

Who Carries the Brief for Black America?

As an African American currently residing in one of the poorest counties in South Carolina, I have become increasingly troubled by the absence of our voice in an increasing number of conversations involving public policies which directly impact the health and future development of African American political, social and economic interests. Since the historic election of President Obama we seem to have drifted in the direction of focusing on the interests and success of the proverbial few rather than press for the development of an agenda designed to improve the opportunity structure for the masses of our people. We seem to act as if the vast majority of African Americans have become immune to the lingering effects of historic racial discrimination and the political marginalization which inevitably follows. The leadership of the Congressional Black Caucus is credited with publicly saying that in the first term of President Obama he was given something akin to a pass on a range of issues effecting Black people. Our traditional civil rights organizations have lost their will to wage a sustained campaign against injustice and now seem to have settled on appearances at "must show events" and campaigns to solicit funds for the implementation of a non-specific agenda for a kind of change that we can believe in.

At a time when women rightfully celebrate the presence of 21 female members of the United State Senate, Blacks who earned the right to vote approximately one half century earlier can only list six African Americans who ever had the honor of knowing such distinction. At a time when too many public schools are continuing to fail and our prison industrial complex is still being profitably maintained on the backs of our youth and communities of color, the African

American voice somehow manages to become even more muted. As an untold number of African Americans slipped into poverty and the clutches of economic jeopardy during the recent fiscal crisis and home mortgage debacle, we are miraculously able to cling to the delusion that we are making responsible progress as a people. With more African American elected officials, agency heads, executives and college graduates swelling our ranks than at any previous time in history, we seem to have lost all reasonable understanding of how the democratic process is designed to work. Our focus seems to now be on individual success, ours and the success of others for whom we hold some special favor. We display very little, if any, regard for policy positions and public stances which reflect African American collective interests. We have no political agenda and seem to evidence very little regard for the development of one. I suggest that from the "collective perspective" our political IQ scores are now being reported at an all-time low. Our public political behavior seems to give more credence to the old adage that "good can often prove to be the enemy of better" than our conduct gives credence to any collective commitment that we have to the least among us. How can we, perhaps as the most privileged in the ranks of African Americans, legitimately fail to identify a sense of urgency to address in some direct fashion the immediate needs of the majority of our people who look to us and place their hope and confidence in our leadership? Dr. King was quoted as saying that "it is always the right time to do the right thing." If we believe that statement, then we must recognize that the right time is now.

The recent tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut, which should in no way be minimized, has spawned a frenzy of activity and thought regarding the production of remedies and counter-measures to eliminate the increasing number of incidents of violent and irrational behavior in American society. There is for the moment at least, a quest for clarity and understanding regarding these tragic demonstrations of incivility. This

event has also produced a heightened sense of fear and insecurity in "mainstream America." The under story behind the patent hideousness of the Newtown experience is the stark reminder of the extent and degree to which we are all vulnerable. The Newtown tragedy has said to America that even in a model community that is not very ethnically diverse, where the economic profiles are quite excellent as are the schools and the latest security systems are in place and public employees are extremely competent and dedicated... even such a near perfect community is incapable of protecting itself from itself.

Without engaging in an assessment of comparative misery or suffering, while we mourn the death of the twenty seven persons who tragically and in some cases heroically lost their lives, we must not become insensitive to the routine loss and systematic destruction of life occurring in Black and poor communities across this great land. We must always be mindful of the thousands of Black and poor students attending our public schools who are unfairly pigeon-holed and labeled for failure, marginalization and prison on an annual basis. We must remember as well the innocent lives and injuries that are occasioned by the now nearly normalized "drive by shooting." Neither can we fail to recognize the difference in the public attitude and public response to these kinds of tragic events nor can we fail to understand and address the reasons for those differences. In part and sadly because of the tragedy in Newtown, African American leadership is presented with an opportunity and an obligation to take a leadership role in framing the public discourse on this subject.

What all of us who dare to embrace this task must resist is the risk of under-analyzing the problem and thusly adopting overly simplistic remedies as solutions to conditions that are complex, ingrained and possibly even politically difficult to discuss. Herein one finds a unique opportunity for the African American voice to inform the national discussion on the

special factors existing in African American and poor communities. Factors which guarantee the maintenance of a culture of violence and community underdevelopment. The culture of violence in Newtown may be created out of the violence in video games, Hollywood movies, television programming, unauthorized access to legally purchased guns and school yard bullying. Those however, are not the factors which insure the existence of the culture of violence in African American and poor communities in this country. Gun control legislation alone is a very incomplete solution. Any serious attempt to address the culture of violence in Black and poor communities will require a more comprehensive analysis of the problem. We must identify the major factors such as: the intergenerational effects of failing public schools, a failed and poorly executed war on drugs, unemployment and underemployment (particularly among Black youth), continued racism in America, low wages and in too many cases police complicity in the maintenance of oppressive environments and underground economies. There is no attempt here to have African Americans disclaim responsibility for African American communities. It must, however, be understood that communities, independent of their persuasion, cannot survive as prosperous entities when they are constantly subjected to the negative impacts of government policies, benign neglect and at times direct governmental assaults.

If President Obama truly wants to be the President for all of the people, then he must examine the Newtown tragedy in a context that exposes the larger culture of violence as a force that destroys families and dreams long before they die. This is a culture of violence which systematically drains the resources and stifles the development of poor communities without regard to their ethnic stripe or political persuasion. If President Obama can cry for the twenty seven, he must at least save a tear or two for the multitudes who for like reasons and with equal innocence fall unheralded and go unrecorded by time. The time is now. The right time is always

now. The question that remains unanswered, however; is who will carry the brief to the table for Black America?

Dr. William Small, Jr., is a retired educator and conflict resolution specialist. He currently resides in Hampton County, South Carolina, and serves as the Vice Chairman of the Area Commission for the Technical College of the Lowcountry. The views expressed in this article are his alone and should not be credited to any other professional organization, entity or individual.