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Race

The most common vision on race portrays black Americans as poor, down-trodden, and unequipped to compete without special privileges. That vision is an insult of major proportions. As a group, black Americans have made the greatest gains, over some of the highest hurdles, in the shortest span of time than any other racial group in mankind's history.

This unprecedented progress can be seen through several measures. If one were to total black earnings, and consider black Americans a separate nation, he would have found that in 2008 black Americans earned \$726 billion, making them the world's eighteenth-richest nation. Black Americans are, and have been, chief executives of some of the world's largest and richest cities such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. It was a black American, Gen. Colin Powell, appointed Joint Chief of Staff in October 1989, who headed the world's mightiest military and later became US secretary of state, and was succeeded by Condoleezza Rice, another black American. Black Americans are among the world's most famous personalities and a few black Americans are among the richest. Most blacks are not poor but middle class.

The significance of such achievement is that at the end of the Civil War, neither an ex-slave nor an ex-slave owner would have believed these gains possible in less than a mere century and a half, if indeed ever. As such, that progress speaks well not only of the sacrifices and intestinal fortitude of a people; it just as importantly speaks well of a nation in

which these gains were possible. These gains would not have been possible anywhere on Earth other than the United States of America.

The question before us is how can these gains be extended to the 30 percent or so of the black population for whom these gains appear to be elusive. I think that a good start is to abandon the civil rights vision that holds that the major problem for blacks is racial discrimination. I do not argue that racial discrimination is nonexistent and that it has no effect but the policy-relevant question is how much of what we see can be attributed to racial discrimination.

The fact that most black children are raised in single-parent families is a devastating handicap but it has little to do with racial discrimination, particularly in light of the fact during earlier periods, as early as the late 1800s, the black family structure didn't differ significantly from that of other groups.

Over 70 percent of black children are born out of wedlock and often to teenage mothers. That is a devastating handicap but it has nothing to do with racial discrimination, particularly in light of the fact that as late as the 1940s black illegitimacy was around 14 percent.

Each year, roughly 7,000 blacks are murdered. Ninety-four percent of the time, the murderer is another black person. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, between 1976 and 2011, there were 279,384 black murder victims. Though blacks are 13 percent of the nation's population, they account for more than 50 percent of homicide victims. This is a devastating problem but it has little or nothing to do with racial discrimination.

The magnitude of this problem can be seen in another light. According to a Tuskegee Institute study, between the years 1882 and 1968, 3,446 blacks were lynched at the hands of whites. Black fatalities during the Korean War (3,075), Vietnam War (7,243), and all wars since 1980 (8,197) total 18,515, a number that pales in comparison with black loss of life at home. It's a tragic commentary to be able to say that young black males have a greater chance of reaching maturity on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan than on the streets of Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, Oakland, Newark, and other cities.

Unemployment is a major problem particularly among black youth that is often blamed on employer discrimination. But that hypothesis comes into question if we look at unemployment in earlier periods. For example, in 1948, black teen unemployment was less than 10 percent and less than their white counterparts. Black teens had a labor force participation rate higher than whites (that is, black teens were more active in the labor market). I do not think that anyone would attribute this more favorable employment situation in earlier periods by saying there was less racial discrimination during the forties.

My columns in this section will argue that many problems of black Americans are a result of ostensibly well-intentioned public policy such as labor laws and self-destructive behavior that few people have the courage to talk about lest they be accused of racism or "blaming the victim."