

The Role of Black Conservative Leaders in the 1990s

By Representative Gary Franks

The black conservative philosophy and its leaders have quite a job ahead of them as domestic discussion and action head toward the issue of empowerment and responsibility.

I read the other day that "black conservatism" is an oxymoron, and judging by our numbers, one could actually believe it. But black conservatism has a base in the American political landscape, and I believe there have been many misrepresentations of how blacks respond to the conservative message. If our numbers are small in high profile positions, our opinions are more widely held than most pundits would have their readers believe.

On the key issues that are most important to black and white families, conservative arguments get a favorable hearing. When you ask black people if they should be allowed to have God in their lives, all would respond, "Yes." So a moment of silence in our schools is not some hideous, off-base ritual. No one seeks to impose his religion or other beliefs on others. Because religion is a staple of black America, holding together the family and community, providing strength and giving it initiative, this conservative message will be heard.

And what of our country, our duty to protect it and its most treasured symbols? If you would go up to a black person or family and ask: "Should we allow the flag to be desecrated, to be burned or be walked upon? Is that something you get angry about?" An overwhelming majority would say: "Yes, that is not right. There are some symbols that are worth preserving and protecting."

And what of serving our country? There has been a lot of discussion in this city and country about the racial makeup of our armed services. Some of the same people who fought to end the draft and instead have a volunteer army now want to bring back the draft and socially engineer our military. Well, we go up to our black person or family and say: "You have a choice available to you, to have a career where you are judged by your ability, where there is discipline and advancement and a safe retirement. But this career has its risks, yet it's your decision. Are you interested?" Many have said: "Yes, it is an honor and an opportunity to serve in the military." Our military is one of choice, and as someone who has four relatives in the military, I can tell you they are proud of their work and country.

Model of Racial Harmony. Many of our men and women who happen to be black have made a choice and are defending their country with great courage and intelligence. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is black, and black officers are leading men and women into combat. Is that so bad? It was not too long ago that blacks had to fight, just to fight. There was a time when the only place in which blacks could serve was a mess hall. And even when they were allowed to enlist, they were segregated and not recognized. So now the military has changed; it is a model of racial harmony and it is a choice offered by the government to its people. This talk about how blacks who freely chose to join the military now do not belong there is insulting, and destroys the morale of all our military.

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Now, are there reasons why the numbers of black enlistees are higher than the overall makeup of our country? Sure! When those men and women do return, whatever their color, they deserve the same consideration that all veterans enjoy. And government should offer more choices to blacks, and that occurs with empowerment. We have to approach old problems with new, result-oriented programs and solutions. Choices have to be tied to an improved economy as well as to an improved social order. These should be the building blocks for advancement. Black conservatives have to work harder to make their case, but when successful, they serve as a bridge to the many people who I believe are looking for new ways to get ahead or stay afloat.

Starting With Families. And we have to start with our families. Talk of role models sounds old and tired, but it strikes at the heart of the problem. Many white students know what a certified accountant or an investment banker does and wish to enter those professions. Unfortunately, many black children do not have that type of goal in mind. When I was a younger man, those who took business courses were presumed to be looking to be secretaries, not bankers or insurance executives. We can make missiles that can fly down an alleyway and hit their targets. But many blacks lack the goals to strive for jobs which catapult them to a better life. Instead, they see the easy money of the street or overblown salaries of rock stars and athletes, which only a few receive.

We offer more programs and disciplines than before, yet when one goes to fast food restaurants, one sees cash registers whose punching keys are coded to products, rather than to dollars and cents. Even recognition of numbers is not needed.

In short, we have to get our families, students, and teachers working for the same goals. Only when a family or individual begins to believe and see they can make it will we break the cycle of dependence and begin to turn the corner. But what do we have now in many schools? We have violence in the school yards and classrooms. We have low scores, high dropout rates, and few role models. The traditional political course of more money, more task forces, and more studies will only perpetuate more endless poverty.

Black conservatives have to get involved and argue that a new approach is due, including support of private business and its efforts to improve the quality of schools. Government has been left behind in many respects. Corporations are frightened at the level of product that is coming into the work place. While many large businesses have sufficient resources for special training, small to medium-sized businesses have tighter budgets. And, unlike the fast food chains that changed their cash registers, corporations are now working with schools to better prepare students for the real world.

Government must encourage more companies to participate, particularly in the inner urban areas, large and small. This will enable us to break up the monopoly of our present school systems, now held by many forces who cannot see the trees for the forest.

Importance of Choices. But this all gets back to giving choices to individuals. And when the supply is open to all, there are incentives and the product is delivered on time and in good working order. In Minnesota and East Harlem, New York, there have been success stories in education through empowerment choices. Black conservatives can supplement this effort, and it should be the duty of black conservatives to bridge the gap of mistrust that does exist. But the bottom line is that if you pose these questions on choices for a secure education, most blacks, if not all, will say: "I agree. Something must be done."

It is up to conservatives to offer guidance and leadership. Conservatives have to show through actions that our philosophy is based on fairness. One rewards risk taking and initiative and allows those with little to use it to better their lot in life.

Small businesses are the backbone of our economy, and quite frankly, will work to have government take a more constructive approach to improving the economic climate for medium to small companies. Small businesses can benefit from a successful empowerment program. If we strengthen the ability of business to find qualified candidates, then efficiency, new products, and expansion will result.

And the number of businesses will grow, too. By building from small units of enterprise, our ability to be productive will rise and with it, the standard of living.

Attaining the Goal. Blacks and whites will see that when they are not limited to one frame of reference, a successful life is available through discipline, ambition, and the courage to take chances. All of us must work for a truly color-blind society, and conservatives can help attain that goal with a more aggressive campaign to convince black Americans that their lives can work if they are presented with opportunity and choices.

