

Excellent think piece from Shelby Steele at *The Wall Street Journal*:

## **Why the GOP Can't Win With Minorities**

By Shelby Steele

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Today conservatism is stigmatized in our culture as an antiminority political philosophy. In certain quarters, conservatism is simply racism by another name. And minorities who openly identify themselves as conservatives are still novelties, fish out of water.

Yet there is now the feeling that without an appeal to minorities, conservatism is at risk of marginalization. The recent election revealed a Republican Party -- largely white, male and Southern -- seemingly on its way to becoming a "regional" party. Still, an appeal targeted just at minorities -- reeking as it surely would of identity politics -- is anathema to most conservatives. Can't it be assumed, they would argue, that support of classic principles -- individual freedom and equality under the law -- constitutes support of minorities? And, given the fact that blacks and Hispanics often poll more conservatively than whites on most social issues, shouldn't there be an easy *simpatico* between these minorities and political conservatism?

But of course the reverse is true. There is an abiding alienation between the two -- an alienation that I believe is the great new challenge for both modern conservatism and formerly oppressed minorities. Oddly, each now needs the other to evolve.

Yet why this alienation to begin with? Can it be overcome?

I think it began in a very specific cultural circumstance: the dramatic loss of moral authority that America suffered in the 1960s after openly acknowledging its long mistreatment of blacks and other minorities. Societies have moral accountability, and they cannot admit to persecuting a race of people for four centuries without losing considerable moral legitimacy. Such a confession -- honorable as it may be -- virtually calls out challenges to authority. And in the 1960s challenges emerged from everywhere -- middle-class white kids rioted for "Free Speech" at Berkeley, black riots decimated inner cities across the country, and violent antiwar protests were ubiquitous. America suddenly needed a conspicuous display of moral authority in order to defend the legitimacy of its institutions against relentless challenge.

This was the circumstance that opened a new formula for power in American politics: redemption. If you could at least seem to redeem America of its past sins, you could win enough moral authority to claim real political power. Lyndon Johnson devastated Barry Goldwater because -- among other reasons -- he seemed bent on redeeming America of its shameful racist past, while Goldwater's puritanical libertarianism precluded his even supporting the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Johnson's Great Society grandly advertised a new American racial innocence. If it utterly failed to "end poverty in our time," it succeeded -- through a great display of generosity toward minorities and the poor -- in recovering enough moral authority to see the government through the inexorable challenges of the '60s.

When redemption became a term of power, "redemptive liberalism" was born -- a new activist liberalism that gave itself a "redemptive" profile by focusing on social engineering rather than

liberalism's classic focus on individual freedom. In the '60s there was no time to allow individual freedom to render up the social good. Redemptive liberalism would proactively engineer the good. Name a good like "integration," and then engineer it into being through a draconian regimen of school busing. If the busing did profound damage to public education in America, it gave liberals the right to say, "At least we

did

something!" In other words, we are  
activists

against America's old sin of segregation. Activism is moral authority in redemptive liberalism.

But conservatism sees moral authority more in a discipline of principles than in activism. It sees ideas of the good like "diversity" as mere pretext for the social engineering that always leads to unintended and oppressive consequences. Conservatism would enforce the principles that ensure individual freedom, and then allow "the good" to happen by "invisible hand."

And here is conservatism's great problem with minorities. In an era when even failed moral activism is redemptive -- and thus a source of moral authority and power -- conservatism stands flat-footed with only discipline to offer. It has only an invisible hand to compete with the activism of the left. So conservatism has no way to show itself redeemed of America's bigoted past, no way like the Great Society to engineer a grand display of its innocence, and no way to show deference to minorities for the oppression they endured. Thus it

seems

to be in league with that oppression.

Added to this, American minorities of color -- especially blacks -- are often born into grievance-focused identities. The idea of grievance will seem to define them in some eternal way, and it will link them atavistically to a community of loved ones. To separate from grievance -- to say simply that one is no longer racially aggrieved -- will surely feel like an act of betrayal that threatens to cut one off from community, family and history. So, paradoxically, a certain chauvinism develops around one's sense of grievance. Today the feeling of being aggrieved by American bigotry is far more a matter of identity than of actual aggrievement.

And this identity calls minorities to an anticonservative orientation to American politics. It makes for an almost ancestral resistance to conservatism. One's identity of grievance is flattered by the moral activism of the left and offended by the invisible hand of the right. Minorities feel they were saved from oppression by the left's activism, not by the right's discipline. The truth doesn't matter much here (in fact it took both activism and principle, civil war and social movement, to end this oppression). But activism indicates moral anguish in whites, and so it constitutes the witness minorities crave. They feel seen, understood. With the invisible hand the special case of their suffering doesn't count for much, and they go without witness.

So here stands contemporary American conservatism amidst its cultural liabilities and, now, its electoral failures -- with no mechanism to redeem America of its shames, atavistically resisted by minorities, and vulnerable to stigmatization as a bigoted and imperialistic political orientation. Today's liberalism may stand on decades of failed ideas, but it is failure in the name of American

redemption. It remains competitive with -- even ascendant over -- conservatism because it addresses America's moral accountability to its past with moral activism. This is the left's great power, and a good part of the reason Barack Obama is now the president of the United States. No matter his failures -- or the fruitlessness of his extravagant and scatter-gun governmental activism -- he redeems America of an ugly past. How does conservatism compete with this?

The first impulse is to moderate. With "compassionate conservatism" and "affirmative access" and "faith-based initiatives," President George W. Bush tried to show a redemptive conservatism that could be activist against the legacy of America's disgraceful past. And it worked electorally by moderating the image of conservatives as uncaring disciplinarians. But in the end it was only a marketer's ploy -- a shrewd advertisement with no actual product to sell.

What drew me to conservatism years ago was the fact that it gave discipline a slightly higher status than virtue. This meant it could not be subverted by passing notions of the good. It could be above moral vanity. And so it made no special promises to me as a minority. It neglected me in every way except as a human being who wanted freedom. Until my encounter with conservatism I had only known the racial determinism of segregation on the one hand and of white liberalism on the other -- two varieties of white supremacy in which I could only be dependent and inferior.

The appeal of conservatism is the mutuality it asserts between individual and political freedom, its beautiful idea of a free man in a free society. And it offers minorities the one thing they can never get from liberalism: human rather than racial dignity. I always secretly loved Malcolm X more than Martin Luther King Jr. because Malcolm wanted a fuller human dignity for blacks -- one independent of white moral wrestling. In a liberalism that wants to redeem the nation of its past, minorities can only be ciphers in white struggles of conscience.

Liberalism's glamour follows from its promise of a new American innocence. But the appeal of conservatism is relief from this supercilious idea. Innocence is not possible for America. This nation did what it did. And conservatism's appeal is that it does not bank on the recovery of lost innocence. It seeks the discipline of ordinary people rather than the virtuousness of extraordinary people. The challenge for conservatives today is simply self-acceptance, and even a little pride in the way we flail away at problems with an invisible hand.

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