

**The  
BLACK  
C o m m e n t a t o r**  
Commentary, analysis and investigations  
on issues affecting African Americans  
www.blackcommentator.com

*Issue 169 – February 2, 2006*

Call for a Black Community Renaissance Movement  
by Martin Kilson, PhD

[click here to become a](#)

**bc PAID SUBSCRIBER**

(Use the back button on your browser to return to the previous page)

Printer Friendly – PDF Format



Copyright © 2002 - 2006  
www.BlackCommentator.com  
All Rights Reserved

*The following is an address by Harvard political scientist Martin Kilson to the Fifth Annual Martin Luther King Day Community Breakfast, Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, on January 16, 2006.*

Let me try to say something of interest to you on the topic of my address. When that great mid–20th Century American leadership personality Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., had his career tragically cut short by an assassin in the Spring of 1968, he was on the brink of the second phase of his great Civil Rights Equalitarian Movement for African–Americans. He was endeavoring courageously to challenge the Ugly Face of American Poverty, especially American Poverty that ravaged and marred the lives Black people. In the late 1960s, the Ugly Face of Black American Poverty marred the lives of 42% of African–Americans, compared to the national poverty rate at that time of 15%. Rev. King was unique among both Black and White American leadership in general and among America's religious leadership in particular, because his unique Christian understanding – that is, his special commitment to the broadest humanitarian Christian vision – just wouldn't allow him to turn his face on the Wretched Face of American Poverty.

In the Jan. 12 issue of USA TODAY can be found an insightful retrospective essay on the second phase of Rev. King's great Civil Rights Equalitarian Movement. The second phase was King's endeavor to challenge the wretched face of American poverty. The USA TODAY essay, by the African–American columnist Diane McWhorter, is titled "MLK's Legacy Reaches Into This Century." Let me read to you her concluding paragraph:

"King encountered great hostility when he took his movement North after the political and moral victories in the Jim Crow South and began contesting what he called the white folks' 'financial privilege.'

## The Black Commentator – Call for a Black Community Renaissance Movement

"At the time of his death in 1968, he was organizing a mass multi-racial protest in Washington, the Poor People's Campaign. Then he made that fateful detour to Memphis to lend support to the striking garbage workers. Their plight, after all, epitomized King's conviction, still fresh on what would be his 77th birthday – [namely] that economic injustice and racial suffering in America are indivisible."

As we all grimly know and as we commemorate here in Kenneth Square today, that great American leadership figure Martin Luther King was cut down in Memphis, Tennessee. So he never got that chance to use his Poor People's Campaign to challenge the average American citizens' protestation of Christian commitment along the lines of Martin Luther King's own special commitment to the broadest Christian-humanitarian vision.

As I've already mentioned, in the Spring of 1968, when King was assassinated, the poverty rate for Black Americans stood at 42%. Fortunately for Black Americans, our country had been governed at the federal level throughout the 1960s by the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, and at that dreadful moment of King's death the president was Lyndon Baines Johnson. President Johnson (a Southerner who had "Overcome," so to speak – that is, he overcame the racist culture of his Texas rearing) promulgated a federal policy to help jump-start the religious souls of American citizens toward a "War on Poverty." The overall public policies promulgated by Johnson – known as "Great Society Policies" – did indeed have some positive impact on the Wretched Face Of Black Poverty.

Unfortunately, however, President Johnson and the Democratic Party did not hold on to federal power beyond 1968. The conservative wing of the Republican Party – which was massively favored by White American voters especially – held two presidencies after Johnson (Nixon and Ford) and held five presidencies under Ronald Reagan, George H. Bush, and in our era, George W. Bush. What the conservative wing of the Republican Party did from Nixon and Ford onward was to minimize federal policies and expenditures in areas of public education, health, and housing that would have helped reverse the Wretched Face Of American Poverty in general and the Wretched Face Of Black American Poverty in particular. State governments, which have been dominated by the Republican Party since the Reagan era, also minimized policies and expenditures that could reverse the Wretched Face Of Black American Poverty.

### *No time for complacency*

Where do we go from here? First, let me point out that as we sit here at breakfast on Martin Luther King Day 2006, the Wretched Face Of American Poverty as a whole stands at 12.5%. Poverty for African-Americans now stands at 24.5%; and poverty for Latino-Americans stands at 29%; and poverty for White Americans stands at 8%.

Now in regard to the nearly 25% African-American families in poverty today, if we add to this group some 15% of Black families who can be classified as "weak working-class families" – that is, what Census figures call "working-poor families" – then we can say that some 40% of African-American families today make up what I call the "Static-Stratum" Black households.

On the other hand, the impact of the great Civil Rights Movement generated enough mobilization challenge to racist public practices and private practices that, during the past 30 years in the post-Civil Rights Movement era, the middle-class and professional ranks among African-Americans have grown significantly. Middle-class and professional ranks now make up what I call the "Mobile-Stratum" Black households, representing about 60% of African-American households.

If you'll bear with me – just let me give you some hard data from the latest 2002 U.S. Census Bureau jobs data that I've been able to put my hands on:

## The Black Commentator – Call for a Black Community Renaissance Movement

- Out of a total of 14,725,000 million employed African–Americans in 2002, some 10% or 1,463,000 were in "executive/administrator/managerial" jobs.
- Some 13% or 1,853,000 were in "professional jobs."
- Some 3% or 439,000 were in "technical jobs."
- Some 9.2% or 1,359,000 were in "sales" jobs.
- And some 16% or 2,369,000 were in "clerical or administrative–support" jobs.

Thus, in overall terms, today some 52% of nearly 15 million employed African–Americans hold middle–class and professional–class jobs. Furthermore, in comparative terms the Census Bureau data show that as compared with 18% of Latino–Americans who hold upper–tier white–collar jobs, some 30% of African–Americans hold upper–tier white–collar jobs.

Finally, I should also point out that the post–Civil Rights Movement era growth of the Black middle class has witnessed *Black females trumping Black males in middle–class and professional jobs*. For example, as of 2002 some 11% of 8 million employed Black women (869,000) held "executive" jobs – compared with 9% of 7 million employed Black men (594,000) having "executive" jobs. Also, 15% of employed Black women (1,105,000) held "professional" jobs – compared with 10% of employed Black men (648,000) having "professional" jobs. Thus, today some 26% of employed Black women (nearly 2 million) hold upper–tier occupations ("executive" and "professional" jobs), as compared with 19% of employed Black men (1,242,000) holding upper–tier occupations.

What these 2002 Census Bureau figures tell us is that, overall, the new "Mobile–Stratum" African–Americans have a brand new social system capability, far beyond anything that existed 38 years ago when Martin Luther King was cut down. Therefore, I believe it is now an important obligation of the Black middle–class and professional households, here in the early years of the 21st century, to step–forward to fashion and execute what I call a "New Black Community Renaissance Movement."

Such a movement cannot in itself fully reverse the persistent poverty level and persistent broader African–American societal crises. Therefore, there remains a yet unfulfilled American national government and American national economy moral obligation toward the problems facing "Static–Stratum" African–American families. There remains an obligation to produce federal–level and state–level resources that will help reverse persistent Black poverty and persistent African–American societal crises.

But meanwhile, middle–class and professional Black Americans cannot sit on our hands, so to speak, just enjoying our new advances in social and institutional standing in post–Civil Rights Movement era American society. Quite the contrary. We can in no way be true to the progressive Christian–humanitarian vision and legacy of Martin Luther King unless we recognize that we have an obligation to fashion helping–hand programs for "Static–Stratum" African–American families today. \_An obligation to fashion ways–and–means with our new Black American middle–class resources that will help reverse both poverty and broad societal crises that today cripple those I call "Static–Stratum" African–American families – some 40% of all Black families.

### ***An unmet obligation***

A very grim picture of the poverty and broad societal crises ravaging "Static–Stratum" African–American households was presented the day after Christmas in the New York Times by African–American columnist, Bob Herbert. Let me read a little from Herbert's column titled, "A New Civil Rights Movement":

## The Black Commentator – Call for a Black Community Renaissance Movement

"[Today] with education widely (though imperfectly) available, we have entire legions of black youngsters turning their backs on school, choosing instead to wallow in a self-imposed ignorance that in the long run is as destructive as a bullet to the brain.

"Most black people are no longer poor. Most are not criminals. Most are leading productive lives. The black middle class is larger and more successful than ever. But there are millions who are still out in the cold, caught in a cycle of poverty, ignorance, illness and violence that is taking a horrendous toll. Nearly a third of black men in their 20's have criminal records, and 8 percent of all black men between the ages of 25 and 29 are behind bars....

"Black children routinely get a rough start in life. Two-thirds [of all black children] are born out of wedlock, and nearly half of all black children brought up in a single-parent household are poor. Those kids are much more likely to drop out of school, struggle economically, be initiators or victims of violence, and endure a variety of serious health problems."

Bob Herbert concludes his quite grim portrayal of the broad societal crises facing what I call "Static-Stratum" African-American households by calling for "A New Civil Rights Movement." I have used the term "New Black Community Renaissance Movement" to express something similar. Here's how Herbert expressed it:

"I believe that nothing short of a new movement, comparable in scope and dedication to that of the Civil Rights Era, is required to bring about the changes in values and behavior needed to halt the self-destruction that is consuming so many black lives. The crucial question is whether the [African-American] leadership exists to mount such an effort."

Let me make a couple of observations on this matter of what Bob Herbert calls a "New Civil Rights Movement" and what I call a "New Black Community Renaissance Movement," and then I will shut up. First, any serious and sizable assault on the *twin-problem areas of poverty and societal crises* among "Static-Stratum" African-American families must have two basic components:

- Above all and foremost, a national-government and national-economy component is required, because our American system has a democratic moral obligation to redress racism's historical and present-day impact on the Black American poor.
- A Black "Mobile-Stratum" (middle-class and professional stratum) component is required.

I would have liked for Bob Herbert's essay to have given more attention to what I call the "national-government/national-economy component" in his overall suggestion for a "New Civil Rights Movement" assault on the plight of "Static-Stratum" African-American families. But of course Herbert couldn't cram everything into a single column on these perplexing poverty issues.

Finally, I want to suggest to you how those "Mobile-Stratum" African-Americans who are serious about their 21st Century Black Leadership Obligation, can proceed today to start the long-run task of undertaking that obligation.

My suggestions in this regard involve the need to fashion three primary-level Black social movements. When these new primary level Black social movements are pulled together by African-American leadership groups on the national level (groups like Black professional organizations, the NAACP, National Council of Negro Women, Children's Defense Fund, National Urban League, Black church denominations, Black trade unions), the result will be what I call a "New Black Community Renaissance Movement."

## The Black Commentator – Call for a Black Community Renaissance Movement

The three primary-level Black social movements now needed and which "Mobile-Stratum" African-Americans must initiate in the first instance are the following:

**The First** primary-level movement now needed I call an "Anti-Racist Criminal Justice Movement." This movement's main goal is to help reverse one of the most dangerous problems facing working-class African-Americans today – namely, the massive disproportionate infusion of police practices and criminal justice practices with blatant and vicious biases against Black people.

**The Second** primary-level movement now needed I call a "Black Educational Renewal Movement." This movement should have at least two subsidiary goals:

- To Stimulate public policies favorable to advancing education resources especially needed for Black school children from pre-school and K to 12. These resources include adequate public funding, an adequate supply of teachers, and teachers with adequate academic skills.
- To Spread attitudes among working-class and poor Black children (and their families) favorable to learning, and thus favorable to a quest to arm themselves with social mobility skills – education weapons for self-advancement. Middle-class and professional Blacks have both skills and resources with which to aid Black children in turning around poor academics.

**The Third** primary-level movement now needed I call a "Black Civil Society Enhancement Movement." This primary level movement would involve middle-class and professional Blacks helping to fashion intervention efforts to solve such problems as the following:

- Black youth violence in schools and neighborhoods.
- High poor teenage pregnancy and thus high unwed births.
- Drug abuse and thus high HIV/AIDS rates.
- Black children's poor academic performance, something that middle-class and professional Blacks can impact upon.

If the new middle-class and professional-class African-Americans can launch even small beginnings toward creating these primary level new Social Movements (aided by our humanitarian-thinking White brethren and Latino-American brethren and Asian-American brethren), a "New Black Community Renaissance Movement" can become a reality in the coming decade.

When those in middle-class and professional ranks among African-Americans here in the early 21st century start dedicating our energies, resources, new social position and political position to this task, we will give substantive meaning to the commemoration of Rev. Martin Luther King 's heroic leadership journey.

*Dr. Martin Kilson is Frank G. Thomson Professor of Government Emeritus, Harvard University. Dr. Kilson was the first Black to be granted tenure at Harvard, in 1968.*