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BLACK UNEMPLOYMENT: A NEW PERSPECTIVE

by

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It seems obvious that the topic of domestic unemployment—and specifically black unemployment—should be of professional and personal interest to career Army officers. It is imperative that senior officers be familiar with the numerous domestic and international issues which affect the United States and its economy; so must we grasp the interrelated nature of these issues. Certainly any issue which affects the general welfare of our country also affects the welfare of our Army.

As noted by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, "America's strength rests on the vitality of America's economy."¹ One can easily term critical the task of reviving our seemingly stagnant economy, and one can just as easily place this task at the top of the list of national priorities for the 1980's.

A particularly demanding aspect of our economic problems is that of black unemployment. This article focuses on that problem because of its meaning to our economy and our nation's welfare, because of its effect on the composition of our Army, and because of its potential impact on the role of the Army in the next decade.

THE CONCEPT OF WORK

In the world's most achievement-oriented society, work is more than a source of income. It is also a source of status and self-esteem, a point of identification with the system, and a second social environment which aids in diffusing the accumulated tensions of day-to-day life. "Who gets what" in the American society is determined primarily by the role one plays in the world of work.² For the foreseeable future, work will continue to be the only socially acceptable way for an American to take from the environment that which satisfies his needs and wants.

At the foundation of this essay is the understanding that the ruthless economic exploitation of skilled black craftsmen and artisans and the national attitude of the 1890's, which not only permitted but encouraged the exclusion of these qualified individuals from the economic mainstream,

caused the initial high level of black unemployment and its attendant erosion of status and self-esteem. Since black Americans to this day have not been able to secure and protect by economic strength their tenuously achieved social, political, and educational gains, the carryover effect through the decades of high black unemployment now looms as a major national problem. The challenge we face today is, simply: How does this nation go about providing each of its citizens with some assurance of at least the opportunity to have the means for achieving a decent level of living, with dignity and without hurt to others? The answer to this question would also resolve the national disgrace of more than 88 years of disproportionately high unemployment of black Americans.

THE BACKGROUND

It is both little known and historically ironic that black Americans were more extensively involved in the skilled crafts and in the technological development of this nation before the Civil War and during the Reconstruction Era than after the 1890's. Free and slave blacks made contributions to American economic development as inventors, mechanics and artisans, shipbuilders and sail makers, shoe and clothing makers, brick and lumber manufacturers, furniture and cabinet builders, wrought iron and silver crafters, grocery and dry goods store owners, caterers and restaurant operators, hotel and livery stable owners, and masters of other businesses and professions, including banking and mutual benefit insurance.

For example, slaves had already invented and were using a prototype cotton ginning machine before Eli Whitney's cotton gin of 1793. In 1846, Robert Rillieux, a free black, invented a sugar refining panning cup which solved a key refining problem and transformed Louisiana sugar cane into a major agricultural industry. In 1848, Lewis Temple invented the "Temple Toggie Whaling Iron." This whaling iron is still the standard harpoon of the whaling industry;

however, Temple died a pauper, having never received any returns on his invention. Granville T. Woods was a prolific inventor of the 1880's and obtained over 50 patents. His inventions included an incubator, an electric motor for streetcars, a complex synchronous multiplex railway telegraph, and a prototype of the present-day traffic light. Elijah McCoy was a most gifted inventor of lubricating devices. He obtained 57 patents, the most important of which were the automatic lubricating device for railroad trains, in 1874, and the drip cup used in heavy industry, in 1891. The superior quality of his lubricating devices gave rise to the commonly used statement of quality, "Is this the real McCoy?" Finally, the invention of the light bulb by Howard Lattimer in 1881 and the invention of the shoe-lasting machine by Jan Matzeliger in 1883 were far-reaching inventions by black artisans which revolutionized industries.

Although there were many thousands of skilled black craftsmen and artisans before 1890, slaves were not permitted to patent their inventions and innovations, and even the free blacks had trouble maintaining control of their patents. Most were not allowed to participate in the marketing of their patented inventions. The ruthless economic exploitation of slave and free blacks in the pre-Civil War period and of skilled black freedmen in the Reconstruction Era, coupled with the then-prevailing national attitude for the exclusion of skilled blacks from the productive economy, resulted in their decreasing creditability and eventual skill erosion. Furthermore, by constricting the opportunities for education and training through blatant discriminatory practices, by employing terror tactics, and by making separate black schools inadequate and irrelevant to the needs of a growing, industrial, and technological economy, the powers at the federal, state, and local levels succeeded in removing most skilled black craftsmen from the productive markets and in blocking the entry of subsequent generations of black Americans.³

This tradition of economic deprivation and separateness was made acceptable to the

majority of Americans by the selective alteration of textbooks and references to omit any positive recognition and respect for the quality and extent of the contributions made by black Americans to our industrial development. Many noted scholars—including Dr. Carter G. Woodson, Dr. John Hope Franklin, Dr. Charles Wesley, Dr. Benjamin Quarles, and Dr. Albert L. DeMond—conducted extensive research into the extent and quality of the contributions of black artisans, craftsmen, and businessmen to our national life and to the growth of the American economy. This area of knowledge exploration had received almost no general support until the early 1970's, when large industrial firms such as the RCA Corporation supported a new look at this aspect of American history in preparation for the bicentennial celebration.

The reality of economic exclusion and restricted skill training which existed in this country from the 1890's until the 1960's, reinforced by the role of work in the American society, explains in large measure why black unemployment rates have historically been two to three times higher than those for white Americans. This condition clearly existed in the post-World War II boom years when the American economy made quantum jumps to become the premier economy in the world. More telling, the disparity was even greater with regard to youth unemployment.⁴

The background sketched above can also be used to explain why persistent problems of unemployment and poverty can exist side-by-side with affluence and equally persevering shortages of skilled craftsmen and professional talent.

High levels of black unemployment in the 1970's are carryovers from previous decades of national disinterest and deliberate neglect in both the public and private sectors of our economy, compounded by serious problems in the American economy. Unemployment is the number one problem confronting black America, especially in the major cities.⁵ US Department of Labor statistics show that

there has been some slight improvement in the work status. The overall unemployment rates for 1976 and 1977 were 7.7 percent and 7.0 percent, respectively, compared with rates of 6.0 percent in 1978 and 5.7 percent in February 1979. However, if one examines the components of these rates, it becomes clear that black Americans continue to suffer an unemployment rate more than double that of white Americans. In February 1979, the unemployment rate for black Americans was 11.9 percent versus 4.9 percent for white Americans.⁶ If one examines these statistics further to look at the status of youth unemployment, the situation is much more severe and potentially explosive. While white teenagers suffered an unemployment rate of 13.6 percent as of February, the rate was 35.5 percent for black teenagers.⁷ The National Urban League estimates that black teenage unemployment has soared well above 50 percent when the "discouraged" teenagers are included. In a few areas such as Oakland, California, and New York City, the black teenage unemployment rate rose to 70 percent in 1977.⁸

THE CONSEQUENCES

The consequences of high black unemployment are manifested not only in dollar costs, but also in the more important areas of human costs and national stability. The carryover effects of previous decades of high black unemployment were frighteningly revealed in the massive riots, lootings, and other forms of civil disorder that occurred in the late 1960's and the 1970's. In surveying the riots which took place in the ghettos of 23 US cities in 1967, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (the Kerner Commission) listed 12 deeply held grievances. Unemployment and underemployment ranked second among these grievances.⁹ The Kerner Commission emphasized that employment is a key problem for black Americans not only because it controls the present but, most profoundly, because it also creates the future.

Discussions of the dollar costs of high unemployment generally focus on

unemployment insurance and welfare payments—costs now amounting to tens of billions of dollars. However, in the recent debate over full employment, a variety of experts have challenged the orthodox “Phillips Curve” and the inverse relationship between unemployment and inflation. Such writers as Keyserling, Ginsberg, Tobin, Weinberg, Melman, and Gross have looked at unemployment from a new perspective and have estimated a much greater dollar cost resulting from unemployment. They point out that for each percentage point of unemployment, approximately 50 billion dollars are lost in national productivity and 16 billion dollars are lost in uncollected tax revenues.¹⁰ According to these estimates, if the black unemployment rate of 11.9 percent could be reduced to match the 4.9 percent unemployment rate for white Americans, national productivity would be enhanced by 350 billion dollars, and some 112 billion dollars of additional tax revenues would be collected. Each of these amounts far exceeds the outlays for training, employment, and social services presented in the President’s budget for fiscal year 1979. From this new perspective, one could argue that full employment would rejuvenate the economy rather than weaken it.

Even though the dollar costs of high black unemployment are substantial, the human costs are more significant and have the greater potential for upsetting national stability and causing irreparable damage to the nation. The premise that “who gets what” in our society is determined primarily by the role one plays in the world of work is an especially useful premise in this discussion of human costs. Without work, there can be no housing, no food, no clothing, no economically relevant education and training, and no means of personal identity and self-worth. Black Americans suffer most from national economic downturns due to the historically applied “last hired, first fired” attitude, and blacks have been in a state of chronic recession for the past 20 years (with national recessions or

depressions in 1953-54, 1957-58, 1960-61, 1969-71, and 1974-75). During these 20 years, white unemployment rates averaged 4.3 percent, while black unemployment rates averaged 9.2 percent.¹¹

The disintegrative effects which this chronic unemployment has had on black family structure and functioning are evident in the increasing number of black female heads of households, in the spiraling welfare rolls, and in the rising number of illegitimate births. Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint recently completed a study on the impact of chronic poverty on illegitimacy and discovered what he calls a “doll syndrome” among teenage, poverty-stricken black girls. The “doll syndrome” is caused by the lack of personal identity and self-worth, and in a last desperate effort to satisfy this basic human need, the girls have their own babies because it makes them feel like somebody to have a baby call them “mama.” The long-term results of this act of desperation are virtual babies having babies and coming prematurely into an adulthood mired in poverty, dependency, and broken homes. The human misery apparent in this situation is an example of the human cost of high black unemployment.

Another example of the human cost of long-term black unemployment is illustrated by the statistics drawn from a 1975 survey by the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The survey revealed that 23

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million Americans were functionally illiterate—unable, for example, to read classified ads. These disadvantaged Americans included 1 percent of the white population, 44 percent of the black population, and 56 percent of the Spanish-American population. Jobs are just not available today for most of these people. Further, successive generational replications of this large group of unemployables will increase the depth and breadth of poverty and human misery.

Poor health is another human cost of high black unemployment. For many years, Dr. Harvey Brenner has been producing noteworthy findings on the relationship between unemployment and numerous physical and mental illnesses. He has used highly refined techniques to show the percentage of heart attacks, mental hospital admissions, imprisonments, homicides, and suicides which could be strictly correlated with the drop in employment rather than with other economic or noneconomic factors.¹² A comparison of death rates in Harlem and New York City is illustrative: The infant mortality rate in New York City is 19 per thousand live births; in Harlem it is 43 per thousand. Deaths from cirrhosis of the liver number 30 per 100,000 population in New York City, 127 per 100,000 in Harlem. So-called “trauma” deaths—including deaths by murder, suicide, and accident—occur at a rate of 61 per 100,000 population in New York City, but they occur at a rate of 134 per 100,000 in Harlem.¹³

The final consequence of high black unemployment to be discussed in this essay is the development of a relatively large American underclass, a group of hopeless, alienated, disruptive people. The soaring expectations of the 1950's and 1960's have given way, in many geographic areas, to intense frustration and anger. Unable to earn a living, many fall into a lifetime routine of handouts and public charity, while others strike out at society in general through such activities as robbing, looting, and random arson. Destitute and desperate in the land of

plenty, they are angry at society. Poorly educated and lacking job skills, their numbers have reached explosive proportions.

The American underclass comprises people of all races and people who live in many places; however, it is made up mostly of impoverished urban blacks. This large group of people (recall the carryover effects of decades of high black unemployment) are more intractable, more socially alien, and more hostile than almost anyone imagined. The bleak environment of the American underclass nurtures values that are often at radical odds with those of the majority, with those of the black middle class, and with those of most of the poor.¹⁴

Vernon Jordan, Executive Director of the National Urban League, has repeatedly warned that in a crisis, members of the underclass feel no compulsion to abide by the rules of the game because they find that the normal rules do not apply to them. Monsignor Geno Baroni, Assistant Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, has said, “The underclass presents our most dangerous crisis, more dangerous than the Depression of 1929, and more complex.”¹⁵ In 1968, the Kerner Commission report warned the nation:

The culture of poverty that results from unemployment and family breakup generates a system of ruthless, exploitative relationships within the ghetto. Prostitution, dope addiction, and crime create an environmental jungle characterized by personal insecurity and tension. Children growing up under such conditions are likely participants in civil disorder.¹⁶

Yet in Detroit in 1975, in New York City in 1977, and in Baltimore earlier this year, rampaging members of the underclass carried out much of the orgy of looting that swept those three cities. By most of society's measures—jobs, housing, education, physical security—the American underclass is hardly better off today, and in some cases worse off, than before the “War on Poverty.” The growing American underclass, with its demonstrated potential for national

unrest, is the one significant human cost of high black unemployment which even the world's wealthiest country cannot afford. So what are the alternatives?

THE REMEDIES

There are several possible remedies for the condition of high black unemployment; however, it should now be apparent that the government cannot and should not try to do it alone. A mix of endeavors in which the government, private businesses, and white and black communities are involved seems to offer the most likelihood of success. The most critical long-range remedy is to improve public education and skill training and to simultaneously reduce the remaining stubborn vestiges of racial intolerance and discrimination. Affirmative actions which permit more than token numbers of qualified black Americans into the economic mainstream must be accepted by all Americans as necessary to correct long-standing economic inequities.

A remedy and at the same time a consequence of high black unemployment—one which will be of particular interest to the military reader—is the increased attractiveness of the armed forces to black youth. Black non-prior-service enlistments in the Army have risen from 12.3 percent of new enlistees in fiscal year 1970 to 34.3 percent of new enlistees in fiscal year 1978. Black youth comprised 13.5 percent of the Army's enlisted force in fiscal year 1970; however, in fiscal year 1978 they comprised 29.2 percent of the enlisted force. Headquarters, Department of the Army, in the annual assessment of equal opportunity programs published in March 1979, listed extremely high unemployment rates for black youth since 1974 as one of the reasons for the continuing increase in the black content of the Army, as well as for the trend of increasing black accessions.¹⁷

The increasing number of black youths in the armed forces serves as a remedy in two ways. First, military service provides a job, skill training, and a degree of discipline which may not otherwise be available. Second, upon the soldier's release from the military, the

American society receives a better-trained individual with a greater potential to become a contributing citizen.

In addition to a robust, growing economy, other long-term remedies include these:

- Greater stress by the black communities on self-help, individual incentive, and the strong intolerance for conditions and acts which erode and mask the rewards of the work ethic.
- National commitment to full employment and balanced growth.
- Greater public and private efforts to improve conditions in the urban communities so that business and industry will want to return.
- Greater access to jobs in the suburbs and beyond for inner-city residents.
- Strong commitment to a "pro-work, pro-family" welfare reform bill by both government and private business.

THE OUTLOOK

High black unemployment is countenanced because it has always been a part of the American scheme. It is deep-rooted and long-standing, and well-thought-out remedies will necessarily only be effective over the long term. The prospects for success are directly dependent on the future character of national attitudes.

With regard to Army opportunities, all black youth able to meet the Army's entrance standards are currently being accepted. Continuation of this equal opportunity policy is both expected and desirable.

The broader outlook may not be so bright, however. Vernon E. Jordan sees:

...the emergence of a new negativism which will retard any additional movement toward economic and racial equality, perpetuate the poverty of poor people and lock them further into disadvantage.¹⁸

Jordan says the identifying characteristics of this emerging new negativism include the spreading tax revolt, growing resistance to affirmative actions, apathy in implementing an effective urban policy, and the preference

of high unemployment over inflation.¹⁹ Also indicative of this negativism were the results of a Gallup poll conducted in the fall of 1977. A subsequent article in *US News & World Report*—titled “Popular View: No Special Treatment”—stated that the poll showed that most Americans opposed granting preferential treatment to minorities and women in getting jobs or entering college.²⁰

On the other hand, the Congressional Black Caucus views the enactment of the Full Employment and Balanced Growth Act of 1977 and the Carter Administration's policies to deal with structural unemployment as positive signs.

Another positive sign is the resolve of the Carter Administration to make the advancement of human rights a central part of US domestic and foreign policy. As defined by Secretary of State Vance, these human rights include the right to fulfillment of such vital needs as food, shelter, health care, and education.²¹

Finally, *Ebony* magazine commissioned the Roper Organization, Inc., to conduct a survey of black youth, ages 18-29, to determine how this new generation of black Americans viewed their economic future. Of the total sample, 44 percent were from households with incomes under \$7000 per year, and 84 percent were from households with incomes under \$15,000 per year. This survey showed that these were economically oriented, optimistic, pragmatic, and materialistic young Americans who still express much confidence in the free enterprise system and the American Dream.

Among the significant findings with respect to their values, expectations, and goals were the following:

- In predicting their work and career status 10 years in the future, 58 percent expected to be far better off, and 32 percent expected to be somewhat better off.
- With regard to their career choices, 41 percent wanted to develop and own their own business, and 36 percent wanted a steady job with a big company.
- With regard to financial success, 64

percent believed they would exceed their parents, and 21 percent believed they would do as well as their parents.

- When asked what would be the best approach to improve their conditions, 45 percent said making money, and 37 percent said voting within the democratic process.

- When asked what should be the goal for black Americans, 53 percent said equal rights and opportunity with no legal or social barriers, so that people could live and go to school wherever they could afford to do so; 26 percent said blacks and whites living in their own communities; 13 percent said complete integration with elimination of racial distinctions through widespread intermarriage; only 5 percent said separate and self-sufficient black communities; and only 1 percent said a separate black nation.

- Importantly, when asked what they thought the outlook was for black Americans, 65 percent believed conditions for all blacks will be good or excellent 10 years in the future.²²

It is clearly a major challenge for this nation to put into reality the dreams of black youth. If this challenge is not met, the disruptive American underclass will significantly increase in size, and the ultimate result may be violent damage to our American society.

As this professional soldier contemplates the role of the Army in the 1980's, it appears certain that continued high levels of black unemployment will affect whatever that role turns out to be. One can recall the recent anger and frustration exhibited by citizens of California as they waited in long lines at gas stations. Anger and frustration resulting from a continued downward trend in the US economy will probably not go unexpressed by the members of the American underclass. Indeed, as scarcity of resources becomes more apparent, the baser human instincts may become more pronounced. The anger and frustration of idle black youth—some in long lines at the state unemployment offices, others just “hanging around”—compounded by the

anger and frustration of more affluent Americans in long lines at gas stations, may produce confrontation and significant disruptive behavior throughout our land. How our national authorities deal with this potentiality should be a matter for serious thought by professional military officers.

NOTES

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