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Minorities must not fall victim to victimization

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In his commencement address May 19 at Morehead College in Atlanta, President Barack Obama stressed that black and other minority students need to overcome the tendency to fall back on victimization with respect to race matters. Too often, minority leaders, for example, overly focus on the racial divide growing larger rather than smaller. This, in part, is a reaction to the concept promoted by others who argue that American society has entered into a post-racial state, especially with the breakthrough election of a black president.

The fact is, of course, we are not in a post-racial state, and objective figures, especially economic ones, still reveal a significant gap between whites and minorities. At the same time, however, it is deceptive, as Obama pointed out, to say nothing has changed. Much has changed with respect to racial attitudes and relationships. Many blacks and Latinos are attaining more and better education and expanding the middle-class sectors of their communities. Much of this progress has to do with the history of civil rights struggles of both groups. Clearly there is ambivalence as to the actual state of racial progress since the civil rights era of the 1960s.

Yet I agree with Obama that while we can point out this ambivalence and mixed record on race relations, still we cannot fall victim to victimization. Black and Latino leaders and communities need to go beyond pointing out disparities in progress and instead encourage a more positive note of agency and struggle to overcome such lingering unevenness. We should point out the gaps, but we need to also point out the progress minority communities have achieved. Our young people need not negative reinforcement but positive reinforcement. They need to be told that only through their hard work and upholding high standards for themselves will they achieve meaningful success. This success is not accomplished by decrying the lack of progress but by struggling hard to break out of it. We can't achieve this through excuses that the system is stacked against us. What if Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr. and Cesar

Chavez had given in to this victimization?

At the same time, a more affirmative approach to eliminating racism is not helped by patronizing liberals who, despite their insistence on high standards for everyone, sometimes look the other way when it comes to minorities and women.

I see this too often on my campus, where liberal administrators look the other way in admitting minority students who are clearly not prepared to study at a University of California campus. This is not the majority of such students, but enough that make it clear, at least to me, that some of them should not be on a UC campus. We must expand diversity on our campuses but not put aside clear and high standards in doing so. This rush to show that we are achieving diversity also affects faculty issues. There are some minority faculty who receive tenure and, later, promotions even though they are not continuing to do their research and being productive scholars. Yet the same liberal administrators also turn the other way and allow such promotions in order not to be accused of being racially biased against blacks and Latinos. As they consider their own upward mobility, they do not want to be accused of having denied tenure or other promotions to minority and female faculty. At the same time, chancellors, vice-chancellors and deans have the gall to talk about high standards. Such hypocrisy only adds to a victimization culture and detracts from minorities focusing on hard work and struggles rather than liberal handouts.

I agree with Obama that we need to move from excuses on issues of race and discrimination and focus instead on people displaying their own agency and self-determination to overcome obstacles to their mobility and integration. The time for excuses and for patronization has to come to an end.

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