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## Communities of Color Unite for Places at the Welcome Table

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# Communities of Color Unite for Places at the Welcome Table

By  
Harold Horton

The "vote" is often referred to as the political equalizer in a democratic society, because when citizens enter the voting booth they express an inalienable right that belongs to all, regardless of education, income, gender, national origin, religious preference, or color. And, as we recall from history, on many occasions one vote has made the difference between winning or losing a crucial decision or political contest.

The early European immigrants coalesced or rallied around their national origin and religious beliefs in order to accomplish mutual objectives, governance preferences, education goals, and ascendancy of their philosophical views. Because the early immigrants arrived at a time in America when the basic principles of the republic were in the process of being established, they were able to participate in the drafting, refinement and adoption of the basic tenets and principles to which U.S. citizens were to adhere. Thus, the early immigrants of European descent, for the most part, were seated at the welcome table of the democratic process in early America and continue to enjoy full participation in mainstream America.

America, although still a young republic, has had an opportunity to age somewhat. Although the foreparents of the "other" Americans, as people of color are sometimes called, were present in America at its beginning, they were for the most part disenfranchised and therefore not granted the opportunity to exercise their rights—even after attaining citizenship—to sit at the welcome table or to participate socially, politically, or economically in mainstream America.<sup>1</sup> Primarily because of the color of their skin, these "other" Americans have not been able to totally assimilate into American society. They are a growing population and are currently referred to as people of color, although just a few years ago it was considered derogatory to refer to such racial-minority groups as "colored" people.

In response to a question on the subject of race and ethnicity in American society that I submitted to Peter Kiang, assistant professor in the Graduate College of Education and American Studies at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, he stated that "We [Americans] need to accept [and become more aware of] the realities of changing demographics. For example, in the New England region during the 1980s, according to the U.S. Census the white population grew by 3.9 percent, while the black population grew by 32.2 percent, the native



American population grew by 51.8 percent, the Hispanic population grew by 90 percent and the Asian Pacific population grew by 2,314 percent!" Thus, with the rapid growth within the communities of these "other" Americans it appears that the time has come for the various communities of color to unite in order to assure themselves seats at the political and economic welcome table in mainstream America.

## Mobilization Time

As we approach the 21st century it is evident that people of color are still struggling to become "first-class" participants in mainstream America. For this reason, it is time for communities of color to mobilize around common issues and concerns in order to claim their democratic rightful place in American society.

During the late 1960s in Chicago, leaders of the Woodlawn neighborhood—a community of low-income people of color and whites—sought the assistance of Saul D. Alinsky, then the executive director of the Industrial Area Foundation, to assist them with organizing and mobilizing their community, located on the south side of Chicago near the prestigious University of Chicago. Alinsky and the people of Woodlawn demonstrated that communities that are organized can indeed become major players in city life and politics.

The Woodlawn activists set up The Woodlawn Organization (TWO) as a federation of representative groups that consisted of eighty-five civil, business, and religious groups or organizations. TWO's broad goal was to counter neglect from city hall that had set in since the demographics of the Woodlawn community changed from predominantly white to predominantly black during the 1950s.

Perhaps communities of color, which are so often neglected, ignored, and barred from participating in all

aspects of mainstream America, need to organize and mobilize around mutually agreed upon social, political, and economic agendas to assure themselves a voice on a local, state, and national level.

On one occasion, Alinsky stated, "...the only reason people have ever banded together and the only reason they ever will, is the fact that organization gives them the power to satisfy their desires or to realize their needs. There never has been any other reason."<sup>2</sup>

In reference to organizing communities of color, Professor Kiang also stated that, "We [communities of color] clearly need to focus on barriers, conflicts, misunderstandings. These are real, systemic, and hard to overcome." Edwin Melendez, director of the Gastón Institute at UMass Boston, in response to a question on the same topic, also stated, "There are factors that promote the cooperation of people of color on many issues, and there are factors that promote controversy and conflict. In general, there are more things that unite the interests of oppressed communities of color than separate them, but there are continuous challenges when forging relationships between different communities . . . I believe that we share a common ground when combating racism and finding solutions to problems related to urban poverty, but there are perceptions in the various communities of color that make the definition of common ground difficult to achieve."

### **Commonalities of People of Color**

It is quite evident that an attempt to get communities of color to work together to accomplish mutually agreed upon objectives will take a considerable amount of dialogue, even though there are commonalities among such groups. Professor Kiang stated that, "Millions of Africans and Asians, including many in the United States, share the Muslim faith. Black, Korean, and Latino churches are arguably the most important social institutions in their respective communities. The historic victory of Japanese Americans in winning reparations for their relocation and internment during World War II has significant relevance to African Americans' efforts to win reparations for slavery. The landmark Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which eliminated the racist, exclusionary, and discriminatory foundations of the United States' immigration policy resulted from the nation's commitment to civil rights and efforts led by the black civil rights movement."

Professor Kiang further explained that there have been many examples of individual and group efforts toward connection and coalition in cities across America. For example, in Boston, there have been strong cooperative efforts around public education and parent empowerment, redistricting, police brutality, and economic development. As activist Mel King demonstrated in his 1983 mayoral campaign, successful efforts that build meaningful relationships across communities demand leadership and vision, and this does not come easily. Meanwhile, the media typically reports only examples of controversy and

conflict among communities of color. In addition, schools offer curricula that provide no insight into all that people of color share.

With regard to the quality of relationships that exist between African Americans and Latinos, Edwin Melendez stated, "How leaders relate to each other has a lot to do with the direction of those relationships...For instance, in the Mel King campaign for mayor in 1983, Melania Bruno and Mauricio Gastón served as Latino organizers for the campaign. Both the Latino and African-American communities rallied around the Mel King campaign in an effort to assert their emerging role in Boston politics...Since then we have elected quite a few Latinos to school boards and as city councillors throughout the state. Shortly after the Mel King campaign, African Americans and Latinos engaged in multiple battles to influence redistricting at the state level. Some of those struggles paid a dividend when Nelson Merced was elected state representative in 1987... Another example of how we [locally] have defined common ground was the establishment of the Gastón and the Asian-American institutes at UMass Boston. Both institutes received the endorsement of the Massachusetts Black Legislative Caucus and the caucus played a critical role in the establishment of the two institutes."

### **Where Do Communities of Color Go from Here?**

It appears that it would be politically expedient for communities of color to unite in their struggle for places at the welcome table in mainstream America. However, as alluded to by Kiang and Melendez, there is a call for leaders from within the communities of color with the vision to determine areas of common or mutual interest.

Melendez stated that "...finding areas of common interest will result in tremendous benefits to all communities of color. For years, the divisions among our ranks have precluded a successful policy agenda. Our history of collaboration demonstrates that we achieve much more if we are able to define a unified understanding of the problems and forge a common vision as to the solution to those problems..."

At the beginning stages of the republic of the United States of America, people of color, especially people of African descent, unequivocally, were intentionally and deliberately denied the right to participate in the formulation of the basic creeds, contributions and bylaws of the new nation. By law, people of African descent were defined as being less than fully developed human beings. Therefore, they were considered to be property or chattel whose rights were invested in their slavemaster.

However, America, like other nations around the globe, is experiencing great changes. With drastic changes happening in the demographics of the nation it appears that communities of color have an opportunity to work together to assure that in the rebirth of the nation all American citizens will have the opportunity to participate in all aspects of mainstream America.

The destiny of people of color in America is in their hands. Will communities of color remain aloof and separate from one another because of trivial matters? Or will they unite to assure that quality education is offered in their public schools, that health concerns of people in their communities are met, that their families have decent housing, and that they will participate in the economic wealth of the nation? It appears that, as Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton stated in their book, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, the time has come for communities of color to "T.C.B."—take care of business—especially with regard to working together to assure themselves seats at the welcome table in mainstream America.<sup>3</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1969).

<sup>2</sup>Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in Black and White* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 324.

<sup>3</sup>Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

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