

Does Thomas Sowell's Retirement Signal the End of Black Conservatism?

On December 27, 2016, at the age of 86, Thomas Sowell published his last column.

After publishing dozens of books and hundreds of columns, Dr. Sowell's retirement may mark the beginning of the end of an era of black intellectuals who were champions of political and economic liberty. Other black scholars like Walter Williams, W.B. Allen and Shelby Steele are all in their 70s or 80s, and there does not seem to be a cadre of like-minded black scholars in their wake.

While in Atlanta for Christmas, I stumbled upon a June 1994 issue of *National Minority Politics* magazine at my parent's home. The magazine began as a newsletter in the 1980s and eventually became a monthly periodical that was renamed *Headway* before publication ceased in 1999. Willie and Gwen Richardson published *Headway* to feature leading black and Hispanic conservative voices like Thomas Sowell, Walter Williams, Raoul Contreas, Roger Hernandez, Linda Chavez, Kay Cole James, Deroy Murdock and others.

The magazine hosted leadership conferences that created conversations between minority conservatives and politicians like William Bennett, Kay Bailey Hutchinson, Phil Gramm and Gary Franks. Many of *Headway's* events were captured on C-SPAN in the mid-1990s.

The political philosophy of *Headway* included the following:

1. Strong families: The foundation of any stable society is—first and foremost—strong families in every community. We should stress to our youth the importance

of marriage and keeping families together.

2. Individual responsibility: Almost every human being is endowed with the necessary means to be successful—a sound mind and the ability to think, reason and make choices. These natural gifts are accompanied with the equal obligation to take responsibility for one's actions.
3. Free enterprise: Our nation has been the most successful on earth in fostering and promoting a free enterprise system with opportunity for all. Strengthening this system is our best hope for a thriving economy in the future.
4. Less government: The size and influence of government at all levels must be minimized in order to guarantee a free society. Government should play a role in performing certain functions, like maintaining a strong defense, but we should not expect government to solve all our problems.
5. Strong Defense: Although it is not America's role to be the world's policeman, there are sometimes threats to American lives and interests which we cannot tolerate.
6. Community-based problem solving. Rather than looking to the federal government to solve local problems such as crime and education, we can and should develop solutions in our local communities.
7. Good taste and common sense in popular culture: The level of violence, promiscuous sex and immoral behavior on television, in movies and in music lyrics should be reduced as it has adverse effects on society, especially our children.
8. Compassionate conservatism: While stressing the importance of free enterprise and less government, we must recognize our responsibility as a society to help those who help themselves or who are unable to help themselves through no fault of their own.

What's missing from this list is an issue that became a

defining position of the conservative coalition in the mid-1990s: abortion. With the rise of Newt Gingrich as the 50th Speaker of the House of Representatives and the passing of the Partial-Birth Abortion Act of 1995, abortion became a centerpiece of American conservatism beyond the concerns of economics and public policy.

Before that, abortion had not been a centerpiece of black conservatism because many black conservatives were more aligned with classical liberal political philosophy and Austrian economics, like Sowell and Williams, rather than religious-right conservatism.

The inclusion of pro-life politics into political and economic conservatism inadvertently took the wind out of the sails of many conservative African American scholars who were more concerned with issues of political and economic liberty. For example, black conservatives like Condoleezza Rice, Thomas Sowell, Walter Williams, Shelby Steele, John McWhorter, Kiron Skinner and the like, have never made abortion a key issue.

Sadly, it seems that with the retirement of Thomas Sowell, and the inevitable retirement of scholars like Walter Williams, Shelby Steele, black scholars, as champions of political and economic liberty, will continue to fade away if abortion remains the litmus test for identifying one's allegiance to conservatism. This is the end of an era. Black conservatism was its most winsome and popular when it primarily addressed issues other than abortion.

Finally, we're left with the question of whether or not there will ever again be a coalition of black and Hispanic scholars who have the political philosophy like the one outlined at *Headway* magazine? Or, is the best yet to come? {eo}

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