programs or a student lounge. Today the situation is reversed, all of these things have been erected for them and yet there has been this terrible decline.

Maybe I have said enough. Next.

**MR. KLEIN:** Next, Dr. Ronald Walters, chairman of the Political Science Department at Howard University and president of the National Congress of Black Faculty. A council member of the American Political Science Association, he has won its Ralph Bunche Award. His most recent books are *Black Presidential Politics in America* and *Jesse Jackson's 1984 Presidential Campaign*.

## The Politics of Power

**DR. WALTERS:** Thank you very much. I would like to set out a couple of parameters for myself, with respect to the ideas that Shelby Steele has written in his book and bothered to publish, so that at least I can understand what we are dealing with.

The first thing, of course, is that he is the latest in a series of black neoconservatives who have graced us with an alternative argument about the nature of black responsibility in America. It interests me because I have had the occasion to debate every one of them at one time or another. Walter Williams, is our new economist of note; Glen Loury, our sociologist of note. And now Shelby Steele, our writer and man of literature, is really our psychologist of note.

I would like to think that those of us who have toiled in the social sciences and have done a good job, would have been able to draw an audience like this for our work. Sadly, one wonders why we have not. We would like to think that work is just as creditable. I think the drawing power of these black neoconservatives has to do not so much with their academic points of view as with their perspectives; and that is interesting because it has more to do with politics than with academics.

The second parameter in which I look at his work is that so much of it is untroubled by empirical fact. We have a very august body of people here, many of whom have consumed these ideas and will go away with these ideas on their typewriters or computers, and yet have not bothered to understand the empirical basis of many of the assertions that have been made in his work, and that troubles me greatly.

It takes me back to a time when Princeton University Press rushed to press a work by one of its black political scientists which was highly critical of Jesse Jackson. This was a work which really would not have been published by any other reputable press as an academic work. But the Princeton University Press published it essentially because this work agreed with the political perspective of many people in this country, and perhaps the political perspective of the Press itself. The press had, in a sense, been castigated roundly by many academic friends on that same basis: that if any of us had written a book like that, bereft of empirical references and fact and data, it would not have seen the light of day, especially if it had been supportive Jesse Jackson.

We enter here an atmosphere of politics that I think we ought to face straight up in this discussion. The politics of difference is interesting to me, but it is not a new concept. In 1944, Gunnar Myrdal attempted to make a positive argument for what he called "the American dilemma" which he located in the moral basis of the way in which America, first of all, set out its creed, and secondly, followed that creed. In effect, what he was saying was that there was a difference.

Some people believed it -- black sociologists at the time, one of the most eminent of whom was Oliver Cox; others, some of them at my own university, noted instead that Gunnar Myrdal had it wrong. From that perspective, one argument against Shelby Steele's work, *The Content of Our Character*, is that it overlooks so much of the structural basis of power, the way in which power is distributed in society. *The Content of Our Character* is about the politics of power, without really addressing the subject. In place of a discussion about power, we get discussions about human behavior masking the basic inequality in the power structure.

This brings me to this question of separatism, which leads me to understand that Shelby Steele is thinking about an external perspective to the black experience. It is really those who are external to the black experience who, when they look at black people together in any setting, think about black power or black separatism or even, as he called it, racism, on the part of students who ask for separate facilities or separate places at the dining table. In effect, he is continuing to suggest and demand that integration take place at the expense of the solidarity of black students, at the expense of their right and their desire to express whatever sense of cultural sensibilities they have. Why shouldn't they be allowed to express it?

## Racism and Solidarity on Campus

I think what we have done, in the world in which Professor Steele lives, is really to go too far in the direction of integration in many cases and to demand that black students sprinkle themselves around dining halls, around dormitories, around universities, simply so other people can feel comfortable. Well, to their credit, black students have not done that. What they have done is legitimate and certainly gives them the kind of strength they need in order to have mobility within what is very often a hostile and a racist institution: the American university today.

The American university is an institution which reflects American society. Especially today, these are often very hostile

institutions to the presence of blacks. All you have to do is look at the report of the community relations service of the Justice Department or any other reputable group that has been tracking hate crimes or racial bias incidents, and you will see that all across this country there are acts of racism being perpetrated against blacks, Jews, Asians, and so forth. Universities are not institutions which really reflect a nurturing attitude towards these minorities.

There is a tremendous transfer rate from these institutions not only into Howard University, but all of the other 127 black colleges and universities. It is not, I would hasten to add, because of Shelby Steele's point, somehow a problem in these institutions, but it is the institutions themselves. I think a lot of things are being done in this country to try to make these institutions more sensitive, more compatible, and one of them is, of course, this question of Afrocentricity within the curriculum. It is attempting to look at America in the future and to decide what kind of country this is going to be.

If Work Force 2000 is any indication, this country is going to be at least 25 percent minority by the year 2000. Most of the entrants into the work force are going to be minorities, and so it just makes sense to have a curriculum and an institution which begins to look something like the country. If you ask the question what does it mean to be an educated person in the year 2000, you have got to produce people who have the sensitivity to the people who are going to be in this country, and not continue the kind of education which was really fashioned in the 19th century when English culture was dominant and excluding all other cultures. That is not the America of the year 2000 and beyond.

So this push for Afrocentricity really is a legitimate push. It is within the American tradition and the people who are opposed to it are the same people who have stood astride the dominant culture and who are attempting to moderate these influences and the perspective of the minority and the way in which they see themselves in history. It is unfortunate that it is a political struggle. But whenever you have these perspectives clashing, you are going to have politics. And that is what it is all about, and that is why an institution like Howard is so compatible. That is why we have students from Africa and Asia and the Caribbean, and all around the world, because it is an institution which values that tradition and that perspective.

The question of Afrocentrism is an important question, one which has been butchered recently in the pages of The Washington Post on a couple of occasions. Several articles have been written about this, articles critical of the Afrocentric perspective. It is, after all, their perspective, and I think that it raises a question of the kind of power which is implicit in this perspective.

This perspective gives to blacks an explanatory power for their own lives and for public affairs which is important. I think we have to admit that there is racial difference and that because there is racial difference, races and other groups see issues differently. Therefore, don't we have the right to use the perspective of blacks of their own history and culture in order to see public issues and issues which affect them in relationship to their own viability? I think we do have that right, and we exercise it, and it is called the Afrocentric perspective, and there isn't anything mystical about it, isn't anything illegitimate about it. It exists, and certainly, it is identifiable. There is a whole body of literature written about it in libraries. I do not really see what the argument is.

## **The Crippling Legacy of Racism**

The question of guilt is important, because I think it is true that black people have attempted to tap into white guilt. It is also true that in the 1960s this question of difference was a source of power: Martin Luther King, Jr. exploited it for all of its moral value. The movement took on moral power, and I think that is great. I do not see anything wrong with using a currency which comes from the monstrous wrong which was perpetrated on black people in this country. It would be different, I think, if it were not a fact of history and if today we were not still suffering the consequences.

But if we take Shelby Steele at face value, what he seems to be saying when he looks at the test scores of black students and the dropout rate and all of these other things, is that there is really no connection between these things and the past, that all of this seems to be a matter individual responsibility. What he seems to be saying is that blacks have had access to the same resources as whites, and therefore, if we do not address the question of development, we are somehow not addressing the problem for which they alone have responsibility.

I think that is absurd. I think it is absurd because there never has been a time yet in the history of this country where blacks have had the kind of resources which would have made such an argument credible. It is like putting the onus on the backs of the victims. And, yes, I am going to say this as straightforwardly and as strongly as I can without any reservation whatsoever: blacks are the victims. I hope that there are people of conscience in this country who see that for what it is and who, based on that victimization, can conjure up a sense of moral power and moral sensibility to do something about it. I do not see anything wrong with that paradigm.

Finally, coming back to the question of power, I think that so much of what Shelby Steele has said about the psychological state of black people in his book is that we are afraid. If you read it, I think you cannot turn over any page without seeing that we are being accused of being afraid, that black students are accused of being afraid to compete, afraid to be honest and so forth. I think it is a natural aspect of behavior for people who are outgunned and outmanned to be fearful. I do not see anything wrong with that. I think that may be part of the psychoanalysis that he has got right.

## Power Through Collective Action

But at the same time I do not see anything wrong with doing things which maintain your power base. We have had to struggle mightily in this country for everything that we have gotten -- and most of that has not been through government largess. In fact, the government has joined our side relatively recently in the history of black people in America; 1954 is fairly recently, as far as I can determine; I was alive then. For all of the rest of that time, we have had to do what we have done essentially by ourselves. And even when the government has helped, it has in no way helped all of the black community; it has helped a segment of it. We ought to keep this in perspective, this business of government support of the black community. Because, in the main, what we have done in this country -- and the achievement has been considerable -- and will continue to do, we have done by ourselves.

We have done that with organized power, out of which we have exercised certain strategies with the assistance, the cooperation, and the coalition of sensitive whites and other people of good will in this country. In order for us to make it the rest of the way we have to go, we will have to follow the same scenario.

This business of rugged individualism really is a sham. America is a country of groups. The university is an institution, and the white students in the university have access to all sorts of supports. The institution is fashioned, in fact, for them. So that if you say that there are people out there who are simply individuals and that they make it simply by dint of their individual genius, freestanding without the support of any structure, any system, any group, I would like really to see those individuals, I would like to see how many there are, because I do not know them.

What I do know is that there is something called sociology that I had the good fortune once to study; I think that our guest here is a sociologist. He should know that rarely do individuals make it by themselves: most individuals have access to a network of support groups. Black people, of course, are no different than whites. I would like a white person in this audience to stand up and let us hear how he or she has made it as a rugged individual, standing alone against the wind without the support of any group. That is nonsense. There is a group in this country for almost every kind of malady you can think of. America is a country of groups.

Blacks have the right not only to assert, but to go after and to develop group power, because they have to compete in this country. This is a competitive country. We do not all live in Shelby Steele's world which, by his own admission, is divorced from the black community. That is fine. But the real world is about maybe 30 million of us, most of whom live together. Most of us have to struggle together. Most of us have to figure out very tough problems every day together. That is the world in which we live and we have a right to attempt to develop group power wherever we find it. And I am just Machiavellian enough to suggest that if its basis is found in white guilt, then so be it.

**MR. KLEIN:** Cynthia McClain-Hill is the publisher of a newsletter, "Focus 2000." It goes to 30,000 young professionals in California and promotes political and professional involvement on the part of black Americans. This year she was named Vice Chair of the newly formed Southern California Democratic Leadership Council. She is a partner in the law firm of Davis and Hill, and worked for four years with Federal Communications Commission, where she won several awards for outstanding performance. She is a member of the UCLA Ralph Bunche Alumni Scholarship Committee, and serves as General Counsel for the UCLA Black Alumni Association.

## The Politics of Entitlement

**MS. McCLAIN-HILL:** For many years, I have told people that I practice the politics of entitlement. The politics of entitlement means, basically, that I feel that I am entitled to be treated fairly. I just expect to be treated fairly and I am genuinely shocked any time I am not. It means I am entitled to succeed or to fail based on my own efforts, resources, abilities, etc. That is what I do. It means that I am entitled to be picked up by taxicabs. But, basically, that is my own political catchword: the politics of entitlement.

It is important to me, and I think to people like me, only in that it represents our response to past eras when blacks often seemed to question whether they absolutely had a right to certain things. You could sense that in the way in which they moved through society. I eat where I want to eat. That is how I approach things, and I do not feel guilty

about it.

I would not feel guilty about going to a black graduation. In fact, when I was at UCLA, we started the first African-American graduation ceremonies. It was not meant to be separatist. It was just that UCLA graduates something like 8,000 people, and in that environment, it is easy to get lost. For a lot of the black kids that were graduating, it was a first experience for their families, and so, before the main graduation, we had a smaller, more intimate graduation where people that knew each other could come, invite their families, and have an experience that was a little different than the experience the university offered. It is not something to feel guilty about. It is not something I feel I need to justify or even explain to anybody. I also attended the main graduation; in fact, I was a Chancellor's Marshal in the main graduation.

## **Perspective of Black Professionals**

When I think about race as an issue in the context of Dr. Steele's book, the first thing that strikes me is that race is something that I do not spend a lot of time discussing with my professional peers, many of whom are, like me, black. At least, we do not discuss it in the context of how it defines or determines what we do.

We discuss issues. For instance, illiteracy is an issue. It is an issue that impacts the black community in a very negative way, but it is an issue. It has no color. And when we discuss illiteracy, we do not discuss illiteracy in terms of black, we discuss illiteracy in terms of what can be done about teaching kids to read. Because I think you teach black kids to read the same way you teach white kids to read. We discuss drugs, which is a problem, not just in the black community but in every community. We discuss it as a problem and we address it as a problem. We happen to be black people, and because I am a black professional, when I address that problem, I tend to address it in a community that I have ties to.

As I listen to this conversation, I listen as a black mother who is also a lot of other things, who deals with the world as an individual and understands that to be my right. That view should not be taken as a denial or an attempt to move away from any group. I am very conscious of being black. I understand, and am organizing around issues that are relevant to the group of people that I happen to belong to. Individuals do not succeed on their own; in fact, because there are so many different people with so many different perspectives in this country, it is often very useful and, in some ways, essential, to organize in terms of groups.

One of the things that I did find somewhat disturbing in Dr. Steele's book, although I am sure it was not intended, was the implication that being middle class, being ambitious, working hard, achieving, would separate you from the mainstream of black America. I take issue with that. Those of us who do those things and happen to be black are not really interested in making any choices along those lines. It is my position that we can do and do do both and do it very comfortably.

When I look at race in America as a problem, I do not look at it as a problem of mine. It is a problem in that other people sometimes do things that they should not do and occasionally those things impact me. My challenge then becomes: how do I accomplish what I want to accomplish in spite of their problem? Sometimes that is not possible, and when that is the case, I have got an even greater challenge: how do I eradicate that particular block? I think that is something that as a culture and as a society and as a country that we need to work on.

It is a little difficult for me to discuss the problem of race in America on a panel that is primarily black. I would be interested in sitting in the audience and listening to three non-blacks discuss race as a problem, since it is not a problem exclusive to blacks. Until we all recognize this, I have to do the things that I do and wait for everyone else to catch up with me. I do not want other people's problems to get in the way of the things that I want to do, the things that other blacks want to do, and the things that I want my kids to do.

Basically, I have to resolve the question of race and how it plays in my life in order to get on with my life. It is really not something that white people have to do, and I think that is one of the inequities that does not get addressed in Dr. Steele's book. You can be white in America and not really have a good understanding of race and how it affects what you do and why you do it and still be basically successful. You can be white in America and never talk to anybody black, and you will be fine. It is very difficult to be black in America and not confront the issue of race, not successfully resolve it in your own mind, not learn to comfortably work outside of your environment and succeed. So, sometimes you will see a little touchiness because blacks feel that they have a higher burden in that regard in terms of dealing with this issue, than the rest of America.

A few years back, a very important post had to be filled on the Republican party ticket. There was a certain individual that was selected out of the blue, and we listed his credentials and looked at ours. And we thought, "What are the

chances of a black American being Vice President of the United States, in general?" -- Colin Powell notwithstanding. And then, what are the chances of a black person being Vice President of the United States with those credentials? Not really high. Those things gall you just a little bit. Those of us who are truly ambitious and might want to be Vice President or President of the United States and happen to be people of color, we look at those sorts of things and they drive home the point that there is still a long way to go.

That is it for me.

**MR. KLEIN:** Okay. Who wants to say something?

**DR. STEELE:** I would not mind.

**MR. KLEIN:** By the way, I bet when you were writing this, you never knew that you were neoconservative?

**DR. STEELE:** A lot of the criticism that I have gotten has involved that kind of name calling and misrepresentation and ad hominem attacks. I have not really heard any of the ideas in the book meaningfully discussed or certainly not refuted. I did not know that I am a neoconservative, or that even though I'm a writer, not a social scientist, I have to use empirical sources. James Baldwin is an essayist that I admire a great deal, as is Ralph Ellison. They were not social scientists either, and, like myself, had a certain suspicion about social scientific methods. Empiricism is no guarantee of absolute truth either.

### **Individual Initiative vs. Group Action**

I certainly did not say that I thought every black should cut himself off entirely from other blacks and become some sort of black John Wayne, rugged individualist, and take on the American mainstream singlehandedly and go on to victory. I did say, however, that we as a race have been very good in the exercise of collective power. There is no other group that has exercised that power more effectively in American society than we have, and changed society for the better. On the other hand, it is not anti-black, it is not neoconservative, to point out also that we have not put enough responsibility on the shoulders of individual blacks to do better and to develop ourselves as individuals.

From this point on, we will not be taken much further by collective action. How many more laws can be passed? We will go forward now by learning to read better, to write better, to compute better, to do better in college, to do better in professional life. And as we all do that individually and with the support of each other and of the larger society, the race will be lifted. If we do not ask that of the individual, if we ask the individual to continue, year in and year out, to focus on his victimization, to think he can only move forward if the group rallies behind him, then we are going to be, 20 years down the line, we are going to be worse off than we are right now.

It is not anti-black to say that. I do not say that because I am isolated and live somewhere far away from the black community and never see black people. I say that because it is true.

**DR. WALTERS:** Well, I want to take issue with that, because it is not true. It is fair game to point to this question of isolation because if one doesn't understand that the capability to exercise individual responsibility is a developmental process which begins with a group, then one does not understand why it is that black people in a disproportionate fashion in some settings are not able to exercise individual responsibility. It is the end of a process, not the beginning. It starts with the group, and it has a lot to do with the possession of resources of the group.

So that to say in a naive way that people ought to take responsibility when they have not had the resources with which to do that, means that one simply does not understand the process. One has not lived in the sort of community which enables a person to do so. One has not gone to the kind of schools which enable the person to do so. One's family has not had the requisite resources enabled to do so. One has to live in hostile circumstances and therefore, yes, I have admitted, there is a certain amount of self-doubt. Racism, therefore, plays a part.

There is a whole system here. One does not simply wake up one day and take responsibility. One has to have access to the kind of resources which begin in a group and which nurture these people, the young people in particular, to take responsibility. It is not only true for blacks, it is true for Indians, whites and everybody else. You simply do not come to the question of individual responsibility by yourself. You get there as a part of a nurturing process. You get there as a part of your socioeconomic status. You get there, therefore, as a result of this power distribution in society, so it is an entire process by which people arrive at the point when they are able to assume the kind of responsibility you are talking about. And if you do not understand, then it is maybe part of your isolation which is the reason.

**DR. STEELE:** Well, I do not know how you have the authority to talk about whether I am isolated or not, since this is the first time I have ever met you.

**MR. KLEIN:** I think that we have to make a distinction here between good kinds of group behavior and destructive kinds of group behavior. In New York, and in most cities where there are floods of immigrants coming now, those immigrants naturally organize themselves into groups, into protective societies. Koreans certainly do. When the Jews and the Italians came at the turn of the century, they certainly did that.

But they did that in the context of finding security and safety as they moved into the economic mainstream of the country. The groups did not define themselves as victims, and they did not make the most victimized the most valid member of that group. I think that what we have here is a situation where the self-segregation is adding to the sense of isolation and inhibiting the ability to join the mainstream economically.

Now, if what you are saying is that by forming into a group, you are going to eventually...

**DR. WALTERS:** You emerge out of a group.

**MR. KLEIN:** I do not think that you emerge out of a group. I think that you exist as an individual in society and you join or not.

### **Victimization and Free Will**

**DR. STEELE:** You know, another point needs to be made. The recent studies from the University of Chicago point out that you could be profoundly isolated within the group. One of the real problems now in the black community is that we are isolated in inner cities, have no access to the resources of the larger community, and that form of isolation is probably more crippling than the one you are accusing me of.

Again, I certainly do not deny the power of the group and the glory of the group and the fact that we all need that kind of identification and we need that kind of support as all human beings on earth do, and we should give that to each other, that support. But that is not what we are really arguing about here. What you are doing, in a sense, is making excuses for blacks. You are saying that we do not have this and we do not have that and we cannot be expected to do this and we cannot be expected to do that. And there is that old line of victimology again.

**DR. WALTERS:** It is not a line, it is a fact.

**DR. STEELE:** I understand everything you are saying and I grant you that there are profound structural sources against us. But we can resist those. Free will does have a role in this as well. And we have to put more emphasis on what we expect individuals to do. A welfare mother can take her child to the library on Saturday mornings when the crack dealers are quiet for a minute, and get them some books and have them learn to read. This kind of thing needs to be encouraged. But what we do instead is say, "Well, she is poor, she has no resources then, so, the hell with it." That is basically what you are saying. That we have to wait for the society, for the government, for somebody to come and help us before we can teach the kid the alphabet.

**DR. WALTERS:** No, no, I am not saying that. I think the point you made is a valid one, that people can exercise free will. But I think that it is expecting probably too much for all of the welfare mothers to exercise the kind of free will that would result in pulling themselves up out of poverty.

**DR. STEELE:** Do you give up on them then?

**DR. WALTERS:** No I am not, I do not give up on them. But I think it is probably too much to expect that they all will do that.

**MR. KLEIN:** It is possible that they could find themselves as victims from the get-go.

**DR. WALTERS:** They have no choice, they are victims. Their entire society reinforces their victimization. It is something which is a part of their reality.

**MS. MCCLAIN-HILL:** Excuse me, the thing that bothers me most is, knowing quite a few welfare mothers, I do not think they define themselves as anything. I mean, they just get up in the morning and do what they do. Perhaps part of the problem is that rather than figuring out or addressing the most constructive ways to impact their lives, we spend

a lot of time trying to figure out what to call them, and how they define themselves, when it is not relevant to them. What is relevant to them is how they get their kids out of these prisons that they are in, not whether they are victims or not.

**DR. STEELE:** When their own leadership continually portrays them as victims, then one of the difficulties they are going to have in that society is in doing more for themselves, they are going to have their racism excuse. They are going to have that as a way to assuage their despair. And what I am saying is, people like Professor Walters, the civil rights leadership, and so forth, basically are giving blacks a way to assuage their despair, rather than a challenge.

**DR. WALTERS:** The point I want to make is that Ms. McClain-Hill is absolutely right that welfare mothers do not wake up calling themselves anything. But I think it is also true that they are aware of the circumstances, that they are aware of their power in quantity. And so it is not something that they have to manufacture. It is the reality.

**MR. KLEIN:** Why don't we go to questions from the floor? Right here.

## Race and Citizenship

**QUESTION:** I was recently in Moscow, where a guide was talking about the Soviet Union's problem with rival national groups. She said, "You Americans are so lucky. You are only one nationality." If you look at a Soviet internal passport, or even a Soviet visa application, it asks first for "citizenship" and then it for "nationality." In the Soviet Union, those are two different things. I suppose any American in this room, regardless of ethnic background, would answer "American" for both those questions, citizenship and nationality.

I can appreciate the need for people to organize into groups for power. But power to do what? Power is not an end in itself. Power is a means to an end, ideally. And what is the end of this accumulation of power?

**MS. MCCLAIN-HILL:** First off, it is impossible for me to be coy about who or what I am. I am black. I cannot hide that at all, so, that just points to one of the differences.

**DR. WALTERS:** Are you black?

**MS. MCCLAIN-HILL:** Yes. I am involved in organizing a group of blacks and it is really to address issues that are universal -- issues of illiteracy or issues of voter participation. You cannot have a democracy that is working very well if people do not vote.

As we look at illiteracy, one of the things that we are going to focus on is inner city schools. Other groups looking at illiteracy might not be as sensitive to the problems of inner city schools as we are going to be. It is not that we are looking to resolve or organize simply to change the status of black Americans, because as Dr. Steele indicates, as individuals move up, the group moves collectively up. Well, the same is true for this country. As African-Americans succeed, the country succeeds. But because I am from a certain experience, while I look at health care broadly, I am going to make sure that particular package addresses health care in the inner city.

When I think about the Jewish experience in this country and thinking of Jews in this country as a political force, their interest tends to be often in the area of foreign relations. I do not think that their interest is anti-American, I just think that as they look at what our country is doing, they are particularly sensitive to one area of the world, because that is something that is very close to their hearts. So when you talk about organizing for what purpose, or power for what, it is really to participate broadly and to make sure that the area of very special concern to you gets addressed.

**MR. KLEIN:** I have to take issue with that. I do not think that the main purpose of the vast majority of Jews in this country has been to organize in order to exert influence on Middle Eastern policy.

**MS. MCCLAIN-HILL:** May I respond first? That is not what I said. And if that is how it was interpreted, I am sorry. First off, I do not believe that all Jews in this country are organized politically.

**MR. KLEIN:** I would say the vast majority.

**MS. MCCLAIN-HILL:** Or even the vast majority are organized politically. To the extent that you have a very political, no I won't even use that, no I will use that, because it is used in the popular press constantly. It is called, "The Jewish lobby", and I don't mean it in any derogatory fashion at all. But one of the sensitivities of that group, in addition to a broad range of issues, is what goes on in the Middle East, period.

**MR. KLEIN:** That is true.

**MS. MCCLAIN-HILL:** That is all I am saying. There is nothing all that heretical about that.

**MR. KLEIN:** I think that once again we are talking about what is appropriate ethnic behavior is in this country. It is appropriate, it is in the grand tradition of American ethnicity to...

**MS. MCCLAIN-HILL:** I did not say it is inappropriate. I think it is fine. I was just drawing a parallel. That group's sensitivity, and my group's sensitivity to what happens in inner city.

**MR. KLEIN:** All right. Let's go on. But let me just comment, and then question. If America is going to become a truly multiracial society in the 21st century -- and I think that the immigration of the last 20 years, the hundreds of thousands coming each year from Asia and Latin America, increases the likelihood that this is going to be a truly multiracial society, a microcosm of the world -- it will, by definition, not be Afrocentric or Eurocentric or Asiocentric. The important thing is to find ways for all of us to come together. You do not do that by separating yourself and defining the rest, the majority society, as a victimizer.

Now, as for immigration. There are quite a few blacks who did emigrate to this country. There is a huge West Indian population in Brooklyn, for example. Now, if this country is so overwhelmingly oppressive, so overwhelmingly racist, why on earth would they choose to come here?

### **Working Whites and Racial Preference**

**QUESTION:** My question is for Professor Walters, and it has to do with a group probably not represented here today, but whose concerns and actions I think are crucial in this debate, and that is the white working class, the white lower classes. Increasingly the politics of difference or the notion of group entitlements in this country is placing those people in the position of victims and I think they are beginning to feel that way. One of the reasons that I found inspiration in Jesse Jackson's campaign was because it addressed the concerns of the white lower class and poor and working classes along with blacks, and did not see the group differences as exclusive of a mutual interest.

**DR. WALTERS:** What Jesse Jackson's campaign did was to illuminate the fact that indeed there are some class interests in this country that are very important. And he spoke to those interests, I think, very convincingly, for example, when he spoke about the 37 million people without health care. That is a class interest. When he talked about redeveloping much of the infrastructure of this country, that is a class interest.

On the other hand, I think that a great fraud has been perpetrated upon the white working class. The neoconservative intellectuals in the 1970s developed a rhetoric which made the white working class feel as though rights and resources were being taken away and given to blacks. Therefore, what you had was a zero sum game and working class whites became the losers in this race war. That is a rhetoric which I think history not only will judge as incorrect, but for which the neoconservatives are singularly responsible, because they gave intellectual force to a white working class movement which was arrayed against the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

If you just take one indicator, for example, labor force participation rates, there was a big hue and cry in this country about the impact of something called affirmative action. Except when you look at labor force participation rates, by race and by gender, what you find is that the big winner over the last 20 years has been white females: there has been no tremendous shift to the benefit of blacks in labor force participation rates as a result of affirmative action.

I could go on, and I could replicate that particular statistic across a number of areas, so that you could prove empirically that there really has not been a transfer of rights and resources from the white working class to blacks, except that the rhetoric of this country has given people the impression that that is what has happened.

**QUESTION:** Do you think that the group rhetoric which you are putting forth may exacerbate that situation?

**DR. WALTERS:** I do not see how. This discussion about what blacks want is simple in one sense. Last year, I was a policy director for something called the National Black Summit, which met in New Orleans, Louisiana. Three thousand people came there and part of our responsibility was to write a "bill of particulars," part of which we would present to the Administration to read. As policy director, it was my job to sift all of the demands coming in and the requests coming in from workshops and produce something comprehensible. As I sat there looking at what came in, it occurred to me that there were really two broad things that were at the heart of this.

One of them, of course, is that black people, like every other people, want the right in this country to express an

authentic sense of their culture. And it is not so much a right which is enshrined in any concept of legality, as it is a civil right and a socially cultural right.

The second thing is they want the right to move as individuals wherever they would like in society. There we come to the product of the civil rights movement, which is to take the fetters away and let blacks move as every other citizen, sampling and savoring aspects of American culture.

Those are the two broad objectives for black people. I think, by the way, they happen to be the two broad objectives of all of the ethnic and racial groups in the country. They want the right to practice their Chineseness or their Japaneseness when they want to, but they want the right to move with some mobility in society wherever their gifts will take them. So I do not think, in that sense, that black people are any different from anybody else, and I think sometimes we mystify what we want.

## Individual Choice and Responsibility

**QUESTION:** As I read Shelby Steele's book, I do not hear any call for rugged black individualism. I just hear him say, let's end the mindset that immobilizes people from making choices in their lives for their economic and the social progress. I want to know from Professor Walters, what is the role of choice in a black person's life in dealing with problems? What makes a person not have a baby at 15, or not shoot somebody for his sneakers, or want to learn to read? More affirmative action? More minority set-asides? What is it that changes these problems that he is addressing and I don't really hear you addressing at all in terms of real solutions?

**QUESTION:** My question is almost the same. Can I throw it out too?

Professor Walters, why do you disagree with Professor Steele when he talks about the need to lay heavier stress on individual responsibility? How are some of these problems going to be solved without emphasis like that?

I wanted to ask Professor Steele if he is not worried about whether he isn't giving comfort to those who don't want to do anything to give people the opportunities that he wants them to take advantage of. And if he is not a neoconservative, I would love him to tell us what he is in his politics.

**DR. STEELE:** Yes, people do ask me if this book gives aid and comfort to people who would not have the interest of blacks at heart and would simply like to ignore that problem and it will go away. The obvious answer is, those people do not need any real aid and comfort from me. If they want to ignore those problems, then I am sure they are going to go ahead and do it and yes, they might use something I have said to justify that. But the only other option is to not say anything and to continue to straightjacket the racial dialogue in America, and so I chose to take my chances.

**QUESTION:** What are your politics?

**DR. STEELE:** I voted for Jesse Jackson in the last election. I am sure Professor Walters would be happy to know that. I have never voted Republican in my life, which is not to say that I won't. I may.

**DR. WALTERS:** I am glad to hear that, because you at least appeared to be fond of Ronald Reagan.

**DR. STEELE:** That is the most absurd thing I have ever heard in my life. How can I be characterized as a supporter of Ronald Reagan? I never wrote a single word in his support. I analyzed Ronald Reagan and criticized him heavily as a person that the black man would have great difficulty identifying with and supporting because he was so willing to deny us our innocence.

**DR. WALTERS:** I think there is a role for choice and I don't agree with you, of course, that I am not trying to address this. I probably have not said what you wanted to hear about this question of the sneakers and so forth. You can trace a lot of that back to deprivation, and I know people don't want to hear that, but that is exactly where it comes from. If you would take the opportunity when you are driving through the ghetto past boarded-up houses and dilapidated infrastructures and perhaps talk to some...

**QUESTION:** You mean, like the house I grew up in that did not have hot water until after I was in high school?

**DR. WALTERS:** Well, yes, and being the color you are, you probably got out faster than I would have.

**DR. STEELE:** That is debatable.

**DR. WALTERS:** It is not debatable. It is exactly what we are talking about right now. If you look at the nature of our communities today, there is no way in the world that you can blame that simply on black people.

**DR. STEELE:** You are right. But a white person would get out of it because he would not think of himself as a victim.

**DR. WALTERS:** I think he has every reason not to think of himself as a victim because he belongs to a group which is dominant and which has been the victimizer.

**DR. STEELE:** You make these white people awful powerful. They don't control my life.

**DR. WALTERS:** Well, I think they are powerful. I don't want to minimize that power. I think it is naive to say that free will will will us out of the ghetto. I wish free will would will us out of the ghetto. There is a role for individual responsibility on the part of blacks, and I think that we ought to encourage individual responsibility and initiative where we can find it.

I don't see a time in history when we have not exercised individual initiative. I don't think that we as black people are going to get where we have to go without exercising individual initiative, because there is no government that is going to save us, no program going to save us, and we have come to that conclusion a long time ago. What we need is individual ability and initiation, plus. It is the plus which is missing. It is the plus which people refuse to acknowledge at this particular point in history. It is the plus which people like George Bush are saying that he won't sign in the form of a 1990 Civil Rights bill. It is that plus which would help, because we are a minority, an oppressed minority, a resource poor minority, and to confront those realities does not mean that you are whining or that you are putting the onus off on somebody else. It is reality. And if you don't face reality, then also you cannot solve the problem.

**MR. KLEIN:** Let me close this in two ways. In my role as moderator, let me say this has all been very interesting and the debate should continue, which is what moderators usually say at the end.

In my role as panelist, let me say that I believe that we have come to the point where this country can no longer afford, in moral terms, programs, even the best intentioned programs, that distinguish on the basis of race. At the same time, this country can no longer afford, in moral terms, to ignore the massive degeneration and despair that is going on in the inner cities; and that far more important than George Bush signing the 1990 Civil Rights Act, I think, is George Bush fully funding Head Start for every child who needs it in this country.