
THE ONENESS OF TWONESS: THE PROMISE AND CHALLENGE OF RACIAL EQUALITY

By John A. Payton and Victor A. Bolden

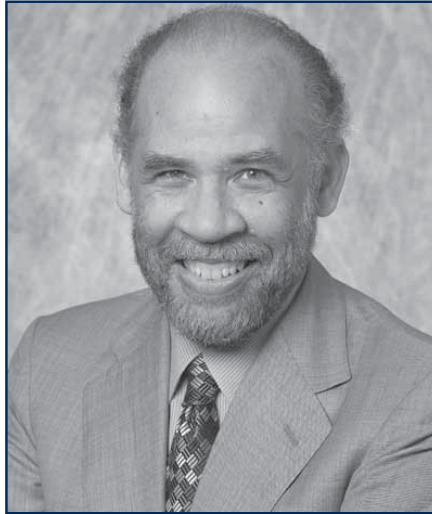
Around the turn of the last century, Dr. W.E.B. DuBois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk* about the sense of “double consciousness” African Americans feel living in America. As he described it then: “One feels this twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength keeps it from being torn asunder.”

In this century, this sense of “twoness” should not be feared but embraced as we move further along the road to racial equality. This sense of “twoness” should lead African American youth to believe they can accomplish things never achieved before and also understand that challenges remain before the full scope of America’s promise of equality can be deemed a reality.

That promise has been partly fulfilled. This is evident in the abundance of opportunities available to today’s African American youth. Today, African Americans have jobs, live in neighborhoods and hold political offices unattainable less than a half-century ago.

Before passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, African Americans struggled to get any job in an American company. Today, an African American, Kenneth Chenault, serves as the Chief Executive Officer of the American Express Corporation, a Fortune 500 company, and countless others have assumed positions of great responsibility in corporations all across the country.

Before passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, many African Americans had the right to vote in theory but not in practice, and thus very little political power. Today, two African



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Americans have served as the United States of America’s Secretary of State in this decade, and there are now African

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American governors in two states. Futhermore an African American candidate may be the nominee of a major political party for the presidency of the United States, and thousands of African Americans hold various

political offices throughout the country.

Before passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, African Americans fought to own a home and live wherever they could afford. Today, the homeownership rate for African American households has doubled in the last 60 years.

African Americans have come a long way from the pervasive and oppressive systems of slavery and segregation and the numerous other ways that racial discrimination has manifested itself in their lives and plagued their existence in the United States.

Yet, today, more than 140 years after the Thirteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution abolished slavery and more than 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawed legal segregation, America is still struggling to overcome its long and tragic history of racial apartheid. African Americans have surely progressed, but racial equality still remains elusive, as the gap between the

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lives lived by African Americans and whites persists.

African Americans 25 years of age or older are more likely to lack a high school diploma than to have a college degree. Whites in the same age group are nearly three times as likely to have a college degree than they are to be without a high school diploma. The economic consequences of this severe racial disparity are enormous. College graduates earn more than twice as much as high school dropouts. Even more troubling, according to the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University, the real income of those without a high school diploma is less today than it was in 1973.

While African American homeownership rates have doubled in the last 60 years, the gap in homeownership rates between blacks and whites has not closed or even narrowed significantly over this time period.

While opportunities for African Americans to participate in the political life of this nation have grown dramatically, racially polarized voting persists.

Moreover, an African American male born in 1991 stands a 29 percent chance of being imprisoned at some point in his life. For white males, the percentage is four. Put another way, an African American male is more than seven times more likely than a white male to be imprisoned at some point in his life.

These remaining challenges are daunting and often overshadow the accomplishments already achieved and the promise of more racial progress in the future. Nevertheless, those who understand not just African American history but the story of all humanity know that this dual existence of both promises and challenges is not just a reality of race, but a reality of life. Life is both full of promise and full of challenge. There are things to look forward to and difficult matters to be

addressed.

We measure a great life both by how much promise one has or had and by how many challenges one has faced and conquered. If we do not want challenges in our lives, we fail to continue to achieve great things. We begin accepting the world for what it offers rather than determining what the world can be. If this sense of “twoness” feels too abstract, consider the example of Julius Chambers, a previous Director-Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (“LDF”).

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Before becoming LDF’s third Director-Counsel, after Thurgood Marshall and Jack Greenberg, Julius Chambers had a trailblazing civil rights career in Charlotte, NC. He filed a lawsuit to integrate a restaurant. As a result, the Klu Klux Klan bombed his car. He sued the Shriners to include a black high school in a football tournament. As a result, someone bombed his house. He represented the plaintiffs in a school desegregation case. As a result, someone bombed his

law office. Yet, none of these attacks deterred him. He had – and still has to this day – “this abiding faith in people that while they do wrong, if they hear that it is better to do what is right, they will eventually do what is right.” Julius Chambers’ “abiding faith” is a belief in the promise of racial equality along with a deep appreciation for the challenge of achieving racial equality.

If he only believed in the promise, but did not understand the challenges that would come along the way, he might have given up long before they bombed his car and if not then, certainly right after it and if not then, after they bombed his house and then his law office. Likewise, if he only saw the challenges he would face in fighting for civil rights but did not really believe in the promise of racial equality, he might not have fought for racial equality at all. Significantly, his car and home were bombed in 1965 after civil rights activists like Medgar Evers had already been assassinated for seeking racial equality.

So, for African American youth trying to find their way, we urge you to think about and embrace this sense of “twoness.” The racial barriers that no longer exist today fell because of this sense of “twoness.” The racial barriers that still exist today will fall tomorrow because of this sense of “twoness.” As Julius Chambers did, we need to both believe that further steps on the road to racial equality are possible and appreciate and be prepared for the challenges that we will face on the way there. Ironically, “twoness” is the way to “oneness” in this nation. It has and will continue to lead to African Americans being full, equal and thriving participants in our democracy, a place where the words “We The People” truly mean everyone. □

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