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OPINION | COMMENTARY

The Resilience of the Black American

The racial grievance industry ignores inspiring examples of African-American achievement.

By Robert L. Woodson Sr.

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Taxpayer-funded institutions are now adding their voices to the movement against “systemic racism”—the invisible legacy of slavery and discrimination that supposedly determines the destiny of black Americans. The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture last month posted a graphic on its website outlining the “Aspects and Assumptions of Whiteness & White Culture in the United States.” The document maintained that “white people and their traditions, attitudes and ways of life have been normalized over time” and “we have all internalized some aspects of white culture—including people of color.”

From the sounds of it, these “assumptions” are the types of things that would be debilitating and deleterious to minorities should they adopt and practice them in their lives. Assumptions such as “hard work is the key to success,” “the nuclear family . . . is the ideal social unit” and “plan for [the] future” are offered as examples of “white dominant culture.” In fact, the qualities attributed to “whiteness” are the same principles and values that have empowered blacks in America to succeed despite lingering discrimination and bigotry. The museum removed the graphic after a public outcry, saying “it’s not working in the way we intended.”

The whiteness graphic is merely one of hundreds of capitulations to the demeaning and disabling message of racial grievance merchants, who claim that any and all failures of black Americans are attributable to so-called systemic racism. Institutions that had once been trusted to provide steppingstones to achievement have jettisoned the principles of personal responsibility and self-determination.

The stories of men and women for whom oppression triggered resilience and success have been redacted from politically correct, grievance-based histories such as “The 1619 Project.” The mission of the Woodson Center, and the “1776 Project,” is to rescue those inspiring examples of achievement against the odds—both historical and current.



The Golden 13 in March 1944.

PHOTO: U.S. NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE
COMMAND

If you asked young black students today who the Golden 13 were, few would be able to identify the group of determined African-American servicemen who won a noble victory in an era in which blacks were prohibited from becoming naval officers. At the insistence of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a crop of 16 college-educated black cadets were chosen for line-officer training in 1944.

To ensure their failure, the normal training period of 16 weeks was reduced to eight weeks for the black cadets. When they realized that someone in the Navy wanted them to wash out, the cadets covered up the windows of their barracks and studied all night. When they were tested, the entire group

passed with high marks. Disbelief in the chain of command that an all-black cadet class could achieve higher scores than an all-white one meant that the black sailors had to suffer the indignity of retaking their tests. Again, all 16 passed, but

the Navy offered commissions to only 13.

This grit and determination to succeed has been repeated over and over again. You can find it the bestselling book and award-winning movie “Hidden Figures”—the story of the three black female mathematicians who played a critical role in astronaut John Glenn’s 1962 mission to orbit the earth aboard the Friendship 7.

Three years ago, I attended a talk by the book’s author, Margot Lee Shetterly. The reaction to her presentation underscored the thirst within the black community for inspiring messages of success against all odds. The 1,000-seat auditorium was filled to capacity with a predominantly African-American audience. People were standing in the balcony and along the walls. Hundreds milled in front of the building after the fire marshal determined that the building’s capacity had been reached. The 100 books that the organizers had brought to the venue were sold out well before the presentation began. Even the local bookstores couldn’t scrounge up a copy. During the question-and-answer session, some in the audience lamented not having heard about Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson and Dorothy Vaughan earlier. Children raised their hands excitedly to learn more.

“Hidden Figures” is but one of thousands of black American stories demonstrating that the most powerful antidote to disrespect isn’t protest but performance and the most potent answer to repression is resilience. Sadly, these sentiments are off-message for black elites, liberals in academia and cable-news talking-heads, who prefer the narrative of black victimization by “whiteness.”

Those who attribute all failure of blacks in America—academic, occupational and even moral—to an all-purpose invisible villain of “institutional racism” are betraying those they purport to represent. Those who shake their fists and proclaim that a change in white America is a prerequisite for black achievement are embracing a version of white supremacy. This debilitating dynamic is exacerbated by the guilt among white liberals, who approach the black community with a combination of pity, patronage and pandering.

Black Americans must refuse to surrender to incompetence, self-devaluation and

self-marginalization. Every day at my office, I pass a wall with a photograph of a group of slaves from 1861. The photo is titled “Strength” and features the quotation: “The strongest people in the world are not those most protected: They are the ones who must struggle against adversity and obstacles and surmount them to survive.”

The Golden 13 and the women of “Hidden Figures” embodied this maxim. As Ms. Shetterly declared at her book signing: “These are the kinds of stories that change your life. You see people doing these amazing things and you internalize it, you normalize it, and it completely changes your inner landscape and what you believe is possible.”

Mr. Woodson is founder and president of the Woodson Center.

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