

By Benjamin L. Hooks

There long have been diverse views in America's black community about the best ways to ameliorate the race problem, which W. E. B. DuBois defined in 1903 as "the problem of the twentieth century." Indeed, DuBois was a leader of one school of opinion. His faction, which demanded "full manhood rights" -- politically and socially -- for black Americans and favored classical education for those DuBois called "the talented tenth" of the race, opposed the gradualist and accommodationist approach of Booker T. Washington.

DuBois, noting that Washington was the most distinguished Southerner since Jefferson Davis, recalled the seeming pledge that the Tuskegee educator had given the White South: "In all things purely social, we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." Washington's philosophy, DuBois said, represented an abandonment of the struggle for political power, an end to insistence on civil rights, and the rejection of higher education for black youth. DuBois agreed with Washington that blacks "should strive and strive mightily" to help themselves. He added, however, that it was "equally true that unless [the Negro's] striving be not simply seconded, but rather aroused and encouraged, by the initiative of the richer and wiser environing group (whites), he cannot hope for great success."

Washington had failed to drive home that important point, DuBois said, and, thus, had "tended to make the whites, North and South, shift the burden of the Negro problem to the Negro's shoulders and stand aside as virtual and rather pessimistic spectators; when in fact the burden belongs to the nation, and the hands of none of us are clean if we bend not our energies to righting these great wrongs."

For his part, Washington made few public responses to critics. He did, of course, state and re-state his own position on issues, and he sometimes suggested that his Northern black critics simply did not understand the conditions that prevailed in the South and necessitated his approach, but he did not seem to want to engage in debate that would elevate his opponents to eminence and equality with him. Privately, however, "The Doctor" (as he was called, though he possessed no earned college degree) and his allies were ever busy with a range of tactics and stratagems, including negative publicity campaigns and libel actions, calculated to diminish and discredit his adversaries.

On at least one occasion, Washington did characterize his opponents in the most dismissive terms. Writing to an acquaintance, he said his detractors "make such asses of themselves, and every one knowing that their object is to gratify a mere personal spite, the colored people in conventions do not take them seriously and for that reason pay little attention to them in the way of opposing or giving notice to what they say."

In light of this history, it is not surprising that there is a debate today that pits those who favor a more traditional approach to civil rights against those who cast negative votes against affirmative action and other strategies designed to improve the opportunities of Americans of African descent.

Of course, affirmative action is only part of the debate, but it is a major part. By and large, the new black critics of affirmative action say such policies have not benefited poor blacks; put obstacles in the way of developing coalitions for social programs to aid all poor people; and given black Americans a deep sense of inferiority and inability to compete, especially in integrated situations.

Shelby Steele, a professor of English at San Jose State College, is a leading proponent of the notion that affirmative action has done psychological damage to black Americans and has had a detrimental impact on race relations. Professor Steele, who is emerging as a major essayist and commentator on racial matters, is no mere ideologue, but a thoughtful writer of grace and power. He has some points to make, and he makes them with skill and felicity of phrase.

Professor Steele is not wrong in saying that black Americans need to develop their individual gifts and strengths, that they cannot assign racism the exclusive responsibility for their problems, and that they must not eternally regard themselves as victims.

Neither is he in error when he urges that young blacks

be encouraged to study, to be disciplined and conscientious, to reject the foolishness that says that achievement diminishes blackness -- as though only whites are entitled to excellence.

One problem is that Professor Steele writes as though these truths were not being uttered by those "black leaders" he is so ready to disparage. I make hundreds of speeches each year, many of them to young people, and I unfailingly preach the gospel of hard work, disciplined study and achievement. Others in leadership positions say the same things. It is a gross distortion and a disservice to debate to pretend otherwise.

In his almost-exclusive focus on what blacks ought to do, Professor Steele appears to overlook the responsibility of the larger society. When black Americans have done everything they possibly could to reach a Promised Land, there remains the uncontrovertible fact of the continued prevalence and persistence of racism. Moreover, great economic and political power resides outside the black community. It is still necessary to remind white Americans of the nation's bitter, indeed, bloody, racial history. We cannot escape history, as Lincoln reminded the nation.

In his discussion of affirmative action, Professor Steele (like other critics) seems to obscure the long history of discrimination and exclusion that prompted such remedial efforts. As the United States Commission on Civil Rights once noted, just as medical treatment is based on the diagnosis of

an illness, affirmative action stems from diagnosis of the social sickness of discrimination by race, sex, national origin, or other considerations. Affirmative action only has meaning in the context of discrimination; the remedy cannot be divorced from the illness. Professor Steele and others write much about some "corrosive effect" that affirmative action is said to have, but very little about the poisonous nature of racism.

I do not and will not apologize for unceasingly calling attention to the historic role of racism in the present plight of black Americans. I fully recognize that there is a need for African-Americans to accept responsibility for many areas of their lives. However, I am firmly convinced that both morality and politics dictate that white Americans must be reminded of the nation's history, and must be challenged to do what they alone can do to remove the remaining barriers to the advancement of black Americans.

Black Americans do have responsibilities and challenges. But so do all Americans. To bring an end to practices founded in racism is the common obligation of all concerned Americans.