

tional community.

Nearly a century after the debate between Washington and Du Bois, and nearly 30 years after the end of the Civil Rights Movement, African-Americans again find themselves at the center of a debate over methods of advancement. It takes place against a dangerous backdrop, fraught with legal setbacks, recession, the Gulf War, the rise of racial incidents on college campuses, the intransigence of a president in refusing to pass a civil rights restoration act, strained relations between police and African-Americans in urban areas, the drug trade and its impact on Black America, the increasing resegregation of American society in schools, housing, workplaces and social spots — this time, condoned by conservative whites and liberal blacks alike — and candidates who run competitive campaigns that may play on racial angles (*a la* George Bush, David Duke or Jesse Helms). Faced by these circumstances and many other challenges, African-Americans again find two divergent opinions of advancement before them in the last decade of this century.

The first opinion of advancement involves the remnants of the Civil Rights Movement. In the wake of the movement, the civil rights organizations have been reduced to shadows of their former being, although they have not ceased fighting for their traditional goals — anti-discrimination laws, civil rights acts, the occasional fair employment agreement with major employers such as General Motors. The enemy to be fought, as always, is the biased, discriminatory practices of racist, intransigent whites; the system is to blame for the myriad problems of African-Americans, whether it be economic, social, political, educational or physical.

Not so, says a professor of English at San Jose State University in California. The actual enemy, he says, is the widely-held ideology of African-American leadership, which is retrograde in nature and all too willing to hinder the African-American masses by portraying them as helpless victims who are incapable of any degree of self-reliance and are in dire need of paternalistic aid.

The professor, Shelby Steele, is among the generation of blacks who grew up in the hectic days of the Civil Rights Movement but has come to reject the course of

action taken by African-Americans since then.

Steele's activity in the past two years have included a book of essays, *The Content of Our Character*, published last fall, a number of articles published in *Harper's* and *New Perspectives Quarterly* and narrating last year's PBS special *Seven Days in Bensonhurst*, dealing with the 1989 murder of Yusuf Hawkins by a group of white teenagers in the predominantly Italian neighborhood of Brooklyn, N.Y. In the February issue of *Emergence* magazine, Steele and black nationalist Amiri Baraka engage in a debate that was touted as "an attempt to articulate how best to respond to racism" but quickly degenerated into little more than a weak attempt by both to lay a metaphysical ass-whopping on the other. On the way to making their points, Baraka called Steele a "neo-con" twit" while Steele lovingly referred to Baraka as a "mad Marxist rapper."

Instead of reflecting the age-old ideal of black self-advancement and working to change their circumstances, Steele argues, most African-Americans are all too willing — even eager — to adopt a victim mentality and blame white racism for their failures. "Certainly there is still racial discrimination in America," he writes, "but I believe that the unconscious replaying of our oppression is now the greatest barrier to our full equality."

The state of dialogue in America today reflects nothing more than a well-rehearsed pattern of unfocused black anger and white guilt that automatically capitulates to that anger, both of which does little to change either the status of the person in need or the person who, by their behavior, can make available the needed assistance.

The anger/guilt mechanism also has the effect of serving as devices used by blacks to gain social leverage and, therefore, become little more than opiates that keep African-Americans from shifting their views from that of the oppressed victim to that of a people whose chains exist only around their mind: preoccupation with racism keeps African-Americans from realizing their true identity as humans, and free humans at that, he argues.

Steele believes the strange, arcane arena of American race relations have their roots in the aftermath of the Black Power

movement. That movement replaced the feelings blacks had throughout the Civil Rights Movement: an acceptance that African-Americans were indeed behind whites in society combined with the determination to gain equality through the channels that had been recently opened. "There is much irony in the fact that Black Power would come along in the late sixties and change all this. Black Power was a movement of uplift and pride, and yet it also delivered the weight of pride — a weight that would burden black students from then on," he wrote in an essay examining the racism on college campuses in the Reagan years. "Without a frank account of one's anxieties, there is no clear direction, no concrete challenge." Black Power brought the notion that blacks had already attained equality and did not have to prove (or improve) themselves.

The results of that shift in ideology has surfaced throughout society, most notably on college campuses today, both in the tenor of demands by black students for cultural centers and in the conservative and racial backlash seen on college campuses: for if, in the context of race, black is beautiful and precious in itself, and therefore deserving of special treatment, Steele says, then indeed everything else, including white (*gasp!*) is beautiful, precious in itself, etc.

Meanwhile, black college students at predominantly white campuses drop out in record numbers despite the presence of multifaceted support systems and their intent to retain black students. Instead, they fight for black

cultural centers while neglecting their studies and failing to take full advantage of their chances for success and improvement.

A great deal of Steele's arguments have been omitted for lack of space, but what he has to say is indeed controversial. Although he hesitates to place political labels on his ideology, it does tend to follow closely the conservative viewpoint of what African-Americans should do to advance their cause at present. His message has not gained the support of many African-Americans, nor has he yet found any allies among whites or conservatives. Nevertheless, his message is circulating.

There are parts of his thinking that do make sense: it is useless nowadays to call yourself a victim and expect help from the powers that be without first making some effort to alleviate your own plight. And it is counterproductive to play on the old game of anger and guilt when it does not cause any *real* changes on the parts of either blacks or whites. And certainly, racism is a constant African-Americans must face, yet for 400 years in America they have excelled in spite of it.

But what Steele does not see in his arguing are those who *do* succeed against the odds, those who *do* try to effect change by using and applying new rules and methods without falling back on old devices and ruses, those who do not attempt to use the enslaving mentality of the victim as an excuse. Those African-Americans who fight to change things in a

manner outlined by C.T. Vivian here during Martin Luther King Jr. Week in January — realizing first that your oppressor has a *conscience*, and in order to drastically change that person, you must *touch that person's conscience* in a convincing manner. Perhaps Steele does not realize these people exist. Or maybe he acknowledges their existence and has come as a self-appointed messiah to heal the sick.

Regardless, the historical divergence of viewpoints continues. It will be interesting to see how this dialogue develops — but most importantly, it will be equally interesting to see how the *talk* affects the *action* taken to solve the problems of African-Americans. It is fair to say that all our leaders, from Congressional Black Caucus to Louis Farrakhan to Angela Davis to Jesse Jackson to Joseph Lowery to Shirley Chisholm, have something interesting to say.

But Black America is sick. Will their rhetoric be successful in helping heal the sick, or will it simply put a Band-Aid on a situation that needs major surgery? Can our leaders effect positive change for Black America, or will they continue to squabble in an unsuccessful effort to unite an ever-diverse mass before taking up a plan of action? And after all is said and done, will there be anything left to say — or do? Or will our society have self-destructed by then? Stay tuned. The debate between Steele and others over the methods of advancement will be interesting, to say the least, for it will be a matter of life and death. Peace.

A New Vision of Race in America

