

400 Years After Jamestown

For African Americans, an Abundant Harvest From an Imperfect Democracy

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To think of America in 2007, it is impossible not to consider the contributions of African Americans -- many of whom have laid the foundation for American culture, democracy, freedom and equality.

Indeed, as we approach the 400th anniversary of the Jamestown Colony, African Americans occupy a civic space that would have been unimaginable even 30 years ago.

Jamestown is as much an idea as a place. There the promise of our founding ideals lived alongside slavery and racial domination. It is nothing short of remarkable that the sons and daughters of those who arrived in shackles now excel in the broad range of American life.

Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) is poised to make a legitimate, not merely symbolic, run for the presidency. The current and most recent secretaries of state are African American. Ruth Simmons recently became the first African American president of an Ivy League university. Last weekend, for the first time in NFL history, an African American coach earned a Super Bowl title. When many of these luminaries were born, African Americans could not use the same bathrooms as whites, let alone participate in civil society as equals.

Amid the celebrations commemorating the Jamestown anniversary, thousands of African Americans will convene in Hampton this weekend for the annual State of the Black Union. While the stage will be populated by the extraordinarily successful, the purpose of the State of the Black Union is to not only showcase our success but also to discuss the staggering numbers of African American citizens in poverty, those who are incarcerated, undereducated, underemployed and otherwise outside the reach of the American Dream.

But, while the factors that conspire to create subcommunities characterized by unemployment and marginal literacy are debated often, and with vigor, rarely do we discuss the factors that led to the successes of millions of African Americans.

So what does it mean that a country so flawed in its founding nonetheless produces such an accomplished population of African Americans?

First, that when given the opportunity, African Americans, like all Americans who work hard, who have talent, ambition and desire, and who possess the complex of values that make up the "Protestant Ethic," can make the most of the American Dream.

Second, the impact of this work ethic is animated by and contingent on another core American value -- equality of opportunity. Opportunity in America, particularly as it relates to African Americans, had been systematically denied until the civil rights movement ushered in state-sponsored programs to ensure that qualified African Americans could participate fully in civil society.

Liberals and conservatives talk past one another, with some bemoaning the structural deficiencies that impede the promise of equal opportunity and others proselytizing the values of a good work ethic as the sole predictor of success. In truth, both structure and behavior are essential ingredients for success in America.

Structurally guaranteed opportunity alone does not guarantee success, nor should it. Beneficiaries of such opportunity must be prepared to capitalize on it. One does that through prudence, hard work, delayed gratification and similar values that have withstood the test of time. An unqualified incompetent cannot much benefit from, say, affirmative action -- no matter how robust the program.

Similarly, hard work alone does not guarantee success if one is structurally barred from realizing one's potential. There are numerous accounts of smart, talented and driven African Americans of generations past who were affirmatively prevented from realizing their potential. Not coincidentally, marvelously accomplished African American conservatives such as Condoleezza Rice and Clarence Thomas benefited from race-conscious programs designed to ensure equal opportunity for minorities. We can only speculate as to whether either would have reached their professional heights without such structural assistance.

The point is that the current political vocabulary, which treats structural aid and work ethic as either-or propositions, is wrongheaded. Both are important. Both make real the promises of democracy.

This changing face of leadership also says something important about the nature of our democracy. While American history is full of contradictions such as racial apartheid in a country founded on ideals of human equality, this democracy continues to work to overcome this failing.

We are reminded that democratic life is an ongoing project, an unfinished masterpiece. Our democracy is a process whereby its citizens continue to try to make it better. It can work if we are humble enough to recognize our failings and courageous enough to do the hard work of remedying them. As we celebrate the founding of Jamestown, we must be ever mindful of both the promise and the problems of our democratic experiment.

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