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Confab: Blacks must embrace Booker T. Washington's view of self-reliance

by Mema Ayi
June 7, 2006

Scholars Tuesday explored what Booker T. Washington might think of today's Black America during panel discussions at Northwestern University Law School's Arthur Rubloff Building.

The third and final day of the Booker T. Washington 150th Anniversary symposium encouraged the Black community and scholars to discuss politics and self-reliance, inclusion and the role of government and the possibility of creating situations to overcome barriers.

Hosted by the New Coalition for Economic and Social Change and the free-market think tank, The Heartland Institute, sociologists, political scientists and historians on Tuesday's panels presented their ideas on the issues facing African Americans – and how Washington coped with similar issues during his time.

"If Booker T. Washington were alive today, he would be saying, 'Black America, have you lost your minds?'," said Carol Swain, professor of political science and law at Vanderbilt University during the "Left, Right and Black: Where to go in the Political Arena" discussion.

High rates of out of wedlock births and abortion would send Washington into despair, Swain said.

"Booker T. Washington would be urging us to return to our religious morals and right living," Swain said.

Sociologist Frank Harold Wilson, associate professor at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, said Washington was bi-partisan at a time when many other Blacks identified themselves as Republicans.

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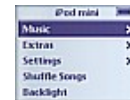
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"He was aligned with the Republican Party, but at the state and local level, he had to deal with Democrats," Wilson said.

If he were alive today, Wilson said Washington would be disappointed, but not disenfranchised, and demand the community take more responsibility for its actions.

But, the basic needs of the African American community have not changed since Washington's time, he added.

"We still need credit and business loans. There is usually a consensus around economics, but how we get there has a lot of differences," Wilson said.

Some issues facing the Black community, Swain said, could be solved if the country were to look at the way a particular issue affects the entire nation and not just African Americans.

"We have made felony disenfranchisement a racial issue. People who have paid their debt to society should be allowed to vote. If we de-racialized (the issue) we would have many more people supporting it," Swain said.

In Milwaukee, Wilson said, a study showed white men with felony records were called more for employment than Black men with clean records.

Whites have changed their views toward African Americans in recent decades, he added.

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"Since the 1980s, (whites) have seen our problems as individualistic causes, such as Blacks aren't working hard enough," Wilson said. "Some people believe we're entering a color-blind society, but maybe we're getting more sophisticated about exclusion?"

William Allen, professor of political science at Michigan State University, blamed conditions in the African American community on the "failures" of Dr. Martin Luther King and former President Richard M. Nixon.

King, Allen said, near the end of his life, wrote that Blacks could not stand on their own without assistance due to the past grievances.

"The great opportunity he had, he spurned. The Black community today cannot overcome its victim hood," said Allen, who served as moderator during the "Self-Reliance and the Role of Government" panel, and as the keynote speaker during Tuesday's luncheon at the Metropolitan Club in the Sears Tower.

Nixon, Allen said, gave us racial preferences in affirmative action.

"He bound affirmative action preferences and wed us to the victim mentality. We still have not escaped it," Allen said.

There is still hope through open, honest discussion, said Swain.

"The problems impacting African Americans will not be solved by like-minded people talking to one another, nor will the problems of African Americans be solved by politics. They're

solved by people working together to change the culture,” Swain said. “At the root, we have to do some things for ourselves. At the end of the day, it’s our responsibility.”

Wilson said the key to changing the tide in the Black community will depend on improving education, creating more entrepreneurship opportunities, homeownership and prison reform.

Swain also argued that an apology from whites for slavery and systematic oppression – specifically from the Republican President of the United States – would start the ball rolling on mending race relations between Blacks and whites.

Allen disagreed. President Abraham Lincoln, he said, apologized for slavery in his second inaugural address.

“Do we need an apology beyond that? I don’t think so. Booker T. Washington didn’t ask for an apology,” Allen said.

Swain said Lincoln’s apology did not cover the Jim Crow years or policies of the U.S. government that continued to disenfranchise African Americans for more than a century.

“The slave owners are dead. The slaves are dead. But the U.S. government is still around. We need the Republican president in a Rose Garden ceremony to apologize. It won’t end the problems, but it’s the right thing to do. It’s a step in the right direction,” Swain said. “It will take something drastic like that to take us to the next stage. And we don’t need (Rev.) Jesse Jackson or the (Congressional) Black Caucus to accept it for us.”