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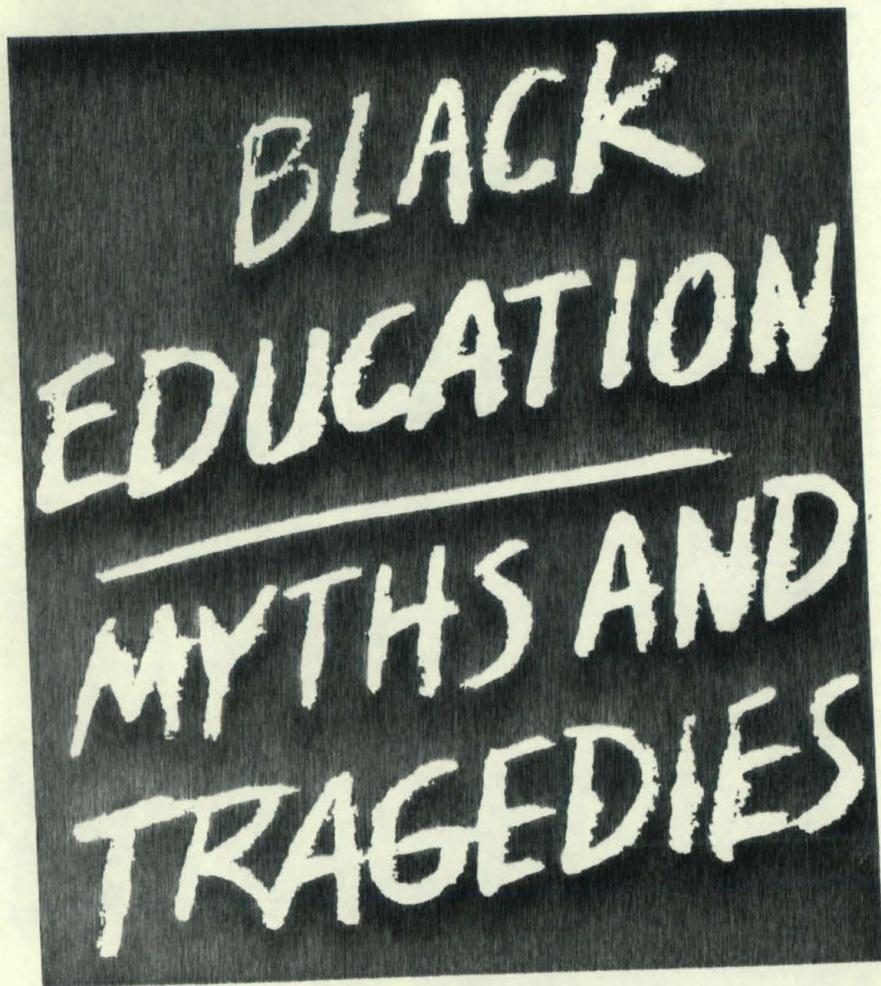
Published four times a year by The Lincoln Institute for Research and Education. Editorial and business offices: 1735 DeSales Street, N.W. (Suite 500), Washington, D.C. 20036. Telephone: (202) 347-0872. Subscription rates: \$12 per year, \$22 two years; \$30 three years. Add \$5 per year for foreign airmail. Single copies \$3.

Authors alone are responsible for their articles. Views expressed in the *Lincoln Review* are not necessarily those of the Editorial Board of The Lincoln Institute for Research and Education.

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by Thomas Sowell

DAVID McKAY COMPANY, INC.
New York

Editor's Comment

The Attack on Tom Sowell

Through the many years during which economist Thomas Sowell has been writing serious books, academic studies and articles, he was largely ignored by both the popular press and the black community.

His work—including such books as “RACE AND ECONOMICS,” “KNOWLEDGE AND DECISIONS,” and “BLACK EDUCATION, MYTHS AND TRAGEDIES,”—was highly regarded and favorably reviewed in the academic community, and in such publications as “COMMENTARY” and “HARPERs.” Still, while his reputation was growing, he was hardly a household name.

More recently, as the nation's political views moved to the right, many radio and television talk show hosts and other journalists have been busy seeking out conservative intellectuals, to discover what their agenda for America's future might be. If such a conservative academician happened to be black, so much the better.

Tom Sowell has, in the days since President Reagan was elected, found himself much in demand. He accepted a position as a member of the President's Economic Advisory Council, although he turned down a position in the Cabinet. He wanted, he repeatedly said, to remain in his position as a senior fellow at the Hoover Institute, to do research and to write. Several new books appeared: “MARKETS AND MINORITIES,” and “ETHNIC AMERICA.” His picture appeared in “TIME,” “NEWSWEEK,” and “U.S. NEWS AND WORLD REPORT.” He was a guest on Meet The Press and the Phil Donahue Show. Suddenly, he was indeed becoming well known.

What was Professor Sowell saying which attracted such attention? He was saying, in part, that Americans, particularly minorities, have been victimized by the welfare state philosophy which had originally been adopted in their behalf. He pointed out that black Americans were being harmed by government interference in the economy, by minimum wage laws which priced black teenagers out of jobs; by

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licensing laws, which prevented an individual from purchasing a taxi-cab or a truck without paying large sums of money for government permission to do so; by labor unions, which in many states have interfered in the free market for labor and which, additionally, have kept black workers out; by a welfare system which stifles initiative and rewards inertia. What he has advocated is freedom and free enterprise as the single best path to insure economic progress for the American society as a whole and, particularly, for minorities within it.

Beyond this, he really believes that black Americans are equal to whites. He believes that just as other ethnic groups—the Chinese, the Japanese, the Irish, Eastern European Jews, Italians, etc.—met discrimination as they entered the American society, lived in slums, lacked education and skills, and were “underprivileged”—and progressed dramatically without government aid and assistance—blacks can do the same. He rejects the implicit racism of liberalism, which holds that blacks cannot progress on their own, and urges the restoration of a truly free market in which barriers to advancement are removed.

When only a few intellectuals were paying attention to Thomas Sowell's message, the organized black community ignored him. Now, when he is being widely quoted, interviewed, and read, that organized community views him as a threat. Thus, the bitter—often vitriolic—attacks have begun. Black men and women in America are not to think for themselves, and come to their own conclusions. They are, the self-appointed black “leadership” seems to be telling us, expected to find out what the “black party line” is in social, economic, political and philosophical issues—and then hew closely to it.

Tom Sowell has committed the sin of thinking for himself and following the evidence of his research to its logical conclusion. Now, the black “leadership” seems to have decided, it is necessary to attack and destroy him, lest others be “misled” by his rejection of their agenda.

Consider some of the recent assaults upon Dr. Sowell:

**Columnist Carl Rowen, writing in “THE WASHINGTON POST” of September 9, 1981, declared: “There are times when I want to ask the Lord to deliver us back to the days of Stepin Fetchit, Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom. The old-style black, illiterate, obsequious ‘handkerchief heads’ were an embarrassment, but they were harmless compared with the ‘educated’ blacks who are now the darlings of the far right. I don’t know when I’ve been as disgusted as I was recently watching Thomas Sowell on a TV interview dishing out bull under the name of scholarship . . . I must exercise my right to say that Vidkun Quisling,

in his collaboration with the Nazis, surely did not do as much damage to the Norwegians as Sowell is doing to the most helpless of black Americans. Sowell is giving aid and comfort to those who . . . are taking food out of the mouths of black children, consigning hundreds of thousands of black teenagers to joblessness and hopelessness, and making government a party to at least the partial resegregation of America. . . . I could never get really angry at the old Stephin Fetchits and Aunt Jemimas. They were poorly educated, and just practicing the art of survival. But I have only contempt for today’s butter-tongued apologists for those who are the new oppressors of America’s down-and-out people.”

**Roger Wilkins, nephew of the late NAACP head Roy Wilkins, writing in “THE NATION” magazine of October 10, 1981, declared: “I hate to brand him (Sowell) an enemy to the interests of his people, but after reading him for many years, I find it hard to escape that conclusion. . . . Thomas Sowell is an enemy of the weakest and the poorest of his brethren.”

**Lem Tucker, in an editorial comment on the C.B.S. Morning program of October 13, 1981, stated: “Sowell especially rankles blacks because he damns as unproductive most of the intended remedies to minority problems. . . . Now conservatives have attacked some of those programs since their enactment. What makes Sowell noticeable is that he is black. And not just that, but at the moment he’s very very popular, spouting his opinions in major newspapers across the country and on television shows.”

Mr. Tucker went on to say that Sowell’s views “seem to place him in the school that believes that maybe most blacks are genetically inferior to whites.” He pointed out that Carl Rowan had “called him more dangerous to helpless blacks than some Nazi collaborators were to their own people” and while not challenging the substance of the Rowan view concludes that this “seems to be giving the professor more credit than he deserves.”

And so it goes. These, of course, are only a few of the bitter attacks which have been made upon Thomas Sowell, and which are likely to be made in the future. Those who attack him refuse to confront his ideas, but seek to eliminate the threat to their own philosophy of those ideas by holding the bearer of these tidings up to disrepute. It is a familiar tactic of those who understand all too well that the facts disprove their arguments and that, to maintain their position, personalities must be substituted for principles.

To the charge that Dr. Sowell can be compared to “Nazi collaborators,” economist Walter Williams, a Sowell colleague, points out that,

"I've read all of Sowell's research on race, which not only includes blacks, but Japanese, Jews, Poles, Irish, and other ethnic groups. I challenge anyone to find anything in Sowell's writings, or in the conduct of his scholarly life, that would make him even remotely a suitable candidate for Carl Rowan's characterization: a Nazi collaborator. Where's Rowan's evidence? . . . One point of disagreement. Rowan like most other so-called black spokesmen, believes minimum wage laws are good for blacks. Sowell, and many other economists who have studied the issue, believe the minimum wage contributes to the high rate of black teen-age unemployment. While Rowan blames racism for today's 50.7 per cent black teen-age unemployment, Sowell points out that in 1948 black teenage unemployment was equal to, or less than, white teen-age unemployment. Was there less racism in 1948 than in 1981? Nonsense!"

Professor Williams argues that, "Racism alone just can't explain increasing unemployment among black youths. The minimum wage law, which Rowan supports, explains a lot. But, I might add, Rowan has a lot of support for the minimum wage law. White racist unions in South Africa insist on the payment of minimum wages (called 'rate-for-the-jobs') for blacks! Their stated reason is that of protecting member jobs from competition with low-skilled, low-wage black labor. The only difference between the Rowans and the racists of South Africa is their stated reason for the minimum wage laws. The effect in both places is the same: unemployment for the most disadvantaged black."

One reason the black "establishment" is so angry at Thomas Sowell is that in an article entitled "Blacker Than Thou," he charged that poor blacks were being used to further the private interests of the black elite. He noted that, ". . . the traditional light-skinned elite have found themselves increasingly challenged by rising members of the black masses. Generations of snobbishness by the lighter-skinned elite have left a legacy of hostility within the black community . . . Andrew Young has thundered from the left on all sorts of issues, and always from a militant stance of being blacker-than-thou. He is a descendant of the privileged elite of New Orleans—historically, the most snobbish of the black elites. Andrew Young's family has gone to college for generations, which is more than most white people can say. Young's primary concern has been to defend the *image* of blacks—which is to say, to defend his own image in the white elite circles in which he moves. What happens to actual flesh-and-blood blacks seems never to have aroused the same fervor in Andrew Young. Though not a reticent man, he had relatively little to say when thousands of

Africans were tortured and slaughtered by Idi Amin and other tyrants. He saved his outbursts for those who sullied the *image* of blacks."

Today's self-appointed black leadership is not representative of either the interests or the opinions of the majority of black Americans. They cannot forgive Thomas Sowell for making this point repeatedly—and clearly. Thus, in his "Blacker Than Thou" article ("THE WASHINGTON POST," February 14, 1981), he pointed out that, "Public opinion polls show that most blacks favor tougher treatment of criminals. The NAACP has gone in the opposite direction, following the lead of white middle-class liberals. Most blacks favor education vouchers that would give them a choice of where to send their children to school and some leverage in dealing with public school bureaucrats. The black 'leadership' is totally opposed, for they have their own grand designs that could not be carried out if every black were free to make up his own mind. Central to the civil rights crusade is school busing—which has never had majority support among blacks and which has even been opposed by local NAACP chapters. Job quotas are another civil rights organization crusade, but rejected by most blacks. Black 'leadership' in general does not depend on expressing the opinions of blacks but on having access to whites—in the media, in politics, and in philanthropy. Whites who have a limited time to give to the problems of blacks need a few familiar blacks they can turn to. The civil rights organizations provide that convenience. Confronted with the anomaly that black 'spokesmen' regularly appear on television saying things directly opposite to black public opinion, a well-known newsman replied: 'We can put Ben Hooks and Jesse Jackson on television, but we can't put the Gallup Poll on television.'"

Tom Sowell has shown us that the emperor, in fact, is naked. The black "leadership" represents no one but itself—and no interests but its own. "For the moment," Dr. Sowell states, "the conventional black leadership has a virtual monopoly on expressing what blacks are supposed to believe. But it is an insecure monopoly. It is vulnerable to exposure to the truth. And after years of being able to get by with a few cliches and charges of 'racism' against its critics, the old conventional leadership is in no condition to conduct an intellectual battle over issues of substance. Smears and innuendoes are about all it has left."

As if predicting the bitter attacks to be made upon him by columnist Carl Rowan, Dr. Sowell pointed out that, "One of those whose monopoly of blackness is being threatened is columnist Carl Rowan, who claims that the new black voices are 'Horatio Algers'

who don't want other blacks to be helped to advance. Disagreeing with Carl Rowan about the best way to advance blacks is the same as being *against* the advancement of blacks, as far as he is concerned. . . ."

The evidence pointing to the conclusion that black Americans sharply disagree with the traditional civil rights leadership is mounting. A recent study of black Americans' attitude toward self-help sponsored by the Neighborhood Revitalization Project of the American Enterprise Institute found that black men and women over 18 years of age generally felt personally competent to control their lives, employed strong family support networks and relied on each other for community problem solving.

According to project director Robert Woodson, the results indicate that blacks look to private initiative—and not federal aid—to solve fundamental societal problems. He noted study findings that:

****Most blacks (93 per cent) felt that black neighborhood groups have a major responsibility for solving problems.**

****Most blacks feel they can and should initiate activities that advance their neighborhoods and private lives.**

****Blacks overwhelmingly feel they can get together with their neighborhoods and solve many of their problems.**

****Church-sponsored community programs were financially supported by 64 per cent of the blacks who gave money to self-help groups last year.**

Mr. Woodson, who is black, criticized government programs that he said worked through the "last choice" of blacks in need. He noted that blacks, like all people, tend to seek out the aid of family and friends in times of crisis. Yet government programs almost always have ignored neighborhood groups and concerned individuals—those who would be most effective in solving programs—in favor of large and expensive bureaucratic programs. The results, he said, is the complete failure of such programs to solve problems.

When he was interviewed by black commentator Tony Brown on the program "Tony Brown's Journal," Presidential counselor Edwin Meese III said: ". . . I think there are those people who are fomenting Black hysteria in order to preserve their own positions of so-called leadership." Responding to Meese's statement on a special edition, "Is There A New Black Leadership?" 57 per cent of the Warner Amex QUBE subscribers in Columbus, Ohio agreed with his assessment that some black leaders were promoting black leadership for personal and selfish motives."

Dr. Gloria Toote, a long-time black Republican, charges that, "The

problem that we have with black leadership is the fact that those who purport to be our leaders have sometimes allowed their own self-interest to precede their commitment to the needs of minority America. And in too many instances, the organizations which they head are more concerned about government grants or grants for white America than designing and preserving techniques and new methods to resolve many of the problems that we as blacks face . . ."

Tony Brown's QUBE audience was asked whether the country needed a new black leadership. A large majority—65 per cent—said yes at the beginning of his program concerning this subject, and 87 per cent said yes at the end. Tony Brown himself declares: "It is obvious that history has outwitted them and brought their plans to nothing. The nation's white-chosen black leaders believe that their responsibility ends with the assertion of dependency and a right to exist off the surplus of white wealth; it is hardly an edifying or inspiring phenomenon. The leadership gang is run by professional operators with little vision, representing a dwindling, but rebellious, constituency and faced with a new reality it cannot grasp or cope with."

The real issue is not Thomas Sowell—but the unrepresentative nature of those who call themselves black "leaders" and who have been accepted as such by the nation's mass media. Naturally, these "leaders" seek to eliminate the influence of any of their critics who appear to be gaining the attention of the nation. Attacking Thomas Sowell, however, will not work. Dr. Sowell does not stand alone. His thinking is representative of a growing body of black opinion.

That body of opinion rejects the new slavery of dependence upon welfare programs, upon food stamps, upon make-work government jobs. It wants to take black Americans off the government dole and assist them in becoming productive and self-respecting citizens. Different from the black "leadership," those who hold these views reject the idea that blacks are inferior and cannot succeed in a free society as every other racial, religious and ethnic group has done. Attacking Tom Sowell does not alter reality. And it is reality itself which marks the demise of the unrepresentative black "leadership." The shrill voices of those whose day is past only represents their own realization that truth is a powerful adversary—and today is on the march.