



America's Broke Priorities

Written by Wilmer J. Leon III, Guest Columnist

Thursday, 12 July 2012 19:10

On July 5, 1852 Frederick Douglass gave his famous speech *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?* Douglass asked, "Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us?" He then said, "I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us ...The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me...This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn."

As Americans recently celebrated another 4th of July, Douglass' words continue to ring true. Too many of us were not included within the pale of the glorious anniversary. On June 18, another important speech was delivered 160 years after the one given by Douglass. This one was delivered by Robert L. Johnson, chairman of The RLJ Companies and founder and former CEO of Black Entertainment Television (BET).

In his address to the Congressional Forum on the "Economic Empowerment in the Black Community," Johnson spoke about the troubling economic predicament of African Americans. He shared statistics illustrating a "wealth gap Tsunami."

According to a Pew Research Center study, "The wealth gap between white and African American families has more than quadrupled over the course of a generation; the racial wealth gap increased by \$75,000, from \$20,000 to \$95,000; the median wealth of white households is 20 times that of black households; and at least 35% of African Americans have no assets."

Johnson state, "Those in society who are generating wealth are beginning to look askance at supporting those who they deem to be nonproductive. So you have one group opposing transfer payments in the form of entitlements and another group arguing that we have to protect entitlements."

Johnson is not racially naïve. He explained, "There is a racial component to the employment and wealth gap between African Americans and White Americans that has to be addressed. Unfortunately, this country is uncomfortable with addressing that racial component..."

It was uncomfortable 160 years ago when after Frederick Douglass said to White America: "The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me,"

And many Whites are equally uncomfortable today.

Republicans and many other conservatives look at the current unemployment rate of 8.2 percent and the \$15 trillion debt and assert that America can no longer afford entitlement programs such as welfare, Medicaid, and Social Security. They claim America is broke.

But a budget is a reflection of priorities. People and governments will commit funds to the programs and areas that they deem important. President Obama's Department of Defense budget request for fiscal 2012 was for \$553 billion, an increase of \$22 billion over the 2010 appropriation.

It is estimated that the U.S. has incurred an additional \$2.1 billion in fuel costs since Pakistan closed its border to U.S. military shipments into Afghanistan in November. Pakistan closed the border after the U.S. refused to apologize for killing 24 Pakistani soldiers in a misguided drone strike.

Closer to home, U.S. taxpayers paid roughly \$16 billion in 2011 in farm support. According to the New York Times, "... The most controversial of these programs are the \$5 billion in annual so-called direct payments to farmers of corn, soybeans and other crops, awarded simply for owning tillable farm land, even if they do not plant on it." The newspaper continued, "Powerful interests and political traditions continue to constrain efforts to cut subsidies."

I don't hear conservatives screaming about that transfer payments to wealthy farmers and agri-business.

Robert Johnson is correct in saying there is a wealth gap tsunami affecting African Americans. The neo-cons are wrong to claim that there is no money to pay for social entitlement programs such as welfare, Medicare and Medicaid, social security, substantive job training and other education programs. Americans simply have to shift their focus. It's not that America is broke, its priorities are broken.

Wilmer Leon is the producer/ host of the nationally broadcast call-in talk radio program "Inside the Issues with Wilmer Leon," and a Teaching Associate in the Department of Political Science at Howard University. Go to his Prescription @ Face Book.com He can be reached at www.wilmerleon.com.