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Commentary, February 1999

Beyond Victimhood by Peter Berkowitz

A review of *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America* by Shelby Steele. HarperCollins. 185 pp. \$24.00.

In the *Content of Our Character*, the 1990 book that first brought him to national attention, Shelby Steele described himself as a "fortyish, middle-class, black American male" who had concluded, on the basis of his own experience and that of others like him, that there is now "an enormous range of opportunity open to blacks in this society." As dramatic a departure as this was from the conventional wisdom of the civil-rights establishment, Steele went still farther, arguing that to take advantage of these opportunities, blacks needed to embrace more fully certain basic American ideals:

| There will be no end to despair and no lasting solution to any of our problems until we rely on individual effort within the American mainstream --- rather than collective action against the mainstream --- as our means of advancement. We need a collective identity that encourages diversity within the race, that does not make black unity a form of repression, that does not imply that the least among us are the most black, and that makes the highest challenge of "blackness" personal development.

For giving powerful contemporary voice to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream that one day individual blacks would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character, Steele was rewarded with a certain amount of fame but an even greater amount of notoriety. In particular, black and white intellectuals of the Left greeted his defection from orthodoxy with loud and often personal vituperation.

In his new book, Steele shows the scars of this unpleasantness. He is older, angrier, and understandably less patient with those who refuse to weigh his case on its merits. In "The Loneliness of the 'Black Conservative'," an essay that comprises nearly half the book, he complains with justice that he has been defined, and vilified, not in terms of the views usually associated with conservatives --- loyalty to tradition or embrace of the free market --- but for the simple fact that he refuses to treat the oppression of American blacks as the sole explanation for their fate. When a black female journalist declares to Steele, "I don't think we can tell the story of our victimization enough," he replies with palpable ire. People can also suffer, he quotes himself responding, from "ignorance, fear, a poor assessment of reality, and from a politics that commits them to the idea of themselves as victims."

Such indignation courses through *A Dream Deferred*, but it hardly makes Steele's thought "entirely reactive," as the sociologist Alan Wolfe charged in his review of the book in the *New Republic*. Indeed, Steele's new essays make clear that, in common with many other so-called conservatives, he remains very much a liberal, albeit one in the old-fashioned or classical sense. For him, individual freedom and personal responsibility are non-negotiable, and represent two sides of the same coin. These principles, he maintains, are the necessary foundation not only for American self-government but also for the dream of racial integration, to which he remains rock-solid in his devotion.

Steele's position is informed by a complex appreciation of America's tragic racial history. After 300 years of slavery and segregation, he believes American society "must bear an undeniable shame." And he is convinced that despite great strides in this country over the last 40 years, racism remains a problem. Still, after marching alongside his father in the 1950s to win the right to eat at the lunch counter of Woolworth's, after working in four different Great Society programs during the '60s and '70s, and after observing the interventions by government, universities, and businesses in behalf of blacks over the last 30 years, Steele has concluded that the reform efforts conducted under liberalism's banner have betrayed liberalism's highest principles, and harmed the very group they were meant to uplift.

Steele's main target is the sensibility according to which racial preferences are the indispensable means to achieving equality for blacks. Calling this attitude "redemptive" liberalism, he contrasts it to the classical-liberal spirit of the early civil-rights movement. Whereas the latter sought to secure freedom for the individual by guaranteeing fair process, the former strives for the far more ambitious goal of an ideal society, concerning itself above all with the wounded souls of the victims and the inner moral intentions of their champions. If classical liberalism is defined by the universal principles of opportunity, responsibility, and merit, redemptive liberalism measures itself in terms of equality of result, ideological conformity, and deference to those who suffer.

Steele is at his best in laying bare the psychology and governing impulses of this new brand of liberalism. He offers a sharp critique of what he calls the black "grievance elite" a coterie of scholars, activists, and politicians who provide soothing rationalizations of black helplessness, thus strengthening their own grip on power, but who utterly fail to deliver what their communities most desperately need to hear from them: internal criticism and a summons to responsibility.

He is also unsparing in his analysis of white liberals. Burdened by shame over America's legacy of racial injustice, they care more about expiating that sense of shame than about dealing with the actual needs of their would-be wards. In pursuit of their own redemption, they have promoted quick fixes and symbolic gestures that have actually debilitated those whom they pride themselves on benefiting:

| Welfare without a time limit or an expectation of work may have shown white America as compassionate, but it also took the problem of poverty away from those who suffer it. When universities took responsibility for the problem of black underrepresentation on campus, and lowered standards to raise the numbers, then blacks became invested in the academic weakness that won the specialness of a double standard.... The black reward follows the display of difficulty, not the display of success.

What social and political reforms would be consistent with putting the human needs of blacks first? Respecting the limits of his own expertise, Steele does not engage the fine points of policy-making. The initiatives that he does endorse --- outreach, remedial education, faith-based community groups --- do, however, share certain characteristics. They assume that those who suffer can nevertheless exercise control over their own lives; they treat opportunity as a responsibility and not as a guaranteed outcome; they strictly avoid categorizing individuals by race; and they insist on high standards for everyone. Only when reforms meet these conditions, Steele argues, can the disadvantaged begin to develop the qualities of mind and character that will enable them to care for themselves, their families, and their communities.

At the core of Steele's critique of racial politics in the United States is a simple thought: race is an inescapable fact, but the demands of human dignity are more urgent. Of this position he writes, "Call it conservatism, classic liberalism, or simply a hard-earned wisdom," what matters is not what it is called but that it is heard. With searing eloquence and an inspiring display of the freedom of mind that he wishes to encourage in others, Shelby Steele reminds us of the demanding principles by which Americans of every race can yet live together with pride and mutual respect.

Peter Berkowitz teaches government at Harvard and is the author of *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, which will be published this month by Princeton University Press.

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