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"To Tell The Truth": Self-Censorship and Public Discourse with Particular
    Reference to the Problem of Political Discourse among Afro-Americans

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I. INTRODUCTION

This is a summary sketch of a work-in-progress, at the juncture of
economics and politics. It is motivated by what seems to me to be a puzzle
concerning the contemporary political life of black Americans, though my
ultimate aim is much more ambitious. I intend eventually to extend methods of
analysis familiar to modern microeconomics into the realm of politics, in
order to understand a particular kind of political market failure--that
involving what I call "truncated political discourse," a self-induced
limitation within a polity on the range of subjects which are considered
admissable to public debate.

In doing so I rely heavily on the ideas of Albert Hirschman, who
pioneered this kind of analysis in his important book Exit, Voice, and
Loyalty. I also make use of the work on "market signalling" of Michael
Spence, and of the brilliant analysis of tacit bargaining and the "problem of
intersubjectivity" in games with limited communication among players advanced
in Thomas Schelling's seminal The Strategy of Conflict. The operative concept
which I will be exploiting in the analysis sketched below is the notion of
uncertainty concerning the underlying values and beliefs of participants in
political debate, and the consequent need for participants to "signal" their
values by adopting positions, and avoiding the expressions of certain
positions, so as to convey the proper "image" to those listening in. The
typical citizen, listening to the public expressions of politicians, is
concerned about more than the specific contents of the messages communicated
in the debate or speech at hand. He/she is also interested in discerning the
larger "vision," "commitments," and "values" of the speaker. The positions
taken, ideas expressed, even the choice of words used to express those ideas
can serve as indicators, or "signals" to the listener about these larger,
underlying views and beliefs of the speaker.

II. Aspects of Political Competition

Indeed, some issues can become, in Schelling's terminology, "focal
points"--commonly understood shorthand indicators of the larger philosophy of
the political speaker, which everyone knows (and everyone knows that everyone

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knows ...) serve this function. Thus, a politician's position on abortion, or affirmative action, or sanctions against South Africa, or a gay rights bill may be taken as evidence of his/her respect for women's rights, or belief in equal racial opportunity, or commitment to oppose Apartheid, or opposition to discrimination against homosexuals. For some politicans, their subjective opposition to the consensus views on these issues may be overridden by their desire to avoid being labelled as anti-woman (anti-black, anti-gay, anti-farmer, etc.) For others, the use of the terminology "Star Wars" instead of "Strategic Defense Initiative," or of the words "reverse discrimination" instead of "affirmative action" may be a choice of as substantial political import as the concrete arguments they advance in favor of, or opposition to the policies themselves.

Political life is full of such symbolic issues. Debates about the most important of subjects are often "distorted" by the need for participants to avoid "giving the wrong impression"--not wanting to appear "soft on communism," or "indifferent to the plight of the homeless," or too "lenient on criminals," etc. And when such symbolic politics is at work, there is usually an element of consensual understanding which supports it--that is, there is a reinforcing mutuality of expectations underlying the use of the symbol, a tacit understanding that taking a particular stand on this issue "signals" that one has a certain underlying set of values. The university official knows that opposition to the disinvestment of securities in corporations with assets in South Africa implies a "softness on apartheid" in the minds of his student body, the students know this too, the official knows that the students know, the students know that the official knows of the students' presumption that official recalcitrance is a signal of sympathy for evil, and so on. When such an understanding is widely and commonly held, the pressure on those genuinely in sympathy with the aspirations of South African blacks who nevertheless regard disinvestment as an unwise policy, to capitulate to the convention and register their support for the policy so as to avoid being associated with those on "the wrong side of history," can be very great indeed. An issue like the Equal Rights Amendment can become more important for its role as a shorthand communicator of the larger (and necessarily unobservable) philosophy of a state legislator regarding the proper role of women in modern society, than for the particular legal significance of the amendment's provisions. The establishment of some political positions as "focal points," commonly understood as indicators of more subtle and complicated positions, depends upon it becoming "common knowledge" that others in the polity view the issues in this way.

An early work which shares the spirit of this inquiry and which can be used to further illustrate my general idea (though advanced primarily as an economic model) is Harold Hotelling's paper [cite??] on spatial competition among duopolists: two vendors on a linear "beach," in competition with each other for the patronage of customers distributed uniformly along the beach, will tend to cluster together at the mid-point ofthe beach. Neglecting price competition and looking strictly at location this result is immediate, since each vendor can see that a move toward the competitor's location will win some of the competition's customers without losing any of his own, while if the vendors are located together at some point other than the middle of the distribution, either could gain by moving slightly in the direction of the

mid-point. The immediate political application of this result is the prediction that two competing political parties will tend to cluster together in the center of the ideological spectrum prevalent among the electorate--that the result of competition for votes is to undermine the differences in expressed views among the parties. Again, the reasoning is that a move toward the center picks-up some of the opponent's supporters without losing any of one's own base.

Notice though (as is well known) that the locational equilibrium among Hotelling's duopolists is inefficient, in that the central clustering of the vendors does not minimize overall "transport costs" of the customers arrayed on the beach. (Nor does the central clustering in ideological positioning of political parties best serve the representational interests of the members of a polity.) It is not hard to see that, given a uniform distribution of customers, locating the two vendors at one-quarter and three-quarters of the length of the beach will minimize the total amount of walking among customers. Were the duopolists able to collude among themselves, agreeing to share the joint profits from servicing the customers, they would settle upon this optimal configuration. Moreover, this configuration would also (it may be seen with a little thought) minimize the opportunity for any third party to find a profitable point of entry into the market.

The intuition from Hotelling's location model for the outcome of political competition has some lessons for the problems with which I am mainly concerned here. Parties in competition should be pushed toward the center of the electorate, Hotelling's model suggests; the position of a given party should represent something like the central tendency among the views of those supporting the party. Extremists ought to find themselves facing great difficulty in gaining broad support, and should be observed to be confined to the fringe of the electorate. Yet, there are some good reasons for thinking that this intuition--this "central tendency" result, is flawed. First, as some political analysts have observed [cite??], party activists, those who volunteer their time and energy to work in campaigns, solicit or provide financial support, build organizations capable of mobilizing grass roots support, etc., are more likely to be drawn from the more extreme wings of the parties in competition. "Movements" most energize the deepest concerns of their activists in order to bring forth the commitment and fervor which their success will require. Thus, maintenance of the loyalty of the activists, an important asset for success in the larger competition, may require the party to adopt positions at some distance from the center of the distribution of views among the general electorate, or indeed among those inclined to support the party's cause. A common observation is that the candidate who wins his party's presidential nomination has to take more extreme positions in order to do so (necessary to attract the support of the most active members of the party) than he/she would take in the general election campaign. Political scientist Jennifer Mansbridge has recently argued [cite??] that the campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment was lost in part because the women most active in support of the amendment tended to be drawn from the more extreme wing of the feminist movement and were not fully representative of the entire popu- lation of women who supported ERA. Many other examples could be cited.

Second, and more pertinent to my concerns here, is the observation that a candidate currently located in the center of the distribution of opinion among

voters, may not most effectively deter entry from a competitor by maintaining this central position. It is entirely possible, I suggest, for a political spokesperson to drift leftward (or rightward) from center without attracting entry, if the electorate would view the entry of an opponent to the incumbent's left (or right) as a "signal" of the entrant's underlying, unobservable political values. (E.g., for some time after it was obvious that Senator Joseph McCarthy was engaged in a campaign of demogoguery, he was nevertheless immune from serious public criticism by established political leaders because, arguably, the very act of publicly criticizing him could be successfully associated with being "soft on communism." Similarly, as I will argue at greater length in the sequel, racialist demogogue Louis Farrakahn was insulated from public criticism by established black politicians due to a similar concern that the expression of such criticism be taken by the black electorate as a signal of a certain kind of "softness.") That is, an incumbent who becomes "off center" may be protected from competition by the tendency of the electorate to infer something undesirable about the entrant from the very fact that the entrant's challenge comes from a particular political direction. I believe this "signalling" phenomenon regarding the initiation of political challenges is very powerful, and explains much about the contemporary composition of political leadership among Afro-Americans. I will offer examples to illustrate this hypothesis in the sequel. First, however, I will turn to a discussion of Hirschman's important notion of "voice."

III. Exit, Voice and Public Deliberation

As mentioned in the introduction, in addition to advancing a general theory of "signalling" in political competition, I propose to undertake here an analysis of the role of public discourse in the development of racial advocacy in contemporary American politics. By "public discourse" I refer to the public exchange of ideas, arguments and opinions about a problem or issue of mutual concern, through which a range of options for addressing the problem or issue are identified, and courses of action ultimately settled upon. By "racial advocacy" I mean the various efforts to advance the interests of black Americans within the larger American polity which have been, and are being, undertaken by a host of organizations and individuals who influence public policy through the courts, electoral politics, and the media.

My principal thesis is that, for a variety of reasons which have been somewhat elliptically and formalistically alluded to above, the public conversations which we Americans are able to sustain concerning the problem of racial inequality in the United States are censored in such a way as to inhibit a consideration by advocates of the full range of available argument and opinion as to what constitutes "the interests of blacks," and how those interests might best be pursued. As a result of this truncated public discourse, I will submit, racial advocacy has been rendered less effective than it might have been, or indeed, might yet be.

I begin with a consideration of the work of economist Albert Hirschman. In his justly famous Exit, Voice and Loyalty, Hirschman distinguishes two basic methods by which members can act on dissatisfaction about the quality of service rendered by organizations with which they are associated. They can "exit," leaving the organization for a competitive alternative, "voting with

their feet," or they can exercise "voice," complaining about what they find unsatisfactory, working "within the system" for change. The process of competition, dear to the hearts of most economists, mainly involves the exercise of the "exit" option, as competitive firms seek, through the provision of high quality products and services at the lowest possible price, to induce their customers to remain, and to attract the patronage of those served by others.

But the important innovation of Hirschman's work lies in his recognition that, for many types of organizations, "exit" is less important than "voice" as a way of coping with organizational failure. Much of what constitutes politics in democratic societies centers on the exercise of "voice" by members concerned with the formulation of government policies. Often it will be very costly to effect control of organizational performance through the "exit" option, and "voice" is sometimes the more efficient method of stimulating needed change. This is particularly so when there are substantial, irreversible and non-transferable investments associated with organizational member-ship, as is the case for example in a marriage, or a business partnership. In such instances "exit" becomes an option of last resort, because members will seek to avoid the loss of their sunk investments. "Exit" may also fail as a corrective device when the organization's membership is heterogeneous, that is when sensitivity to deterioration in the quality of performance and/or knowledge about how to correct such deterioration is unevenly distributed among members of the organization. In this instance, if "exit" is the only viable means of responding to organizational failure, the exit may be highly selective--those members who leave first are likely to be those best situated to recognize and to help remedy whatever has gone wrong. (Because, for instance, more "able" organization members, who can contribute most to reform, can also be expected to have a greater number of alternative opportunities. This is a key aspect of the problem of "brain drain" from third world coun-tries.) The absence of effective "voice" could then imply a low level of performance across the board, notwithstanding the occurence of vigorous competitive "exit" from one organization to another.

Thus Hirschman stresses that efficiency can require, within the same organization, both "exit" and "voice" to be employed in response to performance problems, and that these two modes can interact in interesting ways. For example, the existence of a credible threat to "exit" will serve to make "voice" more effective by giving those making the complaint more leverage with those controlling performance. Yet when "exit" is too readily available, the functional contribution of "voice" may be lost altogether. There is in gen-eral some optimal propensity to "exit," neither so great that those with some-thing to say leave before it can be effectively communicated, nor so small that complainants can safely be ignored by those empowered to make organiza-tional policy.

To approach this optimal propensity of "exit" and "voice," it is necessary that members be willing to delay their departure from the organization in the face of unsatisfactory performance. With other things taken as equal, we may regard an individual's "propensity to exit" from an organization as an inverse measure of that individual's "loyalty" to the organization. "Loyalty" is thus defined as a willingness to "fight" over

organizational policy, rather than "switch" to another organization. Thus, in addition to its _ethical_ value, "loyalty" can be a highly _functional_ human characteristic, when present in not excessive degree, which by temporarily forestalling "exit" buys time for "voice" to do its work.

But "loyalty" can also be a problem for organizational performance. It is entirely possible that what one might call "blind loyalty" would prove to be highly dysfunctional, by constraining the exercise of valuable leadership within the organization and permitting the suppression of such limited "voice" as would otherwise be forthcoming. I have in mind the circumstance where uncritical "loyalists" (guardians of the "true faith," etc.) regard the expression of dissenting opinion by members as traitorous conduct, undermining their "trust" in the complainant, and weakening the ties which make "the party" (say) an effective political instrument. This is, one suspects, a condition more likely to be observed when an organization is in decline, or when it confronts a dangerous external threat. Suspicion by "loyalists" of internal critics will be greatest when the criticism draws on some aspects of the philosophy of the opposing organizations. (There is, by the way, a third alternative besides either "exit" or "voice," namely "complacency." Confronted with unsatisfactory leadership but unable to effectively voice complaint without drawing down on themselves the accusation of disloyalty members, while refusing to leave the organization, may simply avoid engagement in debate about policy, thus depriving the group of their wisdom.)

It is in this sense that I mean to speak of "loyalty" as a constraint on effective leadership. For an organization which has experienced a reversal of its fortunes, a reversal not due to chance or events beyond members' control, but rather to the objective failure of the policies and programs chosen by organizational leaders, it is vital that there occur a critical discourse among members regarding what went wrong and how things might be improved. This, I suggest, is especially so when the competitive forces associated with "exit" are not available. In such a situation effective leadership requires creating an environent where critical intellectual exchange can occur without it undermining the basis for cooperative association among organization members. (That is, one must somehow insulate the critic from the inference about his/her underlying values which the "true believers" are inclined to make, at least for sufficient time for an objective evaluation of the critics' arguments to be undertaken.) Loyalists' suspicion of disagreement makes this more difficult to achieve. The natural distrust of those espousing what had formerly been regarded as heretical thoughts must somehow be suspended at least long enough for there to occur a serious reflection on whether those earlier verities continue to serve the organization's best interest. This will be especially difficult when there lurk without real enemies of the organization known to hold views similar to those espoused by internal critics of the failed policies.

Indeed, when members differ in their ability to perceive and correct mal-performance, and when the demand for "loyalty" is inversely related to the level of organizational performance, then the possibility of a destabilizing downward spiral in organizational effectiveness presents itself. Those members with most insight into the problems will either speak-out, thereby making themselves targets of the "purge," or withdraw, depriving the

organization of its best talent. In either case, further depreciation in performance, greater demands for loyalty, and an ever more deafening silence from the most capable members is the result.

IV. The Case of Contemporary Afro-American Politics

What has all of this to do with the situation of black Americans? The connection is direct and important. For, if we think of the collection of black Americans as a group with some common interests, seeking to cope effectively with a set of severe social and political problems, the foregoing discussion is especially relevant. "Voice" is critically important for blacks because the forces of competitive "exit" are simply not available to those group members who find themselves at odds with the policy of encumbent leadership. Political parties generally have the pressure of electoral competition, in addition to internal debate, as a spur to induce needed reform. American automakers and their workers, by losing sales and jobs to foreign competition, have been forced to face the hard choices that they might otherwise have sought to avoid. But the use of "voice" will necessarily be a much more critical vehicle for bringing about needed change in the political activities of a sub-national collectivity defined by race, religion or ethnicity. While it may not always be preferable for group members to "fight" than to "switch," there is for most members little choice in the matter.

Moreover, there has been extensive suppression of the exercise of critical "voice" within the community. Coretta Scott King, Martin Luther King's much honored widow, and his former lieutenant Andrew Young were actually booed by the black supporters of Rev. Jesse Jackson at the Democratic National Convention in 1984 because of their support for the Mondale campaign during the primaries. This behavior is not, however, a product of the recent rise to power of Republicans. Yale political scientist Adolph Reed identifies this intolerance of critical internal discourse with the cultural-historical roots of protest leadership among blacks, and argues that the growth of an electoral black leadership in the wake of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 has not led to the expected opening up of internal debate: "The long-standing antiparticipatory style of organic spokesmen has been reproduced among elective leadership, and as a result the entrenched elites have been able with impunity to identify collective racial interest with an exceedingly narrow class agenda. The main focus for practical political activity within the black community in this context must be breaking down the illusion of a single racial opinion." (Adolph Reed, The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon, Yale University Press, 1986, page 134)

This intolerance of dissent has characterized intellectual life among black Americans for some time. When Harvard Law professor Derrick Bell raised questions about the efficacy of busing as the primary remedy sought by civil rights advocates in school desegregation cases, he encountered similar treatement. When Thomas Sowell began his sustained intellectual assault on the assumptions underlying the development of civil rights advocacy in the 1970s, by pointing out that discrimination alone could not account for observed economic differences between racial groups, he was denounced (by blacks and white liberals alike) in terms so vitriolic that one would have thought "Uncle" had become his first name. When William Wilson, sociologist

at the University of Chicago, published a book whose principal argument was that poor blacks suffered more because of their class status than their race, he was denounced as a tool of conservatives, in league with those who would reenslave America's black population.

Recent history demonstrates that we are entitled to question the conception of loyalty implicit in these denunciation, and to decry the limited debate among blacks about social and political options to which it has led. The issue here is not whether the individuals subject to such attack have been treated unfairly--though it is arguable that they have. "The real issue," as Sowell has pointed out, "is whether the new McCarthyism creates an atmosphere is which only a handful of people dare to question publicly the prevailing vision. If it succeeds in discrediting ideas and facts it cannot answer, in intimidating others into silence, then the whole attempt to resolve urgent social issues will have to be abandoned to those with fashionable cliches and political cant."

V. Signalling and the Demand for Loyalty

How can this situation be explained? Why is there so little critical "voice" among blacks, despite the great need? There are, I believe, a number of factors at work. A bit of reflection on the history of black Americans provides some hints as to why the discussion of values and norms has been such a limited part of the group's struggle for social advance. Of fundamental importance in this regard is the atmosphere of racist ideology within which blacks have had to function. From the early days of slavery and the need to fashion some justification for its practice in a democratic Christian society, but continuing into recent times, blacks have had, in various ways, to defend their basic claim to an equal humanity before the general American public. The presumed inferiority of the African was the primary rationalization of his enslavement. The social Darwinists of the last century and this one had, by finding the explanation of blacks' poverty in our culture or our genes, posed basic challenges to the integrity and self-respect of the group. The "retro-gressionists," who well into this century argued that the black population was, after emancipation, doomed to slip back into its natural state of depravity without the civilizing influence of paternalistic masters, created an environment for thoughtful blacks virtually unique among American ethnic groups.

Among the major consequences of this ideological environment has been the stifling effect that the need to refute these racist beliefs has had on the internal intellectual life and critical discourse of the black community itself. Objective assessment and discussion of the condition of the community has been made difficult for blacks because any critical discussion within the group (about problems of early unwed pregnancy or low academic performance, for example) must be guarded by conscious concern for how such discussion might be appropriated by extern-al critics, all too happy to find black spokesmen willing to provide support for their base hypotheses.

It is possible to see a general phenomenon at work here, one which will tend to limit the exercise of "voice" within a beleagured minority population. For frank, critical political discourse within a somewhat insular and

legitimately suspicious community requires trust. The nature of the external threat is such that members of the community must always be on their guard. There are those "without" who would welcome proof of the group's inferiority, who would rationalize its predicament as due to its own failings, who would roll back its progress. These forces may have supporters, witting or not, within the group itself, and members of the group know that their every public utterance must be calculated with this in mind. One cannot know with certainty, then, where a speaker is "coming from," but this in no way inhibits speculation as to his motives. Someone who speaks on behalf of the "free market," for example, or who intimates that there are deep structural problems within black communities having to do with values and attitudes, courts trouble precisely because known enemies of the group have made similar claims. Such a person risks being labelled "Uncle Tom," and being socially ostracized by the group for his deviance. In such an environment it is likely that individuals within the community will tacitly agree not to discuss certain ideas, at least not publicly, thereby impoverishing political discourse.

Moreover, tacit censorship of this sort tends to perpetuate itself, and for good reason. The very act of political speech takes on an emblematic character. Certain issues tend to become "focal points", attracting attention as key determinants of the political identity of the speaker. The willingness to engage in certain kinds of discussion becomes a "signal" as to the deeper beliefs and values of the speaker. The fact that "law and order" conservatives talk constantly about the ravages of crime within poor communities makes it difficult for someone who does not wish to be mistaken for a right-winger to urge stricter law enforcement there. When the South African government takes to using the existence of so-called "black-on-black" violence as an excuse for its political oppression, those who want to be seen by black South Africans as being "on the right side of history" will find it prudent to avoid this subject, however disturbing to them it might be.

A kind of "Gresham's Law" is at work here: When two media of exchange of different intrinsic value are circulating, e.g. unsupported government greenbacks and high quality gold coin, people will tend to horde the "good" money and trade only with the "bad" money--leading to the maxim "the bad money will drive out the good." Something similar happens with regard to political speech. "Bad" critics make it impossible for "good" people to engage in like criticism. Once the known "reactionaries" begin to take political advantage of the weaknesses and contradictions within the "progressive" ranks, it becomes impossible for "people of good will" publicly to take up such problems, and thereby help to resolve them.

Indeed, once such a tacit accord of silence is established, suspicion of those who violate it becomes justifiable; for, in a sense, the accord acts like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Given that the primary means of enforcing the accord is to socially sanction its violator, only those who place relatively little weight on social acceptance by the community in which the accord prevails--those who, therefore, are objectively less likely to share the group's prevailing conception of its interests--would be willing to breach the "implicit contract of silence." The fact that a speaker is observed to violate the accord therefore becomes a reliable "signal" that the speaker is an "enemy" of the group.

The notion of "signal" being employed here is formally identical to that introduced in the economics literature by A. Michael Spence. Spence identifies the preconditions necessary for an economic equilibrium to arise in which an observable, though perhaps intrinsically irrelevant, characteristic acts as a "signal" for an unobservable, though highly significant one. His leading example is the use of educational credentials (easy to observe though of possibly limited intrinsic value to an employer) to "signal" labor market productivity (highly important but intrinsically unobservable at the point of initial hire.) Employers, looking for workers of greater productivity, might come to rely on acquired educational credentials to "signal" the presence (or absence) of what they seek. Spence shows that such a "signalling equilibrium" is possible only if the (marginal) cost of acquiring the "signal" (educational credential, e.g.) is lower for those with an unobservable characteristic (labor market productivity) of greater value to the evaluator (prospective employer). This condition is necessary so that those with more valuable unobservable characteristics will have a greater economic incentive to acquire the "signal" than others; as a result, the "signal" will come to convey useful information about what cannot be observed.

In the context of "discourse truncation" being discussed here, "speaking out on sensitive issues from an unpopular perspective" is the "signal", while "having objectives inimical to the interest of the group" is the unobservable characteristic of interest to other members of the community. If "social sanction" is the price which community members extract of those who speak out, then it is plausible to assume that those who in fact have objectives at variance with the community's interests, will also be those for whom social ostracism by community members is a less costly event. Spence's necessary condition for a "signalling equilibrium" thus may be expected to obtain. In such a situation it is possible that the limitation on the group's discourse might live on after most individuals within the group have recognized that something is wrong. It is a situation aptly captured by the children's tale "The Emperor Has No Clothes."

Support for this explanation of limited public discourse among blacks about "the enemy within" may be found in a consideration of the long history of racial exclusion which black Americans have suffered. This has led to the development of a sense of embattlement, causing blacks to place group solidarity above mere philosophical differences when deciding whom to support within their community. Black ideologues of the left (or, for that matter, of the right--Louis Farrakhan, for example) are almost immune from challenge by another black, since it is precisely in ideological terms that whites most often oppose them. By posing the challenge, the black critic seems to ride with whites against his own race. A dissident black politician may, for example, forfeit black political support if, as a consequence of his criticism of incumbent black leadership, he expands his appeal to white voters. The opposition of whites to the black incumbent is taken by other blacks as proof that the incumbent is "sticking it to the man" and thus deserves support. The black challenger thus winds up appearing, in the eyes of his own people, to be an agent of forces inimical to their interest.

Consider, e.g., the response of black Congressman Charles Rangel (D-NY) to pressure from Jews and others that he renounce the statements made by

Minister Farrakhan to an almost totally black, overflow crowd at Madison Square Garden on Oct. 7, 1985. Farrakhan is reported to have said, to wild cheers, on this occasion: "'The scriptures charge your people (the Jews) with killing the prophets of God.' He contended that God had not made the Jewish people pay for such deeds. However, if something were to happen to him, then God would make the Jews pay for all the prophets killed from biblical times to the present. He went on: 'You cannot say "never again" to God because when God puts you in the oven, "never again" don't mean a thing. If you fool with me, you court death itself.' And concerning black leaders Farrakhan added: 'when a leader sells out the people, he should pay a price for that. Should a leader sell out the people and live?'" [Julius Lester, "The Time Has Come," The New Republic, Oct. 28, 1985, p.12]

Writing five days later in the Washington Post, Rangel declared to be "most objectionable" the assumption that he "and other elected leaders who happen to be black have a special obligation to issue denunciations" of such remarks from Farrakhan. He likened efforts to get him to make a statement to the requirement that he carry a "South African-like passbook stamped with issued denunciations" of the Muslim leader. ("Intimidated by Farrakhan? No." W. Post, Oct. 12, 1985, p. A23) It is a measure of the great pressure which this Member of the U.S. House of Representatives was under that he would resort to such a transparently faulty attempt to evade his responsibilities as the principal national political spokesman for the blacks of Harlem. There were many thousands of his constituents in that auditorium, cheering on Mr. Farrakhan. To whom else ought concerned observers have gone to ascertain whether such sentiments as were expressed there represented the views of the majority of blacks in New York? Were Rangel the black representative of a farm district in Iowa one might take more seriously his cry of "South Africa-like" racism at being asked to respond. As it was, his talk of politicians who just "happen to be black" seemed, at best, disingenuous. He would, after all, be among the first to insist that blackness is a primary qualification for one who would occupy the seat once held by Adam Clayton Powell. Surely this example illustrates how restricted is critical political debate in public among black American leaders. For while Congressman Rangel, and many others, take strong issue with much of the philosophy of Minister Farrakahn, he is evidently reluctant to give voice to that disagreement.

Moreover, there can be little doubt that the electoral success of the Reagan administration has exacerbated this problem of discourse among blacks. For the apparent absence of any felt need for the federal government to artic-ulate a policy on the continuing problem of the black underclass, as well as the highly publicized opposition of the administration to the conventional program of the civil rights leadership has deepened the sense of embattlement which blacks have historically felt. When addressing racial issues Reagan administration officials tend to talk in formalistic terms about the principle of "color blind state action." Its civil rights officials absurdly claim that they are the true heirs to Martin Luther King's moral legacy, for it is they who remain true to his "color-blind" ideal--as if King's moral leadership consisted of this and nothing else. Its spokesmen point to the "trickling down" of the benefits of economic growth as the ultimate solution to these problems; it courts the support and responds to the influence of segregationist elements; it remains at this writing without a positive program

of action aimed at narrowing the yawning chasm separating the black poor from the rest of the nation.

In other words, the Reagan administration has made itself into a prototypical example of the antagonistic "outsider" whose positions become emblematic of anti-black sentiment, making it difficult for those who want not to be so regarded to effectively and critically address issues on which the administration has spoken. This government has failed to engage the problem of black poverty with the seriousness and energy which it requires. It has permitted ideology to stand in the way of the formulation of practical programs which might begin to chip away at this dangerous problem. It has mustered greater public relations skills in defense of segregation academies than have been deployed to convince black Americans that addressing this life-threatening circumstance is among its highest priorities. This lack of a positive, high-priority response from the administration to what is now a longstanding, continuously worsening social problem has allowed politically marginal, intellectually moribund and morally bankrupt elements among blacks to insulate themselves from internal criticism, and thereby to retain a credibility and force in American political life far beyond that which their accomplishments could otherwise support.

For example, after Mr. Reagan's triumphant reelection in 1984 there ensued a period of what can only be termed "black leader-bashing," as a number of administration officials, including the President himself, publicly attacked the traditional civil rights leadership. U.S. Civil Rights Commission chairman Clarence Pendleton spoke of key black leaders "taking their people into another political Jonestown," referring to the nearly 1,000 followers of the Rev. Jim Jones who perished in the mass murders and suicides in Guyana in 1978. Mr. Reagan later said that some black leaders were "protecting ... (their) rather good positions" by keeping "their constituency aggrieved and believing that they have a legitimate complaint." He further suggested that if blacks "ever become aware of the opportunities that are improving, they might wonder whether they need some of those organizations." He has steadfastedly refused to meet with these leaders, allowing them to claim (with some credibility among blacks) that the administration is indifferent to their concerns. Perhaps needless to say, these statements and actions have made it very much more difficult for blacks who share some of the President's concerns about incumbent leadership effectively to advocate their case within the black community. [See my "Drowning New Black Voices in Partisanship," The Wall Street Journal, Feb. 12, 1985.]

It is a measure of the political ineptitude in racial affairs of this administration that many who are put-off by such leadership are reluctant to criticize it, precisely because they do not wish to be identified with administration policy on racial matters. For example, those who advocate the positions of self-help and greater personal responsibility within the black community have found their positions undermined by traditional black activist who can say: "But your argument plays into the hands of those who are looking for an excuse to abandon the black poor." Self-help advocates have no credible response to this argument. Thus, the deteriorating quality of our public debate about civil rights matters--the increasing belligerence and polarization to which some administration figures have contributed--has worked

to impede the internal realignemnt of black political strivings which is now, arguably, so crucial to the interest of the inner-city poor, and the political health of the nation.

VI. Limited Discourse on Behavioral Problems among Blacks

One particularly important result of the "discourse truncation" problem is that there has developed a tendency to avoid any public discussion of the role that normative factors--the values, preferences and attitudes of poor blacks--might play in the perpetuation of poverty within the group. Though this is understandable, it is unfortunate, because there really is no other manner in which such matters can enter the public discussion effectively. For government to attempt as a matter of public policy to mandate, or even to discuss, what the values and beliefs of any segment of the society should be, is to embark on a course fraught with political, constitutional, and moral pitfalls. Moreover, concerned external observers of the black community are in no position to raise such issues if they desire to maintain their credibility as "liberals." Only blacks can talk about what other blacks "should" do, think, value, etc., and expect to be sympathetically heard. That is, only blacks can effectively provide moral leadership for their people. To the extent that such leadership is required, therefore, it must come from within.

For example, in January 1986 CBS aired a documentary special moderated by Bill Moyers called "The Vanishing Black Family." It sensitively described the lives of three young families in Newark, N.J., the unwed mothers and their children struggling to survive on the meager public provision available to them, the unemployed fathers and their desultory lives in the ghetto subculture. One of the most striking figures was a young man named Timothy, the attractive, articulate father of the three children in one of the families featured. Timothy, having fathered, in all, six children by four different women, expressed no regret about the fact that he supported none of them. He proudly bragged about his sexual prowess. When asked about his obligation to the women who bore his children he said: "That's on them ... I ain't gonna let no woman stand in the way of my pleasures." He explained that he would like to marry the mother of three of his children, but only when he could afford "a big wedding ... with all the trimmings." He seemed not even to be trying to provide financial help to his children, explaining: "What I don't do, the government does." Evidently a bright and artistically talented young man, Timothy spent his time "on the streets," with no visible means of support. He took great pride in his children though, noting that, should they grow-up to accomplish notable things in their lives, he would be able to vicariously experience a feeling of achievement thereby.

For many viewers, black and white, Timothy symbolized a great problem in the black ghettos--male irresponsibility toward their progeny. His attitudes and values, and not simply the fact of his unemployment, seemed to be part of the problem. Indeed, the comments of the mothers who appeared in the documentary confirmed this judgement; the mother of Timothy's children openly complained to Moyers about his lack of support. Nevertheless, some influential blacks came to Timothy's defence, and denounced Moyers for projecting a false and damaging image of black family life in his program.

Nationally syndicated columnist Carl Rowan was typical of these. Referring to the Moyers' program as "just more slander of the black family," he declared himself "tired of seeing the black family analyzed," and worried that such analyses would only be used as an excuse for mean-spirited social policies. Rowan unabashedly defended Timothy as a victim, saying that he was "just this side of slavery," comparing his circumstance to that of a handicapped child, suggesting that he deserved our compassionate understanding rather than our condemnation. Rowan, caught-up in the ostentatious exhibition of his finely honed moral outrage concerning American racism, found himself without the capacity to judge Timothy's behavior. Being a "loyal" black, he could thus only apologize for it. He seemed not even to notice how his line of apologia implicitly devalued the efforts and sacrifices of those many black young men and women who have faced the same hardship as Timothy, but who have married, worked when they could, and struggled against the odds to give their children a better life. Rowan appeared oblivious to the fact that, by taking Timothy's behavior as beyond his control, as the necessary consequence of being born in the Newark ghetto, he was dishonoring the accomplishments of millions of working-class black Americans, and contributing to the intellectual malaise in which we blacks now find ourselves.

Even among trained social scientists, one sees evidence of the intellectual failure about which I am concerned here. In December of 1984 so-called "subway vigilante" Bernard Geotz shot four black youths who he claimed were about to accost him on a New York City subway. He instantly became a folk hero among many urban dwellers, black and white, living in fear of victimization. In the ensuing public discussion of the problem of urban crime one of the most eminent living black social scientists, Kenneth Clark, offered the theory that in today's big cities it is not poor young men, but instead "society", that is the "real mugger." Writing in the New York Times, Clark, while condemning the unseemly vigilante sentiments evoked by the Geotz case, ascribed to "society" responsibility for the criminal acts of urban muggers. Those committing most street crimes, he asserted, have been "mugged" themselves. They are the victims of "pervasive community, economic and educational muggings" perpetrated by a "hypocritical society," at the hands of which "their humanity is being systematically destroyed." The theft and violence which many city-dwellers fear are, for Clark, but "the inevitable criminality that comes out of the degradation of human beings."

This is a remarkable argument, not only for its questionable sociology--some impoverished urban minority populations have very low crime rates--but more significantly for what it reveals about Dr. Clark's view of the values and capacities of the inner-city poor. Like Mr. Rowan, he is willing to avoid discriminating judgments about behavioral differences among blacks in the interest of portraying the problems of the community as due to racism. Yet it is factually inaccurate and morally disturbing to say of poor black persons generally that their economic deprivation has destroyed their humanity. The majority of criminal offenses, criminologists have found, are committed by the most active 5% of offenders, whose behavior therefore cannot and should not be taken as representative of the inevitable consequences of poverty. Even in the harshest slums the vast majority of residents do not brutalize their neighbors; they can hardly be taken as aberrant exceptions to some sociological law requiring the unemployed to become "mindlessly anti-social" (Clark's usage).

Moreover, even the poor who are violent must be held responsible for their conduct. Are they not made poorer still when they are not accorded the respect inherent in the equal application of the obligations and expectations of citizenship? What is most dangerous about this "social muggings" analogy is that it invites society, blacks and whites, to see the black poor generally as morally different, socially distorted human beings. What such a construction may "achieve" by way of fostering guilt and pity among the population at large would seem to be more than offset by the extent to which it directly undermines the dignity of these persons. Yet the fact that this view is seriously and publicly proffered by such a distinguished and influential black public figure suggests the depth with which this perspective is held among contemporary black elites.

It is difficult to overemphasize the self-defeating dynamic at work here. The dictates of political advocacy require that personal inadequacies among blacks be attributed to "the system," and that emphasis by black leaders on self-improvement be denounced as irrelevant, self-serving, dishonest. Individual black men and women simply cannot fail on their own, they must be seen as never having had a chance. But where failure at the personal level is impossible, there can also be no personal successes. For a black to embrace the Horatio Alger myth, to assert as a guide to personal action that "there is opportunity in America," becomes a politically repugnant act. For each would-be black Horatio Alger indicts as inadequate, or incomplete, the deeply entrenched (and quite useful) notion that individual effort can never overcome the "inheritance of race." Yet where there can be no black Horatio Algers to celebrate, sustaining an ethos of responsibility which might serve to extract maximal effort from the individual in the face of hardship becomes impossible as well.

The disrepute among contemporary black intellectuals of the emphasis on character-building and personal imporvement associated with the philosophy of Booker T. Washington illustrtes this point. Washington, infamous for the acquiescent politics of his 1895 "Atlanta Compromise," also preached a social-cultural message to Southern black peasants to "cast down your buckets where yor are," to make personal improvement a central focus of the effort for racial uplift. W. E. B. DuBois, while rejecting Washington's politics, nevertheless accepted his social message, saying: "So far as Mr. Washington preaches Thrift, Patience,and Industrial Training for the masses, we must hold up his hands and strive with him, rejoicing in his honors and gloring in the strength of this Joshua called of God and of man to lead the headless host."

But this distinction between the political and the cultural messages of Booker T. Washington is not so often made today. The modern tendency is to dismiss both, seeing in the former only the inevitable consequence of belief in the latter. For example, in an influential essay on black leadership, historian Nathan Huggins contrasts the leadership styles of Washington and DuBois, seeing in DuBois a classical "reformist" leader, while casting Washington as an example of what he called "emblematic" leadership. Emblematic leadership was carried on by "persons of notable achievement, respect, and reputation who could be understood to speak for the race," and who acted so as to "exploit (racial) caste (by serving) as emblems" of the group.

Whereas, reformist leaders were "advocates(s) of social change," often "radicals" on poor "terms with even their (white) colleagues" in the struggle, whosought to "attack caste as reformers."

The cultural and social assumptions of these leadership styles are as important for Huggins as are their political content. Reform--fighting the system--is rightly portrayed by him as a noble activity, but he has little use for those who would hold up a standard of behavior for their brethren to follow. To do so "perpetuated assumptions of racial inferiority, he says, by implying "a recognition that the present status of blacks was marked by a lack of education, industrial skills, cultural refinements, and experience in government." (Of course, this was characteristic of the status of blacks emerging from Southern peopnage.) He seeks not simply to stress the unmet need for reform of the system of racial caste, but as well to discredit the idea that, by pointing to his own accomplishments, a black leader might have shown others how best to cope with their adversity.

For Huggins, the fact of political powerlessness obviates the possibility that legitimate leadership could address itself to the personal realm--the reformer always "trumps" the emblem, ruling-out the idea of internal reform. Washington, educated by "self-righteous Yankee missionaries who were certain of the proper formula for Negro uplift," encouraged his people in the "familiar Protestant virtues: industry, frugality, cleanliness, temperance, order, decorum and punctuality." Yet Huggins finds this focus unacceptable, for "(i)t preempted any consideration of compensation for blacks or any other group that might have been exploited unfairly in the past ... (and) in no way challenged racial caste patterns." In this view of leadership, the ongoing fact of racial caste oppression leaves little room for a black leader who would, by making discriminating judgments among the behaviors of black people, work to effect a general improvement in the values and character of individuals in the group.

It may be questioned, however, whether such a perspective actually serves the interest of the black poor. For it works directly to undermine the capacity of black communities to employ the social sanctions against undesirable behavior among blacks which may be essential to the maintenance of a healty normative climate. Application of such sanctions requires judgment of the behaviors of community members. One has ultimately to be willing to hold individuals personally accountable for their possibly deviant acts. Yet the view that all such deviance inevitably stems from systemic failures mitigates against a willingness to judge individuals, and thus to enforce communal norms.

These examples begin to convey what I mean when I speak of "loyalty" as a constraint on effective leadership among blacks. To call for "law and order" in the nation's ghettos, or to openly criticize politicians who fail to do so, is to invite (as I have now done) attack by advocates of blacks' interests, attacks which I believe are at base motivated by a sense of betrayal: such problems of the group are not to be discussed in public, at least not while whites can hear. One should put the best face on things. Yet given the extent of the problems which plague black society, especially the poorest of blacks, it is obviously necessary for writers, artists, intellectuals,

political leaders and ordinary folk openly to examine what is happening so as to formulate effective responses.

How is this to be done? A necessary first step is to understand the nature and extent of the problem, and to carefully examine its root causes and its enormous consequences. This I have undertaken at length elsewhere[2], and cannot pursue here. Suffice it to note that the difficulties about which I am concerned are cultural, as well as political. They run very deep, and will not be reversed overnight. My arguments can only hope, by dramatizing a disturbing state of affairs and offering some insight into its causes, to contribute to an ongoing process of critical examination of the state of contemporary black intellectual life.

For the fact is that we blacks have been unwilling to acknowledge the depth of behavioral pathology within the community, and unable to tolerate around us those few, black or white, who are prepared to express their outrage and concern. And the extent of the difficulty I am outlining here has not yet been fully recognized. To invoke such terms as "values," "character," or "social pathology" in speaking about some among the black poor is still today to invite the charges of racism, of "blaming the victim" and, if the speaker is black, of being an "Uncle Tom." It is a remarkable and sad fact that one still encounters the same line of argument used for decades to dismiss unpleasant truths about some blacks--namely, that acknowledging any behavioral basis for economic deprivation feeds stereotypes about blacks and provides grist for the racists' mill. It is as if the facts about inner-city life, staggeringly evident to anyone with eyes to see, could be blunted by simply banning any discussion of them from polite society. There remains a reticence among blacks, especially the elites, to judge the behavior of their fellows, and in so doing, to set and enforce standards for the community. That is to say, there is a reluctance among these elites to provide genuine leadership for their people. I claim that a false, if historically understandable, notion of "racial loyalty" lies at the root of this problem.

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[2]Loury, "Problem of Ideology ...", op. cit.