

Today's Conservative Movement: Historical Perspectives and Current Dialogue From the African-American Community

**Dr. Gloria E. A. Tooté
and
Phyllis Berry Meyers**

Dr. Gloria E. A. Tooté: I have been an advisor to four presidents, including George Bush. I seconded the nomination of Ronald Reagan in 1976. I served as an uncommitted delegate to the Republican National Convention that year from New York State. For those African-Americans who refer to themselves as being conservatives, I would like to remind them that I am considered one of the oldest of the new breed of conservatives.

O, let America be America again
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—
The land where every man is free.

The land that's mine—
The poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, Me
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

We the people must redeem our land, the mines, the plants, the
rivers, the mountains, and the endless plains—
And all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again.

Those were the eloquent words of the late poet laureate Langston Hughes, an African-American. They are ideas of individualism and liberty. These are words that I, as a conservative, can identify with: respect for the accumulative wisdom of human traditions; regard for the ordinary realities of human life; distrust of optimism based upon good intentions. These are the tenets of conservative Republicans.

Dr. Gloria E. A. Tooté is a New York attorney and former vice chairman of the U.S. Office of Private Sector Initiatives during the Reagan Administration.

Phyllis Berry Meyers is Executive Producer of the TV series "A Second Look Live," sponsored by the Free Congress Foundation.

This panel took place at The Heritage Foundation on February 18, 1992, as part of a lecture series observing Black History Month.

ISSN 0272-1155. ©1992 by The Heritage Foundation.

In 1964 America's racial crisis was regional [southern]. In 1992 racial violence is erupting all over the country, but with greater frequency in northern cities.

Today's problem is that the genuine progress of the past thirty years is at an impasse, and deteriorating rapidly. Affirmative action, as some would enforce it, and busing create an imbalance of fairness, and fails to remedy the anguish of past tragedies, or the legacy of 300 years of slavery and discrimination.

The Kerner Commission report in 1968 said that our nation was moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal. It is now 1992 and indeed this was a self-fulfilling prophecy. I wonder if they suspected that in 1992 a half a million Americans, including mothers with children, would spend the night in a homeless shelter, or on the streets; and that one-third of them would be seriously mentally ill; or that the *Washington Post* (in an editorial on January 17, 1992) would report that “fully three-quarters of the 10th graders in Washington, D.C. have had sexual intercourse.”

African-Americans are not so unenlightened that we can not recognize the past failure of government to correct our nation's social and economic ills; nor the fact (as reported in *Time Magazine*, April 9, 1990), that “in the 21st century... racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. will outnumber whites for the first time.” And that the “browning of America will alter everything in society, from politics and education to industry, values and culture.”

Even though the Republican party has not in recent years courted the African-American vote, young educated African-Americans are registering as Republicans. Our heritage and culture attracts us to a party that speaks of entrepreneurship and self-development.

The African-American community has suffered from the policy of benign neglect, designed by Democrat Senator Patrick Moynihan. We have seen the cruelty of a Congress that allowed drugs to permeate black communities in the belief that it was an instance of self-degradation that would not happen elsewhere. A Democrat-controlled Congress allowed our nation's educational system to provide inadequate educations to black children while rationalizing that the problems of illiteracy was peculiar to being black. Now these cancers have spread throughout America and endanger our nation's productivity and economic vitality.

Winston Churchill believed that a person acquired conservative principles through the passage of time. I agree. I am also mindful that the Republican party was founded as a means of political empowerment for the newly emancipated enslaved black; and that African-Americans identified as Republicans until the New Deal era of Franklin Roosevelt.

The love of God, self-respect, integrity of work, self-reliance, the thirst for an education, and the freedom to live unshackled by government rules and regulations that impede the acquisition of wealth and a better quality of life, are principles respected in the African-American community. We want economic empowerment.

How I wish the Union Army colonel could have fulfilled his pledge of 40 acres and a mule to equal the playing field for my ancestors who were brought to these shores without wealth and worked without pay. What a difference it would have made.

But the unfettered chance to achieve need no longer be a myth for African-Americans if the Republican party and Republican conservatives will galvanize their energy to make our country a nation that can offer employment for all, a nation where all are educated, a society in which all persons care about each other and all citizens are an integral part of the economic flow of America.

African-Americans are tired of being the victims and forewarners of social dislocations and failed government policies. They are ready to become a swing vote in America to assure that their concerns are met. By now the Republican party must realize that this is a vote that can no longer be dismissed.

Republican Presidents have demonstrated that we know how to keep inflation down, how to create jobs, and how to privatize the wealth of government into the hands of many. Yet we will continue to falter in our quest for the best for America as long as we lack control of the United States Congress. Without more elected Republicans in Congress or a line-item veto—which a Democrat-controlled Congress will never grant—Republican Presidents will remain underachievers.

And so as life would have it, we come full circle from the founding of this great party to afford political leverage to the freed black to now. We can welcome and encourage African-Americans to register as Republicans, and embrace our ideals of governance, and forge a partnership for national economic growth and stability. We can include within our ranks a segment of America that has always shared our party's value of God, home, and caring.

The option belongs to the Republican party. I hope we choose the right priority.



Phyllis Berry Myers: I do not profess to be old enough (or wise enough) to give you an “historical” perspective on much of anything. However, I do wish to talk about what political thought has been in the black community; where I hope it will be headed in the future and to show that there has been a long tradition in the black community of those values that conservatives today call their own.

To understand, a little, the emergence of today's black political thought, it is important to look at three things: (1) our legal/political system, (2) our economic system; and (3) our cultural/value system.

First, long ago, our political leaders determined it was of paramount importance that we, as Black Americans, emphasize the need for us to be “legal” Americans.

It is not difficult to understand why that was so: the U.S Constitution, originally, did not consider us legal Americans. We were non-persons. We were property. We were slaves, but we were not “legal” Americans. Therefore, we did not have any of the benefits, rights, etc. of legal American citizens. The struggle for us to become legal Americans culminated in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

But do not be misled to believe that all black Americans felt that it was imperative that we concentrate solely on our legal, political rights. There were those who felt our most assured avenue to full citizenship and independence was for our community to become economically viable and independent.

Slavery certainly was not a wealth creating endeavor (for us anyway!). Sharecropping was a not a wealth creation endeavor for us. Segregation was not a wealth creating endeavor for us. Yet, even in those difficult days, there was an understanding of the need to economically empower our race. And there were strong voices who spoke out on that subject. They would probably be called the “economic conservatives” of their day!

The third point that must be made is that our heritage is one that has long valued families—ours having been ripped apart by slavery; valued education—so long denied us; and had a healthy respect for hard work, especially from those who knew what hard work in sunbaked fields was really like.

Religion has long played an important part in our lives. And, we have been proud patriots having fought in every American war—answering America's call to fight for freedom abroad even when we did not know it at home.

Briefly, that is our past. You would probably label it one typifying what you call "socially conservative."

And what of our future, and what role do conservatives have in helping us shape that future?

As black Americans, we must:

- ◆ **Move beyond merely a civil rights agenda.** Does that mean our civil rights struggles are over and all battles are won? Of course not. But are we now "legal" Americans with all the rights and responsibilities that that entails? Emphatically, yes! It is angering and annoying that every time we, as conservatives, try to bring up discussion of where we need to move beyond merely a civil rights agenda, we get accused of wanting to "turn back the clock." What black American wants such a thing? Not this one.
- ◆ **Advocate those policies that will make us economically strong so that we can better take care of our own, build our businesses, educate our young, heal our sick.** Does that mean the government has no role in assisting us in this endeavor? Of course the government has a role. It had a role in exacerbating the problems in our community. It has a responsibility in helping us solve the problems of our community. The question is what role? For there are some things that we must define and solve for ourselves, by ourselves.
- ◆ **Reaffirm and rededicate ourselves to those traditional values inherent of our heritage that has served us well in the past in order to ensure our future.** What are those values? A belief in God and country; a belief that human life is sacred; a commitment to strong families and communities; respect for excellence in education and a belief that hard work and sound preparation prepares an individual for success and economic independence.

What can conservatives do to assist us in our efforts?

It seems to me that conservatives today need to join with us in remaining vigilant so that our legal rights remain secure. We now have the right to vote; we now have the right to live where we choose; we now have the right to employment opportunities. You must join with us in vigorously enforcing the law when those rights are threatened.

You can help us stress for the future, what we have learned from our past, that freed black men could earn a living; they had jobs. They made their living in some way—entrepreneurial enterprises budded and sprouted throughout our communities. They believed in hard work. They believed in families and extended families. Religion played an important part in their lives. They were proud citizens. They fought for America in every war. Those are the things you—and we—as conservatives say we believe in and the principles we say we stand for.

So, we need your brains to think with us as we develop a new governing consensus and the policies that such a consensus demands. We need your moral outrage and commitment to battle the debilitating plagues of ignorance, poverty, and crime in our urban centers. We need your troops to turn welfare into workfare; economic stagnation into enterprise zones and economic empowerment; poor educational opportunities into education reform and education choice. You cannot do this for us, but you can work with us.

Most often, when black Americans hear the word "conservative," they shy away from the label; because they think conservatism equals racism; that conservatives do not have anything in common with us; that you do not share or understand our American desires and aspirations; and therefore, most black Americans cannot get beyond the "conservative" label.

Despite all that, “conservative” is a good label to keep, perhaps, if it serves as a line of demarcation as to where we are, as opposed to where other folks might be. That is valid.

But, I think, that before we can start telling black folks that they are conservative in essence—although I believe strongly that a majority of us are—and, before they will believe and hear us—we have to speak to them in a way they can relate to. We must talk about the things that are important to them. Their families are important to them. Reclaiming their communities from the terrorists that kill them with guns and deal drugs that is important to them. Being able to have schools that educate their children well and safely; that is important to them. Having a decent job and lower taxes; that is important to them. These are issues that conservatives have staked out as their issues, too. I firmly believe it is only a matter of time before black America hears your message—our message—and says, “Yes, those ARE our beliefs, too.”

I am grateful in some ways—if I can say that I am grateful for anything that happened to Clarence Thomas during the confirmation hearings—that many, many black Americans say they *have* heard our message, want to hear more of what we have to say, and say we speak for and to them. But what an awesome sacrifice made just to be heard! And, if those days are any measure of the price that all we who call ourselves conservative must pay in order to make our voices heard, then so be it. We will pay the price because it is the price of FREEDOM. It is the price for our FUTURE. And, we need your voices to help amplify and to shout our freedom message from the rooftops for all to hear.

As I look back on our past, and ponder our future, I am optimistic. Some accuse me of being born optimistic—and it’s probably true—but the principles we espouse, I fervently believe, offer guidance, offer hope, offer deliverance for the black community—and America—as we enter the 21st century. Who dares not to be optimistic?

