Steele, Shelby and Robinson, Peter M.. “Shelby Steele: The Content of His Character. Hoover Digest. No. 2. 30 April 1996. Adapted from KTEH interview.

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| [http://media.hoover.org/images/steele_shelby_biophoto.jpg](http://www.hoover.org/bios/steele.html) |
| [Shelby Steele.](http://www.hoover.org/bios/steele.html) |

ROBINSON You argue in your book The Content of Our Character that the civil rights movement has gone badly wrong. In what way?

STEELE The mistake that grew out of America's desire to fix the racial problem was that it inadvertently made victimization itself a kind of currency of power. Victimization now brings certain benefits, preferences, and entitlements. By rewarding victimization, we encouraged people to think of themselves as victims.

ROBINSON I want to make certain I understand your use of the term. What exactly do you mean by victimization?

STEELE Having to make your historical experience of injustice—of victimization—the centerpiece of your cultural and group identity. Blacks today are freer than at any time in our entire history, yet our identity is more grounded in victimization than ever.

ROBINSON Do you argue that victimization status is peculiar to blacks? That it is less pronounced among, say, Hispanics? Is that your position?

STEELE No. My argument is that victimization has become the currency of power for every group that's seeking redress from the larger society—women, Hispanics, Asians, blacks, and so forth. The power of those groups is grounded in victimization.

ROBINSON But victimization works, doesn't it? It is a currency of power. Once a group claims victimization, it does achieve special preferences and entitlements. From the point of view of the victimized group, what's wrong with that?

STEELE If my benefits come to me primarily as a black and not as an American, then the effect over time is to undermine common society—the common culture and democracy of America. I as a black don't identify with America—America is my enemy. This kind of thinking causes me not to move into the American mainstream. Which correspondingly causes me to fall farther and farther behind. That is the tragedy of that kind of power. That is the tragedy of victimization.

ROBINSON So you reject affirmative action. But how did you reach this position? What was your upbringing like? Did you experience discrimination in your own life?

STEELE Sure. As a child growing up in a suburb outside Chicago, I had terrible, wretched, abominable schooling. It was a segregated school. Black kids taught by white teachers who were rejects from the white schools. The teachers had emotional problems. They abused us. Our books were old books that were passed down from the white schools.

ROBINSON How did your parents cope with having to send their children to segregated schools?

STEELE They organized the other parents in the community and shut the school down. My mother and father led the fight. The parents boycotted the school, keeping their children out of the school for months. Finally they got a response from the school board. The principal and many of the teachers were fired, and after that there was a slow reconstruction of the school.

ROBINSON So you were raised to fight discrimination.

STEELE Absolutely. My parents met in the civil rights movement. They were members of the CORE [Congress of Racial Equality], and I was what was called a "CORE baby." I marched in demonstrations throughout my childhood.

ROBINSON I'm curious then. You and your parents were active members of the civil rights movement. Did you sense that the movement was taking a wrong turn? That it was replacing a call for equal rights with a call for power based on victimization? Or was that a realization that you only reached later, as a mature man looking back on events?

STEELE Oh, no, no. My parents certainly knew. And I could see it myself instantly.

ROBINSON Instantly?

STEELE Instantly. That doesn't mean I didn't go along with it—I did. But as soon as we began to see power congeal around race rather than around morality—rather than around citizenship and ideas of integration and so forth—we knew something was wrong. The white power that had oppressed us for three centuries had been based on race. Black power might have had more justification, but it was no different. It was oppressive toward anyone who wasn't a member of a certain race.

ROBINSON Then why did you go along with it?

STEELE I knew intellectually that things in the civil rights movement were going wrong, but emotionally I identified with the anger. I had grown up in a segregated world. I was denied all sorts of opportunities. I couldn't go into certain parts of town. So I had the same rage as any other black, and I gave full vent to it. I was a vociferous participant in the Black Power movement.

ROBINSON So how did you change your mind? What led you to write The Content of Our Character, in which you condemn black power just as forcefully as white power?

STEELE I attribute a lot of it to simply growing up—of having a family, a profession, bills to pay, reality to deal with. I began to see in the process of doing those ordinary things that there was a great deal more freedom in American society than I had previously owned up to—my life was pretty much in my own hands. This is not to say that there isn't any racism—I still meet it every day. It is simultaneously true that I have an enormous amount of freedom and that I can pretty much take my life in whatever direction I want to take it.

I wanted to communicate that reality to my children. I wanted them to feel that. It seems to me that the worst thing in the world is to tell your children that they don't have freedom. Again, one of my complaints with this victim-focused identity is that blacks will end up telling our own children that things are not possible for them—and that guarantees defeat. I couldn't stand that. I believe that there is enormous possibility for our children. That's what drove me to write my book.

ROBINSON Shelby, do you really want to see affirmative action ended? Brought to a complete stop? Are you willing to see the number of black students at elite universities drop? Are you willing to suffer the shock to black morale that could follow from the loss of role models in high positions?

STEELE My opposition to affirmative action has to do with my concern for black uplift. Affirmative action has created what I call a "culture of preference." It's not just a benign social policy having to do with college admissions. It is a vast and all-defining culture that continues to lock me in, as a black person, to a victim-focused identity. Affirmative action makes me passive. It makes me into someone who cannot move forward unless white people are benevolent and help me move forward. It perpetuates dependency. I think affirmative action is the greatest negative force—the greatest force in opposition to black uplift—in society today.

Will blacks disappear from higher education? That is not a decision for white Americans to make. That is a decision for black Americans to make. If blacks focus on education, I have absolutely every confidence that they can compete with everybody.

But in any case, when you take that decision away from me as a black person, you make me a secondary citizen. You oppress me in the name of helping me. You perpetuate my dependency. You demoralize me. As long as that continues to happen, you will see the same gaps in scores, with blacks at the bottom. You will see blacks having the highest dropout rates, the lowest grade point averages, and on and on and on. Affirmative action guarantees black inferiority.

ROBINSON You want affirmative action eliminated, but that's not the position of Jesse Jackson or any number of other black leaders. How has black America responded to you?

STEELE Let me put it this way. Black America is a one-party system. It is a party organized around the use of our historical victimization as the source of our power. Jesse Jackson's power is the power of victimization. He is an ambulance chaser for victimization. If there is anybody, anywhere, who has been victimized by racism, Jesse is there, before the person even hits the ground, with the television cameras rolling.

Jesse knows that that is when he can go back and ask for special treatment from the larger society to maintain his position as a member of what I call the "grievance elite." That is what Jesse Jackson and so many of the civil rights leaders are right now. They are not helping the masses of people. They are members of a grievance elite.

When Shelby Steele comes out and says that maybe victimization is untrue, that it ought not to be the number-one element of our identity and our politics, and that we ought not to use it as a source of power, then I am challenging them right where it hurts. I am challenging the very source of their power itself. But because we only have a one-party system, I then become a dissident.

What I am fighting for is for black America to become a two-party community, so that ideological opposition is acceptable and dissidents are no longer purged. There's nothing wrong with Jesse Jackson. What's wrong is that he has no opposition. In black America, no other ideological framework is allowed above ground. That hurts black America. That hurts Jesse Jackson. His arguments are not going to be as good if he does not have to argue against an opposition and vice versa. You need that duality for a group to be effective.

ROBINSON Are there any signs that the one-party system is breaking down? Are you changing any minds?

STEELE Polls indicate that 60 percent of black Americans supported Clarence Thomas. A poll in the Los Angeles Times showed that 48 percent of black Californians oppose the use of racial preferences. So what you have in black America is people who feel differently but won't speak out.

ROBINSON But that's changing?

STEELE It's changing.

ROBINSON Ten years from now, will black America still represent a one-party system? And will affirmative action still be the law of the land?

STEELE Ten years from now affirmative action will be moribund. And the fact that there are more and more black people every day who are willing to speak their minds indicates that in the future black America will be a two-party system.

Shelby Steele is the Robert J. and Marion E. Oster Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution and a member of the Working Group on Islamism and the International Order. He is a prominent voice on the subject of affirmative action, race relations, and multiculturalism. In 2006, Steele received the Bradley Prize for his contributions to the study of race in America. In 2004, he was awarded the National Humanities Medal. In 1991, his work on the documentarySeven Days in Bensonhurst was recognized with an Emmy Award and two awards for television documentary writing-the Writer's Guild Award and the San Francisco Film Festival Award. Other books by Steele include A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited about Obama and Why He Can't Win (2007), White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era (2006) and A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America.

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