

Slavery to 1992: A Historical Perspective of Black American Success Through the Free Market System

By Armstrong Williams

In 1992 it is hard to imagine a world in which human beings were captured in their home villages, bound in chains, and forced as slaves to bear the many burdens of bondage. My African ancestors lived in harmony with nature and kept alive religious traditions that revered life.

However, many African-Americans today are but the latest generation of our people who have never come to terms with life on this continent. To other African-Americans, the market economy has been a blessing from which they derive ample incomes for a comfortable and satisfying way of life. From slavery to 1992 is a long way, and, in fact, some have not made it yet. The souls of some are still bound in the chains of slavery.

Perhaps the key to success in the American free market economy is accepting the idea that it is morally permissible to be prosperous. It may seem incredible that any Americans in our commercialized society would hesitate to validate the fruits of one's labor as professional or business persons.

Consider, however, that African culture at the time of slavery was a way of life that for countless centuries had revolved around simple subsistence. Cows and goats were traded for goods, so there was not a sense of valuing money. Even today, some people in Africa have no use for money. The concept of buying and selling is not part of their world.

To slaves who were brought off the ship in Charleston, South Carolina, and sold on the auction block, the idea of being traded for pieces of paper must have seemed strange indeed. The value of money was one of many things to be learned in a strange land while living in slavery.

Wealth and Poverty. Another thing that slaves were taught was the Christian religion, which has an underlying theme that views money as being evil. "Money is the root of all evil" is a saying that is as Christian as a Baptist hymn book. We also could look to Christ's statement in the New Testament that it is harder for a rich man to get to Heaven than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.

We could also look to the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience that members of religious orders take as they seek lives of piety and holiness. Somehow, poverty seems more noble than being wealthy, and the assumption is that to gain wealth, one must make compromises with the world that endanger one's soul.

To African slaves, who often sat in the balcony of churches and listened to the same sermons as their masters, the Christian attitude toward money must have seemed highly compatible with the attitudes they had brought with them to this country. Poor people often see themselves virtuous and console themselves with the assurance that they remain close to God, which rich people, in their view, obviously cannot do.

Armstrong Williams is Managing Partner of the Graham-Williams Group, and international public relations firm. He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on February 11, 1992, as part of a lecture series observing Black History Month.

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Even after the Civil War, when many former slaves remained on the plantations as day laborers, the occasional black entrepreneur was looked upon with disfavor by members of his own race. Again, there was a presumption so heavily weighted against wealth that if a black man became rich, he must have done something terribly wrong to have prospered in such fashion.

It would be hard today to assess the attitudes in the black community about money and success. Undoubtedly, however, one would still find a certain fatalism about poverty to which many have condemned themselves. These poor African-Americans accept their station in life. Their minds are not geared toward striving to get out of poverty. They endure their lives of poverty not with desperation but with resignation.

The idea that God must have loved the poor because He made so many of them, is prevalent among poor whites and the poor of other ethnic groups. The mountains of Appalachia are thinly populated with hill people who live hand to mouth and are thankful that they are not sinful like the rich.

The free market is an impersonal economic system that offers its rewards to those who build a better mousetrap, sell the mousetrap, repair the mousetrap, insure the mousetrap, or represent the mousetrap's purchaser when he sues the manufacturer because the trap allegedly won't catch mice. Money, of course, is essential to the free market, so that prices can rise or fall with demand and so that supply can match the requirements of the market.

Morally Neutral. In a free market economy, moral virtue is not a saleable commodity. One can contribute to the GNP by being a crook as well as by being a choir director. It is not that the free market economy is immoral; it is simply amoral. The question of morality doesn't enter the picture. As an example of what is meant by amoral, consider a house. It is a physical structure. The structure has a roof and walls to enclose a space so that it can be used for whatever purpose the owner chooses. A house can be a monastery, or it can be a place where crack dealers sell their dope. The house is neutral as far as morality is concerned. Thus it is with the free market. Within the free market, one may sell Bibles or assault weapons. Either would boost the GNP by the amount of total sales.

Some people do get rich while cutting the throats of other people in business deals. Sometimes fraud is involved. Sometimes other crimes are committed. But it is not always true that success in business is the mark of the Devil.

Now, you may never have had any doubts that it's morally justifiable to earn a fair profit or a decent salary from enterprise or hard work. However, I would submit that many people in America, including many African-Americans, are happy to remain poor because their value system warns them against the sins of riches.

Those of us who are sophisticated in the ways of the free market may find it extraordinary that anyone would hesitate to expend effort to earn money. Not everyone operates according to the same value system. Americans who have become successful, including African-Americans, take it for granted that economic success is desirable. They realize that it is not just that you *are* successful but *how* you became successful that counts.

There are ethical manufacturers and unethical ones. The same is true of wholesalers, retailers, professionals, and managers. In fact, even among the clergy, now and then a preacher makes news by straying from the straight and narrow. No field of economic endeavor is inherently moral. Any economic activity can be subverted by unethical dealings. However, the vast range of our incredibly complex economy consists of honest people producing or selling honest goods for an honest price or honestly providing needed services for competitive fees or salaries. The marketplace simply reflects humanity in all its goodness and its weaknesses.

As African-Americans have come to terms with the market, they have developed a value system that permits them to pursue success and which validates honest endeavors. Such a value system is vital if more African-Americans and Americans of other races are to break with the code of poverty and begin trying to make more affluent lives for themselves.

The question of how to lead the African-American people into greater economic success has been with this country since the freeing of the slaves. Even under slavery, some African-Americans not only gained their own freedom but became wealthy landowners. Ironically, some of those black landowners were also owners of slaves, members of their own race who were still in servitude. Early freedmen gained success as farmers, blacksmiths, carpenters, and artisans. There were also many who applied themselves academically and became preachers, teachers, accountants, and journalists.

Unshackling the Mind. When society changes, and the shackles are taken from the wrists and ankles, it is still up to the former slave to take the shackles from his or her mind. Once the shackles are removed from the minds of African-Americans, they are able to compete in the free market as everyone else does.

I believe sincerely that there are no black issues or no white issues or beliefs. We are all shaped to some extent by our backgrounds, but there is an American belief system, and we all are free to share in it if we choose. I am African-American, but, like my father, I am also a Republican, and I believe in the work ethic and the concept that success follows hard work.

The free market respects merit. The free market rewards merit. You can be a scoundrel and make a killing in the stock market, but in most fields your reputation goes before you. For most people, character and integrity are important, and sustained business depends upon fair dealings.

Assuming that fraud or some other crime is not involved, the willing exchange serves society well by matching a willing seller with a willing buyer. Where there is a mutual will to carry out a transaction, there can be no harm. Where there is good faith on the part of the buyer and good faith on the part of the seller, goodwill should remain long after the transaction has been completed. Karl Marx called it capitalism, but the true term is economic freedom, the freedom to buy, to sell, to own, and to lease or rent without government interference.

We have only to read the news about Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union to know that Marxist socialism has failed. There was a system that tried to improve on freedom by rigging the system so that everyone would have economic equality. This scheme didn't work, and in the end, the Soviet people rebelled against those who had imposed an artificial and unworkable system on them through armed force.

Institutionalized Welfare. In this country, we don't try to achieve absolute economic equality, but we have institutionalized a welfare system that is based on ideas about equality. Our government has said that there shouldn't be any poor people in our society. To combat the problem of poverty, our government gives payments to those who are poor.

Consider the motion picture, *Field of Dreams*. The voice in the cornfield said, "If you build it, he will come." So the protagonist built a baseball field in Iowa, and the ghost of his baseball-player father did come. Another voice could say, "If you pay them, they will be poor." As long as we reward people to stay in poverty, they will, indeed, show up to collect the money and stay on the welfare rolls.

To use another illustration, if you were to sit down on a park bench in Washington, D.C., with a fifty-pound sack of grain and start feeding the pigeons, eventually you would have just about every pigeon in D.C. at your feet.

The truth is, we as a society cannot provide instructions to every citizen in poverty about how to become economically viable. But we can be sure that as long as we provide subsidies for staying poor, the poor will always be with us. It will become necessary for the poor to be weaned away from their monthly checks if we ever are to deal with the problem of poverty.

By the same token, some say there is a "Field of Dreams" syndrome at work with the homeless. We have built shelters and established kitchens, and they have come. Many were living with relatives, perhaps on the sofa. But society created a place for them in the shelters, so they abandoned the sofa or were shoved out of their uncle's apartment, and now they are homeless. It is good to help people, because anyone might need temporary help at one time or other. But help that is permanent is injurious to the spirit. It creates dependency and robs the individual of his or her ability to cope independently.

One of the problems with the free market is that it doesn't have a doctrine of altruism. But, of course, the free market was not created for altruistic purposes. It sprang up and evolved as a way to provide goods and services to society, not to provide assistance or redistribute income.

Investing in Individuals. To the African-American people, the question of how to inspire our poor brothers and sisters to success is very important. Solidarity is very strong in the African-American community, and there has always been a debate about the way for all our people to achieve success. I believe that a way should be found within the context of the free market to enable and empower people, including African-Americans, to achieve success. We have plenty of companies that provide goods and services and invest in plants and equipment; what we need are companies that will invest in individual human beings.

If we had human resource development companies, a person could obtain funds for education, training, or a small business loan and repay the company through the proceeds of increased earnings. A company could deal with a client throughout the client's working career, so that the client could advance with changing technology. Because technology is changing, the time is coming when workers will have to change specialties three or four times during their working lives.

Human resource development companies could provide a wide range of services to clients, all of which the clients could repay on a deferred basis. The economy would benefit from better trained, better educated workers. In some cases, the result would be a business loan so that an individual might open a small shop or start some other kind of small enterprise.

Self-help is important, but also some outside help usually is needed to make the act of self-improvement a success. Our free market system needs a greater social sense in order to be fully human. We need to learn to help others in an institutionalized way so that there is dignity on the part of both the service provider and the client.

African-Americans who are poor would benefit from human resource development companies, but so would all poor Americans. If such companies were established, we could begin to move away from the welfare system and toward a system in which each able individual is expected and empowered to work and to succeed. Since slavery, millions of African-Americans have been assimilated into the mainstream of the nation's economy, having adopted a value system compatible with the free market.

In the area of retail business, African-Americans sometimes have hurt themselves by preferring to do business with people of other races. It's strange that a black man can open a store in a black neighborhood and go broke, whereas a Korean or Jewish merchant on the same block will succeed. Something in the African-American heritage causes our people to distrust those of our

own race who go into business. This is a phenomenon that must change if our people are to succeed as entrepreneurs.

However, a people are defined by their idiosyncrasies as well as by their aspirations for success. My people have their particular and sometimes peculiar ideas, but we are also deeply spiritual, and it is always hard to reconcile the spiritual with the material. In some ways, we bring the spiritual to the marketplace, just as we bring our spirit to the arts, entertainment, sports, and fashions.

Some of us have come a long way in a relatively short time, historically speaking. Others of us have a long way to go and have not started the journey yet. Meanwhile, there can be no safe generalizations about how African-Americans are competing in the free market. We are rich, we are middle class, and we are poor. But despite problems unique to our people, we are like anyone else. We know joy and sorrow, happiness and pain, hope, and despair. We are your brothers and sisters, and whether you realize it or not, you share in our struggle.

May the day come when all who aspire and work hard will succeed, and it can no longer be said, "The poor will always be with you."

