

**“Bush’s Blacks: Race Traitors?”***Part One of a Two-Part Series*

---

---

For over one hundred years, the African-American middle class has largely supported what I call “liberal integrationism,” the organized attempt to assimilate into the U.S. mainstream to achieve a “color blind” society. Through groups such as the NAACP, liberal integrationists have allied themselves usually with the Democratic Party, and have pursued reform strategies such as affirmative action and minority economic set-asides, that promoted capital formation and the long-term expansion of the middle class within the black community. This liberal approach to racial policy, however, has never been universally accepted within the black bourgeoisie as a class.

A minority segment of the black bourgeoisie, especially those elements most extremely hostile to black nationalism, have argued that pluralist-style, interest-group politics have not and do not advance blacks’ interests as individuals. The ultimate goal of “integration” should be, ideally, the complete elimination of separate black and white institutions, and the end of race-based criteria for directing public policy. This wing of the black bourgeoisie has relied more heavily on white corporate and philanthropic support to advance its goals, and since the 1970s has developed a strategic dependency on Republican administrations in the White House and the Republican-controlled Congress to advance their careers. They shift back and forth between government positions within conservative administrations, then back to private sector managerial and executive positions for personal wealth accumulation. They usually argue against “racial

quotas,” and believe that private enterprise and the free market, if left alone without excessive governmental regulations, would ultimately solve the country’s race problem.

During the long nightmare of Jim Crow segregation, it was difficult for any sane Negro to advocate such an individualistic conservative integrationist philosophy. The comprehensive nature of Jim Crow as a social system based on white supremacy, made absolutely necessary for blacks to build race-conscious organizations to defeat it. It was only after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act which outlawed legal segregation—but significantly, did not destroy racial restrictions in private clubs and institutions—that this conservative element of the black bourgeoisie found its true voice.

In electoral politics, black Republican Edward Brooke emerged after winning the election as Massachusetts Attorney General in 1962, and four years later, becoming U.S. Senator. Brooke rarely, during his twelve-year career in the Senate, identified himself as a “black politician.” After his 1966 election, he hired only two blacks out of a nineteen-member staff. He supported affirmative action, but took economic and social policy positions to the right of many mainstream white Democrats. Brooke had no problem campaigning twice for the election of Richard M. Nixon. Political scientist Chuck Stone once described Brooke as “Mr. Non-Negro Politics,” and “the answer to the white man’s prayers.”

Brooke’s success in the Republican Party created a model to which others within the most conservative wing of the black bourgeoisie would aspire. Floyd McKissick, the former head of the Congress of Racial Equality, endorsed Nixon’s re-election in 1972 in return for

federal support for “Soul City,” a planned community located in North Carolina. With Reagan’s election to the presidency in 1980, a new generation of black conservatives found their way into power: Melvin Bradley, minority business development and black colleges adviser to Reagan; Thaddeus Garret, domestic policy adviser to Vice President George Bush; Thelma Duggin, who was involved in the GOP’s national black voter program in 1980, and subsequently a deputy to Reagan, cabinet member Elizabeth Dole; Clarence Thomas who in 1981 was appointed the Education Department’s Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights; and Clarence Pendleton, former head of the San Diego branch of the Urban League who was selected as chairman of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. This group of opportunists was provided ideological cover by a group of conservative intellectuals, prominently including economists Thomas Sowell, Walter Williams, Glenn Loury, and later in the 1980s, with the emergence of author Shelby Steele.

This conservative wing of the black middle class during the 1980s and 1990s, in effect, committed “racial suicide,” in the sense that it disavowed any sense of obligation, or “linked fates,” with what happens to the masses of disadvantaged African Americans. There is no sense of personal responsibility or accountability to a political project that is race-based. They wish to be judged as “individuals,” not as part of the larger “black community.” They explicitly reject any notions of the concept that their career advancement was largely a product of a mass, democratic movement to challenge structural racism. So in this limited sense, the reactionary wing of the black political elite has stopped being “black” in terms of its historical function as an oppositional group against racism. They are essentially “race traitors”: dedicated to the destruction of all racial categories, or even for some the collection of data indicating racial

discrimination; critical of the liberal integrationist establishment; and enthusiastic boosters of capitalism as we know it.

The first Bush administration's most prominent "race traitor" a decade ago was unquestionably Clarence Thomas. Since his 1991 appointment as an Associate Justice on the Supreme Court, Thomas has consistently voted against affirmative action, civil rights, and social policies designed to advance the interests of the truly disadvantaged. Some of Thomas's closest personal friends are Attorney General John Ashcroft and Solicitor General Theodore Olson in the Bush administration—in fact, Thomas even officiated at Olson's wedding.

In a confused and angry tirade delivered at the conservative American Enterprise Institute's Francis Boyer Award dinner in Washington, D.C., on February 13, 2001, Thomas defended his dissenting opinion which argued that the beating of a handcuffed prisoner was not tantamount to "cruel and unusual punishment" as defined by the Eighth Amendment. He praised as his "friend and mentor" Jay Parker, formerly a registered agent for the white minority apartheid regime in South Africa. He then cited the work of conservative historian Gertrude Himmelfarb to attack the ideal of maintaining "civility" as "the governing principle of citizenship or leadership." For Thomas, conservatives have a moral obligation to vigorously oppose liberal politics. "The war in which we are engaged is cultural, not civil," Thomas declared, which "tests whether this 'nation conceived in liberty ... can long endure.'" The spirit of political intolerance, the refusal to compromise or to reach halfway toward a political opponent, was for Thomas essential for the defense of a free society. "An overemphasis on civility," Thomas warned, "allows our critics to intimidate us. As I have said, active citizens are

often subjected to truly vile attacks; they are branded as mean-spirited, racist, Uncle Tom, homophobic, sexist, etc.” The challenge to conservatives was not to “be tolerant and nonjudgmental,” but to fight back hard.

Compromise, Thomas warned, “is cowardice, or well-intentioned self-deception.” Thomas’s ideological commitment to evangelical, free market racial assimilationism knows no boundaries. Even as reported in USA Today, Thomas once declared, “If I type one word in my word processor” in favor of affirmative action, “I break God’s law.”

One might condemn Clarence Thomas as an “Uncle Tom,” but that would be an insult to “Uncle Toms.” Thomas, the “race traitor,” unfortunately represents a growing list of conservative blacks who actively oppose the black community’s interests.

---

---

Dr. Manning Marable is Professor of History and Political Science, and the Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University in New York. “Along the Color Line” is distributed free of charge to over 350 publications throughout the U.S. and internationally. Dr. Marable’s column is also available on the Internet at [www.manningmarable.net](http://www.manningmarable.net).