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Jordan: From 'Deliberate Speed' to 'Deliberate Obstruction'

From 'Deliberate Speed' To 'Deliberate Obstruction'

By Vernon E. Jordan, Jr.

When the *Brown* decision came, it was met with high hopes. Some of those hopes have been realized. Some have not. *Brown* is now an adult, 25-years-old. But *Brown* is neither healthy nor flourishing. The principles behind *Brown* get plenty of lip service, but the actions necessary to fully desegregate schools in America have been lacking.

Most people still think *Brown* ended racial segregation in the schools. They are wrong. The majority of Black school children are still in racially isolated schools.

Most people think Blacks have made tremendous gains in education. There again, they are largely wrong. Despite statistics that show increased Black educational attainment, there are other statistics documenting a continuing gap in relations to white people.

The Black dropout rate is still double the white rate. Proportionately three times as many Blacks as whites are behind grade level. Black and poor children are still short-changed in available school resources. The highly publicized college attendance figures hide the fact that most Black students attend two-year community colleges, while most white students attend four-year colleges and universities.

Meanwhile, *Brown* itself has been diluted and stripped of its potential by the very Court that proclaimed it. "All deliberate speed" has been converted to "all deliberate obstruction" with the sanction of the Supreme Court.

It is disgraceful that a quarter of a century after *Brown* the nation should still be embroiled in controversy about implementing desegregation. It is disgraceful that busing should have become the central focus of national attention, while the evil of segregation that busing helps cure is seen as a lesser problem.

By refusing to sanction metropolitan-wide desegregation plans, and by demanding positive proof of discriminatory intent, the Supreme Court has effectively

limited the application of the *Brown* decision. It has built walls of segregation around inner city school systems. [I live in New York, where there is an all-Black high school in Queens just 15 blocks away from another high school that is 90 percent white. Between those two schools is a county line that is as formidable as the Berlin wall in separating those students].

Rather than adopt a defensive position on busing, I believe that busing—and any other effective tool—should be used to breach that wall of segregation. I have vivid memories of Black kids boarding busses in Atlanta to travel to all-Black schools for purposes of segregation. And I see no reason why today's children can't board buses to get an integrated, quality education.

Quality is a key word here. Simple desegregation isn't going to close the educational gap. There is plenty of evidence to show that it helps, but while we concentrate on continued challenges to racially isolated schools, we've also got to concentrate on making all schools work better for our children.

Brown was the beginning of the breakthrough that pierced the wall of a brutal, racist system. But the struggle is far from over. And central to the realization that we have far to go yet must be the understanding that *Brown* has meant very little to the masses of Black people. *Brown* has not touched those who are poor, those who are denied skills, training and jobs, those who are locked into a vicious cycle of poverty and deprivation.

Unfulfilled Promise

Today's theme is "The Black Underclass: Untouched by *Brown*." Millions of Black people were not only untouched by *Brown*, but they've been bypassed by the other breakthroughs in employment, in housing and in other key fields. For many millions, the promise of *Brown* and the advances of the '60s have been illusory. Their needs have been ignored, their aspirations trampled upon, and their desire for equal opportunity scorned.

An indifferent nation has travelled a long road since *Brown*, but it is a road that leads not to equality but rather it leads to *Bakke*. The path from *Brown* to *Bakke* is a path of reaction and of callous neglect of the best interests of both the nation and its poor.

The plight of the Black poor has been met with indifference, even hostility. The Second Reconstruction ended before it had completed its work. It ended with the slogan "benign neglect." And today we hear similar slogans—"the era of limits," and "the era of new realities," "the era of the new foundation." But in the end they all boil down to the same thing—malign neglect.

There appears to be a general consensus that Black people have made such substantial progress that there is no further need for special assistance. This illusion of progress provides the rationale for even former friends to back away from affirmative action, from full employment policies, and from implementing school desegregation.

The illusion of progress is thus one of the most dangerous myths in American life today. It is dangerous because it is false. It is dangerous because it provides justification for abandoning progressive policies that would help the poor. It is dangerous because it stigmatizes the poor by blaming the victims of the system for their own poverty. Indeed, the very term "underclass" has a connotation of individual blame and personal responsibility for not making it in our society.

The fact is that the so-called underclass is a creation of our society's economic malfunctioning and its continued discriminatory policies. It is a product of schools that don't educate, of neighborhoods pervaded by bad housing, crime and neglect, and of an economy that doesn't provide jobs for all.

That millions of people live lives of poverty, despair and alienation tells us more about the workings of this society than it does about those millions brutalized by society's neglect.

The illusion of progress, 25 years after

⁸ *Brown*, is just that—an illusion, a myth, a lie. The Urban League has studied the facts regarding Black Americans and has come to the inescapable conclusion that not only is progress limited to very few areas, but the gap that separates them from whites is growing wider instead of growing smaller.

Consider something as basic as income. In this decade, median Black family income has declined when measured against median white family income. Several years ago, the typical Black family made 62 percent of what the typical white family earned. Today it's down to 57 percent.

Consider jobs. Black unemployment is almost two and a half times the rate of white unemployment. That's up from less than twice the white rate. In fact, Black joblessness in our best years has never been as low as white joblessness in its worst years.

The Black unemployment rate in 1979 is 25 percent higher than it was 25 years ago when the *Brown* decision was handed down.

Consider youth. Up to two-thirds of Black teenagers are jobless. White youth unemployment is going down; Black youth unemployment is going up.

Consider the middle class. It's become popular to assume that Blacks are becoming middle class in overwhelming numbers. That's an illusion, a myth.

Every year the government publishes three sample budgets. The top one is for a higher living standard—what we would consider comfortable middle class living. About 1 of 4 white families earned that level of income. But less than 1 of 10 Black families are at that standard. And that represents a *decline* from 12 percent just 6 years ago.

Let's look at the lower living standard. That's a tight austerity budget. No frills budget—that's a budget where every quarter is squeezed till the eagle screams. Last year one out of four white families earned under that standard. But for Black families, a majority of them had incomes

lower than the government's own lowest standard budget.

What kind of progress is that? The majority of Black people in America are poor or near poor. The gains Black people made in the 1960s were significant. But they came nowhere near closing the gap with white citizens. And in the 1970s, those gains were eroded.

There are no grounds for complacency. There's no call to be unconcerned. The illusion of Black progress and the myths of Black gains cannot be allowed to halt the programs and policies we need.

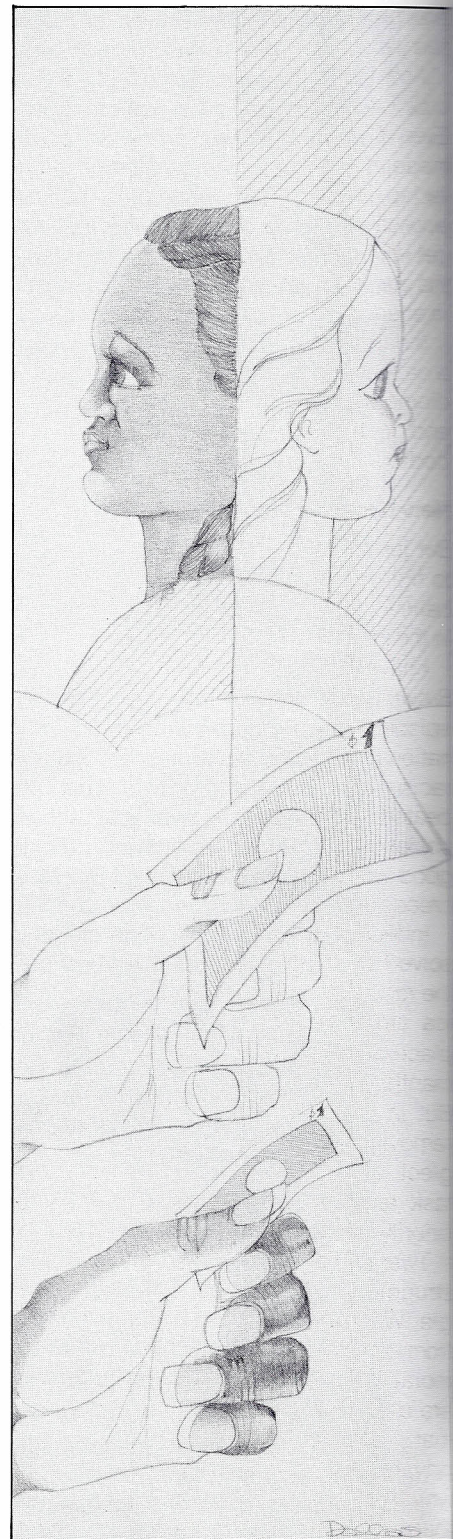
And the most urgent of those policies is full employment. It is the cornerstone of Black demands—jobs. Back in 1963, Blacks and white Americans together came to Washington in a great march for jobs and freedom. We got some of those freedoms. A few of us got some of the jobs. And we're in deep trouble without all the jobs we need.

With decent jobs, people can afford better housing, health care, decent living standards, and they can cope with inflation. But today, the myths about inflation have become a barrier to providing those jobs.

Indeed, inflation has become the all-purpose answer to ending programs aimed at helping poor people. If it didn't exist, it would have to be invented.

In the name of slowing inflation, the Carter Administration has come up with a budget that slashes social spending. It is a budget that will cut 158,000 public service jobs. It is a budget that will slash 250,000 summer youth jobs. It is a budget that will drop 25,000 subsidized housing units. It is a budget that would take \$600 million away from Social Security recipients.

And what will the 96th Congress do to that budget? Will it restore those cuts? Will it finally provide adequate funds for the urban, job and housing, health and educational programs that the Black poor so desperately need? No, the Congress is trying to make deeper cuts. One congressman was quoted as saying that the President's budget will be the most lib-



eral proposal to come out of Washington this year. That is a sad state of affairs.

And the cruel joke is that the budget cuts won't begin to deal with inflation. Even if all the Administration's cuts were made, the inflation rate would not be affected. A \$30 billion deficit in a \$2 trillion economy is peanuts. And while this budget is being sold as an anti-inflation step, the poor have been hit hardest by inflation in energy, housing, health and food costs.

Indeed, this nation seems caught up in a callous mood of new negativism that is diametrically opposed to the idealism, and to the enlightened philosophy embodied in the *Brown* decision.

New Negativism

But just as all Americans came together to fight for a more equal society, so do I believe they will continue that struggle in the future.

I have faith that the New Negativism of *Brown* in America is just another brief episode of retreat in the long march of national progress. I have faith that the racism we see about us will be decisively beaten, that the real problems that our society faces will be solved through the good will of people of all races, political creeds and economic interests.

Indeed, our nation's problems can be solved by interracial cooperation and by the recognition that our destinies in America are intertwined. There is no hiding place. In the late 1960s, Americans dismantled the overt barriers of segregation. But in the 1970s they have not finished removing the barriers of centuries of neglect and oppression. That unfinished task remains our society's most urgent priority, the real moral equivalent of war.

Twenty-five years after *Brown*, the struggle for equality is still a moral struggle. When a third of the poor are drawn from a tenth of the population, that's a moral issue. When a third of the jobless are drawn from a tenth of the population, that's a moral issue. When public and private policies strangle the cities in which the majority of Black people live, that's a moral issue. When a nation that

subjected its Black citizens first to slavery and then to persistent oppression, and today subjects them to disproportionate disadvantage, that's a moral issue.

It is a moral issue when people label limited affirmative action as "reverse discrimination." Every statistic in any field shows continued white male advantage. Where is this "reverse discrimination" in an economy where Black men and women with some college have the same unemployment rates as white high school dropouts; where Black citizens with some high school education have *double* the unemployment rates of whites who never got past elementary school!

It's a moral issue when welfare is labelled a "Black program" while the majority of welfare recipients are white. It's a moral issue when every halting step of Black progress is fought, when policies that would perpetuate a system that locks Black people into the bottom of society are proposed.

And it is that moral factor that continues to distinguish the civil rights movement. It is that moral factor so many people refuse to acknowledge today. Their refusal is based on the desire to avoid the necessary steps to modify the functioning of society in a way that would help Blacks, Spanics, women and other minorities overcome their present disadvantage.

If desegregation was right in 1954, desegregation is right today. If Martin's dream of brotherhood and justice was right in 1963, it is right today. Truth and justice cannot be erased from the moral map of America's soul. We cannot evade our personal responsibility for doing everything in our power to right the wrongs of the past and the present.

With all the broken promises and unfinished business *Brown* symbolizes, we look forward to finishing the job the Court started in 1954. We look ahead to the future, to the struggles yet before us. We look ahead to the massive effort to get America to abandon its negativism, to return to the ideals and principles that made it great. We go forth to renew our energies, revitalize our spirit, and win the

war for human freedom and equality. That was our goal 25 years ago, that remains our goal today. □

Vernon Jordan is president of the National Urban League.