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Mobilizing Black America: The Education Problem

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ABSTRACT

Mobilization is defined simply as the act of organizing national resources to support national objectives in time of war or other emergencies. America's greatest national resource--its people--have traditionally rallied behind the country's mobilization call by personal sacrifice for the good of national objectives. There is a growing concern, however, that a significant portion of our society--black Americans--may not be prepared to assume their mobilization roles due to deficiencies in our public educational systems.

MOBILIZING BLACK AMERICA: THE EDUCATION PROBLEM investigates the state of education in the black community and identifies the principle shortfalls to our national education strategy. Six social-economic issues are identified which directly influence the educating of black Americans. These deficiencies span the spectrum of education, from the classroom environment to our national education strategy.

What is most important as you read my research project, is that you personalize the education problems and consider for yourself the mobilization repercussions if these issues are not attacked head-on. America's fastest growing minority group is a national resource worthy of our increasing commitment and support.

MOBILIZING BLACK AMERICA: THE EDUCATION PROBLEM accomplishes the first step which is to articulate the issues which are contributing to the failure of our public educational systems.

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ABSTRACT

Mobilization is defined simply as the act of organizing national resources to support national objectives in time of war or other emergencies. America's greatest national resource--its people--have traditionally rallied behind the country's mobilization call by personal sacrifice for the good of national objectives. There is a growing concern, however, that a significant portion of our society--black Americans--may not be prepared to assume their mobilization roles due to deficiencies in our public educational systems.

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MOBILIZING BLACK AMERICA: THE EDUCATION PROBLEM

MOBILIZATION is defined as the act of assembly and organizing national resources to support national objectives in time of war or other emergencies. Mobilization actions include education policy and programs to support the expanded requirements for military skills and war production and support.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the most important elements of our American society--directly influencing one's prosperity and potential economic success. Education is a key to our children's economic potential and it lays the groundwork for our own professional advancement opportunities. In fact, education has often been attributed to many of society's failures such as poverty and inner-city violence, while at the same time being the cohesion element of a multi-cultural society. So why is there a problem with the greatest country in the world's educational systems? In particular, will the education of black America be able to support the needs and sophistication of tomorrow's military and commercial establishments? There are no easy answers to either of these questions; however, unanswered these issues will threaten our national cohesion by creating a two class society: the

educated versus the uneducated. .

Black Americans have essentially pursued two strategies to improve educational experiences for their children. Prior to the mid-1950's, blacks fought for quality education by demanding that segregated schools receive an equal distribution of resources. Following the 1954 Supreme Court decision (Brown vs Board of Education), blacks united behind the goal of school integration as a means of attaining equal-quality education. Progress has been made under the integration strategy; however, black students continue to fall short of their white counterparts in academic achievements such as completion of high school and scores on standardized test.¹

Over the past 35 years and despite school integration, America has continued its transformation into a two class society--the educated versus the uneducated. In July of 1967, President Lyndon Johnson announced the appointment of the Kerner Commission and charged the body with articulating ignorance, discrimination, and poverty in America.

We should attack these conditions - not because we are frightened by conflict, but because we are fired by conscience. We should attack them because there is simply no other way to achieve a decent and orderly society in

¹ Jaynes, Gerald D. and Williams, Robin M. Jr. , Blacks and American Society, National Academy Press, Washington D.C., 1989. p. 331.

America.

President Lyndon Johnson

Nationwide address (July 27, 1967)

Although the Kerner Commission specifically looked at the '67 urban riots in relation to what happened and why, many of the findings in the report uncovered a deteriorating public educational system that was incapable of meeting the needs and expectations of its black constituents. Specifically, this document reported the black population migration from the rural south to the urban centers in the north shortly after the end of the second world war. As blacks moved into the northern metropolitan areas, whites began an equally dramatic exodus to the suburban communities in pursuit of a "better quality of life." The inner-city voids left behind during the white flight quickly deteriorated and decayed the underpinnings of an effective society--employment, security, and education.

This paper will investigate the problems with educating black America. What are the mobilization issues affecting educating black America for the next worldwide crisis? What changes must be made today to ensure that the defense establishment of tomorrow has the finest and most educated citizen resource available to defend the country by employing the complex weapon systems?

WHAT DOES AMERICA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM LOOK LIKE TODAY?

Although more and more Americans are attending school, many of them, and in particular as many as 1 in 4 black Americans, are believed to be functionally illiterate. The 1983 Commission of Excellence in Education stated that not only that numerous functional illiterates were graduating from high schools, but that many students did not possess "the higher order" intellectual skills--skills increasingly important to the DoD mission--that they were supposed to have learned. The state of education in America has not shown any improvement over the last decade and the effects upon black Americans have reached crisis proportions.

Effective primary and secondary education in the large metropolitan areas became more critical to blacks in the sixties and seventies while growing less relevant to whites.² The Kerner Commission studied fifteen central cities and reported:

- With the exception of the South, blacks live in large concentrated metropolitan areas.
- the concentration of blacks in America have a disproportionate influence upon their equity and well-being.
- if you know only the racial composition of a high school, you can predict its percentage of poor children, the average achievement scores, dropout rates, and college entrance exam

² Harris, Fred R. and Wilkins, Roger W. , Quiet Riots, Pantheon Books, New York, NY, 1988. page, 113.

scores with an alarming degree of accuracy.

Statistics support the Kerner Commission's findings that black income levels are concentrated at the low-end of the economic ladder. Furthermore, while the educational gap between white and black students continues to close, blacks as a whole, continue to score significantly lower than their white classmates on standardized tests. The chart below illustrates this point.

Progress in Academic Achievement, by Race and Age, 1967-1984

| Achievement | correct scores (percent) | | | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|------|--------------|------|--------------|------|
| | 9 year-olds | | 13 year-olds | | 17 year-olds | |
| Assessment (Reading) | wht | blk | wht | blk | wht | blk |
| 1969-70 | 66.4 | 49.7 | 62.6 | 45.4 | 71.2 | 51.7 |
| 1974-75 | 67.0 | 54.5 | 61.9 | 46.4 | 71.2 | 52.1 |
| 1979-80 | 69.3 | 59.6 | 62.6 | 49.6 | 70.6 | 52.2 |
| 1983-84 | 69.1 | 57.4 | 64.4 | 52.4 | 72.5 | 60.0 |

Source: Data from Educational Testing Service(1985) and earlier

Education today is a national crisis. Statistics available from various sources confirm what concerned parents have been fearing for quite sometime--our educational system is not preparing our

children for the technological advanced world of tomorrow. Will our children surpass the economic milestones which their parents were able to achieve? Will young adults, specifically young black adults, assume the traditional leadership roles in this expanding global economy that the previous majority population was able to enjoy?

As a sort of good news-bad news story, the latest statistics confirm that the educational gap between the black and the white American student is closing. The percentage of blacks (aged 18 to 24) with a high school diploma actually grew from 68 percent in 1978 to 75 percent in 1988. The amount of similar aged white adults with high school diplomas remained relatively constant during the same period (82 percent in 1978 to 83 percent in 1988). Another less publicized yet positive trend, shows that the black high school student dropout rate has declined from about 10 percent in 1978 to 6 percent in 1988. The white high school student dropout rate, which includes GED data, has remained virtually unchanged--6 percent in 1978 to 5 percent in 1988.³

There are some growing discrepancies between black high school dropout rates as reported by the census bureau and private survey organizations. Although the government estimates that

³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey-1991, Report number 169-RD, p.50.

approximately 75 percent (includes GED data) of black students earn a high school diploma, other reports estimate that the high school dropout rate approaches 50 percent. The answer to this discrepancy is that about 18 percent of the 450,000 people who complete the General Educational Development Test (GED) are black. Although these approximately 40,000 young black adults achieve the equivalence of a high school diploma, statistics show that an over-represented portion of these people accept lower-pay service related employment over continuing with higher formal education.

WHY IS THE STATE OF BLACK EDUCATION IMPORTANT TO THE DoD MISSION?

DoD decision-makers can not afford to ignore the well documented problems with educating black Americans. DoD, much like the private sector, depends upon every generation to produce competent young men and women who are capable of operating increasingly sophisticated hardware. In the 1940's, most entry-level Navy tasks required only a fourth-grade reading level. Today, most Navy entry-level tasks requires an eight grade competency level. The growing number of more challenging tasks requires a minimum eleven grade education.⁴

⁴Doug Bandon, Human Resources and Defense Manpower (Washington: The National Defense University, 1989), p.47-62.

During the 1980's, both the private sector and the military had to appropriate greater resources to enhance the quality of young recruits. In 1982, the Navy reported that one-fourth of its recruits could not read as the night-grade level, and that the service was forced to provide remedial instruction.⁵ DoD can no longer afford to use increasingly limited resources to accomplish what our public educational systems are task to do.

WHO HAS THE PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY OF OUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM?

Educating our young citizens is primarily the state and local government's responsibility. The diversity in which the state and local governments discharges their responsibility contributes to much of the public's opinion about our educational systems. Imagine trying to run a successful business with 50 different departments and more than 1600 separate divisions, each being managed without a common set of standards. Managing a world class business as we now manage our country's educational system would result in failure.

POLITICS, RESOURCES, AND LEADERSHIP

Politics, resources, and leadership are the fundamental elements

⁵Ibid., p.50

to the U.S. educational system. As with other government controlled programs, these elements are continually subjected to close media and public scrutiny. State and local governments seek the right balance--a combination which achieves parents expectations without exceeding the opportunity cost criteria of the community. For example, the decision by a school board to close an unnecessary public school might be accepted by the local public if the action results in a more efficient school district. I consider each of these elements important for developing the framework to consider the most significant problems with our educational system. Let's examine each element more closely.

Politics has much to do with forming our opinions about the state of U.S. education. Politics is prevalent at all levels--local, state, and national. Our political system is the medium in which we choose education administrators and resolve important education revenue questions. It is worthy of much of the blame in the state of education today; however, politics also charges our dreams for a better tomorrow. The relationship between politics and educational systems is tough to comprehend, but one knows it's embedded in every level. We just have to learn how to make education work for us--not against us.

The state of U.S. education is greatly influenced by our country's allocation of limited resources. Americans are often accused by foreign competitors of being short-sighted and

impatient when considering long term investments. During tough economic times, the competition for our resources is driven more by short-term growth opportunities than long-term, and perhaps low return educational investments. State and local governments retain much of the financial responsibilities for their educational systems, and cutbacks in federal aid to states and local governments cause a chain reaction review of the opportunity costs of local and state resources. Our educational systems require a steady and predictable level of resource support over the long term in order to produce a world class graduate product.

Leadership, in the form of national direction, is probably the most important element of a successful strategy. Because many of our senior education administrative positions are filled with political appointees, leadership at the state and local level is, at best, inconsistent and clearly absent of any long-term vision. Leadership also serves as the sounding-board which keeps the focus of a community on its educational goals. President Bush wanted to be remembered in American history as the "Education President" because he recognized that a lack of national leadership and direction was as much a factor in this country's declining global literacy standing as any other issue. Leadership remains a problem in our educational system today.

HOW ARE BLACK AMERICANS DOING IN TODAY'S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM?

Until perhaps the last 15 years, blacks have not been in a particularly good position to influence any of the fundamental elements in education--politics, resources, and leadership. One could make a successful argument that blacks have little, if any, influence in educational systems, especially beyond the household, even today. Integration has been successful at closing the resource gap somewhat, but even that momentum has slowed over the last 10 years as illustrated by the following ACT scores data:

ACT SCORES: TRENDS

| blacks | # students | English | Math | Social Studies | Composite |
|--------|------------|---------|------|----------------|-----------|
| 1985 | 58,988 | 13.5 | 10.1 | 11.4 | 12.6 |
| 1987 | 61,763 | 14.4 | 11.0 | 12.1 | 13.4 |
| 1989 | 74,227 | 14.4 | 11.6 | 12.0 | 13.6 |

whites:

| | | | | | |
|------|---------|------|------|------|------|
| 1985 | 593,785 | 18.9 | 18.1 | 18.3 | 19.5 |
| 1987 | 610,759 | 19.1 | 18.0 | 18.3 | 19.6 |
| 1989 | 661,010 | 19.2 | 17.9 | 18.1 | 19.4 |

Source: "Average ACT Scores by Racial-Ethnic Groups," Black Issues in Higher Education, September 28, 1989, p. 12.

This data clearly shows that while black students have demonstrated continued improvement with respect to standardized tests, they remain measurably deficient to whites in most categories evaluated. A few other significant data points addressing blacks and the educational system include:

- * There is little or no difference between the percentage of blacks and whites aged 14 to 24 enrolled in vocational courses (2.8 percent to 2.5 percent).
- * The proportion of black and white students aged 25 to 34 earning four-year degrees did not change significantly over the previous decade. In 1990, 13 percent of the black students and 24 percent of the white students had completed 4 or more years of college.
- * A disproportionate percentage of blacks fail to earn a high school diploma.
- * Fewer black high school graduates are entering and completing college degree requirements.

The deterioration of America's educational systems has affected all Americans; however, statistics consistently confirm that black Americans are disproportionately impacted.

WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH EDUCATING BLACK AMERICA?

My father once told me that it is relatively easy to identify issues contributing to a problem, but its another question entirely to develop definitive solutions to the issues. I found no shortage of books and articles which echoed the public opinion that our educational systems are in trouble. The problems are much larger in scope than just a black white issue; however, as a result of my research this year I have identified the following problems directly affecting educating black Americans:

- * Low teacher and student expectations
- * European oriented curriculum for a multi-cultural society
- * Inadequate/inequitable allocation of resources
- * Deteriorated inner-city environment
- * Insufficient family support structure
- * Lack of leadership and direction

LOW TEACHER AND STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

Webster defines the word "expectation" as "what is considered reasonable or due." As normal human beings we all have expectations about our future and we work hard to achieve requisite milestones. Expectations can be very healthy if they serve as a positive catalyst for advancement and prosperity, but they can also be a barrier-to-entry if they cultivate prejudice

or bias.

In terms of educating black students, a teacher's expectations of a child's success potential is an important issue and one worthy of thorough consideration. Although I can not support my assumptions with hard evidence, I believe that some teachers come to the inner-city classroom with a low success expectation for black students. This low expectation bias might have been generated as a result of a teacher's personal experiences, or more likely is the product of third party information--the local nightly news or inner-city police crime statistics. No matter what the source of this bias, the resultant teacher behavior is often predictable and unfortunately unproductive. For example, if a white student fails to give the correct answer to the teacher's question when asked, chances are that the teacher will continue to ask leading questions until the student is successful. On the other hand, when the same set of entering circumstances are placed in an inner-city environment, chances are that the teacher will move on to another student immediately because of the low expectation factor for black students. The teacher's low expectation bias for black students perpetuates the student's low expectation feelings for himself.

Failure, like encouragement, at any age influences a student's expectation of his or her potential to succeed in life. Failure gets the student accustomed to disappointment and cultivates his

low expectation of himself. The label becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The following chart illustrates how achievement expectations can be seen in student performance:

Black College Students: High School Grade Point Average

| High school grade point average | Total population | Campus Race | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------|-------|
| | | black | white |
| below 2.5 | 10.0 | 15.0 | 4.1 |
| 2.5 - 2.99 | 22.4 | 27.8 | 15.9 |
| 3.0 - 3.5 | 35.9 | 39.2 | 31.5 |
| above 3.5 | 31.9 | 17.9 | 48.5 |

Source: Nation study of Black College Students, 1981 and 1983,
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Inner-city black students know failure well, and a teacher who is incapable of drawing-out the correct responses is only reinforcing the students' defeatist attitude. Both black and white teachers are guilty of this stereotyping and unless there is a societal change, we could loose an entire generation of potentially productive black citizens.

A CURRICULUM OF INCLUSION

In 1989 the New York State Commissioner of Education, Thomas

Sobol, released a report entitled "A Curriculum of Inclusion" which characterized minorities as victims of an intellectual and educational oppression by the culture of European America.⁶ The report went on to state that this oppression did not consist in giving an inferior education to minorities, but in giving them the same education as whites. The report made a strong argument for restructuring the curriculum in the state's public schools system. History, achievements, aspirations and concerns of minority cultures were to be made an integral part of the curricula. The report was hailed as an excellent document worthy of becoming the blueprint for follow-on actions.

If structuring a curriculum around a European center of gravity is damaging to minorities, and in particular to black students, how do we explain the notable academic credentials of a Martin Luther King? America has since its inception been a culture of diverse people and we see little if any difficulties in the Asian American educational experience. I found no convincing evidence that presenting a Western-oriented education degrades a black youth of his self-esteem. While I do not agree with the argument that we must restructure the public school system around individual minority needs, I fully support the movement to rewrite many text books in order to recognize the cultural and historical contributions of our diverse population.

⁶ Auster, Lawrence, "The Regents' Round Table," The State of U.S. Education, The H. W. Wilson Company 1991. pp.87-91.

Many text books used in our public educational system portray subtle messages to the student and perhaps discourage his participation in class activities. Professor Leonard Jeffries, a contributor to the social studies portion of the Kerner Commission study, discussed how the front cover of the fifth grade social studies reader depicted only two white students participating in school activities. On the cover of another text book several families--both white and minorities--were illustrated ;however, the black family only included a single parent. While it would be at best difficult to convince anyone that these authors intended to enforce a European bias upon the minority audience, a greater point can be made that educators must be more sensitive to subtle messages and remain proactive in reaching the self-esteem needs of the black student.

ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES

The equitable distribution of resources is critical to having a successful and competitive educational program. Integration was believed to be the solution to blacks not receiving an equitable share of the educational resources; however, one only has to visit one of the local inner-city schools to see that they are "different" from their counterparts in Northern Virginia or Maryland. Although resources are limited throughout all facets of our economy, inner-city schools have suffered more from a lack of

adequate maintenance and operational funding.

Resources available for educational needs are reflective of both the community's tax base and its commitment to the local school district's needs. Suburban communities are traditionally made-up of white middle-class families living in owner occupied single family homes. Blacks have, on the other hand, traditionally concentrated in inner-city communities made-up of rental or government subsidized housing and earned wages at the low-end of the pay scale. Without some improved process of economic redistribution, both the inner-city and the suburban schools will continue their predictable states of educational success.

Resources available include the quality and quantity of teachers in the schools. More resources and financial incentives for the prospective teacher result in more competition and improved quality of applicants for teacher positions. Increased resources also allow teachers to maximize their training skills with the use of educational aids--computers and better textbooks, for example. I'm convinced that the resource--or lack of resources--issue is an under-emphasized yet significant factor influencing the state of education in America today.

INNER-CITY ENVIRONMENT

Deep down inside, we all want the community we live in to be the best--a model for other communities to emulate. If we don't have the means to cause the desired change by ourselves, we want to muster our efforts with those of other community residences who have similar aspirations. The state of education in our communities should be one of the issues worthy of such community involvement.

Over 50 percent of all black Americans live in crime plagued inner-cities.

Percent Residence and Poverty

| <u>Characteristics</u> | <u>blacks</u> | <u>whites</u> |
|------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| inner-city | 57.2 | 34.0 |
| suburban area | 17.8 | 33.9 |
| rural area | 25.0 | 32.1 |

Source: Poverty Distribution, by Race of Residence, 1986," A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society, 1989, p. 286.

The education of black Americans is another of the many casualties associated with poverty; however, education is the only respectable catalyst for economic and social improvement.

The black inner-city environment affects the education of its residents in the following ways:

- * Isolates communities
- * Creates an environment of fear and distrust
- * Cultivates the cycle of failure

Education partnerships suffer in inner-city schools because there are genuine concerns for the personal well-beings by anyone daring to help. In recent years even schools have become battle zones for gangs and often teachers and students are the innocent casualties. A safe environment is not only critical to learning, but required to encourage partnerships from businesses and civic organizations.

The inner-city environment of crime and violence creates a community environment of fear. This fear can be seen in the parents who hesitate to become involved in school activities, and teachers who wonder what new levels of violence the day will bring.

FAMILY SUPPORT STRUCTURE

What skills would one expect a young child--5 years of age for example--to display upon entering the first grade? I would submit that you should expect the young student to be able to recite the

alphabet and spell his or her first name. Most teachers would also expect a child to understand and follow simple instructions: sit down, no talking, or hold hands. A child's readiness to start school lays the foundation for participation in the educational process. Not being socially ready to start school can launch a child, especially a young black child, down the road of failure.

For a sizable portion of the inner-city black students, their readiness to start primary education is questionable. In 1988, roughly 55 percent of all black children were being raised in a single parent head-of-household environment⁷. More than half of those head-of-households were young and relatively uneducated women who were themselves victims of the inner-city cycle of failure. Many black children have little or no traditional family structure to call-upon to support the readiness to start school skills.

The importance of a solid family support structure is not limited only to a child's readiness to begin primary education. Family support is more important at the secondary educational level. A student should be expected to acknowledge generic school-house and classroom rules, especially as they relate to discipline and mutual respect. These are fundamental values which should be

⁷U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey-1991, Report Number 169-rd, p.50.

taught at home and reenforced in the classroom. Students who are incapable of conforming to basic rules degrade the learning experience for all.

The non-traditional family structure of the black student often falls short of what is needed to instill discipline and mutual respect. Role models often originate from the streets than the home. The following chart confirms my suspicion that there is a correlation between the educational attainment of an individual and his likelihood to participate in crime.

Prisoners' Educational Attainment

Percent of Prison inmates by educational level

| | # inmates | < 6 YRS | 7-8 | 9-11 | GED | H.S | >13 |
|-----|-----------|---------|------|------|-----|------|-----|
| ALL | 448,694 | 6.7 | 14.2 | 40.8 | 4.3 | 27.5 | 6.6 |
| wht | 222,823 | 7.7 | 15.7 | 33.6 | 4.4 | 30.6 | 8.0 |
| blk | 210,223 | 5.3 | 12.3 | 48.8 | 4.2 | 24.4 | 5.0 |
| oth | 15,312 | 8.9 | 16.3 | 37.1 | 5.7 | 24.5 | 7.5 |

Source: "Educational Attainment of State Prison Inmates, 1986,"
Black Issues in Higher Education, September 28, 1989, p.7.

Approximately 65 percent of all black inmates in 1986 had less than a high school education.

CONCLUSION

Since colonial times, black Americans have faithfully served their country under arms. While the underlying motivation for that contribution has changed, the principle issue remains that when mobilized, black Americans serve their country with distinction. My research effort has looked at the state of educating black Americans today and the broad social-economic problems degrading their participation in our 1600 plus local educational systems.

In this post-republican administration era, there are great expectations throughout America that once again domestic issues will surface to the top of our national agenda. Educational reform is a priority issue. In order to go beyond just marginal improvements in educating black Americans, specific and innovative policy initiatives are needed to combat the following social and economic culprits:

- * Teacher/student expectations
- * Curriculum development
- * Equity in Resource Allocations
- * Inner-city environment
- * Family support structure
- * National leadership and vision

As throughout our country's 200 year history, mobilizing black America in support of a national crisis will not be a problem. Like other critical resources however, the scope of the black American's contribution will be influenced--perhaps severely limited--by his education and the skills he brings to the mobilization call. Investing in programs which enhance the state of black education is a worthy challenge, and one that our country can not afford to ignore.

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