The process of nominating and confirming Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court served to underline the debate about public philosophy ongoing among black Americans. The fact is that Thomas, a black of humble origins and an avowed conservative, met with vehement opposition from much of the black leadership, as well as from other quarters. The racial aspect of the appointment"that Thomas has replaced on the Court the only other black ever to serve there"is of crucial importance to understanding the vehemence of some of the opposition. Indeed, the entire affair illustrates how powerfully two separate levels of deliberation about racial matters"that of the American polity as a whole and that of blacks by and among themselves"can interact with each other, on both sides of the political divide. The attack on Thomas from the white liberal community would have been crippled from the start without a sufficient measure of black authorization. And his nomination would surely have been defeated absent massive support for him among southern blacks, which authorized certain key votes cast on his behalf by Democratic Senators.

The replacement of Thurgood Marshall by Clarence Thomas may well prove to be an event of enormous significance for race relations in our nation-only time will tell. What is already clear is that the debate Thomas' nomination set off among blacks has taken on historic proportion. It is a debate pitting advocates of the liberal civil rights approach, for decades now the established orthodoxy among respectable exponents of black opinion, against advocates of a philosophy for black American advancement based on direct empowerment of the poor, relying significantly on self-help, and dubious about the ability of government programs to resolve the deepest problems of the black poor.
The conflict between Thomas’ black supporters and his critics recalls the epochal struggle among blacks that raged at the turn of the century between the followers, respectively, of Booker T. Washington and of W. E. B. DuBois. Washington was a conservative advocate of a philosophy of self-help; DuBois was a radical exponent of a strategy of protest and agitation for reform. While he lived, Washington’s view was the orthodoxy. He spent a considerable amount of energy seeing to it that this was the case, including using his enormous influence among whites to cut his critics off from sources of financial support. Nevertheless, in the end it was the ideas of the DuBois camp that prevailed. These ideas led to the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and provided the impetus for the decades-long legal struggle that culminated in the Brown decision.

Though it would no doubt be an over-simplification, one can see Justices Clarence Thomas and Thurgood Marshall as direct intellectual descendants of these two great black protagonists of nearly a century ago. Of course, the DuBois-Marshall view is today’s orthodoxy, defended fiercely by the civil rights establishment from the criticism of radical dissidents like Thomas, just as Washington once defended his orthodoxy, and by similar methods. But there are signs that a new era is dawning, and that, in the contemporary struggle over the ideas that will inform efforts to improve the black condition into the twenty-first century, the principles laid down by Booker T. Washington will be rediscovered and play a significant role.

What, then, are those principles? Fundamentally, they constitute an understanding about how blacks should respond to the great philosophical and political problems created by our history of degradation, more recently followed by our unequal citizenship. Translated into program, what Washington wanted to see was blacks concentrating in the main on developing their capacities to exploit such opportunity as already lay at hand, relying on the expectation that as such self-development proceeded, blacks would be in a stronger position to make a successful claim for the full rights of citizenship. He saw two factors that prevented blacks from enjoying our rightful status in American society: there were the actual defects of character manifested in patterns of behavior and ways of living that were observable among the black masses, and there were the racist attitudes of whites. He believed that blacks had both an opportunity and a duty to address the former difficulty; and that in so doing, we would go a long way toward overcoming the latter. He preached a litany of self-improvement. He emphasized Protestant virtues of thrift, industry, cleanliness, chastity, and orderliness. He urged that above all else we blacks must make ourselves useful "to our families, our neighbors, and our fellow citizens. All of this may sound quaint today, but at the time
Washington’s focus on self-help was not particularly controversial. What did stir opposition to him, however, was his rejection of mass political agitation. He thought the active pursuit of civil rights to be premature and dangerous. “Brains, property, and character for the Negro will settle the question of civil rights,” he said. “The best course to pursue in regard to the civil rights [cause] in the South is to let it alone; let it alone and it will settle itself . . . . It is the duty of the Negro to deport himself modestly in regard to political claims, depending upon the slow but sure influences that proceed from the possession of property, intelligence, and high character for the full recognition of his political rights.” Surely, said his opponents, this was madness, nothing less than an unmanly acquiescence by blacks in their own oppression. And it invited the delighted contempt of whites whose lives were made so much easier for being “let off the hook.”

Writing from Boston in 1901, William Monroe Trotter, the first black elected to Phi Beta Kappa at Harvard, denounced Washington as a traitor to the race, and called for “a black Patrick Henry” to arise who would “save his people from the stigma of cowardice . . . rouse them from their lethargy . . . and inspire [them] with the spirit of those immortal words: ‘Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death.’ “ Two years later Trotter got his wish. In his now-famous essay “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” DuBois wrote:

On the whole the distinct impression left by Mr. Washington’s propaganda is, first, that the South is justified in its present attitude toward the Negro because of the Negro’s degradation; secondly, that the prime cause of the Negro’s failure to rise more quickly is his wrong education in the past; and, thirdly, that his future rise depends primarily on his own efforts. Each of these propositions is a dangerous half-truth. The supplementary truths must never be lost sight of: first, slavery and race-prejudice are potent if not sufficient causes of the Negro’s position; second, industrial and common-school training were necessarily slow in planting because they had to await the black teachers trained by higher institutions . . . and, third, while it is a great truth to say that the Negro must strive and strive mightily to help himself, it is equally true that unless his striving be not simply seconded, but rather aroused and encouraged, by the initiative of the richer and wiser environing group, he cannot hope for a great success.

In his failure to realize and impress this last point, Mr. Washington is especially to be criticized. His doctrine has tended to make the whites, North and South, shift the burden
of the Negro problem to the Negro’s shoulders and stand aside as critical and rather pessimistic spectators; when in fact the burden belongs to the nation, and the hands of none of us are clean if we bend not our energies to righting these great wrongs.

It is not difficult to find the contemporary relevance in this classic dispute of black American political thought. To be sure, Washington’s was a different time from our own. The quality of black citizenship is now dramatically improved, due largely to the efforts of advocates working in the tradition of the NAACP. Moreover, given the political and economic forces that combined to limit economic development throughout the South in the first half of this century, and that ultimately encouraged massive migrations of blacks out of the region, one may doubt that Washington’s strategy would have “worked,” in the sense of negating the effects of these structural factors, even had it been assiduously followed.

Thus it cannot be said that history has proven Booker T. Washington to have been right, and W. E. B. DuBois to have been wrong. Yet given the way the history of American blacks has evolved, it has to be seen that the animating spirit of Mr. Washington’s philosophy now offers a sounder guide to the future for blacks than that reflected in the worldview of his critics.

Herbert Storing pointed toward this conclusion when, in 1963, he offered a defense of Washington’s position:

Yet when the harsh words have been said, when the blame is assigned, when many rights have been granted and are actually enjoyed, Washington’s soft, tough words still speak. Opportunities are limited. How well have we used those that are open? Rights are still curtailed. Have we prepared to exercise those we have? The Negro is blamed for too much of American crime. Are we nevertheless responsible for too much of it? . . . The Negro can find deficiencies . . . in every phase of American life, but his own deficiencies are not one whit removed by pointing out those of others. The Negro can serve himself, as he can serve his country, only by learning and thereby teaching the lesson that Theodore Roosevelt said was “more essential than any other for this country to learn, . . . that the enjoyment of rights should be made conditional upon the performance of duty.”
These are harsh, unpalatable words to the modern political ear, carefully attuned as it is to the possibility of giving offense. Such words were politically incorrect even thirty years ago. Still, without raising any question of the “fitness” of blacks for citizenship, it is fair to ask now about opportunities unexploited, about rights unexercised, about whether we are too much responsible for what ails our urban centers, about duty and obligation. It is fair to inquire, with the many cries for “Freedom Now!” ringing out from angry, defiant protestors on behalf of racial justice across the land, whether we have a clear conception of what this “freedom thing” really is, of what being free and responsible participants in this democratic polity actually requires of us. It is, I think, necessary to question what it takes for one to stand truly equal among one’s fellows; to explore the limits of a rights-oriented approach to the problem of inequality between racially distinct populations in our contemporary national life; to deal with issues of dignity, shame, personal responsibility, character and values, deservingness.

The necessity of raising such questions is clear from the tenor of our contemporary national (non)discourse on race. As everyone knows, there is a tremendous cultural struggle going on in national politics, manifested in disputes over abortion, capital punishment, gun control, crime, welfare, affirmative action, gay rights, school prayer, and other kindred things, many of which have a subtle racial dimension. This cultural tension is believed to exert a profound influence on presidential politics, to account for the severe disadvantage of the Democratic party in national elections in the South and West and among white voters, and to be implicated in the reaction of ethnic working class voters in the cities against racially progressive policies like housing integration, busing, quotas in municipal employment and contracting, and the like.

It is time, then, to recognize that further progress toward the attainment of equality for black Americans, broadly and correctly understood, depends most crucially on the acknowledgment and rectification of the dysfunctional behaviors that plague black communities, and that so offend and threaten others. Recognize this, and much else will follow. It is more important to address this matter effectively than it is to agitate for additional rights. Indeed, success in such agitation has become contingent upon effective reform efforts mounted from within the black community.

Concern for “further progress” for black Americans should not focus in the first instance on passage of another civil rights bill. Such a bill may or may not be necessary, but it is beyond doubt that its passage will not significantly alter the quality of life, or equality of standing, of those blacks whose condition bespeaks
that fundamental and age-old crisis for the American polity, namely, the incompleteness of the process of incorporating many descendants of African slaves into the estate of full and equal American citizenship.

The progress that must now be sought is that of achieving respect, the equality of standing in the eyes of one’s political peers, of worthiness as subjects of national concern. Such progress will without doubt require public action as well as self-help. Health care for the poor, education in the inner city, job training for welfare mothers, discipline for criminally offending youths, improvement of community infrastructure and housing, nutrition for infants, drug treatment for recovering addicts—all of these things and more require the provision of public funds and are essential to the progress we seek. But one’s ability to persuade one’s fellow citizens to tax themselves in order to provide the services needed depends upon how “deserving” the beneficiaries are perceived to be. This in turn depends upon how they comport themselves. And such comportment is not a matter that public policy alone can effectively address.

The point on which Booker T. Washington was clear, and his critics seemed not to be, is that progress of the kind described above must be earned, it cannot be demanded. He understood that when the effect of past oppression has been to leave people in a diminished state, the attainment of true equality with their former oppressor cannot much depend on his generosity but must ultimately derive from an elevation of their selves above the state of diminishment. It is of no moment that historic wrongs may have caused current deprivation, for justice is not the issue here. The issues are dignity, respect, and self-respect—all of which are preconditions for true equality between any peoples. The classic interplay between the aggrieved black and the guilty white, in which the former demands and the latter conveys a recognition of the historic injustice, is not an exchange among equals. Neither, one suspects, is it a stable exchange. Eventually it may shade into something else, something less noble”into patronage, into a situation where the guilty one comes to have contempt for the claimant, and the claimant comes to feel shame, and its natural accompaniment, rage, at his impotence.

As Booker T. Washington argued:

> It is a mistake to assume that the Negro, who had been a slave for two hundred and fifty years, gained his freedom by the signing, on a certain date, of a certain paper by the President of the United States. It is a mistake to assume that one man can, in any true
sense, give freedom to another. Freedom, in the larger and higher sense, every man must gain for himself.

This is neither an “unmanly” nor an “acquiescent” nor a “race traitorous” sentiment. Quite the contrary, this is the candid exhortation of a leader who has understood a hard truth about the condition of his people, i.e., that to be able to look their emancipator squarely in the eye, they must first raise themselves from their current level. Nor is it the rhetoric of an apologist for the crimes of others, but rather the unapologetic embrace of responsibility for one’s own freedom. Consider the fact that, unlike DuBois and his followers, Washington lived out his life in the South, among the poor blacks of his time. Moreover, he built from nothing, and in the midst of white reactionaries, a permanent, lasting institution which, to this day, helps to meet the needs and expand the opportunities of his people.

Nor is Washington’s sentiment anachronistic-appropriate for the second generation after slavery but irrelevant today. For the basic thrust of today’s civil rights posture looks to the “signing, on a certain date, of a certain paper by the President,” or by a federal judge, to deliver freedom to blacks. That is, rights advocates avoid the necessary hard work of facilitating reform within their own community, reform aimed at reversing the destructive effect of past violations of rights. They seek to lay responsibility for the hard realities of contemporary ghetto life on the shoulders of whites, citing the fact that whites have not treated blacks as justice would require. They argue as DuBois did: “If they accuse Negro women of lewdness and Negro men of monstrous crime, what are they doing but advertising to the world the shameless lewdness of those Southern men who brought millions of mulattos into the world? . . Suppose today Negroes do steal; who was it that for centuries made stealing a virtue by stealing their labor?” But this argument concedes far too much in the way of black dignity for the sake of being able to demand sympathy. Can we really expect whites to agree that black “lewdness” or criminality is no more than the consequence of white depravity” that is, conditions for which whites, not blacks, are ultimately responsible?

Do we really believe it ourselves?

Today’s civil rights orthodoxy is to denounce as “racist” ordinary people’s revulsion at behaviors among blacks that offend and threaten them, as well as policies such as affirmative action that strike them as basically unfair. If whites express fear of crime in central cities, crime committed disproportionately by
blacks, and if politicians exploit these fears, then the problem is defined as the racist exploitation of baseless stereotypes. If whites reject racial preferences as unfair to them, and if politicians campaign on the issue, the problem is construed as a lack of restraint by unscrupulous candidates who are willing to use divisive tactics to achieve their ends. Today’s orthodoxy holds in contempt the need to express concern for, and acknowledge the legitimacy of, the sensibilities of whites when they run up against the presumed interests of blacks. What Washington understood "something as true today as it is difficult to say out loud" is that attending to the sensibilities of whites is directly in the interest of blacks. Because we live in a democracy, we bear the burden of persuading our fellows of the worth of our claims upon them.

The political version of crying racism in the face of every form of opposition to, say, busing or affirmative action has brought on the current crisis in the politics of both blacks and white liberals. Let us stipulate, for argument’s sake, that the Willie Horton ad should not have been run; what do we say about the fact that it worked so well? Let us assume that the “white hands” ad of Jesse Helms was inappropriate; what are we to make of the fact that it had such an impact?

The orthodox answer, as we know, is that these phenomena simply give further evidence of the fundamentally racist character of the American polity. Rights advocates hope to banish such tactics from the political arena through moral suasion. They set out to achieve unilateral Republican disarmament—as if Republican restraint in appealing to whites’ concerns will somehow cause those concerns to disappear. This is the ambition of people who simply do not take American voters seriously. It is not useful to assume that the voters who responded to the Helms or Bush commercials, or even to David Duke, are simply racists. No doubt some of them are, but that is beside the point "which is, that many, many of these voters have legitimate concerns to which an effective politics must give answers, not lectures on racial etiquette.

Washington readily accepted the constraint that progress for blacks depended upon their being sensitive to the concerns of whites. Indeed, every black leader who has managed to wield any influence has had to work within such a constraint. Only in our time has the notion been advanced that “authentic” black leaders should be unencumbered by the need to assuage white opinion. Only in our time do we draw electoral district lines so that black representatives may be assured of election without the inconvenience of having to solicit white votes. Not that such redistricting is always wrong or unfair. But there is a fundamental
tradeoff involved here: majority black districts raise the likelihood of the black candidate’s success while lowering the probability that his election will bring along white support for his program.

A central feature of the old civil rights activism was its aim to persuade. Martin Luther King and his followers engaged in open protest against clear instances of social injustice, and they did not share Booker T. Washington’s aversion to civil rights agitation; quite the contrary. But they sought, through nonviolent civil disobedience, to compel the affirmation of common principles from their fellow citizens, relying on the humanity and decency of the vast majority of Americans and thereby showing respect for the moral integrity of their fellows. They always appealed to someone’s moral sensibilities”if not those of their immediate foes, then to those of white onlookers who tacitly accepted segregation, and also to blacks themselves whose complicity had made the system easier to sustain.

Dr. King was a leader of both black and white Americans. His stature in each community depended upon his influence in the other. The dramatic public confrontations he and others in the movement engineered were viewed by multiple audiences”white and black”each being aware that the others were watching. Through the morally persuasive nature of his appeal, King mobilized the conscience of the white majority. In so doing, he also convinced many blacks that there was realistic hope, at long last, that their essential interests would be accommodated. King thus confronted the most critical task any leader faces when seeking to promote racial harmony: assuring the “good people” on each side of the racial divide that their counterparts on the other side do, in fact, exist. He sought to create a dynamic within which growing numbers of Americans could embrace a strategy of reconciliation among decent people of both races.

It is a telling commentary on the moral confusion of today’s orthodoxy that so many young blacks see in Malcolm X and Martin King a legitimate polarity of philosophic alternatives. Yet on the point that the interests of blacks, properly understood, are inescapably intertwined with the concerns and sensibilities of whites, Malcolm provides very poor guidance. But it is to the radicalism of Malcolm X that the Afrocentrist, rejectionist rabble-rousers like Al Sharpton look for inspiration. And it is precisely because the civil rights establishment has itself lost sight of the need to take whites' fears and revulsions seriously that they are willing and able to remain speechless in the wake of the excesses of Sharpton, Jeffries, Farrakahn, et al.
What, for example, did we see in response to the Central Park jogger episode? Incredible public displays of contempt for white opinion, in defense of the indefensible, and all with the tacit, if not explicit, support of much of mainstream black opinion. What did we see in Crown Heights? We saw murderously rampaging mobs of black youths, openly incited by Sharpton and others, who through this rampage precisely gained status and prestige for themselves as brokers of the peace. Leaders like Sharpton are the natural consequence of the abandonment by more respectable black advocates of that cardinal principle which Washington understood so well. The message transmitted is that blacks are openly contemptuous of white opinion, seeking not to persuade but either to cajole or to frighten. Although, as did King, Sharpton leads marches through white neighborhoods, the Italians and Jews of Brooklyn are mere supernumeraries in a political drama within the black community itself. Sharpton wants blacks to see whites at their most primitive and racist. And if he creates occasions for whites to see blacks at their most atavistic and violent, this suits his purposes as well. The apparently intended effect of such “leadership” is to ensure that the people of bad will in both races will find each other, the better to keep conflict alive.

The truth is that whites do not need to be shown how to fear black youths in the cities; instead, they need to be taught how to respect them. This means that effective, persuasive black leadership must project to these whites the image of a disciplined, respectable black demeanor. That such comportment is not inconsistent with protest for redress of grievances is a great lesson and a great legacy of the civil rights movement. But it is not just discipline in protesting that is needed. Discipline, orderliness, and virtue in every aspect of life contribute to the goal of creating an aura of respectability and deservingness. Such an aura is a valuable political asset.

The point is that racial oppression tangibly diminishes its victims, in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. Thus the construction of new public identities, and simultaneously the promotion of self-respect, are crucial tasks facing those burdened with a history of oppression. If this cannot be done, there can be no recovery from past victimization. A leading civil rights advocate teaches the exhortation: “I am somebody.” True enough. The crucial question, however, is: “So what?” Because I am somebody, I will not accept unequal rights. Because I am somebody, I will waste no opportunity to better myself. Because I am somebody, I will respect my body by not polluting it with drugs or promiscuous sex. Because I am somebody”in my home, in my community, in my nation”I will comport myself responsibly, I will be
accountable, I will be available to serve others as well as myself. It is the doing of these fine things, not the saying of any fine words, that teaches oneself, and others, that one is somebody.

But how is this to be done? One must operate at two levels”playing the “inside game” and the “outside game.” The outside game aims to secure rights by petitioning for redress of grievances. Booker T. Washington thought this could wait. He may have been tragically wrong, but we have since made up for his omission. Even so, we must proceed carefully, wary not to move in violation of clear public norms. Nonviolence was the key factor in securing the ultimate success of the revolt against Jim Crow that eventually came to the South. Perhaps paradoxically, nonviolence was the more manly course, as well as the more publicly acceptable one. This is where Malcolm X, and his followers in the urban centers of today, have gotten it so badly wrong. Kant defined enlightenment as “man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage.” Though blacks’ tutelage has not been entirely self-incurred, the link between liberation and enlightenment is just as real for us: the black nonviolent disobedient realizes his own freedom by accepting the constraints of universal moral laws, by maintaining civility under strong provocation even when others do not. The discipline demanded by the practice of nonviolence provides irrefutable evidence of the humanity of the protester: Despite the oppressor’s best efforts to perpetuate the myth of racial inferiority, it establishes that the protester is somebody in a way that violent protest never can.

The philosophy of self-help, of good old-fashioned “uplift,” applies this same principle to the “inside game,” that is, the striving for moral reform within the black community. Working diligently to overcome the profound pathology to be found in some quarters of contemporary black life establishes what too often is only asserted”that we are indeed a great people struggling under terrible odds to overcome the effects of profound historic wrongs. The doing of such work is the means by which we can gain freedom in its “larger and higher sense.” Because we are free human agents, we are obligated to strive to reverse the debilitating patterns of social life that limit our progress. We are rightly judged by the extent to which we meet this responsibility. The liberal transaction in which victimized blacks insist upon relief from guilt-ridden whites often points away from the necessity for us to be engaged in our own improvement. It leads to a perverse “exhibitionism of nonachievement” by blacks (e.g., the remorseful recitation of statistics showing that more black men are in prisons than in colleges). It is as if the fact of our failure to meet a certain standard or surmount a certain obstacle must of necessity constitute evidence of a social or political failing by the larger society. Even, or perhaps especially, when whites engage in this transaction, one cannot help suspecting
that they don’t really believe what they claim to believe, and that for them black non-achievement has another, less respectable but never spoken, explanation.

The “inside game” is critical because, in the nature of the case, much of what needs doing cannot be done by outsiders. An overly simplistic socioeconomic determinism continues to impute all manner of self-destructive and dysfunctional behavior now rampant in some black populations either, on the one side, to historical victimization, or, on the other, to the incentive provisions of certain government transfer programs. How then could it be that other disadvantaged communities have a way of overcoming such assaults and temptations? It is to take the black poor less seriously than they deserve to assume that, unless white people somewhere change what they are doing, poor blacks must live as many are now living.

It would be hard to overestimate such a task, but one must nevertheless believe that the levels of gang violence, drug abuse, family instability, sexual promiscuity, of sloth, of indifference to responsibility, etc., can, through concerted effort at the propagation of alternative values, be changed. In any case, through religious, civic, and voluntary efforts of all sorts, we must try. This is certainly not a problem to be seen exclusively in its racial dimension, but race is an important factor. Nor can the effort to overcome it be guided by a single program or strategy.

Any internal effort to reform the ways in which people live is not a task for the state in our liberal society. Rather it is one for what Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus have called the “mediating institutions.” Mutually concerned persons who trust one another enough to be able to exchange criticism constructively, establish codes of personal conduct, and enforce social sanctions against what they judge to be undesirable behavior can create and enforce communal norms that lie beyond the capacity of the state effectively to promulgate. The coercive resources of the state, though great, are, to put it mildly, not subtle. And, of course, their application is in any case rightly limited by constitutional protections. But no one has a right to good standing among his fellows. We must strive through the “inside game” to create conditions in the communities of greatest concern where such status rewards may be denied those whose behavior violates reasonable norms of right conduct.

Moreover, self-help is critical to securing the sympathetic support of the rest of the political community. It is essential to establishing in the minds of whites the truth that the bulk of poor blacks are deserving of the help they so desperately need. Making the effort to help yourself clearly conveys this message. This is why
the move to reform welfare programs so as to place some burden of responsibility on recipients does not threaten blacks. On the contrary, such reforms are a godsend, for they help to diffuse a potentially damaging stigma associated with the disproportionate dependence of blacks on state-funded transfers. Moreover, by according recipients the expectation that they are capable of meeting commonly held norms about how people should conduct their lives, welfare reform shows respect for the beneficiaries. Thus self-help is not a substitute for government provision but rather an essential complement to it, ensuring that the state-funded assistance is more effective, and that it is seen as legitimate by the political majorities who must approve it.

Now this is a case that cannot be proven. Beside being woefully politically incorrect, it is not based on scientific data. No doubt some people listening to this message will object that it gives aid and comfort to the political right. Nevertheless, it is crucially important to our nation that there be no more one-note politics from the Afro-American community. This is a great nation, a great people; and our national ideals, to which blacks are every bit as much heir as whites, are literally the envy of the world. The opportunities of this land, which continue to beckon to peoples the world over, are the birthright of black Americans. Yet too many of us lag behind others in exploiting this opportunity. We must empower ourselves to seize this opportunity more aggressively, so that we can fulfill what God has ordained for us to do.

Are blacks truly better off with this kind of thinking barred from American politics? Do the ideas of Booker T. Washington, as elaborated here, really have no place in the councils of the Supreme Court? Are such ideas, whether labeled “conservative” or otherwise, inauthentic, not genuinely “black”? Must we conclude that blacks espousing such ideas are a “discredit to their race”? That clearly was the message of the well-coordinated, nearly successful campaign to destroy Clarence Thomas’ aspirations for higher office. Some black politicians and intellectuals still seek to discredit him, to deny his voice the weight that it deserves to command among our people and in the national dialogue.

Should this defensive and essentially reactionary effort of the civil rights advocates prevail, it will not be only a few outspoken individuals, or even only the black American political community, who will be the losers. This is not about a Clarence Thomas, or a Glenn Loury, or any other black critic of today’s orthodoxy. What ultimately is at stake in our halting efforts to widen the national dialogue on racial matters is the determination of whether we Americans are going to fall apart, fighting with and picking at
each other for the next two generations, or whether we are going to find some way to pull ourselves together and go forward into the twenty-first century as a strong, world-competitive, multiethnic nation. This is about whether we can develop and sustain sufficient ties across the many boundaries that separate us as to enable us to cooperate in our mutual interest.

This is not a message to be directed to blacks alone, of course. Neither Democrats or Republicans have distinguished themselves on the issue. But because of the relationship between permissible expression in national discourse, and in the subnational discourse that takes place among blacks, a broadening of debate in the black community may encourage white politicians and intellectuals to speak, and think, with a greater measure of candor on this issue.

Advocates of a new public philosophy for black Americans, men like Clarence Thomas, are drawing on an old wisdom, well suited for our times. To advocate self-help, to argue that affirmative action cannot be a long-run solution to the problem of racial inequality, to suggest that some of what is transpiring in black communities reflects a spiritual malaise, to note that fundamental change will require that individual lives be transformed in ways that governments are ill-suited to do, to urge that we must look to how black men and women are relating to each other, how parents are bringing up their children, that we have to ask ourselves what values inform the behavior of our youth”to do these things is not to take a partisan position, or vent some neoconservative ideological screed. Rather, to take this radically dissident line of departure from the orthodoxy of the day is to speak what, for many blacks, is a truth inherited from our ancestors, a truth we know as a result of our awareness of our history coming out of slavery, a truth reflected in the ambiguous but great legacy of Booker T. Washington.

**Glenn C. Loury** is Professor of Economics at Boston University. He is a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of First Things, and his essay “Black Dignity and the Common Good” appeared in our issue of June/July 1990.