

Visions of Black America, 1990s and Beyond: The Reality of Our Duality

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Opening Remarks

NSBE officers, members, faculty, and guests. Thank you and a personal thanks to Ken Johnson for inviting me to speak to such a distinguished group of future leaders of industry and leaders of the African-American community. I would also like to thank you for inviting my parents as your guests. This is the first opportunity that my parents have had to see me address a public audience. As with all parents, they are enjoying the ability to participate with their offspring in an effort to move our people ahead. And, as all parents, they are probably feeling some measure of pride in their accomplishment. But, it is not they who should be proud of me; it is I who am proud of them. We in this room understand the kind of struggles and sacrifices they and all the generations of Africans that preceded them have made to help prepare us for a world that is seldom fair. It is their wisdom, their caring, their guidance, and, yes, their discipline that has helped us get this far. Any measure of success that I may have today or any that still waits in the future is directly due to Blake and Ruth White. Please join me in thanking them and in thanking all of our parents.

My talk this evening is entitled: *Visions of Black America, 1990s and Beyond: The Reality of Our Duality*. I hope we can take a look in the mirror at the successes and the challenges that face us. As with anyone looking in the mirror, sometimes it can make you walk a little taller and sometimes you just don't like what you see. But, looking in the mirror is the only way to identify and fix the blemish, which in our people's case is the accumulated effects of centuries of racial exploitation and subordination. We need to look in the mirror as part of a racial healing process, as described by Professor Derrick Bell of the Harvard Law School. Such a healing process might be compared to the treatment war veterans receive after long periods of combat. We are also likely to gain a psychological boost from the discovery of what we can achieve. So, in that vein, we will examine:

- Our progress to date
- The turmoil in our community
- The roles of education, politics, and economic development
- The duality of Black technical professionals' existence and responsibility
- Quantum Leap: African America's high tech challenge

I know this is Saturday night and I'm the only thing standing between dinner and the celebration, but bear with me. This is admittedly a meaty subject (45 mins.) with a lot of ground to cover. I didn't travel 3,000 miles to give you an "okee doke" speech. On the contrary, I hope we can indulge in food for the mind and the soul. Although I'm not likely to reveal any new truths, together we can develop a new perspective on what we already know.

Let me also say up front that these are my personal opinions, not those of any organization with which I may be associated. I also note that I came here to speak to the NSBE, based on my reality and experience as an African man in America. So, those of you who happen to be non-Black, bear with me. My concentration on my own African experience should reinforce the theme of this conference and show that it is okay to be pro-Black and, as such, this does not mean anti-white or anti-anyone else. Frankly, we who have scarce resources have no intention of wasting them on hate.

Our Progress to Date

Certainly no segment of the African-American population has moved farther from some earlier set of imposed expectations than those of us in this room who pursue the challenge and rewards of a career in science and engineering. "Today, tradition and restrictive expectations still need to be challenged," according to Lawrence King, Past President of the National Technical Association (NTA), and I applaud you for doing just that!

Further paraphrasing King, the 40,000 Black engineers and 22,000 scientists represent those of us who have challenged and broken with the tradition of bleak statistics. We have met grade school teachers who told us that we "would never amount to anything." (For instance, based on some obscure test I took years earlier, my old high school guidance counselor in Concord, North Carolina encouraged me to lower my sights from engineering and NC State University to brickmasonry and some two-year vocational school .) We are the ones who have and will continue to deface the old myths that engineering is pre-business for Black students.

Somehow in spite of all the odds, our people, so decrepit in the statistics, can produce the kind of nurturing needed for the well-being of that icon of perseverance and faith, Nelson Mandela, and the late Dr. Ron McNair the NC A&T and MIT physicist and NASA astronaut, or a Jesse Jackson from a Greenville, South Carolina housing project, and the brilliance and enthusiasm of you professionals, students, and faculty. We know from these experiences and 20,000 years of history as a civilized people that we can, must, and will define ourselves and our expectations.

Blacks have made strides in the political arena, the most obvious example being the phenomenal success of Rev. Jackson's presidential candidacy in which he garnered more votes than elected Jimmy Carter, in Douglas Wilder's election as the Governor of Virginia, and in the most recent attack on ignorance and bigotry led by your Harvey Gant in his bid for the U.S. Senate seat held by that embarrassment to the state of North Carolina, Jesse Helms. In

1987 there were 6,681 Black elected officials in the US. Sixty-five percent of those serve in the South. The number of Black mayors in cities with a population over 50,000 continues to grow.

We are also justifiably proud of the achievements of African technology, business, and government leaders such as: General Colin Powell, who as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs holds the fate of the world at his fingertips, Dr. Alan Letton, a second generation scientist who received his doctorate in polymer chemistry at the age of 25, of Barry Rand of Xerox who manages a \$4 billion marketing group, of entrepreneurs like Reginald Lewis who boldly took his \$1 billion TLC Group into the ranks of the Fortune 500, or Emmitt McHenry, president of the 11 year old \$49 million Virginia-based Network Solutions Inc., of Dr. Mae Jemison the physician and NASA astronaut who shows that no frontier is beyond the realm of Black women, of Mark Hannah the 35 year old co-founder of Silicon Graphics, one of the world's top engineering workstation vendors, and of the the 30% of middle management personnel in major corporations who are Black or Hispanic¹.

As Dr. Jemison demonstrates, African-American women also give us reason for extreme pride. From 1965 to 1985 the number of Black women enrolled in college increased by 300%, from 148,000 to approximately 600,000, and labor force participation by Black women increased from 48% in 1970 to 54% in 1985. These workforce statistics also show progress in the nature of employment. For example, in 1970 about 42% of all Black women worked in [principally non-exempt or domestic] service jobs. That number has now dropped below 30% and the number of Black women in sales, technical, and administrative positions increased from 26% to 38%. Today more than 17% hold managerial and professional positions.

In spite of the media's portrayal of our people as an "endangered species," in the '80s 53% of Black families were intact with two-income married couples heading the household.² Seven percent of African American families fall into the top 20% income bracket.³ Blacks are producing a critical mass of middle class professionals, increasing our presence in managerial and professional positions by more than a striking 330% since 1960.⁴ As a whole, our community has well over \$210 billion in annual purchasing power, equivalent to the 14th largest country in the world in terms of GNP (roughly equivalent to England, Poland, and Saudi Arabia).⁵

Trouble in Paradise: *The African-American Community in Turmoil*

However, there is trouble on the horizon. The state of African-America is a case study

¹ Black Enterprise, Nov. 1990, p.24.

² Derrick Bell, *And We Are Not Saved*, Basic Books, 1989, p.46.

³ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 1984. As quoted in Derrick Bell's *And We Are Not Saved*, Basic Books, 1989, p.47.

⁴ Theodore Cross, *The Black Power Imperative*, Faulkner Books, 1984, p. 250.

⁵ Power Program statistics, the Wellington Group and the Nation of Islam.

in duality -- as we, the new Black intelligentsia and professional cadre, make impressive career and economic gains, the majority of Blacks face a bleak future. The people in this room represent a subset of Black America that is negligible in size, barely more than 3% of the age 14 and over group.⁶ The most optimistic among you must concede that the once swiftly moving march toward racial equality through law and reform has slowed to a walk, leaving millions of Blacks no better off than they were before the civil rights movement.⁷ In spite of what Mr. Reagan and Mr. Bush said about economic prosperity in the '80s, the words and the results diverge depending on the reality in which you live.

The Black child born in America is twice as likely as a white child to die as an infant, 4 times as likely to live in poverty⁸, 7 times as likely to be involved in adolescent crime, 4 times as likely to be incarcerated, 3 times as likely to die from alcoholism, and 6 times as likely to be murdered during his or her life.

Through the 80s, more than 30% of the Black population lived below the poverty line; and for those under 18 the poverty rate was 40% -- a shocking statistic when we consider that census data indicate that Blacks under 24 make up 46% of our group. Even though it routinely requires two incomes to "make ends meet" in today's society, 47% of Black children live in single parent households, most headed by women who suffer from the triple blows of historic racism, sexism, and the troubling statistic of teenage mothers ill-equipped to support themselves, much less someone else. One study indicated that 46% of working age Black men were either jobless (13%), not participating in the labor force (20%), in prison (2%), or "unaccounted for" (10%).⁹ Those working earn only 80% of what a comparably educated white male earns and overall Black families have 56 cents to spend for every dollar white families spend.¹⁰ Black males with some college experience show family poverty rates more than twice as great as whites with high school education only.¹¹ (So, educational attainment alone does not explain this poverty gap.) These statistics are grim! They show the situation, not only worse than white males, but actually worse than Black males of 1960!

Relatively speaking, we have actually regressed! Blacks in every income strata, from the poorest to the most affluent, lost ground and had less disposable income in 1984 than in 1980, according to Professor Bell. The 1970 census indicated that Black family income was only 62% of the national average; only Native American income was

⁶ Theodore Cross, *The Black Power Imperative*, Faulkner Books, 1984, p. 250.

⁷ Derrick Bell, Harvard Law School.

⁸ Theodore Cross, *The Black Power Imperative*, Faulkner Books, 1984, p. 219.

⁹ Derrick Bell, *And We Are Not Saved*, Basic Books, 1989, p. 47.

¹⁰ John Jacob, National Urban League 1986, as discussed in Derrick Bell's *And We Are Not Saved*, Basic Books, 1989, p. 46.

¹¹ Theodore Cross, *The Black Power Imperative*, Faulkner Books, 1984, p. 223.

lower. After more than a decade of Black professional development, the median income of Black families in the mid-80s was only 58.4% of the national average.

According to Professor Bell, America's pattern of racial oppression -- a gory history filled with more murder, mutilation, rape, and brutality than most of us can imagine or easily comprehend -- created the huge Black so-called "underclass" who accumulated and passed down from generation to generation a series of disadvantages. Coupled with economic and technological revolution of advanced industrial society, this underclass status seems to make the situation almost hopeless. Even though we have a whole new generation of Blacks who may have never marched or protested, make no mistake about it, the battle for public accommodation has been won, but the war for respectability and humane treatment has not (and, this includes the vast majority of corporations and academic institutions). In this sense slogans like "racism is dead" are hasty pronouncements which dilute the achievement of those who have moved ahead and deny even society's sympathy for those less fortunate Blacks whose opportunities and life fortunes are less promising today than they were 30 years ago.

Family, friends, and acquaintances, many of whom stare at the danger inherent in ghetto life, scraping meager existences from odd jobs and other more shady means race through our minds because opportunities missed in the past by either apathetic attitudes of our people or by the racist, indeed the legal apartheid of the 40s, 50s, and 60s, will not return under the current or near-term administrations. To make matters worse, the Joint Center for Political Studies notes in a 1987 study that 44.7% of Blacks believe that the federal and state government has responsibility for the poor, 30.2% believed that responsibility lay with charities, and 17.1% don't know. Only 8.1% imply that we and the poor themselves should shoulder that responsibility. Ladies and gentlemen, let's not delude ourselves! Dreams of social and economic advancement for the majority of African-Americans will be actualized only through nurturing by the Black community; not through the sociopolitical pimp of half-hearted empty dreams that mainstream America has become.

However, racism alone is not our only roadblock. We contribute more than our fair share to our own mental and economic enslavement. According to the Department of Labor, those of us that have disposable income spend over 93% of it. While our people gained in average income by 6.2% in absolute terms, our spending increased by 11.8%. Blacks spend 30% over the national average on cars, 57% over the average on imported beer, 108% over the average on health club memberships, but 66% below the national average on mutual funds and other investments.¹² Black accumulated wealth is only 1/12th that of white families.¹³ Brimmer & Co, a Washington consulting firm, notes that while the American economy benefits by increased Black spending, Black-owned firms are clearly losing out -- receiving only 8.3% of the Black population's income. It seems that while the 60s integration gave us the freedom to lift ourselves,

¹² Claritas Corp., as reported in *Emerge*, Oct. 1990., p. 38.

¹³ Derrick Bell, *And We Are Not Saved*, Basic Books, 1989, p. 46.

we have chosen the alternate freedom to export our money to someone else's economy.

This too, is the reality of our dual existence!

The Struggle Continues

Many of the engineers and scientists in this room also discovered that our flight to the suburbs left an empty cultural feeling, that our children have no concept of the past civil rights struggles, and that a degree and six figure salary cannot guarantee respect.

We learned something that recent immigrants "right off the boat" seemed to know all along -- that without an independent upper class (i.e., those who own and control the means of production), sustained upward mobility for Blacks in all strata will remain an elusive dream.

Our successes in corporate and institutional arenas deserve to be celebrated and emulated. However, the duality of our existence as professionals and as a statistically select group of new Black leaders should not delude us into allowing effective participation in the mainstream degenerate into total and uncritical assimilation with its inherent effect of diluting the value of our own historical traditions.

Far too many Black Americans have lost sight of our collective vision that was forged by 100 million deaths in the Middle Passage, by risking life itself just to learn to read and write, by the humiliation of "white only" signs, water hoses, police dogs, personal sacrifice, and collective struggle. Far too many Black professionals have fallen into a malaise of "I have arrived." We have become comfortable, indeed complacent and insensitive. Have we forgotten how 30 years ago, armed with a PhD and a million dollars in the bank we could not use the toilet on the highway. Clouding our reality in consumer labels by Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Ralph Lauren, and Mercedes, have we forgotten the sacrificed lives of the past and the present struggles of the vast majority of our people? Are some of us so contemptuous of what we are that we dare blot out our past? Have we so bleached our souls that we have forgotten that old game of divide and conquer, of "house slave" versus "field slave" that we vote our personal self interests to the detriment of our own families? How bankrupt in morality can a people be to sell their futures for the coins of the present?

Let's not be so comfortable that we dare not imagine the truth -- that only 1 to 3 paychecks separate many of us from the average brother on the block. We need to fully understand that our power base is indelibly linked to the total African community. We need to understand that when the less advantaged Blacks win, we all win; and, likewise, they need to understand that when we win, they win. We need to fulfill the dream of Dr. DuBois' "Talented Tenth" instead of deciding to step over the homeless and just join the parade.

Black Political Powerlessness

In spite of our apparent dramatic professional progress, we remain politically powerless as a people. For instance, during the last few national elections, I watched the decay of American conscience and consciousness. On one hand America was ironically rededicating the Statue of Liberty and more recently rejoicing in the Berlin Wall's destruction, but on the other hand, even in 1990, we've seen Mr. Bush veto a civil rights bill and we watched politicians continue the moral sandblasting of affirmative action, women's equality, religious autonomy, and America's tradition of reaching out to those in need. We've seen Americans and Soviets (groups who so easily justified up to half their national resources to prepare for mutual destruction) come together around their European derivation to collaborate on rebuilding Eastern European cities (while U.S. cities decay). We've seen them attempt an assassination of an African leader and his family and jointly prepare for an ultimate showdown with factions of Arab, Persian, and Babylonian (Iraqi) people. People of color who struggle for their self-determination are called "terrorists" while similar actions by European-derived great powers are called acts of "freedom fighters" that ensure "international stability" -- i.e., status quo. These national and international developments tear at my heart and my hope.

We watched African men in Brooklyn arrested before they commit a crime and, with a supreme court that grows ever so padded with ultra-conservatives, their illegal arrests are made legal. We've seen whole neighborhoods of Black men in Boston rounded up as suspects because a very sad example of white manhood decided to murder his wife and unborn child, and then shoot himself. We recently watched in dismay the injustice of a system that is more interested in the rights of crack dealers in Washington than in supporting strong-willed Black Muslims in their attempts to rid their neighborhoods of these agents of genocide. Wall Street's thugs can steal billions of dollars with little more than probation, but the unemployed teenage mother can be jailed for stealing a loaf of bread. On major university campuses a cross can be burned in your dorm (I was spit upon on my first day on N.C. State's campus back in 1974), 8 Temple students were beaten by campus police last Spring, an Ethiopian youth was beaten to death by skinheads in Portland, and two Blacks hanged at the same suburban San Francisco-Oakland subway station were ruled suicides.

Blacks, especially the masses of locked out Blacks, are tired of broken promises, tired of intentional and convenient lies, outraged at the game being played by multiple sets of rules (as Jesse Jackson warned). We abhor our precarious economic, social, political, legal, and physical position in this society and decry the institutional negligence affecting the bases of poor people's health, safety, freedom of body and mind. We mock the hypocrites who are so interested in the rights of Polish union members while ignoring rights at home and winking at the holocaust going on in South Africa.

As Ethiopians starve while U.S. farmers are paid not to grow food, as an Oliver North and a Manuel Noriega can be strange bedfellows in a scheme that ultimately imports drugs into our communities to pay for totalitarian squads of death inflicted upon Central and South American people, as our President has the nerve to veto a major civil rights bill while an over-representation of Black soldiers sit in the desert to protect the price of oil, politicians try to wrap Black malcontent in sound bites, prayer cloths, and the output of flag factories.

This is the other half of the dual reality of Black America today, and with a few exceptions, these are our collective experiences of societal abuse.

Why us? What did Africans do to merit such treatment? Well, maybe our situation is the result of believing too strongly in the good graces of other people who haven't walked in our shoes. We followed America's rules, sought education, worked hard, humbled ourselves, tried to look, sound, and act like the majority. We sold our original culture, values, and in some cases we sold our souls. We so passionately wanted to believe the lines thrown to us as appetizers: the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, Emancipation Proclamation, bootstrap and trickle-down theories, and yes, even the Bible itself were sometimes held out as carrots before the Black mules that far too many of us have become. It would seem that by now, as an historically agricultural people, we would have realized that mules typically have blinders that limit their wider vision and that the mule team driver always holds the reins.

Education: Of Haves and Have Nots

We have traditionally believed that education is the way out of this abyss. If so, we are preparing a generation of haves and have nots.

Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, and other numerical minorities make up over 21% of the U.S. population, but only 16% of students in public secondary schools and 17% of college enrollments. Among Black 18 and 19 year olds, 15% dropped out of high school. The number for Hispanics is 27%. In urban centers, the dropout rate for Blacks and Hispanics reaches a staggering 50%. In an age of technical literacy, the NAACP estimates that 44% of adult Blacks are functionally illiterate.

African-Americans are about 12% of the population but make up only 8.8% of college students. Where whites make up about 79% of the BS/BA graduates, Blacks account for only 5%, according to the US Council on education. Total undergraduate enrollment in engineering is estimated at 400,000, with only 4.3% of those Black, and unless something changes drastically, 30% of those will not graduate. Overall, there are 1.5 million engineers in America, less than 2% are Black. Since the early 80s until today, there seems to be very little evidence of positive change. All of this is occurring when over half the jobs in America today may not even exist by the year 2000, and those that exist will require higher levels of education and proven experience.

Adequate preparation is part of the problem. According to Cyrus Cantrell of the University of Texas at Dallas, only 10% of high school graduates have taken Algebra II, which is a minimum prerequisite for any engineering or scientific studies. Cantrell also notes that, "We don't have any Black graduate students."

Echoing Cantrell is Kevin Greenough, Past President of NTA, who notes that in the Washington DC area (an area of high Black population), a mechanical engineering department of a major university has 241 graduate students; none of them Black! According to Larry King of the NTA, every time the U.S. graduates an engineer, the Soviets graduate four and the Japanese graduate three. At the same time, 30% of all PhDs awarded in U.S. engineering schools go to foreign nationals.

Looking toward the future, demographic data show that the ethnic character of America is changing drastically. By the year 2000, 45% of the college age population will be people of color and women will represent 47% of the workforce.¹⁴ By 2020, whites and people who are today called "minorities" will reach numeric parity in the overall U.S. society, assuming continued birth trends.¹⁵ [This has already happened in Texas and in major cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Miami.] As the global economy forces a non-competitive America to compete, not on the size of its factories or the price of its products but on the talent and creativity of its people, America will not be able to afford to continue to ignore the needs of minorities because we will be America in the future! As America will continue to face the need for technical and creative talent, America can invest in us now or pay someone else later.

The Role of the Black College

One of the questions often posed by groups like NSBE is what is the role of the Black college vs the white college in the preparation of Black technical leaders? We can answer this question as W.E.B. DuBois did --

"Theoretically, the Negro needs neither segregated nor mixed schools. What he needs is education. What he must remember is that there is no magic in either mixed or segregated schools. A mixed school with poor and unsympathetic teachers, with hostile public opinion, and no teaching concerning Black folk is bad."¹⁶

Echoing Dr. DuBois' sentiments was the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, who in 1965 said --

"The so-called American Negro ... needs even more than equal education. He needs superior

¹⁴ Workforce 2000 report

¹⁵ B.G. Foster, G. Jackson, W.E. Cross, B. Jackson, and R. Hardiman, *Workforce Diversity and Business*, Training and Development Journal, April 1988, p. 38.

¹⁶ W.E.B. DuBois, *Does the Negro Need Separate Schools*, 1936.

*education to that which is ruling the nations of the earth today."*¹⁷

Taking it a step further, Carter G. Woodson noted that --

*"Most of what [white] universities have offered as language, mathematics, and science may have served a good purpose, but much of what they have taught as economics, history, literature, religion, and philosophy is propaganda and cant that involves a waste of time and misdirected the Negroes thus trained." Woodson also cites examples still appropriate today, where business schools teach the psychology and economics of Wall Street, i.e., we are taught how to manage other people's money as employees, but rarely are students taught how to make money themselves. "The mere imparting of information is not education. Above all things, the effort must result in making a man think and do for himself just as the Jews have done in spite of universal persecution," Woodson noted. In addition, Blacks need an education that doesn't study our people as a "problem" or dismisses us as of little consequence.*¹⁸

In this sense, I agree with Woodson and DuBois. As a product of two white universities, I believe the benefits available for Blacks on large white campuses, such as advanced research, larger equipment budgets, more choice among curricula need to be maintained as a viable option. However, in reality 70% of all Black engineering students are enrolled at historically white colleges but 50% of all Black engineers graduate from historically Black engineering schools, according to the NTA. The bottom line is: Black colleges continue to produce most of our leaders. Considering their limited resources, this makes them the most productive element in our nation for educating Blacks.

Black universities also take on the challenge and succeed where the public school system fails. They succeed in developing the "average performer" from marginal high school skill levels to the levels normally expected of a college graduate. Of possibly more long-range significance, they identify and personally nurture the top 10-25% of their students toward world class academic and professional excellence, something the white university is ill-equipped to identify and usually lacking in developmental interest. They accomplish both these goals by focusing on the student first (instead of only research and publication), by personal attention, instilling a sense of pride, and by displaying positive role models.

The top Black students from white universities excel in spite of the university's nonchalance, not because of the the kind of nurturing he or she may have received at a Black college. While those that survive this steeple chase may be more equipped experientially to deal with the hard cold world of corporations, we cannot forget that the number of survivors is relatively small. (And, many of the survivors do so at the expense of a permanently damaged self-esteem.)

Considering these facts, the African community as a whole can only conclude that we cannot

¹⁷ Muhammad Speaks, 1965.

¹⁸ Carter G. Woodson, *The Miseducation of the Negro*, AMS Press, 2nd. ed., 1977, originally published in 1933.

afford to be without or to relinquish control of Black American universities. As the Jews have Brandeis, as the Irish Catholics have Notre Dame, as white Protestants have Harvard, and as the Mormons have Brigham Young, the worldwide African community must control and develop (but not restrict entry to) Howard, Fisk, Morehouse, Prairie View, Spellman, and North Carolina A&T.

What is an Appropriate Education?

However, there are some cautionary notes.

First, Black colleges, as our primary production facility for future leaders, must insist on world-class academic excellence. The introduction of integration opened more options for talented Black youth, that group called the "Talented Tenth" by Dr. DuBois. Being able to compete for and retain these stars must be uppermost in the minds of the administrators if our schools are to be world-class. [In my opinion, African-Americans have spent far too much of our limited resources on the problems of the bottom 10% at the expense of the opportunities of the top 25%.]

Secondly, Black colleges must prepare its graduates for a changing economic world. The corporation of the future is likely to experience an accelerated rate of change. Competition will be increasingly global in scope. Costs will need to be cut, non-productive plants and processes overhauled, organizations will become leaner and flatter, and non-productive people will not be tolerated. Finding better ways to target products and service offerings to finer segments will require more and better information in a timely fashion.

Business functions that were once valued for their unique skill sets will become more routine and automated. Technology will continue to increase its role as an augments of existing processes and as a lever, opening the gates to the new unforeseen markets and opportunities. As American industry faces the growing challenge to its traditional leadership, there will be an increased need to concentrate less on cost-based competition and more on competitive advantages as a result of applying new technologies to old problems in creative ways. The demands of the future will require a technical base, plus the ability to think creatively, and the skills to effectively deal across multiple cultures in a team setting.

The minimally structured organization of the future will require people with the following attributes:¹⁹

1. Interpersonal communications skills,
2. Tolerance for ambiguity, change, and environmental flux,
3. Self-management and self-motivation,
4. Ability to handle multiple tasks simultaneously,
5. Knowledge integration skills (instead of specialists in facts),
6. The ability to add value to existing information,
7. Persuasive communications skills (written and verbal),

¹⁹ Certain concepts adapted from N. Muller and R.P. Davidson, *The Impact of Information, The decade ahead*, Procom Enterprises Magazine, June 1990, p. 42.

8. The ability to separate sense from nonsense.

Third, we must teach our people to think, create, and produce for themselves. This will provide an unprecedented degree of independence and flexibility from the vagaries of the corporate marketplace, which will certainly continue to be in a state of structural and technological upheaval, trapping those with narrow skill sets (those who were trained for a job but not "educated" in the broader sense) in a declining spiral of opportunity.

Finally, Black universities must heed the advice of Carter G. Woodson and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and not merely emulate "*an antiquated [educational] process that does not hit the mark even for the white man.*" We must compete with the best institutions in the world, while adding unique value for our own people. That unique value will be a result of developing and carrying out a program of our own that breaks the chains of mental slavery and prepares our leaders to deal with the harsh realities of institutional racism in a productive way, instead of fooling them into ignoring it based on some delusion that the society is equal and just.

Industry: The Honeymoon's Over

Adding to the complicated picture of Black professional advancement is a specter well known to those of us working in industry. Most of the Black engineers working today were products of the 60s, 70s, and early 80s -- a time of rapid advancement and a belief in unilinear economic tides. Just at the time when Blacks were reaching corporate maturity and a critical mass, we found ourselves caught up in an economic traffic jam filled with corporate downsizing, bankruptcies, buyouts, and decreased management opportunities. (For example, although Black women have made tremendous strides in managerial and technical fields, they still represent only 0.9% of corporate officers.)

We also witnessed a strange dichotomy. One would have hoped that most Americans would have hailed Black achievements resulting from hard work, dedication, education, and to a certain extent, affirmative action programs. Rather, after an initial patronizing surprise, it seems that America deems it abnormal when large numbers of Blacks begin surpassing many whites in business, education, and government. Instead of reinforcing a successful formula, America seems to treat the possibility of widespread Black competence as a threat, indeed even un-American, and seems to prefer policies that condone Black ignorance instead of initiative.

Those of us who attempted the entrepreneurial route found that capital is hard to come by and that, many times, our own people don't support us. Consider how the total value of Black owned businesses today is estimated at only \$12.4 billion, roughly equivalent to just one Digital Equipment Corporation.

The Talented Tenth (With Their Heads Screwed on Right)

We need to rededicate our minds, bodies, finances, and collective spirit to face the challenges of duality. Just as multi-tasking computers do, we must stress our own technical development so that with excellence we buy our freedom -- permanently -- and we must simultaneously struggle to oppose the evil insensitivity and ignorance that eats the Black community alive like a cancer from within and the battering ram of backward looking leaders (Black and white) that threaten us externally.

We will be busy from now on; too busy to worry about the mostly insincere promises of America's slogans. Black Americans will have to be the ones to assume the responsibility for the care and feeding of Black America.

We will be busy helping our communities, as we have helped corporate America, with our business and technical expertise. We will need to recognize that the African American economy is worth over \$210 billion, making it the 14th largest world economic power -- larger than Poland, the former East Germany, Saudi Arabia, and other major industrial nations. If such economic powers can feed themselves, educate their own people, provide jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities, defend themselves, and run their own hospitals, then so can we.

We will clearly understand that political presence without economic strength is a hollow victory that forces us to relinquish control of our institutions to others. This cannot be tolerated! This is a sensitive subject, but let's face reality here. I don't know about you, but pounding in my chest is the specter of the majority of my people, fending for themselves in a foreign economic system, learning that the rules change in mid-game, seeing targets that always remain just out of their reach, and blindly following the lead of national politicians who now blatantly ignore their issues but clearly expect their votes. (Because in most election years, both national political parties generally give Blacks a choice between tweedle-dum and tweedle-dee, between the frying pan and the fire, between the devil and Satan, and we are expected -- indeed encouraged by weak-kneed, handkerchief-head, okee-doke, archaic leadership - - to choose between the lesser of two evils, neither of which have our interests at heart.)

We will also need to learn a few things from the Koreans, Jews, Japanese, Chinese, and Arabs about turning money over in our communities. (I've heard Tony Brown cite Black dollar turnover in the community as less than one time, where other groups have internal turnover rates of up to 12 times.) Of course, we will continue to sell our products, services, intellect, and skills on the open market to the highest bidder regardless of race, but we need to negotiate from positions of strength. Although we may continue to work in the mainstream corporate world, our hearts and long-term goals will be rooted in the best interests of the total African community -- not in the best interests of unknown owners to the detriment of our people.

As Booker T. Washington would state it:

"We will do common things in an uncommon manner. We will do uncommon things that will be demanded by others. We will produce what other people want and must

have and in the same proportion we will be respected." ²⁰

This strategy has worked well for others. For example, according to Dr. Thomas Sowell of Stanford, when the European Jews were kept out of many occupations central to the landed economy of feudalism, they were forced into commercial and industrial occupations peripheral to feudalism but central to later emerging capitalism, giving Euro-Jews an historic advantage from which they still benefit. They bought their freedom with their only resources --- valuable skills. ²¹ Here in America, when Jews weren't admitted to country clubs, they didn't grovel and whine as Blacks did with Birmingham's Shoal Creek USPGA controversy, they built their own clubs. Other powerful minorities wouldn't dare beg beach resort merchants to take their money when the town's police force beat their heads in just one year ago, as Black folks did in Virginia Beach. When Korean merchants in New York mistreat Black customers, we shouldn't protest to have our dollars accepted. We should stop this most effective boycott in history -- against ourselves -- and develop our own economy and keep on stepping.

Likewise, Black technical professionals are the natural resources of the African-American community. Our people have very little land, no minerals, oil, or substantial stock. What we do have, however, is mind power! (And, as with any other nation's resources, the Black community has a claim on our skills by birthright.) As such, we must face up to the dual responsibility to ourselves and to that community. We need to be of such undeniable skill, intelligence, character, and value to the worldwide economic community that it cannot afford to dispense with our presence, as Booker T. Washington noted.

When we are so independent, proud, self-assured, and economically powerful, then we can wield political power such that our allegiance will be given to no one other than ourselves.

Quantum Leap: African America's High Tech Challenge

My vision is that Black technical professionals will come out of the laboratories and corporate offices to make a real difference in our communities and in our world. When we stop to consider the nature of the new economy and the complexity of simply earning a living in the future, we must be convinced of the need for broad scale Black technical literacy and active scientific participation. Considering the promises and the dangers of genetic engineering, nuclear power, space-based lasers, synthetic chemicals, massive information banks, and artificial intelligence, Blacks are further compelled to prepare.

Remember, history shows that if technology is to adversely affect anyone, it will be the poor, powerless, and those of color. For example, the Lumbee River, which provides drinking water to 100,000 mostly Black and Native American residents in the Robeson County N.C. area has been targeted for hazardous waste treatment sites at least four times since 1984. In fact, a 1987 report by the United Church of Christ noted that nationwide 60% of Black and

²⁰ Derrick Bell, *And We Are Not Saved*, Basic Books, 1989, p. 250.

²¹ Derrick Bell, *And We Are Not Saved*, Basic Books, 1989, p. 250.

Hispanic Americans live in areas with “uncontrolled toxic waste sites.”²²

Blacks, and indeed all people, must play a significant role in ensuring the appropriate uses of technology. To accomplish this we must help the Black community understand basic scientific principles and interpret the complexities of techno-political issues. This doesn't mean that everyone should become scientists or engineers, rather, it means that Black America needs to be equipped to lobby for their own best interests.

We can no longer rely on the guardians of technology alone to look out for the best interests of the public. We have too many technically competent barbarians for that. You know what I mean. These are the engineers and scientists who have stepped to the sidelines of society and have become totally out of touch with human needs. They shelve their responsibility for manufacturing nuclear weapons, for spraying genetically produced viruses on potato fields and on people, for leaving the safety of nuclear power plants to ill-informed politicians and bureaucrats, and for believing that society's broader issues are no concern of theirs. Nor can we leave our fate in the hands of the pure profiteers who, while exploiting technology, leave the interests of the public by the wayside. High technology demands an unrelenting, educated, enlightened public lead by socially responsible leaders as its watchdog.

Although we certainly will be aggressive capitalists, our historic struggle and the learning behind it will not allow us to forget our tradition of humanitarian values. We will not practice capitalism in the manner of America's majority. We African American technical professionals must go beyond just elevating our status to join the exploiters. We don't want to be the exploiting rich rather than the exploited poor, the politically powerful rather than the pitifully powerless, the influential and prestigious rather than the ignored and forgotten, as Professor Bell notes.²³

We can't afford to sit on the sidelines of education, politics, technology, or economics. Paraphrasing Professor Bell, our people helped build this country. We fought in its wars, sweated in its factories and fields, and suffered its indignities. Out of the anguish of our lives we have given the nation a language and a music that vitalized its culture. We are now giving it our creative and technical talents. For too long, our people's reward has been underpayment, overwork, and stolen recognition. We deserve, we want, and we are determined to have a share of America's dividends adequate to compensate for our gifts and our burdens.²⁴ For Black America and for those of us who have and will beat the odds in a dual reality, abstention is not a viable option! I hope that you will join me in taking up the challenge and aggressively moving forward.

Thank you.

²² *Emerge*, Oct. 1990, pp. 33-34.

Biography

Blake White is a Product Marketing Manager for data communications networks with a major computer company. He is also a freelance writer and Principal Consultant for Strategic Systems, Inc., based in San Francisco. Mr. White's management textbook, **THE TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT PROCESS: A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR MANAGING TECHNICAL INNOVATION**, was published by Quorum Books in 1988. Other publications to his credit cover such topics as space industrialization, energy alternatives, technical literacy, humanistic technology, and the social impact of technology on the African community.

Mr. White's career also includes over 12 years of management and technical positions with Procter & Gamble, Hewlett-Packard, Digital Equipment Corporation, and Apple Computer. He is a graduate of North Carolina State University with a BS in Industrial Engineering, an MBA with a concentration in Management Information Systems from Xavier University (Ohio), and he has done additional research on the societal impact of technical innovation at Xavier.

Active in the community, White was a board member of the National Technical Association and has served on the Cincinnati Environmental Advisory Council and the North Carolina Human Relations Commission (Cabarrus County Chapter).