

# Keeping The Dream Alive: African-American Achievers

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The election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980 symbolized a new era of conservative leadership in the nation. His economic policy of "Reaganomics" was designed to cut the national debt; however, he succeeded in creating more debt than any other president in United States history. In fact, Reagan's economic policy only served as a barrier to the prosperity of African-American citizens. Although he failed to reduce the budget deficit, he succeeded in reducing a number of programs designed to aid the uplift of black people. During Reagan's presidency, Pell Grant funding was cut, which reduced the number of black students who could seek higher education. He also cut the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), which was designed to provide job skills for the chronically-unemployed, many of whom were black. The cuts in Pell Grant funding and CETA indicated that Reagan did not want to ensure equality of opportunity among all U.S. citizens. And as soon as Reagan left office, George Bush stepped in to continue the Republican tradition of cutting programs designed to help the disadvantaged. Perhaps one of the biggest setbacks for blacks came when Bush vetoed the Civil Rights Act of 1990. As a result of a whole decade of Republican presidents, African-Americans must fight and re-win battles that they had already won. However, despite numerous attempts by Reagan and Bush to deter black achievement, blacks did make strides during the 1980s and are

continuing to make progress today. Black people can look toward several African-American modern heroes as evidence that the dream is still alive.

In order to understand the importance of black achievement in the 1980s, the current problems still facing African-Americans must also be examined. In the socioeconomic sector, one can see the emergence of a great number of black households headed by women. In 1990, black children are three times more likely to be poor than white kids. There are four million poor black children in the United States and at least two million black families that live below the poverty level.

In addition, the ratio of black to white unemployment has always been at least 2 to 1. For black teenagers, the unemployment rate is about 37 percent, which can carry over to the adult population. One million black men don't have jobs in America—the land of opportunity. The unemployment rate among black men is indicative of the total struggle facing the African-American male. Of all black men in the age group 20 to 29, one in four is in prison, on probation or on parole. Murder has replaced heart disease as the number one killer of black men. For black men age 15 to 24, homicide is the main enemy. It is a disgrace and shame that black men have a one in 21 chance of being murdered before reaching age 25.

Black life expectancy has also dropped substantially over the past several years. The National Center for Health Statistics reported that a growing gap exist between the life expectancies of black and white Americans. From 1987 to 1988, overall

black life expectancy dropped from 69.4 years to 69.2 years. White life expectancy remained constant from 1987-88 at 75.6 years. Statistics also show that more blacks are dying prematurely of diseases that are not considered to be lethal. Influenza, hypertension and asthma are examples of diseases that kill thousands of blacks, even though they could be treated by a family physician. Many blacks cannot afford health insurance which helps lead to premature deaths. From 1980-86, 121,560 people died of premature deaths and 80 percent of them were black. The premature death statistic is extremely shocking because blacks only comprise 13 percent of the U.S. population.

The problems facing black people are indeed alarming and appalling. It is difficult to believe that African-Americans still lag behind white people in the socioeconomic sector. However, black people must not allow these alarming trends to keep them from fulfilling their dreams. History shows that there are numerous blacks who have overcome economic and social disadvantages in order to become successful. The decade of the 1980s and the year 1990 also introduced a great number of African-Americans who overcame racism en route to achieving their goals.

In the political arena, blacks made considerable progress over the past 11 years, which can be seen in the number of black mayors across the country. Black people have become mayors in cities of all sizes and populations in the United States. David Dinkins became the first black mayor of New York City in 1989. Detroit mayor Coleman Young is one of only a few blacks elected to serve multi-terms as mayor during the 1980s. *Ebony* magazine listed Dinkins and Young as two of highest paid black public officials in the U.S. In Corinth, Miss. 85 percent of the town is white, yet the citizens elected their first black mayor, E.S. Bishop, this year. Also in 1990, Washington D.C. elected Sharon Pratt Dixon as its first black female mayor. Other black mayors in the country include Maynard Jackson in Atlanta and Wilson Goode in Philadelphia, who both have become successful at winning elections in major U.S. cities.

Mayors are not the sole indicator of black progress in the political arena. The election results from 1990 show that black politicians made gains across the country. William Jefferson became the first black Congressman from Louisiana since Reconstruction. Gary Franks will represent Connecticut as the state's first black Congressman. In Tennessee, Thelma Harper became the first black female elected to the state Senate. It is ironic that black people have made significant gains in three states where

they had been characteristically denied full political participation.

In 1984 and 1988, the Rev. Jesse Jackson became one of the only blacks ever to be considered a serious candidate for the U.S. presidency. Jackson, founder of the National Rainbow Coalition, received overwhelming support from the black community in his attempts to win the Democratic nomination. And suddenly the White House did not seem like it was far beyond the reach of black people. Former Charlotte, NC Mayor Harvey Gantt became the only black person to ever seriously compete with Jesse Helms for the U.S. Senate. Former N.C. Gov. Jim Hunt fought furiously to unseat Helms back in 1984. However, his campaign could not compare to the extraordinary effort by Harvey Gantt. Gantt moved people across the state with his goals to uplift the disadvantaged. Black people knew that they would have someone truly representative of their needs so they voted on Nov. 6 in record numbers. The dream that a black person could sit among the 100 U.S. senators was closer to reality than before. And although Jesse Jackson is not in the White House and Harvey Gantt isn't a senator, these two men indicated that black people could garner widespread support when attempting to become high-ranking government officials.

Ironically, blacks have made progress in the White House because African-Americans have received important jobs. Over the past decade, the White House has become much blacker. In the Bush administration, several African-Americans hold prominent positions. George Bush did not appoint these people because he cares about blacks or civil rights; he appointed them to make blacks think he does. However, no matter what his intentions, the jobs held by blacks in the White House indicate progress over the past decade. Kristin Clark-Taylor is the first black to become the director of media relations in the White House. No one can receive a press pass unless they go through a black woman first. Louis Sullivan, serves as the first black doctor to head the Department of Health and Human Services, which oversees health care problems in the U.S. Constance Berry Newman is the first black director of the U.S. Office of Personal Management, which oversees the work of the administration. Frederick McClure, advises the president about bill proposals in Congress as the first black legislative director. Condolezza Rice, special assistant to the president for national security affairs, is the first black to hold this position. Gen. Colin Powell is the most powerful soldier in the U.S. military as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The world should know that it is a black

