

Thomas should be approved

By NIARA SUDARKASA

The tide is turning in favor of Clarence Thomas in the African American community. What appeared at first to be an avalanche of opposition to his nomination to the Supreme Court is subsiding. This is not only because of the mobilization of the black conservatives. Many liberals and others in between are asking: If not Thomas, who?

As a registered Democrat who at different times has been labeled a nationalist, a radical and a liberal, I believe there are reasons that African Americans can and should support Clarence Thomas.

On this issue, as on many others, we are dealing with options that we do not control. It is unrealistic for us to expect (although we might wish) that the President will nominate someone who would carry on the legacy of Thurgood Marshall. He will appoint a conservative, male or female, white, black or Hispanic.

There is a special need on this court for someone who can reach back into his or her experiences to find the compassion, courage and

He knows what it means to be black and poor. And African Americans can surely use a voice at the table.

conviction to stand up for justice for those who are downtrodden, excluded or overlooked.

I believe Thomas would be such a person. He knows what it means to be black and what it means to be poor. His life shows him to be a man of courage, and his speeches and writings reveal his belief in equal justice.

The question is whether he understands that given a history of injustice and discrimination a commitment to equal justice requires a commitment to equity.

The concept of affirmative action rests on this premise. Much has been made of Thomas' opposition to affirmative action. Yet, the record shows that he supported it at certain times and opposed it at others. We know that he has been surrounded by conservative opinion that opposes affirmative action on the erroneous ground that it requires quotas. We need to be persistent in presenting Judge Thomas with the counter arguments as to what affirmative action is and what it is not and why it is important in redressing past discrimination.

History proves that Supreme Court justices can be persuaded to moderate their views. After all the segregationist political and intellectual climate of the early 1950s, the court decided in favor of Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP in the famous *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation case. In that landmark decision, several minds were changed by the power of the arguments they heard.

As African Americans, we have always fought for access, for a seat at the table, regardless of who else might be there to speak for us. We never said there was no need for Thurgood Marshall to be on the Supreme Court because the liberal majority might represent our views. Marshall's was a distinctive voice on a liberal court.

Thomas may not speak for the majority of African Americans, but he speaks for a growing number. Black conservatives deserve a voice on the court just as black liberals did. Thomas can be a distinctive voice, and hopefully a moderating influence, on this conservative court.

Why would I argue for an African American to replace Thurgood Marshall? Because if any voice is needed in those halls of justice, it is a voice for black people. Black men go to prison in larger numbers, get longer sentences and are executed more often than any other group in the nation.

The chances for equal justice for African Americans and all minorities in this country have improved markedly as more black lawyers and judges, conservative as well as liberal, have come into the legal system. They have made a difference through their own arguments and decisions, and by influencing their colleagues.

Diversity on the Supreme Court is important, whether the court is mainly liberal or mainly conservative. Of course race, gender and ethnicity must be taken into account in achieving that diversity. How else can we redress a situation where race and gender were used for centuries to exclude all but white males?

In the era of a conservative Supreme Court, Clarence Thomas is a known quantity. He is a bird in the hand. We do not know who might emerge from the bush.

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Don't Write Off Thomas

BY NIARA SUDARKASA

When the venerable historian John Hope Franklin speaks, I listen. When the NAACP takes a position, I usually agree. But not this time. I am not a conservative, but I, and many others like myself, are not convinced by the NAACP's and Franklin's view that Clarence Thomas's appointment to the Supreme Court would be detrimental to African-Americans. We see a greater risk in casting our lot with an unknown nominee whose record might be far worse.

What concerns me here is that Thomas might be opposed because "he does not speak for the majority of blacks." I am reminded of the time when some NAACP chapters led a campaign against the film "The Color Purple" because it did not "represent the black experience."

The movie was picketed at the box office, blasted in the press and passed over at the Academy Awards largely because some blacks decided this was not an acceptable portrayal of black life. Who were the losers? Alice Walker, who wrote the probing and compelling novel, the movie's outstanding cast, led by Danny Glover, Whoopi Goldberg, Oprah Winfrey and Margaret Avery, and Steven Spielberg, the film's producer-director.

But the biggest loser was the black community, because we denied our own the chance to be honored for their artistic achievements. And why? Because we could not allow a fictional work to be judged as fiction. We had to judge it as a historical treatise.

I wonder what would have happened to "The Godfather" if the Italian-American Civil Rights League, which had objected to some aspects of the film, had opposed its nomination for the Academy Awards because it "did not represent the Italian experience." "The Godfather," with its three Oscars, is remembered as one of the great movies of recent decades. "The Color Purple," with 11 nominations and no Oscars, has been pushed aside as a "controversial film."

The reaction to Clarence Thomas's nomination to the Supreme Court is analogous to what happened to "The Color Purple." Of course, the two situations differ in substance, importance and impact. But in both cases, there is a presumption that there can be only one valid interpretation of the African-American experience. More than anyone, we should understand the potential value of a minority point of view.

Thomas may not speak for the majority of black people, but his voice, his views and his experiences are those of many African-Americans who "came up the hard way." This is not to say that everyone who grew up poor ends up a conservative. I was born in Florida to a teenage mother who picked beans, scrubbed floors and worked in a dry

cleaner most of her life to send her four children to college. My grandparents' home, where we grew up, had no plumbing or electricity until the house was literally moved into town from the countryside. Before that, we used an outhouse, drew water from a well, bathed in a tin tub in the kitchen and lit the house with kerosene lamps. That was not uncommon in the rural South in the '40s and '50s.

I do not share Thomas's political views, but they are the views of many people who grew up with me. Liberals need to listen and learn from conservatives, just as conservatives can learn from liberals.

Sense of self-worth: Many complex experiences made Clarence Thomas a conservative. His way may not be our way, but that does not mean it cannot produce results. His ambivalence toward affirmative action, for example, could lead to a search for an alternative approach to providing equality for African-Americans and others.

Those of us who went to college in the '50s, before there was affirmative action, welcomed this federal initiative of the '60s as a means of helping deserving black students get into college. But we did not experience affirmative action from the point of view of the student—as Clarence Thomas and his peers did. I recall many of my students at The University of Michigan resenting the notion that they did not make it to college on their own merit. They suffered slurs

and innuendoes from faculty as well as other students. Although they appreciated the opportunity for an education, they felt there had to be a better way of opening the door. I would guess that today many of them have mixed feelings, if not wholly negative feelings, about affirmative action.

Those of us in my generation who entered college without affirmative action

should stop and think about how much pride we take in that fact that "we made it on our own" (although we too had help), and how much that affects our own sense of self-worth.

As African-Americans, we have always fought for access to America's institutions of power and influence. We demanded representation regardless of who was sitting at the table. When we raised our clenched fists in the cry for "black power," I don't think we meant power for black liberals only. Thomas should not be barred from serving on the Supreme Court because he does not speak for the liberal black leadership or what we think is the majority of black people. The fact that he speaks for many blacks, including a growing number of black leaders, should carry some weight.

We know that with or without Thomas, this conservative Supreme Court will no longer interpret civil and individual rights as the court has done over the last three and a half decades. Thomas's background and experience could make him a moderating influence and a distinctive voice among his conservative peers. His appointment would represent a personal triumph over poverty and racial discrimination. Many in our community would see his success as a victory for us. As African-Americans, we can live with Clarence Thomas on the Supreme Court. Let this not be a repeat of the "The Color Purple" episode, where we all end up losers.

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'More than anyone, we should understand the value of a minority view'

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COMMENT

Taking care of our own isn't new

Conservatives, liberals share common ground in promoting self-reliance

Clarence Thomas' nomination to the Supreme Court has brought a number of issues out of the closet. One of the most hotly debated is whether or not a serious and successful program to uplift the African-American community can be built around a strategy of self-help.

In other words, can the African-American community realistically be expected to pull itself up by its bootstraps?

The new black conservatives seem to answer a resounding yes. The liberal black leadership asks what about the people who have no boots.

The new black conservatives view economic empowerment through self-help as the key to most doors that are still closed to us. Black liberals contend that self-help will not get us very far without government assistance and changes in the laws and practices that have kept the doors of opportunity closed to African-Americans for all these years.

Obviously, this does not have to be an either/or proposition. Self-help and government support are both necessary if African-Americans are to achieve justice and equality in America.

We cannot allow the government to ignore poverty and suffering. There must be government programs to help the poor and the needy. But we also must help ourselves to break the cycle of dependency by working toward economic and political empowerment based on



SELF HELPERS: Booker T. Washington, left; Mary McLeod Bethune and Malcolm X preached self-help before Clarence Thomas

self-reliance and self-help.

Liberals should not disavow the notion of self-help, just as conservatives cannot claim exclusive right to it. Black churches, lodges, sororities, fraternities and other institutions are rooted in self-help. Black colleges were founded to enable an educated black citizenry to reach back and help "lift the race."

Welfare programs as we know them have existed less than 50 years, and they serve only a fraction of the African-American community. For over 3½ centuries, we have survived and prospered in America mainly because of our own hard work and the help of our extended families and other institutions.

Hundreds of our leaders, from the most conservative to the most radical, built organizations and institutions to promote self-help. Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, Mary McLeod Bethune, Elijah Muhammad, Father Divine, Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell and Leon Sullivan immediately come to mind.

In the late '60s and early '70s, the Black Panthers, black nationalists and other "radicals and militants" launched many self-help initiatives, including breakfast programs for needy children, "buy black" campaigns, independent black schools and after-school tutoring programs.

Today, the ideology of economic empowerment through self-help appeals not only to black conservatives but to African-Americans across the political and economic spectrum.

In fact, black conservatism and

black militancy are once again converging around the issue of empowerment through self-help. Many of its younger advocates see themselves as militants in the tradition of Malcolm X. Others are young professionals who want to be entrepreneurs and executives — not just token black faces in the white corporate world.

The civil rights movement's focus on breaking down legal and political barriers to integration does not sufficiently address the concerns of this new current in the black community. If the civil rights leaders do not give high priority to self-help and empowerment, they will be perceived as perpetuating dependency and, in time, will lose the support of the majority of African-Americans.

Twenty-five years ago, the cry of "black power" by Stokely Carmichael (now Kwame Toure) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee pushed the civil rights movement to a new level of militancy and ushered in a period of radicalism throughout the black community. The call for economic empowerment and self-help now coming from conservatives and militants may once again force the civil rights movement onto a new course, or bring about an entirely new "rights movement."

In either case, black conservatives as well as young militants will be there to challenge the liberal civil rights establishment for the leadership of the black community as empowerment rather than integration becomes the primary goal.



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