



United States Mission to the OSCE

Introductory Remarks on Combating Discrimination Based on Color

As prepared for delivery by Robert L. Woodson, Sr.
to the OSCE Conference on Tolerance and the Fight Against Racism,
Xenophobia and Discrimination, Brussels
September 14, 2004

The end of legalized discrimination and segregation was one of the most defining moments in the history of the United States. It was one of the few social revolutions in which the oppressed were not fighting for separation or dominance, but rather, for inclusion into the social fabric and economic fabric of America. Blacks and whites alike were on the forefront of this struggle. Because both groups understood that racism was evil, blacks and whites fought side by side to end it. There are remnants of racism that continue to be a problem in America, but racism no longer is the most dominant issue, even for minorities.

Since the formal barriers to racial equality have fallen, governmental steps alone have been inadequate to address the needs of the vast majority of black Americans who continue to experience disenfranchisement. What is required is a companion strategy that addresses the underlying residual effects of racism and segregation.

That strategy must be focused on finding a common goal between groups. Most inequality is based on the insecurities of groups who feel that their dominance is threatened. When we can identify the underlying, nonracial problems that we have with other groups, and when we invest our energies in addressing those underlying problems that produce personal insecurity, then the result is interracial harmony and/or inter-religious respect.

For example, in one area of Brooklyn, New York, Muslims and Hassidic Jews existed for years in tension and antagonism. But these groups came together to fight a common enemy - - drug dealers and addicts -- who were coming in and destroying the neighborhood for all people. Muslims and Jews came together against the drug addicts and the criminal element, and interreligious harmony was the consequence.

Just as blacks and whites came together to end segregation, a common goal for the present day should be to address those inequalities that are a remnant of racism—the lack of information and preparation that would allow minorities to fully participate in the opportunities that are now available to them. Racial discrimination contributes to the civil and social decline of any given group of people. But even within each group, not all members suffer equally. During the days of American slavery, some black slaves were freed by their masters. Others were chosen to live in the house and were educated and taught to be craftsmen, and were valued over those who worked in the field. There was a caste system even in a racially discriminating world.

When race defined the principle difference between the situations and fortunes of whites and blacks, it was easy to focus on ending racism as the foremost barrier to be removed in order to achieve equality. But merely removing racial barriers and integrating both races into an existing caste system does little except to open the doors of opportunity for those who are prepared—those who have acquired marketable skills. Simply removing the barrier of segregation and racism does not in itself address the problem of those who are unskilled and unprepared to compete in an open marketplace. It was Dr. Martin Luther King who said, “What good does it do to have the right to eat at the restaurant of your choice, or live in the neighborhood of your choice, if you lack the economic means to exercise those rights.”

Therefore, to bring about true equality, a nation cannot stop simply at removing discriminatory laws and promoting diversity. There are examples, for instance, in the South once racial laws were removed and blacks were elected to positions of authority, these blacks became the new oppressors because they took over systems that benefited those who had the best preparation. If a nation acts only to change the sex or race of the ruler without altering the rules of the game, the rules themselves become a surrogate for racial discrimination against the less-advantaged. By definition, these are low-income, minority people.

What a nation must do to fully address the issue of racism to assist those who suffered not only from the cruelty of racism, but from the consequences of the economic and social inequality that was bred by a racist system. It is important to have a companion strategy to bring about true equality. Social and economic changes to uplift the poor must be as important as are the removal of racial laws.

This is not to call for a system of elaborate entitlements. Government’s role should not be to give handouts or create dependency, but to find creative ways to change the rules so that those who have been disadvantaged can help themselves.

An example already exists in the area of home ownership -- one of the most important elements of security and building wealth. Early in this century, 90% of Americans could not qualify to purchase homes, because the system required that a family had to pay 50% down and pay the rest within five years. At that time, blacks faced both exclusion by a discriminatory society and because of the rules that rendered most Americans unworthy for credit.

The system was then changed with the advent of governmentally-sponsored entities that insured loans and made it possible for individuals to borrow mortgage money for 30 years instead of five, and for 80% rather than 50% of a property’s value. But because of the history of racism, many blacks still are at a disadvantage.

There are two ways the system can be fundamentally changed. Government can stimulate the creation of new financial instruments -- such as longer loan periods -- that make it easier for those who have been disadvantaged to become homeowners. It also can provide financial incentives. The Bush Administration has already put in place some assistance through the American Dream Down Payment Act, which furnishes grants to low-income families for down payments on first homes. This legislation will disproportionately help minorities because minorities have been disproportionately disadvantaged in the past.

Another part of repairing the breach is education. Civil society can play a significant role by educating low-income people about how the economic system works, in addition to providing more access ramps to the system.

Any measure that helps to address the economic inequality issue has ramifications for the racial issue. It is a surrogate way of addressing it.

There is no single answer to racism or to the inequalities between races. Legislation ensuring equal civil rights is insufficient. It is not enough simply to take down the barriers and expect meritocracy to flourish. It is analogous to a physician who removes a knife from a victim—it takes more than the removal of the knife to restore the victim to health. Racial discrimination has caused wounds that require remedial attention in order to provide healing.

The solutions must be market-oriented, and people must be encouraged to invest in their own futures. Minorities must be empowered to compete in a fair and open marketplace. Non-governmental organizations can play a powerful role in educating people about their role in the marketplace. Corporations and government should invest more in the NGOs to carry out that task.

Aside from economics, the most important restorative to health is moral and spiritual renewal. The consequences of oppression cannot be removed merely by removing the oppressor. There must be repair. The institutions of civil society -- the faith-based and community groups -- are best suited for this task. Those that work alongside people and are trusted by them can motivate people to strive for themselves.

In summary, we cannot let our focus on racism create a permanent class of victims. We must always make clear that while the victimizer may knock someone down, it is the victim that must get up. We cannot substitute government policies for the God-given desire to elevate oneself.