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ESSAY

**“A Historical Critique of
Black American Leadership”**

by

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Introduction¹

Black America has a troubled, yet rich, history. We all know the story: African people taken prisoner, brought to North America, and forced to work as “slaves;” rendered “free” by the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution; Reconstruction; segregated life under Black Codes and Jim Crow; the Great Migration north; the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s; Integration; the Crack Cocaine Epidemic and accelerated incarceration through the evolving prison industrial complex; the reverse migration south; suffering through the Great Recession; a flirtation with a “Post Racial America” under the first “Black” President, Barack Obama; and now, a great hope for real change after George Floyd’s murder under a Joe Biden Presidency.

This history is peppered with the names of important Black figures (leaders) who held sway during specific periods. There is no doubt that these leaders would have been more successful had they not faced a wall of racial discrimination and opposition from White America. Black leadership was more successful when efforts were made to achieve clearly stated goals. Today, Black America is still far from being fully satisfied with life in America—meaning that Black leadership was not fully successful.

Why has Black leadership been unsuccessful? As already noted, a clear first reason is racial discrimination and general opposition to progress for Black America by White America. On the other hand, also as already noted, certain Black leaders failed to articulate clear and correct goals for Black America. However, we should not ignore the possibility that certain Black leaders were unsuccessful in helping us achieve a state of satisfaction and well-being because they put their interests ahead of the interests of Black American people. The latter results from the absence of a commitment to the liberation of Black America, which in turn, results from the lack of education and training to comprehend what Black Liberation means and how to liberate Black America. **Here, Black Liberation can be defined as independence, meeting our demands with our own supply, and self-governance.**

The extent of “success,” the notion of clear and correct goals, the extent to which leadership placed its interests ahead of the Black masses’ interests, and the absence of a Black Liberation mindset, are somewhat “subjective.” What is not “subjective” is the pain—so many types and so many forms—that Black America is experiencing today. Therefore, we should seek to analyze how and why Black leadership has failed so that we can correct these failures and ultimately achieve success.

This is a brief essay. Therefore, we will not go into great depth on any aspect of the analysis. We are not attempting to author a book on the topic. Rather, we want to highlight certain reasons why Black America is in the position that we are in today. It is within our purview to do so because, as economists, we have every right to explore how Black leadership has not prevented the economic hardship and suffering of Black America. We will leave a book-length analysis of this topic to other scholars who have the time and energy to do so.

¹ This essay was inspired by the wonderful scholarship of the late Prof. Amos N. Wilson. Readers are urged to consider Prof. Wilson’s works. To obtain the full benefit of this essay, readers are advised to read it in its entirety.

This historical critique of Black American leadership unfolds as follows. First, we consider “Goal Setting” because it is only when leadership establishes goals that we can ultimately determine when and whether we have achieved success. Afterwards, we provide the heart of the essay by considering critical “Historical Leadership Successes and Failures” by examining four examples. Then we conclude.

Goal Setting

Over the 400-plus years of Black America’s sojourn in North America, what has been our goal? At different points in history, it was clear what our immediate goals were (end slavery, end Jim Crowism and stop the lynching, “integrate,” rid our areas of influence of crack cocaine, reduce income and wealth inequality, extinguish racism, etc.), but Black Americans have seldom espoused clearly what our ultimate goal should be—“Black Liberation.” The exceptions may be during the Marcus Garvey Era and during the 1960s when the Nation of Islam, the Black Panther Party, and other Black organizations championed Black Liberation. But today, very seldom does one hear the term “Black Liberation.” It has lost currency. The idea is not valued. In other words, Black America appears to have given up hope of ever being fully liberated as a people in the wilderness of North America. We now settle for securing crumbs from the rich man’s table, while forgetting that we remain unliberated. That is, we remain unconvicted persons (prisoners) of African descent, who have been redesigned to serve White America into perpetuity.

We all know that leadership can envision or generate possibilities for its people. The people are generally unable to advance beyond the vision of their leadership. When the leadership of a subjugated people forgets that the ultimate goal is liberation, then that people will not achieve liberation. The reason Black leadership has a memory problem—forgetting the essentiality of liberation—is because of its education/training. The lesson for Black America here is to never adopt, establish, or accept leadership that has not received some form of Afrocentric education and training. Only leadership that has received such training (formal, informal, self-directed, or otherwise) has the potential to move us forward into a state of Black Liberation.

Historical Leadership Successes and Failures

Not having a deep background in African History, it is not possible for us to write definitively about the failures of African leaders who permitted Europeans to organize the so-called “slave trade.” But our reading permits us to recall critical leadership incidents and events that have landed us where we are today—absent our liberation. In this section we will highlight four such incidents/events. Analysis of these incidents/events in no way presents a comprehensive picture of Black leadership successes and failures. However, these four incidents/events highlight how Black leadership could have opened the door more widely to liberation for Black Americans.

*An Opportunity to Form a Nation*²

When considering opportunities for Black American Liberation, we are often drawn to an early pivot point in Black America’s history. It was 1862, when the US was in the throes of the

² The history discussed in this section is documented in Clarence Lusane (2011), *The Black History of the White House*, City Lights, San Francisco, pp. 185-91.

Civil War and searching for a solution for the peculiar institution. President Lincoln called in Black leadership to float (convey) an idea: Territory for (colonization of) former “slaves” in Central America. Irrespective of the reasons for, and the merits of, the idea at that time, one can consider the counterfactual today and imagine what would have been the outcome had Black Americans agreed to build a life beyond “slavery” in Central America. While that territory may have been initially established as a US colony, the colony would have likely gained its independence in due course. One can imagine the efficacy of having taken a decision to relocate to Central America alongside a view of Liberia or Sierra Leone today. While the latter two countries do not offer an ideal material state, we find that, even today, Black Americans are relocating to these countries to realize some semblance of liberation, honor, and self-respect.

But alas, it was not to be. Black American leadership, on a widespread basis (including the venerable Frederick Douglass), rejected President Lincoln’s proposal, and here we find ourselves today hoping for separate territory for independence and self-determination. And even if Black American leadership did not agree with Lincoln’s proposal, we must ask: Why did that leadership not offer a counter proposal? That is, why did they not propose to secure separate territory in the US proper? If rejected, at a minimum, such a proposal would have been on the table for consideration throughout the remainder of US History. In our view, the decision to reject territory in Central America and not request independent territory in the US was a miscalculation—a Black American leadership failure. Notably, the decision was made mainly by free and economically thriving Black Americans who contemplated their own immediate welfare over the long-term welfare of all Black Americans of that day and this day.

*Garrison Frazier and Land from the Nation for the Nation*³

As history would have it, Garrison Frazier looked Edwin M. Stanton, President Abraham Lincoln’s Secretary of War, squarely in the eye and said: “The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land and turn it and till it by our own labor.” Frazier was a former “slave,” who had purchased his freedom. He stood as a representative of Black refugees of the Civil War in Savannah, Georgia. He spoke to Secretary Stanton on January 12, 1865. His request for land from the spoils of war for his people was most natural and logical. Most importantly, in Frazier’s statement lies the heart of liberation: “...take care of ourselves...land.” With land, we can take care of ourselves, control our destiny, and experience a form of Black Liberation.

At the time, Frazier was a 67-year-old former pastor, who was wise enough to understand the value of land and to know that without it the Black refugees of the Civil War stood almost no chance of a safe and protected survival. He also recognized that racial animus would render life miserable for Freedmen unless the latter had separate tracts of land.

As a purchaser of his freedom and as a pastor, Frazier was likely able to read. This background placed him heads above many of his fellow Black refugees. Yet, as a Black leader, he placed the future plight of his comrades at the center of his consideration when asked to speak on their behalf. By so doing, his statement and General William Tecumseh Sherman’s follow-on

³ For a historical account of the exchange between Frazier and Stanton, consult William A. Byrne, (1995), “‘Uncle Billy’ Sherman Comes to Town: The Free Winter of Black Savannah,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 79; No. 1, pp. 91–116.

actions established the widely held convention that Black former “slaves” would receive land with which to start their post “slavery” lives.

We all know that the “40 Acres” expectation did not materialize for most Black Freedmen because General Sherman’s Special Field Orders #15, which was penned in Georgia, was ultimately vanquished in Washington, DC. However, the idea of receiving land from the US government was anchored in history and the notion of Reparations in the form of land persists to this day.

It may be safe to say that Frazier’s request for land echoed the sentiments of his comrades. They had endured “slavery,” and probably wanted very little more than to experience Black Liberation in the form of land with which to provide for themselves and to build a life in this new land free of White subjugation. Such an arrangement would be an enormous improvement over the pain that they had suffered in America up to that time. With his eye on Black Liberation, Frazier proved to be a favorable and successful Black leader.

“Integration”

The concept of “integration” reeks of seeking “otherness.” Theoretically, integration requires a mixing/blending of equal entities to form something new. But to seek to be something new is to reject the current self. Rejection of the current self means hate or an absence of favor for the current self. We all know that subjugation under the European with the perpetual display and inculcation of Whiteness conditions most under its influence to reject all that is not White. In the Civil Rights Era context, what is the origin of the word “integration” as a solution to the race problem? What was the intended meaning of “integration?” Was considerable thought given to prospects for fulfilling the meaning of “integration” in the American context in the 1960s and beyond? These three questions are for readers’ further research. What we can tell you now is that much of the decision-making during the Civil Rights Era, at least on the Black American side, can be attributed to “making it up as we go along”—that is, “brick-by-brick.”⁴

Fundamentally, the operationalization of “integration” that was motivated by the Civil Rights Era is not “integration” at all. In fact, it produced the “superimposition of superiority.” Consider **Figure 1** (next page), which shows that the practice of integration forced the coming together of two unequal entities, White Americans over Black Americans. This caused the superimposition of superiority. The result was the filtering of selected portions of the Black American population upward, with the masses of Black American pressed down in their former states.

Figure 2 (next page) shows how an effective “integration” process could have been achieved. It calls for raising the state of Black America to an equal state with White America before “integrating.” We submit that, having reached a comparable state to White America, Black American may have rejected the “integration” plan.

⁴ We gleaned this informed perspective from our observation of the movie *Selma*. See B.B. Robinson, (2015), “‘Selma:’ Lost Time, Lost Opportunity;” <https://www.blackeconomics.org/BEMedia/selma.pdf> (Ret. 121221).

Figure 1

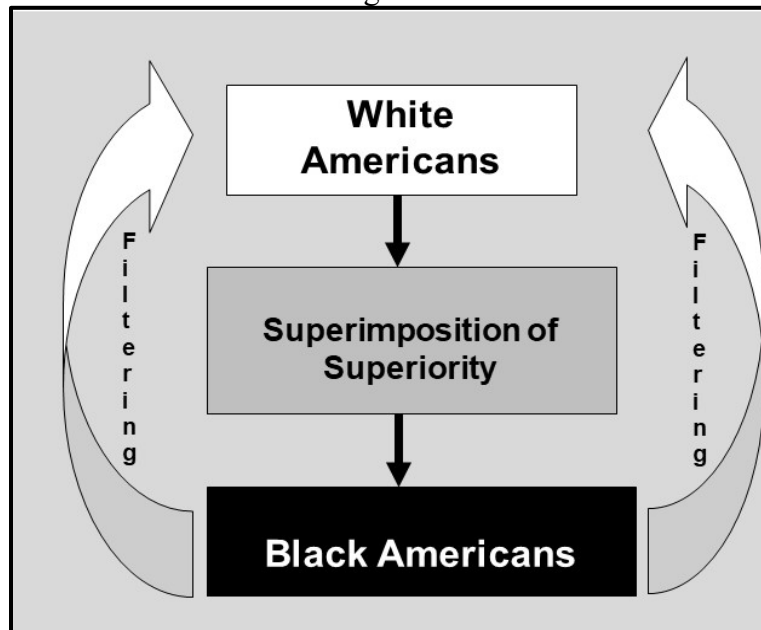
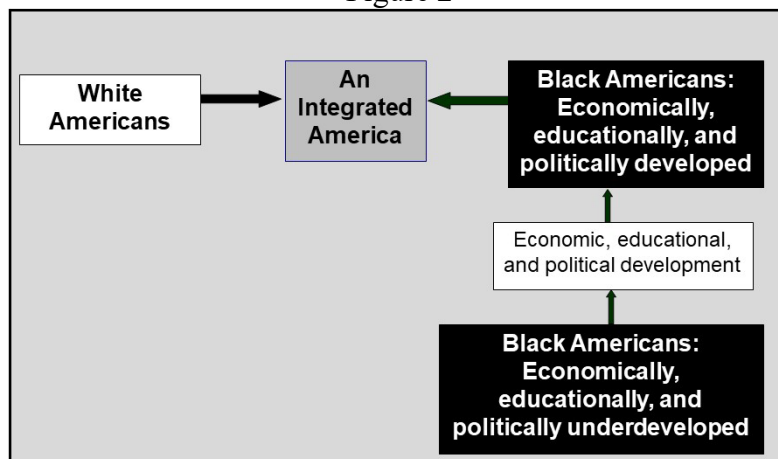


Figure 2



Integration does not solve the Black Liberation equation. In other words, in choosing or accepting “integration” Black Americans turned away from the possibility of Black Liberation. Hence, the question that we must ask is: “Why did the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King leadership cohort have ‘integration’ as a vision for Black America?” A simple analytical answer is that King and his leadership cohort were steeped in the Christian theological tradition, which is infused with a White Christology. A White Christology is a double bind on the preferred. First, because Christ consciousness is widely accepted and favored across multiple religious traditions. Second, Whiteness, which pervades our media infused world, is presented as the most acceptable way of being. Consequently, we were presented with dual reasons to accept “integration.”

Through the “integration” process that was adopted Black American leadership told Black and White America alike that Black America wanted to become “more and more like Jesus,”

and more and more like Whites.⁵ Again, this precluded the prospect of preferring and favoring Blackness, which closed the door on Black Liberation. This outcome, we believe, serves as an example of a Black American leadership failure. As part of this assessment, we recognize that much of the Black leadership of the period benefitted personally as intermediaries in this “integration” process—even if the benefit was restricted to only being invited downtown for a cup of coffee. We know today that many Black Americans are still awaiting benefits from “integration” that will never come.

Failure to Obtain Reparations

We arrive at the end of 2021 with a very germane case of Black leadership that appears to have made another critical miscalculation. Here we are referring to the Congressional Black Caucus’s (CBC’s) failure to display spinal integrity and moral excellence by distancing itself from a Democratic Party to which it is adjoined at the head and register a salvo for sincere consideration of Reparations for Black Americans.

In early 2021, the Democratic Party assumed leadership of both closely divided Houses of Congress. Fifty-eight (58) voting Black Democratic members of the House of Representatives and two (2) Black Democratic members of the Senate hold power over the passage of all legislation that requires a simple majority vote.⁶ Note that H.R. 40, the so-called “Reparations Bill” that calls for USD 12 million to study Reparations (not to begin Reparations Payments), has languished in the House for over 30 years. Moreover, many White Democratic Party members in the House and the Senate (the Senate Reparations Bill is labeled S. 40) pledged support for the Bill. Importantly, many Black voters were motivated to go to the polls and vote for Democratic Party candidates in 2020 because of an upsurge of interest in the Bills and the prospect of their passage.

At the end of 2021, Republic Party antics to divide the country partly along racial lines threw up the prospect of reclaiming control of both Houses of Congress with the November 2022 elections. At the same time, the Democratic Party, which was swaggering under the Republican Party’s efforts to make the Biden Presidency appear to be failing, rushed to pass three key pieces of legislation that were designed to fulfill President Biden’s agenda: (1) An “Infrastructure” Bill; (2) a provision to raise the nation’s debt ceiling; and (3) a “Build Back Better” Bill.⁷

Instead of leveraging their enormous power as gatekeepers for all simple majority legislation and refusing to cast votes in favor of these three critical pieces of Democratic legislation unless H.R. 40 and S. 40 sailed through the Congress, the CBC acquiesced to Democratic Party leadership, which pushed the Reparations Bills to the backburner. Democratic Party leadership took this action claiming that passage of the Reparations Bills at this time (the fall of 2021) would jeopardize their control of the Congress at the 2022 elections.⁸

⁵ Admittedly, Dr. King experienced a transformation toward the end of his life that acknowledged the difficulty of rationalizing “integration” and pervasive Black-White inequality.

⁶ For completeness, it is important to clarify that not all Black national legislators are members of the CBC. Notably, Barack Obama did not sign on to the CBC when he served as a Democratic Senator from Illinois.

⁷ As of this writing, the “Build Back Better” Bill remains under consideration in both Houses of Congress.

⁸ This Democratic Party position on the Reparations Bill was voiced by Kamm Howard, Male Co-Chair of N’COBRA (National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America) during an IBW21 (Institute of the Black World 21st Century) Reparations Town Hall on December 10, 2021, in Evanston, Illinois. Specifically, Howard said

It turns out that two of the three critical pieces of legislation passed thanks to CBC members' votes.⁹ With those votes and the promise to vote favorably on the “Build Back Better” Bill, the CBC members lost their leverage and power—there is no longer a need for a *quid pro quo*. Moreover, given the work of former President Trump and his supporters in the Republican Party, and the expected lack of enthusiasm by Black voters (who will have not seen successful passage of H.R. 40 and S. 40) during the November 2022 elections, it is likely that the Republicans will gain control of the 118th Congress in January 2023. When that happens, the CBC will no longer be in the enviable position as legislation gatekeepers. A wonderful opportunity will have been lost.

Why did this turn of events transpire? Because the Black leadership in Congress (CBC members) received no pressure from Black leadership outside of Congress. Black leadership does not appear to understand the essentiality of Reparations. It is noteworthy that the CBC members to whom we have referred are now benefitting from incomes that exceed USD 200K per annum. Also, CBC members control annual spending budgets that range from USD 1.0-to-5.0 million. While Black Congressional leaders might benefit at the margin from a Reparations Payment, such a payment would not be the type of heaven-sent gift that Reparations Payments would represent for most Black Americans. Again, CBC members and Black leadership outside of Congress appear to have chosen their own welfare over the welfare of the broader Black American population. Ironically, in the case of CBC members, their positions of income, wealth, and political power are extended to them by the very people whose interests they have disregarded.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that great Black insurrectionists, such as Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner, sought Black Liberation. Their goal was to free “slaves” and experience life away from White oppression. Notably, Garrison Frazier had this same vision. Also, Black Liberation was and is expressed and envisaged by selected Black leaders and scholars who captured the imagination of Black America during 20th and 21st centuries. All of these leaders and scholars recognized that there was and is great difficulty in achieving liberation for Black America in a White American context.

Yet, while these Black Liberationists went and go about their work, most “recognized” Black American leaders, especially in the past 60 years, have sought advancement for Black America inside an “integrationist” philosophy. Whether we consider Black American leaders who rejected Abraham Lincoln’s offer of territory in Central America in 1862, the “integrationists” who placed us on a path to further superimposition of White superiority during the 1960s, or CBC members who failed their constituents by not holding critical Democratic Party legislation hostage to passage of the Reparations Bills in 2021, we see leadership failures. In all three cases, Black American leaders seemingly placed their interests above the interests of Black American people.

that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Democratic Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, and Democratic Majority Whip James Clyburn would not permit the H.R. 40 Bill to reach the House floor for a vote.

⁹ It is instructive that one White Democratic Senator, Joe Manchin of West Virginia, exercised his Democratic right and leveraged his critical vote to the hilt by withholding it—thereby denying passage of the “Bill Back Better” Bill as of this writing.

We must applaud those Black American Leaders who were and are true to Black Liberation. For those Black leaders who did not and do not adhere to a Black Liberation philosophy, we can plead on their behalf that they were or are not fortified in a Black Liberation tradition either because they did not receive Black Liberation education and training, or because they did not make themselves aware of the essentiality of Black Liberation. The latter leaders came to the task with what they had and served to benefit their constituents/followers or themselves.

However, going forward, if the Black American experience is not to end very badly in the 21st century, then each Black American must realize that the goal that we are struggling to achieve is Black Liberation. Accordingly, we must all come to comprehend the Black Liberation philosophy and its principles by whatever means available. Most importantly, to ensure our success as a people, we must hold each other accountable for Black Liberation—especially Black American leadership. If we do not, then we will have only ourselves to blame.¹⁰

¹⁰ While not integral to this essay, which is a critique, it is appropriate for us to suggest that, in addition to absorbing an appropriate education, at least two actions can contribute significantly to our achieving successful Black Liberation. First, Black Americans should establish lobbyists to push our agenda in the political halls of power across the nation. Second, Black Americans should establish a “Watch Dog” organization(s) to identify efforts (however configured) to thwart our drive toward Black Liberation. Of course, to operationalize these two suggested actions, resources are required. After securing these resources, we must monitor them diligently to ensure that they are not expended for unintended purposes.