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***How Black Conservatives Hurt Their Cause  
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I just recently came across conservative commentator Star Parker's January 18 article "The Credibility of Black Conservatism," in Townhall.com, a conservative Web journal. Parker's piece was apparently prompted by the storm then surrounding Armstrong Williams, the discredited black radio and television commentator. Williams, we recall, got in trouble when it was revealed that he received payment from the U.S. Department of Education to plug George W. Bush's "No Child Left Behind" program.

In the interest of disclosure, I am a self-described progressive/leftist. But even though it might seem I do not share much in common with conservatives, I do not subscribe to the proposition that one side of the ideological divide has a monopoly on truth. So, I do often give the conservative side the benefit of the doubt. At least I think many do operate with good motives.

However, as an African, and resident of the (black) south side of Chicago, I have often wondered why the black conservative view has such poor resonance in African American communities. One of the most popular explanations, offered by black conservatives themselves, is that the "liberal media" caters to traditional black leadership at the expense of alternative voices. While there may be a grain of truth to this view, I would like to suggest that the answer is a bit more complex. In fact the "credibility" gap of black conservatives that Ms. Parker laments in her article has many roots.

First, I think tone and language matters. When I heard Star Parker suggest on Fox Television News that New Orleans' black residents suffered from a "welfare mentality" I cringed, was angry and overwhelmed with deep emotion. I thought to myself, even if for a moment this were true, it is not the way anyone, black or white should be sounding in a time of such despair for that community. Although it was not readily apparent to me what Parker meant, I know that the term "welfare mentality," used in certain contexts, is a provocative term. And for those among Katrina's victims who work hard and do not receive welfare, I thought it would be particularly offensive.

But it seemed particularly mean-spirited for Parker to say this at such a crisis moment for black Louisianans. This tone, and the reflexive, single-minded identification of black people with "welfare" is not conducive to a

## The Black Commentator – How Black Conservatives Hurt Their Cause

healthy dialogue between conservatives and the black community. Surely, Parker cannot think this kind of attitude will move large numbers of black people to her side. Moreover, such harsh words about black people are at once hypocritical and one-sided: How often is “welfare mentality” ascribed to white people on the receiving end of government largess after a disaster? How many times have government emergency services been used to rescue white adventurers stranded on mountain tops or snow slopes while engaging in voluntary activity such as hiking or skiing? But we never hear black conservatives suggest that there is a “welfare mentality” at work there. I think most people would agree that people caught in a natural disaster have a better claim to government services. But, maybe to black conservatives the stranded white adventurer is more deserving, somehow.

Blacks aren’t voting liberal–Democratic because they are simply misled by Jesse Jackson and the civil rights leadership, or because they have a “herd mentality” as conservatives often contend. It would be condescending to deny the fact that black people, like any other population group, know and comprehend their self-interest. The black community is voting against what it hears, or does not hear, from black conservatives. Here are some examples:

- **Minimum Wage and Living Wage:** Black conservative opposition to raising the minimum wage and rejection of living wage proposals across the country puts them squarely at odds with the vast majority of black people who are stuck in low-wage jobs. Blacks do not buy the defense that these regulations “stifle” business profitability and undermine job creation. It is hard to convince these black workers when, for example, Wal-Mart made \$10 billion last year in profits and Alice Walton, heir to the Wal-Mart fortune, just purchased a painting for \$35 million at a NYC auction! Americans overwhelmingly agree that people who work should not have to be impoverished, that able employers such as Wal-Mart should pay a living wage;
- **Speaking out against racism:** Black conservatives seem unable to instinctively convey revulsion over racism or its vivid manifestations. When a James Byrd is dragged behind a pickup truck, crosses are burned in front of black homes, or a Trent Lott or William Bennett utters racially offensive rants, black conservatives need to be as resolute as Jesse Jackson in criticizing it. The only comments I heard from black conservative leaders after the James Byrd murder was a call to reject the “politicization” of the issue by “liberals” and to reject calls for hate crime legislation. While hate crime legislation is certainly debatable, it shouldn’t be the first and only time black conservatives are involved in the conversation. They too, as black people, should share in the revulsion and be front and center in protesting gruesome racial violence. That’s where credibility and authenticity comes from. And, here’s a secret: Jackson keeps his credibility among many blacks precisely because he speaks out. Black conservatives’ failure to respond forcefully to such outrages only feeds the suspicion that they have essentially declared racism a thing of the past, that it no longer has urgency. This is a source of the credibility gap that Parker bemoans;
- **African Americans respect intellectual and political independence:** Right or wrong, black conservatives are often seen as defenders of, and apologists for white racism. John McWhorter, an African American scholar at the Manhattan Institute has defended, as have many other black conservatives, William Bennett’s recent offensive remarks, dismissing them as just “hypothetical.” For many in the black community, conservative commentators who cannot call these offensive remarks what they are lack independence, are morally bankrupt and intellectually dishonest. When something so blatantly offensive is uttered by people of such influence as Bennett, black conservatives need to stop the knee-jerk defense and simply call it for what it is. I live in the black community and I know there is universal revulsion over these remarks. Jesse Jackson is not coaching black people to feel offended. Black people know racially offensive stuff when they hear it. Quite frankly, there is no way that black conservatives can make inroads into black communities while giving aid and comfort to such contemptible views;

## The Black Commentator – How Black Conservatives Hurt Their Cause

- Affirmative action matters to black people. The knee-jerk references to “merit” and “qualification” made by conservatives every time affirmative action is debated lack credibility, especially now when the Bush administration is stacking government bureaucracies such as FEMA with incompetent friends. In light of such obvious cronyism, opposition to affirmative action is seen merely as a conservative strategy for maintaining white privilege. And please, conservatives should drop the charge that affirmative action “stigmatizes” black people. Racism is what stigmatizes black people. We should not blame the solution. Furthermore, no one should think for one moment that Michael Brown ever felt “stigmatized” by taking a job at FEMA for which he was unqualified;
- The environment and workplace safety matters: Environmental racism is a reality. As long as black conservatives are seen as defenders of an unfettered free enterprise system that disregards the environment and public safety, no one in the black community will take them seriously. After all, black communities are disproportionately affected by diseases such as asthma, cancer and heart disease, maladies that have a strong environmental dimension. Black conservatives need to stop apologizing for negligent corporate conduct and support positive action to reduce pollution.
- Katrina has deepened black opposition to the Iraq War: Regardless of its merits, the failure of the government to respond to Katrina’s victims has deepened black opposition to the Iraq War and exacerbated an already palpable backlash. The most common refrain here in Chicago runs like this: “black kids are dying trying to bring 'democracy' to the Iraqis and our government can’t even rescue our people from a flood in New Orleans.” Black conservative commentators who uncritically cheerlead for this war are seen as out of touch with the needs of Black America and sharing the “lopsided priorities” of this government;
- Health Care for All: By large majorities, blacks want to join the rest of the industrialized countries in having a right to health care. Black conservatism that does not accept this sentiment and seeks to maintain the status quo will flounder;
- Historical racism: Any analysis of the present black condition that denies its link to historical racism, seeks to locate the “black problem” wholly within the individual and denies the presence of structural barriers to social and economic mobility will not be taken seriously. Black conservative attacks on government belie the positive and legitimate force that government has been in advancing black interests. Such attacks provoke a well deserved rebuke from black beneficiaries. Black people share an understanding that the federal government, no matter how flawed or inadequate, has been a positive force in their lives, an equalizer that forced open the doors to higher education, gave access to affordable housing, invented Social Security, Medicare and yes, welfare, and has sought justice, albeit belatedly and often inadequately, in defense of black civil rights. The recent conviction of KKK member Edgar Ray Killen in the murders of civil rights workers Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner is a notable example. Obviously, it is legitimate to criticize governmental failure. However, black conservatives too often sound as if government is the enemy of black people, and come perilously close to embracing the radical libertarian premise that people should be left to the vagaries of the marketplace, and everything will be just fine. Black people do not subscribe to this view. The fact is there is no level playing field for everyone and, especially in the current economic climate, it is ever more necessary for the government to assert its role as a counterweight to corporate excesses (have we forgotten the Savings and Loan, Enron, Global Crossing, Tyco Xerox scandals?);
- Foreign policy for the people: Black conservatives’ uncritical support for trade deals such as NAFTA and CAFTA that have played a role in the de-industrialization of American cities will win them no allies in black communities. And black people view with suspicion conservative attacks on leaders such as Hugo Chavez of Venezuela that do not acknowledge the source of his popularity: the largest share of the country’s oil revenue goes to fight poverty. Black conservative attacks on Chavez fuel

## The Black Commentator – How Black Conservatives Hurt Their Cause

suspicion that they only care about protecting American oil interests. And black people remember that during the anti-apartheid struggle, many black conservatives aligned themselves with the white establishment here, which sought to protect white minority interests in South Africa at the expense of blacks. And it is worth noting that in 1986, President Reagan vetoed a strong sanctions regime against South Africa and Dick Cheney, then a member of congress, dismissed Nelson Mandela as “terrorist.” The black conservative movement has never tried to disassociate itself from this kind of racial bias in foreign policy. It is truly hard to imagine black Americans flocking to the conservative movement anytime soon, given its attachment to the historically racially insensitive foreign policy establishment.

- Racial discrimination is a reality: The wave of successful class-action suits in recent years (against the FBI, Denny’s, Wal-Mart, and so on), funding inequities in education, disparities in the criminal justice system (17 black inmates have been released from death row in Illinois, vindicated by DNA evidence), discrimination in employment (ironically, with the exception of Fox News Sunday, Sunday morning TV news programming in the “liberal media” is now off-limits to black commentators and opinion makers), all conspire to undermine black progress. Black conservatism that does not acknowledge this contemporary reality will not attract black followers;
- Attacks on black leaders: No matter what they think of Jackson, Sharpton, Representatives Maxine Waters, John Lewis and others, black conservatives’ vitriolic attacks on the black civil rights leadership will never work. Whatever the merits, when Star Parker, Armstrong Williams, Larry Elder and other conservatives attack black leaders in a personal way (as opposed to reasoned, honest and constructive engagement), they are seen by many black people simply as attack dogs for the white Republican establishment. I have listened with disbelief to language used by black conservative commentators and wondered whether they want a real debate, or just to humiliate the opposition and score points. I’ve heard Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton described as “race prostitutes,” “poverty pimps” and much worse. This kind of language does nothing to advance the debate and only helps galvanize black support for the leaders. Like other communities, black people will rally around their leaders when they are unfairly attacked. As one who has seen how these attacks work I can say: (a) they simply help elevate these leaders in the eyes of black people – call it the “Arafat effect”; (b) even if they may have misgivings about their leaders, black people do not believe these to be appropriate or accurate characterizations. I don’t think many black people doubt Jackson’s bona fides as a champion for civil rights. Race pimp? Poverty pimp? No matter how meritorious, that won’t work. To the contrary, one has to admit there is something quite extraordinary about an Al Sharpton, a child preacher who grew up to become a self-made political actor in the U.S., a leader, and formidable debater and polemicist. People may disagree with him, but the narrative of his personal accomplishment actually validates the possibility of America, the “American Dream,” if you will. Isn’t this what conservatives should be applauding? How many black youngsters will grow up to become a presidential candidate and eminent leader? (c) The personal nature of the attacks simply re-enforce the suspicion among black people that black conservatives are carrying out someone else’s agenda.
- Furthermore, respect still matters in black communities, a holdover from Africa, perhaps. But we grow up to respect our elders, even when we disagree with them. Put more plainly, personal attacks against the civil rights leadership will not endear black conservatives to black audiences. They will be rejected.

I have offered these views in the hope that black conservatives who are truly interested in changing the lives of black people for the better take another look at why their ideology has not taken root in the black community. It might comfort some to blame the “liberal media” for ignoring them. But let me suggest that black people have heard the black conservative message. They just don’t like what is being said and how it is being said. There are white conservatives who have a long history of antipathy toward black people and they

## The Black Commentator – How Black Conservatives Hurt Their Cause

too hate government. But they hate government because they think government does too much for black people. If black conservatives don't distance themselves from such convoluted sentiments, they will be shouting in the wilderness for a long time.

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