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For Black Leaders:

A Study of West African and
African-American Leadership

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Richmond, Virginia

May, 1998
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Dr. Ciulla
April 13, 1998
Introduction

Ninety-two years ago, W.E.B. DuBois wrote, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the Color Line.” This line is not just one experienced by blacks or merely a problem for the United States, but, rather, a problem the entire world faces. Many events in this century have supported his statement. However, I feel that the problem for Black America is the lack of intellectual and spiritual leadership within our community. The only solution for the problem of the “Color Line” is to critically analyze its origins. This includes a closer analysis of world history and the history of oppression in this nation. The next step is then to reconsider our values and notions of leadership with the intent of constructing a more inclusive world society.

For this reason, it is imperative that the African-American leader of today knows from whence racism derived and has the skills and education necessary to combat it. One of the major premises of racism against blacks is the believed inferiority of the members of this group. As a people, African-Americans have in many ways subscribed to this view by aspiring to physically look like Euro-Americans, to speak and dress as they do, and even to worship in Eurocentric ways. We tend to view Africa, our mother continent, as a place of savages and lesser peoples. The acceptance of this worldview has led to self-hatred within the black population and also the general miseducation of blacks and whites alike about all things African.

Re-educating the masses is the job of the intellectuals. Those who are learned in particular fields have a responsibility to the rest of society to disseminate their knowledge through our communities. Every major intellectual revolution began in this manner.
Likewise, this has been the case in the United States within the black community. Artists had a message to send to the United States during the Harlem Renaissance. Intellectuals had information to teach during the Black Consciousness Movement. But where are our black intellectuals today? Who will teach black children that evidence of African traditions and contributions is present all around us, in every nation in the world?

There has been a decline in African-American intellectuals since the Civil Rights Movement. It is as if we have become complacent because we are no longer being physically brutalized on a regular basis when it is clear that mental brutality still remains. This brutality is evident in the urban culture of America in which black youth learn that their lives are of no value and hence devalue other human life as well. This is also evident in the image of Eurocentric beauty in which the person of African descent does no fit.

It is the responsibility of every citizen of the United States and the world to personally commit to finding, believing and acting upon the truth about American history and the history of the entire world. For this reason, I have decided to study the leadership styles of the ancestors of African-Americans; they include West African styles of leadership and American slave styles of leadership. I will conclude with prescriptions for the contemporary American leader by contemporary American intellectuals. The accounts of historians and anthropologists have provided most of the information from the precolonial period. Slave narratives and historical accounts were used to assess leadership among American slaves. Also, the writings of contemporary intellectuals were the stimuli for my treatment of American leadership today. Because my project is constructed to be a guide for black leaders, I must begin in the beginning. African-
Americans can only lead members of their community if they use models designed to inspire and guide people of African descent. Equally important is recognizing the wisdom and perseverance of our ancestors to improve the image we have of our community and ourselves. People will never be capable of loving one another as neighbors until the accomplishments and contributions of every group are recognized and praised.

I will focus specifically on the accomplishments of Africans and people of African descent because they are my particular group (well, one of my groups since I am a cultural hybrid) and their contributions to mankind have been significantly understated. My identity is very much dependant on the way in which I view black people in the past and present. One cannot feel good about personal accomplishments if one does not feel good about those who made those accomplishments possible. For this reason, it is my duty as an African-American to aid in the resurgence of black intellectual and spiritual leadership in order to insure that my children are able to “say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud.”

Part 1: Leadership in Precolonial Africa and Europe

In order to trace the accomplishments of those of African descent, one must look first at West Africa and the ways of her people before European intrusion. However, most things in the world today are defined as they contrast or compare to Western ways. For this reason, this study will begin with a contrast of those things African and those things European before the colonial period. The intent is to identify the West African model of leadership and contrast that to the European model.

**African Spirits**

The climate and terrain of the area in which a people begin has a significant effect on the people themselves. Not only will the body adapt to accommodate its surroundings, but the mind will also adapt to make sense of them. The historical differences between Africans and Europeans are very good examples of this.

Africa, an enormous continent with various climates and conditions, millions of plant and animal species as well as thousands of different ethnic groups, has been titled the richest continent on the planet. Among its natural resources are precious stones and metals, vegetation and livestock, oil and minerals. Living in a land crowned by the sun, warm and nurturing, adorned in light, led to the physical attributes of the African and her descendents. Yet even more interesting though, is the worldview that prevailed due to these circumstances. Mitchell states in Black Belief that, "... the longer human history in Africa, together with a climate less hostile than that in Europe and parts of Asia, would provide a quite understandable basis for the deeply ingrained positive African world view."
Most Africans worked the land during the pre-colonial period. In fact, the farmers held a social status similar to that of nobles in many societies.\textsuperscript{2} Because of the plentitude with which the land produced vegetation, it was viewed as sacred to Africans. The land gave them all they needed. For this reason, they revered the land and praised it. It was viewed as the mother, giver of life. The land itself was alive. It had a spirit just as they did, in fact even greater than they, and a pulse that they could feel. So as a people, they began to try to evoke the spirit of the land and respond to it with the drum. The drum was seen as the liaison between the spirit and the people. It was used in various ceremonies and rituals.

These rituals were an integral part of the lives of Africans because it was only in this context that they could feel a personal connection with the spirit. This spirit was everywhere and everything. This belief in an ever-present spirit is the basis for the African emphasis on harmony, man with nature. If the spirit is what sustains you and the spirit is everything, then mankind must respect all things natural because they are directly responsible for the life within man. For example Diop states, "Earth is a divinity: it would be sacrilege actually to appropriate any part of it. It only lends itself to our agricultural activity in order to make human life possible."\textsuperscript{3}

The idea of harmony with nature came also from the belief that the spirit in nature is within humans. This makes us one with all things in the universe. The connection between humans and nature and the faith that one’s needs will always be accommodated add to the African disposition and notion of freedom. Throughout history, Africans and those of African descent have always emphasized freedom, even before it was stripped away. The spirit within man and nature knows no boundaries. Only in the spirit world
could humans truly be free for the spirit or soul could manifest itself in anything. This emphasis on freedom is evidenced through the movements of the body during African dance. The music, too, resonates of aspirations of total spiritual emancipation. Freedom is attained through true harmony with the rest of the universe. The members of one's community are thereby included in this universe.

Along with the notion of spiritual freedom, the Africans also valued mental freedom. It was believed that the answers to questions could be found in any place or at anytime. There was no need to place mental restraints on one's actions or existence. Allowing the spirit to move you included deterring the mind from interfering with this sacred communion. Consequently, Africans saw no need to make restrictive rules about interaction, praise, or communal activities. Spontaneity was encouraged and treasured. Making mental decisions about activities of the soul or interactions with the community would only restrict the spirit from totally dominating the consciousness, and this was the ultimate goal. Trying to control everything with one's mind left no room for the spirit to lead one to freedom.

This is not to say that the community did not make important decisions about survival and goals, but one individual certainly did not make those decisions. It is believed that the spirit is among you when the community comes together. This belief is the main reason that the entire community partook in the grandiose event of evoking the spirit. Individuals would allow the spirit to become a part of their consciousness in order to communicate with the people in the community.

The importance of the drum then becomes clear. It beat out the pulse of the spirit in order to invite it to work within members of the community. In essence, the drum
invited the spirit of the land (or sea or other life-giving entities) to inspire the community through one or many individuals. This is one of the many traditions that are a part of the African diaspora today. The drum is essential in Haiti, various countries in South America and the Caribbean. Murphy states, “In vodou the drums provide . . . the “pulse” for the personality of the spirit. The complex rhythms of the drum fine-tune the pulse to a variety of spiritual energies shared by the community as they move in time with its beats.” Similarly, in Candomble and Santeria, religions of the diaspora in South America, the drums call the spirit.  

The number of spirits evoked varied among the different ethnic groups. This was dependent on their surroundings or place in the continent. However, the constant factor among all African religions and those of the African diaspora is that they all feature a Supreme Being who is praised and honored above anything or anyone else. This entity ensured that each individual in the community would be well taken care of in exchange for the service of the community members to each other. In order to please their Creator, members of the community had to work together and serve one another. The Creator would only continue to bless them if they, in turn, loved one another.  

This identification with nature was certainly displayed within the ideas of leadership. West Africans believed in birth right because nature would decide who should be a noble and who should be an artisan. This consistent belief system made for stable communities, free from insurrection. However, it also dictated much of communal life and left no room for human questions. People were not allowed to question that which was thought to be prescribed by nature. In general, the precolonial West African style of leadership was very in tune with the environment and natural world. So much so
that nature dictated human relations and abilities. This will be treated more thoroughly in the section about the West African Caste System.

**European Minds**

Europeans got their start as a race in a much different setting. The climate of the sub-continent of Europe is much harsher than that of Africa. Thus, vegetation and livestock were scarce (when compared to their abundance in Africa). Likewise, so were other natural resources such as minerals, oil, metals and stones. The lack of warmth and light from the sun led to physical adaptations to the dark, cold environment. Similarly, as in the case of the Africans, Europeans also formed a worldview according to their natural surroundings, which were all they knew.

Europeans constantly fought against the elements to survive. Often times, people went hungry or did not live through cold seasons. This struggle led to an estrangement from the land and other natural surroundings. Here, we find the root of beliefs that have lasted until today. Such a feeling of estrangement led Europeans to feel as if they had to fight against nature. This fosters an inverse relationship between man and nature. As a result, Europeans felt they had to do whatever they could to survive. If one feels no connection to the land, one feels no guilt in exploiting it. Likewise, if one feels no connection to the African, one feels no guilt in exploiting him either. Everything other than the European became, in his view, a part of the natural world, hence his opposition. Mitchell states, “In Western view man, the enemy of all things in the natural world, seeks constantly to control and exploit both his environment and fellow human beings.”

The European outlook on the world differed greatly from that of the African. The constant battle, man against nature, led to a need to control or contain the environment.
Generally, Europeans distrusted the universe and therefore had to conquer it, which left everything open to be conquered: land, sea, animals, and other people. This “me against the world” attitude plays out in various aspects of Eurocentric beliefs. The notion of separation between individuals (individualism) finds its genesis here, so do materialism and thus, capitalism.

The results of this view of the universe led to the Western need to contain all things. “Everything has its place,” they thought. This is perhaps the reason for the scientific need to categorize all plants and animals in existence (including people). Each object, natural or man-made, had its specific title and purpose.

The need to contain manifested itself in other aspects of Western life as well. Other races often perceived whites as having the need to contain themselves. The emphasis on mental control over the environment led to the view that the mind should control all things natural. Obviously, this would include physical and emotional inclinations. Nature is seen as bad, so it would need to be controlled by the human in order for the race to survive. The city-state of Greco-Roman societies is a prime example of this need for containment.

The City-State

Each city-state was a separate and sovereign entity. The union of two cities was inconceivable for centuries because each city had its own religion upon which the societal norms were based. Festivals and calendars all stemmed from the religious beliefs of the city-state. The currency of the city had the observed religious symbol on it. Marriage between cities was strictly forbidden due to religious, hence cultural, differences. Even the conquerors of a city did not settle there. The resources that were
Equals and Inferiors of Sparta and the Patricians and Plebians of Rome. For this reason, the lowerclass were the individuals who always challenged the status quo. They did not fear the priest-king's threats of death for innovation, because they had nothing to loose.  

The later attempt at democracy proved itself to be a system designed for the elites. The needs of the lowerclass were still not being met, so they began to sell their votes to tyrants who promised to redistribute the wealth from the rich to the poor (usually by theft or seizure). At this point in history, everyone had noticed that there were serious flaws in the system, but most still did not challenge the status quo. 

It was at this point that the Sophists, a number of travelling teachers arose to fulfill the increasing need for higher education. They taught public speaking, which was a powerful weapon because all of the important decisions were made by the assemblies of citizens or in the courts with very large juries. Many philosophers also emerged, not to be confused with the Sophists, who also questioned established values. Socrates was, of course, among this group. He disclaimed that he taught anything, unlike the Sophists; his conversations were aimed at discovering the truth about life and human nature. Philosophers like Zeno and Anazagoras were also a part of this group of philosophers to challenge the status quo. 

Socrates felt he was on a moral and intellectual pursuit. He believed that men do wrong because they do not know any better. Socrates sought to become the type of person who is incapable of acting immorally by making morality inherent in the spirit of the educated man. Zeno believed in a God of the universe and thought the whole human race should become one state. This was the first time the idea of breaking the
division of the cities was introduced. It was at this point in history that Europe began to emerge out of its dark ages and into enlightenment.\textsuperscript{17}

**The Contribution of Egypt to European Development**

It was at this moment in history that the West began to incorporate that which it had learned from its neighbor in the so-called “dark continent”, Egypt. Without a doubt, the ideas of the Sophists and early European philosophers derived from Egypt. One thousand years before the Sophists emerged, during the time of Amenophis IV, the Egyptians had conceived of one God being responsible for all of creation. The religion of Isis and Osiris brought to man a formal promise of immortality. These ideas obviously spread to Europe and materialized themselves in various theories and religions including, but by no means limited to, Christianity. Diop quotes Grenier in stating, “Egypt is the country from which contemplative devotion penetrated into Europe.”\textsuperscript{18}

**The Question of Egypt**

Many people argue over the question of Egyptian contributions to the advancement of the entire world. Black scholars argue that Egypt is a part of Africa, hence Egyptians were, and still are, Africans. However, Egypt has been portrayed and labeled by Western culture as separate from Africa; Ancient Egyptians could not have been black Africans (as if one can separate black from Africa). This view is evidenced in Elizabeth Taylor’s and other Euro-American women’s portrayal of Cleopatra in the media. Some blacks attribute that to the European need to make everything of value white. Yet others attribute this view to a misconception of history.

However, for the intents and purposes of this paper, the issue will be addressed now, rather than later. Egypt is certainly a part of the African continent. It is, however,
much closer to the continent of Eurasia than most of the rest of Africa. For this reason, many either feel that Egypt was influenced by Eurasia or physically integrated by Europeans and Asians. The latter is very true, however, exchange in large numbers did not occur until later in history. Ancient Egyptians were just as African as other Africans from different ethnic groups. This is evidenced by the similarities between Egypt and other parts of Africa. The Asante and Yoruba kingdoms greatly resemble that of Egypt. The ideas and values of the Ancient Egyptian people are generally in line with those of the rest of Africa. Additionally, and this is the most important point, Ancient Egyptians were merely migrated Ethiopians, and there has never been a question about the “Africanness” of Ethiopians. W.E.B. DuBois quotes Diodorus Siculus as saying,

“The Ethiopians conceive themselves to be of greater antiquity than any other nation; and it is probable that, born under the sun’s path, its warmth may have ripened them earlier than other men. They suppose themselves also to be the inventors of divine worship, of festivals, of solemn assemblies, of sacrifices, and every religious practice. They affirm that the Egyptians are one of their colonies.”

North and West African states have always had many aspects in common. These include religious beliefs because they share the same fertile soil. Another common aspect would be political and social systems. There were, however, surface differences between the social structures of North and West Africa. The basic values and ideas were constant though. This should be considered when reading the next section discussing the caste system in West Africa. The details may differ from that of the north, specifically Egypt, yet the basic similarities are noteworthy.

**West African Caste System**

In West Africa, the social systems differed greatly from those in Europe prior to African influence. Caste systems arose in West Africa from a division of labor under an
advanced monarchy. However, division of labor may have evolved out of clanic organization in which all the members of one totemic clan practiced the same trade.\textsuperscript{20} For this reason, the basis of the relationship between the caste levels in West Africa differed significantly from that of Europe. Senegal is a particularly good area to represent the prevalent notions of caste within West Africa. The caste levels are as follows:

- slaves—djam
- freemen—gor
  - nobles; no manual labor except farming—ger
  - artisans; shoemakers, etc.—neno
- poor peasants—ba-dolo

The nobles, or ger, held the responsibility of providing for the lower castes. This included housing or feeding someone of a lower caste if that person requested aid. Otherwise the nobility would be disgraced.\textsuperscript{21} This contrasts with Europe where the lower caste citizens were obliged to give of their possessions to the nobility.

Consequently, the members of lower castes in West Africa were not as disgruntled as those in Europe. Diop states, “The general abundance of economic resources and the extraordinary, legendary wealth of the continent in fact foreclosed the birth and growth of any revolutionary spirit in African consciousness.”\textsuperscript{22} Similarly, the members of lower castes would not enter into conjugal relations with members of the higher castes because they sought not to change their position in society. As caste level increased, so did responsibility to the community at large. For this reason, the caste system in West Africa was pretty safe from insurrections.\textsuperscript{23}

Exploitation did exist within this caste system though. Members of a certain caste would exploit other members of their castes if they could. For example, the prince would
exploit the farmers because they were in his caste. He would not exploit those in a lower caste though, because it was thought dishonorable to exploit those beneath you who have not the means to defend themselves. This led to alliances between the nobles (which included the farmers) and members of lower castes.\(^{24}\)

This caste system did require that the prince be accountable to all other nobles though. Artisans and nobles could go straight to the prince to complain about problems in the community. On the other hand, this system did not allow the king to ennoble anyone into the nobility, not even an artisan. It was believed that people were born into their positions in society. One person could not change castes, or occupations, because their ancestors had not been in the different caste. Diop states, “It was the ancestors who concluded the initial contract with the spirit who had originally taught it [the trade] to humanity.”\(^{25}\) What one’s ancestors learned was passed on, hence a shoemaker, or artisan, would not have the ancestral knowledge of farming and could not become a farmer, or noble.\(^{26}\)

The system did allow members of lower castes, like slaves, to have leadership positions though. Every person had a specific role in communal life. There were no social activities or duties from which members of lower castes would be restricted. For example, the nobles formed the calvary in the army and the slaves, who were former prisoners of war, formed the infantry. Slaves of the king formed his forces and shared in the treasure after expeditions. Additionally, a slave could be a commander in the army over other slaves.

Everyone was bound by the caste system by religion and economics except for the slaves. The slaves were usually from a different community (as prisoners of war) and
were not forced to adhere to the new community’s idea of caste. Additionally, the Africans never created religious significance for subjugating the slaves. The social status of their master carried over to them. If their master was a member of the nobility, then so were they.

In light of this, the slaves had a unique position in society. They were usually prisoners of war or the nephews of noble prisoners of war. In the latter case, a member of the nobility could give his nephews or servants in his stead if he were captured as a prisoner of war in exchange for his safe return to his community. Slaves, in this way, were a means by which to barter. They could be sold on open market or the leaders of a community could assign them to a particular family that had lost a child or other family member.

There were two types of slaves in these communities, the slaves of the mother and the slaves of the father. Slaves of the mother were slaves that were bought in an open market by women and given as gifts of inheritance. Children felt much closer to the slaves of their mothers than those of their father because of the matrilineal, polygamous society. In a polygamous society, one’s immediate family includes one’s mother and maternal siblings. Paternal siblings could reach high numbers so the attempt at closeness was much more difficult. The slaves of the mother became integral parts of society and were respected in a domestic capacity.

The slaves of the father, on the other hand, became the scapegoat of society. Because individuals did not feel close to their fathers, they did not feel close to their father’s slaves. Hence, no one in society protected these slaves from maltreatment. Unlike other members of society, these slaves had reason to revolt. However, the village
structure and disbursement of the West African populations would not have allowed them to band together.

There are other distinct differences between the European and West African caste system. For one thing, Africans never forbade the possession of goods. Caste was determined by religious beliefs only. Contrastly, some members of European caste systems were forbidden to possess certain items. In an attempt to balance the scales in West Africa, the lower caste was allowed to retain all of their belongings and ask the nobility for additional things if they needed them.28

However, the examples of early leadership in Africa and Europe do show similarities between the two groups. It is obvious that there was some sort of exchange at least between Europe and the northern parts of Africa. The differences between the two groups can all be attributed to the difference in their environments. It is clear that basic human nature is the same though.

3 Diop, p. 11.
5 Mitchell, p. 22.
6 Murphy, pp. 179-184.
7 Murphy, p. 195.
8 Murphy, p. 7.
9 Mitchell, p. 25.
10 Diop, pp. 21-23.
12 Diop, pp. 18-20.
13 Diop, pp. 30-31.
15 Diop, pp. 30-31.
16 Plato, pp. 3-4.
17 Diop, pp. 30-31.
18 Diop, pp. 32.
19 Mitchell, p. 25.
20 Diop, p. 6-7.
21 Diop, p. 2.
22 Diop, p. 6.
23 Diop, pp. 1-2.
24 Diop, pp. 5-6.
25 Diop, pp. 8-9.
26 Diop, p. 4.
27 Diop, p. 3.
28 Diop, pp. 10-11.
Part 2: Continued Leadership Through Slavery and Oppression

The first encounters Africans had with Europeans on a large scale began in the sixteenth century. There had been a small number of Europeans to visit Africa before this century, but there were not enough of them to significantly influence the African way of life. However, during this century, the Portuguese, among others, visited the continent, which led to many questions on the part of the natives as to how to perceive this new group of people.

As the numbers of Europeans in Africa increased, the natives began to look for explanations for the arrival of Europeans. Why had they come? What type of people were they? None of these questions were fully answered until long after slavery and colonialism had begun. Africans had no knowledge of the lack of natural resources in Europe. They also knew not that these people had developed a worldview that would allow them to exploit nature. These sentiments were alien to Africans, hence they could not have predicted them.

Because the African mind constantly searches for answers in many aspects of life, they began to compare and contrast Europeans with other people with whom they came into contact. These people looked like no one they knew, so the initial perceptions of European identity varied greatly among ethnic groups. Finally, the majority of Africans began to treat these visitors in the same manner in which they would treat members of other ethnic groups. The told the strangers which land they used for housing and farming, then suggested places where the missionaries could construct dwellings for
themselves. Out of curiosity, the Africans watched the European missionaries and others build their dwellings and find sustenance.

Later in history, once methods of communication had been established, the natives then began to ask more questions of themselves. Which of the European values are worth adopting? Which of my traditional values are worth keeping? Africans seldom wrote explicit answers to these questions, because most traditions and such were passed orally. For this reason, one must study the actions of Africans later in history to discover the answers to these questions initially.²

When one looks at the history of Africa and other continents, it is clear that the European race created materialistic civilization wherever economic circumstances were ripe.³ This is very much the case with Africa, beginning with West Africa. The Europeans became familiar with West African customs and such after having lived in the area for decades. One such custom being the position of slaves within the caste system. As mentioned in Part I, slaves were traded among different ethnic groups for various reasons. One of these reasons was to correct a transgression in order to avoid a battle. For example, if a member of one group killed a member of another group, the murderer would have to offer his nephew (because of matrilineage) as a slave to the family that had been wronged in the other ethnic group. Also, some slaves were prisoners of war. Important factors here are that slaves were always provided for and their children were born free.

This institution was particularly inviting to Europeans who needed agricultural labor in the “New World”, or rather the world that was new to them. Since the Africans were treating the Europeans as a neighboring ethnic group, the bargaining of slaves was
not a new concept. Hence, bargaining with the Europeans about slaves was not a moral issue or threat to their way of life.

In fact, once the Europeans introduced the idea of currency, as opposed to the notion of barter, the Africans were even willing to sell their slaves or warring neighbors into slavery at the hands of the Europeans. In the case of warring neighbors, two particular villages may have been known to fight over a herd of certain animals for years. In order to just get rid of the enemy village, one group may decide to attack the other and sell the slaves they kept to the Europeans.

Africans selling each other into slavery soon began to transform into the slave trade we know of today. Once the Europeans had become familiar with the terrain and the need for labor began to increase, due to acquiring more land in the “New World”, they began to raid large groups of West Africans all at once. The arms they used allowed them to take many people at once, and they were indiscriminate about whom they put into slavery. Africans had always allowed the nobility to exchange their slaves for freedom. Europeans did not respect social position or societal responsibility within the community. Every West African they could find became a slave. By the time the natives realized the ramifications of their actions, it was far too late.

Coping With Slavery

The European institution of slavery was like nothing the West Africans had ever experienced before. They were treated like animals and even their most basic needs were not met if it was inconvenient for the Europeans. Millions decided to end their own lives (and those of their children) before they even reached land. Others were physically
incapable of dealing with the lack of food and water, the stench of the slave ships (due to human waste and regurgitation), and the tight quarters.

For those who did complete the journey from Africa to the Americas and the Caribbean, their perseverance was tested even further. Slaves had to find something within themselves, yet greater than themselves, to fulfill their new aspiration: physical emancipation. Mitchell states in Black Belief that,

“For life to continue to be worth living, some sense had to be made of it; some interpretation had to be given to the absurdly cruel and unexplainable experience that they were undergoing. The spirituals are eloquent testimony of how far the slaves were from blissful ‘ignorance’ of the injustices done them... this awareness would have driven them crazy en masse had they not brought with them a way to view and affirm life when things hit them hardest.”

It was at this time that their particular worldview became essential to survival. The slaves needed something in which to believe. Their view that the Creator and nature would always provide for them gave them the motivation to continue everyday, the hope that their descendents would live a better life, and the spirit to rejoice amidst oppression.

This belief system was also responsible for making them such productive slaves. There is a distinct reason that Africans survived the type of harsh treatment that either killed or drove crazy most of the white indentured servants and Native American slaves. Certainly, the slaves’ knowledge of agriculture and physical adaptations to the sun were important, but even more noteworthy was their perception of the world that allowed them to continue to hope for a better tomorrow. The African’s predisposition toward harmony one with another and faith in the Creator made acceptance of the Christian faith a logical progression in their ultimate search for spiritual freedom.
To believe that the slaves were converted by their wipe-wielding masters is not only naive, but also deeply flawed. The acceptance of Christianity by the slaves was caused by the African’s tendency to constantly survey all things in her environment for answers to life’s questions. It is also notable that the Judeo-Christian beliefs are comparable to African religious beliefs in values and perception of the world. The Greek roots of Euro-American Christianity are largely derived from Egypt. This accounts for the consistencies of Christianity with West African traditional beliefs.\(^6\)

The colonists’ perception of the slaves’ conversion stems from the Europeans’ misinterpretation of African religions and fear of slave insurrections. Out of misunderstanding and fear, the Europeans mistakenly perceived African religions as demonic, homicidal, and deranged. They feared that the mystically forces with which the slaves supposedly aligned themselves would be the exact thing that caused them to strike out at Europeans in an attempt to free themselves. Murphy states that,

> These images have their origin in the French colonial reaction to the revolt of Haitian slaves whose motive in liberating themselves from grinding and brutal enslavement was thought to rest in vaudoux. The success of the Haitian revolution sent shock waves through the white world that are still being felt today. I think that the relegation of ‘voodoo’ to the horror genre reflects mass America’s real horror of independent black power. If voodoo was powerful enough to free the slaves, might it not free their descendents?\(^7\)

This statement supports the notion that slaves were not “converted” by their masters. The change in their surroundings called for a change in their beliefs, but not so distinct a change that they would abandon the Creator and spirit(s) that had carried them for centuries. The African mind would not allow the slaves to accept the ideas of Christianity as presented by the colonists with its
many contradictions. The slave songs and insurrections prove their discretion when interpreting the teachings of those who oppressed them.  

In further support of this premise, the example of the underground church of the slaves is presented. During free times, which usually came on the weekend, slaves would practice the aspects of Christianity that were in line with their beliefs. This stemmed from the slave’s need to practice a religion that was consistent with his heritage and related to the practices of the land in which he now lived. Secret prayer and praise meetings kept slaves hopeful of a better life and connected to mother Africa.

Formal black congregations emerged in the 1770s and 1780s, but they had to appear on the surface to resemble those of the whites. Authentic African traditions remained underground until emancipation. The practices that were in the view of whites also stemmed from African beliefs, but they had a Euro-American mask to disguise the connection to the motherland.

This type of “mask” was necessary for blacks throughout American history because there was a distinct effort on the part of whites to eliminate African culture, or in many aspects, blackness (that which made the slave a black person). For this reason, the slave and emancipated Negro, had to disguise all things which constructed his identity by actions and words that seemed Euro-American.

2 Curtin, p. viii.
Prescriptions for Contemporary American Leaders

Upon recognizing the achievements and resiliency of people of African descent, one may ask why there are so many problems within the black community today. The answer lies within the history of this nation and its treatment of African-Americans. How has America's history affected the black community and how can blacks overcome such effects? Many factors must be considered when answering that question and in finding a solution to the problems within the African-American community.

There are many factors that contribute to the lifestyles of African-Americans. Three of the most prevalent are: 1) the mis-education of all Americans 2) the state of double-consciousness in which African-Americans constantly find themselves and 3) the current crisis of black leadership. Once we as a people have addressed these issues, we must then discover ways in which to reconcile our past with our future. This assessment is by far the most important, for it will not matter if we discuss issues of race and history without deciding what we should do about them.

Throughout this century, there have been quite a few African-American intellectuals that address issues of black identity in white America. However, three of them stand out among the scholars, and when combined into one study, offer an insightful look into black America and the daily struggles of African-Americans. These scholars are Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B. Du Bois and Cornell West. These three African-Americans address issues of importance in the black community and offer realizable solutions to all Americans. Cornell West in particular addresses the effects a dysfunctional black community can have on the state as a whole and why the problems in
the black community are America’s problems. On the other hand, Carter G. Woodson addresses the root of problems in American society, which can be witnessed today, even though his book was first written in 1933.

**Mis-education**

Carter G. Woodson makes many good points about the effects of Eurocentric education on African-Americans. Suppression of a minority group is, of course, easier if you can get the group to believe that they are inferior. The members of the group will then willingly accept discriminatory treatment because they believe that it is warranted. However, this has a detrimental effect on the minority group that falls victim to such propaganda. Members of the group, as Woodson states, begin to suffer from self-hatred which leads them to act violently toward themselves and other members of their group. This self-hatred has obviously extended into the present generation and is evident in gang violence, black-on-black crime, and large numbers of African-Americans being imprisoned.

For this reason, the educated, middle class blacks disassociate themselves from the masses. They reject anything African including their heritage and identity for fear that society’s negative view of blacks will be displaced upon them. Woodson states that, “The present system under the control of the whites trains the Negro to be white and at the same time convinces him of the impropriety or the impossibility of his becoming white.” This left educated blacks with no one with whom they identified and no purpose in life. The only goal that was given to them was to attempt to be like whites, yet their education taught them that they were so inherently inferior that it would never be possible.
This type of "mis-education" has a negative effect on the whole of society as well. Teaching inferiority leads to a lack of confidence. Confidence is necessary to be successful and contribute to society at large. However, low self-esteem will eliminate the contribution that a particular group could offer to society. Woodson discusses the various aspects of American culture that have been greatly influenced by African culture. These include jazz, dance, athletics, and many more. However, African-Americans could make many more contributions if the group, as a whole, were confident in its own identity and worth. In essence, America misses out by holding down the African-American.

Woodson goes on to describe areas and specific subjects that need to be changed in order to make a difference in the lives of African-Americans. He discusses ways to revamp mathematics, science, geography, and especially history. For example, not until recently have maps been drawn to scale and school children taught that Europe is part of a continent as opposed to making up its own separate continent from Asia. On the new maps, African-American children can see how much of the world's mass Africa actually encompasses. Additionally, the scientific advancements of Africans in general are yet to be taught. These include early navigation and mathematics. Similarly, African folklore is ignored in literature classes, and African linguistic history is not studied by black children who would find it of more use when evaluating their own dialects than European linguistic history. The arts are another area in which black contributions have been ignored in America and abroad. Pride in one's self often stems from pride in one's ethnic group. If all of the accomplishments of blacks in the past and present are withheld from black children, they will not realize that their people have a history in which they can be proud.
Double-Consciousness

How then does an African-American survive in such an environment where at anytime anyone may become the target for exploitation due to economic circumstances? Historically, African-Americans have been the most victimized for this reason. Du Bois's answer to this question is two-fold. He states that the African-American can either use the spiritual and mental gifts passed down by his ancestors to make him resilient or he can attempt to become an Euro-American and lose his soul.

For the African-American, these are the only available choices according to Du Bois. He believes that we cannot become a part of a system that is contrary to all that we have been taught without losing ourselves in the process. Consequently, the African-American is always riddled with a double-consciousness. She must try to fit in to white America without allowing it to consume her identity. One might ask why retaining one's identity and cultural heritage is so important. Du Bois's answer is that culture makes us who we are. Without it we are soulless blobs that can be transformed into any creature with the slightest effort. Culture builds resilience. It helps us decide who we are and what we stand for. To get rid of one's culture is to allow any set of values to permeate one's consciousness. This is evident in the ghetto culture of urban America. Black youths are not taught about themselves and their culture, so they are easily swayed into lives of crime. The poverty and despair of the ghetto certainly require that one build resiliency to that which constantly strives to break one down. However, that resiliency is not present in many youth today because of their lack of identity. Hence, they are susceptible to all sorts of skewed values like materialism instead of morality.
The challenge for America is to allow African-Americans, and others as well, to feel pride in their culture and be accepted for who they are in mainstream society. Du Bois states,

"The history of the American Negro is the history of strife — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face."^4

In this statement, Du Bois discusses the dream of all African-Americans and the goal of an inclusive, multicultural America. The acceptance of different cultures and identities is necessary in solving many of the ills of this society. A change in leadership is the catalyst to resolving societal problems.

**The Crisis of Black Leadership**^5

Most leaders of communities come from the elite class of the group. For African-Americans, those are the middle-class. Those individuals who are privileged to an education, nurturing environments, and other tools that aid in the development of well-adjusted, creative intellectuals. However, according to West, these individuals tend to forget the struggle of the masses. One the one hand, there are individuals like Clarence Thomas who became a Supreme Court Justice as a result of Affirmative Action, but he now votes against such programs. He has obviously forgotten the struggle that other blacks go through on a daily basis.

Conversely, Thomas is quick to yell "injustice" when his position is threatened. How can one identify with the plight of African-Americans only when it serves one’s
purpose? West believes this is a value he has learned through his formal education in the United States. Certainly, no textbooks suggested that he act in this manner. However, suggesting that he must reject all things African also suggests that he must forget the values which his family and community have taught him.

On the other hand, there are black leaders who are completely on the other side of the spectrum and exhibit as much racist animosity as the white leaders they despise. This type of reverse racism, despite its reactionary nature, is still harmful to the black community and the nation as a whole. These sentiments drive an even larger wedge between the races and seemingly justify the racist attitude that African-Americans have been fighting since the inception of this nation.

To address these issues, there must be a new type of leader. Cornell West calls these leaders race transcending. He states, "To be an elected official and prophetic leader requires personal integrity and political savvy, moral vision and prudential judgement, courageous defiance and organizational patience." Martin Luther King Jr. was this type of leader. He recognized the need for all Americans to come together to combat racism and reverse many of the negative effects our history has on us as a nation.

At present, there are not many of these types of leaders. They are missing from the nation at large, and especially from the black community. African-Americans of today do not have to struggle as hard as our ancestors. For this reason, it is much easier for blacks to forget about the struggle once they have reached a position in society. According to West, blacks are afraid to risk their appointment, position, or tenure to address issues of race in the nation. The lax attitude within the black community has led the larger population to believe that the race problem no longer exists. White America
did not readily address civil rights. The black community was the catalyst for such
efforts like Affirmative Action and the Civil Rights Act. When the black population
began to neglect issues of race, so did the population as a whole. This is the crisis of
black leadership. Black leaders must realize the essentiality of black leaders in the past to
the formation and drastic changes of this nation. Otherwise, the problem of race relations
will not be resolved because everyone will stop asking questions.

**The Role of Whites in African-American Leadership**

In order for African-Americans to make a difference in our community, we must
learn about our ancestors and the ways in which they viewed and dealt with the world.
We must again free our minds and spirits so that we may be able to critically analyze the
information that is presented to us and design creative solutions to the ills of our
community and the rest of the world. For this reason, it is in the interest of all Americans
to consciously work to change the images and messages portrayed in our society. It is
also the responsibility of educated Americans to re-educate the rest of America.
Historians need to rewrite America history. Teachers need to be multicultural in their
approach to educating the nation. Otherwise, no new ways of thinking will arise. The
nation will continue to build upon the shaky foundation of racism left by our ancestors.

White Americans specifically need to contribute to the building of a new
America. Otherwise, every point of view will not be recognized, everyone will not be
represented. Being aware of this need for whites in a multicultural society, Gary
Howard, a white American educator, asks, “how does an ethnic group that has
historically been dominant in its society adjust to a more modest and balanced role?”
Howard presents many possible answers to this question because he deals with the
underlying issues knowing full well that we cannot come together as a nation without
addressing our history and present feelings.

First, Howard addresses the need for white Americans to defend their position of
dominance "even in the face of overwhelming evidence that our world is rapidly
changing." He states that a peaceful transition in America will require changes in
education and deep psychological shifts for many Americans. His solution to this
mindset is for white Americans to recognize the distinct contribution whites have made to
America and the world. Many whites, he states, despise being called European
Americans; they prefer to just be Americans. However, these Americans fail to
recognize the diversity of European culture and the diversity among white Americans
today. Recognition and celebration of European American diversity would ultimately
lead to white Americans being more mentally ready to accept notions of racial diversity
in America.

Howard also addresses the negative emotions that many white Americans feel
when dealing with issues of race in America. The first one he addresses is denial. He
states that many white Americans simply state that the past doesn't matter. Secondly, he
addresses hostility toward racial minorities such as backlash to civil rights and a
resurgence of hate groups. Howard feels that both of these emotions stem from a deep-
seeded fear of diversity. Many fear for their personal and economic security, so they
seek to destroy that which is not like them. They fear the loss of Western cultural
supremacy in schools and other institutions as well.

These emotions, Howard feels, are literally emotions that kill. He states,

"With this hostility toward diversity, we threaten to destroy the precious
foundation of our national unity, which is commitment to equality,
freedom, and justice for all people. It is not multiculturalism that threatens to destroy our unity—as some neoconservative academics would have us believe—but rather our inability to embrace our differences and our unwillingness to honor the very ideals we espouse."

This racist attitude, Howard adds, is destructive not only to the victims but also to the perpetuators. Racism is ultimately self-destructive and counter-evolutionary. It eats away at the human spirit of those who harbor its negativity.

The third deadly emotion, according to Howard, is guilt. For white Americans who make the effort to become familiar with this nation's history, the feeling of guilt or shame is difficult to overcome. Rationally, whites can state that they had nothing to do with the oppression, but emotionally the feeling of guilt still lingers. However, Howard feels that this guilt can be used positively. It can be a catalyst to act against oppression and to make a difference in this nation. To become one nation, he states, we need to find a path out of the debilitating cycle of blame and guilt to one of action and responsibility.

In order to heal as a nation, there are certain actions Howard suggests that whites take. First, he feels that white Americans must realize that the changes in the nation and the world are necessary for growth and development. The appropriate role for white Americans then is to participate in the changes instead of attacking them. Secondly, Howard adds that whites must approach multiculturalism with honesty and humility. "It is not helpful for white Americans to be marching out in front with all of the answers for other groups. The future belongs to those who are able to walk and work beside people of many cultures, lifestyles, and perspectives." Honesty and humility are based on respect. One of the greatest contributions white Americans can make to
multiculturalism is respect for other people and groups. Howard states that "in the process of respecting other cultures, we learn to become better people ourselves." In essence, we can all become better people by building a better, more tolerant America.

**Conclusion**

If it is true that leaders represent a people, then it is important for us, as a nation, to support leaders within specific communities and of differing ethnic groups. Our leaders must reflect the diversity of background and thinking that is uniquely American. Similarly, black leaders must be encouraged to teach the masses of blacks and whites new ways to think about our place in the world and history. Intellectuals must continue to challenge the status quo; this type of creative thought should be fostered by academia instead of deterred. The principles upon which this nation was publicly founded must become a part of our private dealings with each other. The history of all Americans is intertwined and so must be our future. However, we will not be able to move into the future without dealing with the past.

It is essential to the growth and development of the United States that all groups play a role in its historical accounts, economic successes, and even moral norms. Consequently, the African-American population must be nurtured and supported by its mother, the United States of America. The problems of the black community are America's problems, and black identity significantly contributes to shaping American identity. For this reason, it is in the interest of all Americans to celebrate cultures of the African diaspora and cultivate the talents of African-Americans. Realistically addressing our history and the history of the world will give us, as a nation, more from which to
draw for our future. We are doomed to repeat the mistakes of our past if we do not recognize and deal with them as one people.

1 This section was inspired by: Woodson, Carter G. *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. Trenton, Africa World Press, Inc.; 1990.
2 Woodson, p. 23.
4 Du Bois, p. 29.
6 West, p. 61.
7 This section was inspired by: Howard, Gary R. “Whites in Multicultural Education: Rethinking Our Role.” *Phi Delta Kappan*. September 1993, pp. 36-41.
8 Howard, p. 36.
9 Howard, p. 37.
10 Howard, p. 39
11 Howard, p. 39.
12 Howard, p. 40.