

Steele, S. (1990). [The Content of our Character](#). New York City: Harper.

OVERVIEW

Shelby Steele is an African-American professor of English at [San Jose State University](#) in California. [The Content of Our Character](#) was a New York Times Bestseller and the winner of the [National Book Critics Award](#). This book is a collection of articles originally written and published in periodicals and journals.

While watching yet another boring, mapped out discussion of racism on television, Steele decided to write something that would hit closer to the heart. His purpose is to trace racism's path from "the private self to the public reality." (p. xi) Steele notes, "...in this book I have tried to search out the human universals that explain the racial specifics...if there was a secret to the writing of this book, it was simply to start from the painfully obvious premise that all races are composed of human beings." (p. xi)

Steele's main point is two-fold. First, black Americans need to quit building black identity around victimization and racism, because if what it means to be black is defined in opposition to these themes, racism and victimization must exist for blacks to maintain their identity. Blacks have looked too much to the ills of white society and not enough at their own individual responsibility as human beings.

States Steele, "And this, I'm convinced, is the tragedy of black power in America today. It is primarily a victim's power, grounded too deeply in the entitlement derived from past injustice and in the innocence that Western/Christian tradition has always associated with poverty." (p. 14)

In the 1950s, the focus of the movement was moral power; in the 1960s it changed its focus: "Increasingly, the movement began to seek racial as well as moral power, and thus it fell into the fundamental contradiction that plagues it to this day. Moral power precludes racial power by denouncing race as a means to power. Now suddenly the movement itself was using race as a means to power and thereby affirming the very union of race and power it was born to redress. In the end, black power can claim no higher moral standing than white power." (pp. 18-19)

"The barriers to black progress in America today are clearly as much psychological as they are social or economic" (p. 34): blacks hesitate in the face of opportunity or challenge because they fear that the perceived inferiority assigned by white society is really true. They have just as much capacity to succeed as any white American, but they have a greater capacity for self doubt and fear of failure, and this is where the Black movement needs to focus: on development: "when blacks enter the mainstream, they are not only vulnerable to society's racism, but also the racism within." (p. 45)

The second point of Steele's book is that whites need to quit offering "quick fix" entitlements and special privileges to blacks in order to ease their own consciences, and instead work for the development and uplifting of black Americans that only comes as a result of genuine concern.

Notes Steele:

What is needed now is a new spirit of pragmatism in racial matters where blacks are seen simply as American citizens who deserve complete fairness and in some cases developmental assistance, but in no case special entitlements based on color. We need deracinated social policies that attack poverty rather than black poverty and that instill those values that make for self-reliance. The white message to blacks must be: America hurt you badly and that is wrong, but entitlements only prolong the hurt while development overcomes it. (p. 91)

Affirmative action is more damaging to blacks than it is helpful, because it ignores developing blacks so that they can achieve such positions on their own, and because "the quality [blackness] that earns (us) preferential treatment is an implied inferiority." (p. 116)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- How realistic are Steele's solutions? How does a society focus on development instead of entitlement?
- If you are white, assess your own guilt. Do you recognize that you have it? In what ways does it play out in your interaction with blacks and other minorities?
- If you are black, what is your reaction to Steele's assessment of

where black Americans are? Does he strike a cord within you? Or is he totally off?

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