Written by Joseph C. Phillips
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Last week I had the honor of participating in a panel discussion on Civil Rights in the Age of Obama sponsored by the Milken Institute. Appearing with me on the panel were Ben Jealous, current President of the NAACP; Wade Henderson, President of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and Myrlie Evers-Williams, Civil Rights Icon and former President of the NAACP. The panel was moderated by Dr. Beverly Tatum, President of Spelman College. I was, as my father used to say, “Steppin’ in some pretty high cotton.”

I can think of no better proof of the victory of the traditional civil rights movement than that these distinguished individuals (and myself) were gathered together under the auspices of the Milken Institute to ponder what to do next. The battles of the civil rights movement so hard fought have been won. To those heroes, on whose shoulders my generation stands I say, “job well-done.” That is not to say that we need not be jealous of our civil rights. It is to say that it is time to shift our focus toward those things that will best guard our victories and secure those blessings for future generations.

Malcolm X described education as the passport to the future, a sentiment that found general agreement among the panelists. All of us seemed to agree that the current public school system was failing our children – not just Black children, but all of our children – and that there was a role for civil rights organizations to play in improving public education. The panel was split, however, on exactly what that role should be. Henderson for example argued for dismantling the state run school system and massive injections of federal dollars and oversight, an approach that I see as gulping down more of the poison that is killing us, while others decried the lack of diversity.

Unfortunately, in spite of all the flying rhetoric there was reluctance to amend the notion of government-run schools and embrace the idea of publicly funded education.

For 40 years we have poured money into government run schools and yet math and reading scores have remained flat. Class size has been reduced and yet achievement gaps persist. If education funded from the top down is not delivering the results we want, perhaps we need to consider funding education from the bottom up – that is empowering the consumers of public education by allowing the public dollars to follow the students. Those of us concerned with civil rights in the age of Obama should be in the forefront of the fight for school choice, fighting for charter schools and vouchers, fighting against the legal challenges to homeschooling and demanding greater autonomy for principals in choosing staff and curriculum. There is nothing partisan about fighting for the health of public education and against the sovereignty of government schools.

My suspicion is that once parents have choice- schools will be integrated. More importantly the schools will be effectively educating our young people, preparing them to be contributing members of our society.

Civil rights in the 21st century must finally and unashamedly admit that there is a moral component to the enterprise. There was much back and forth among the panelists about the disparate impact of this or that policy, but we as a community are being dishonest if we do not recognize that very often disparate outcomes are the result of disparate behavior, difference of

choices and differences in the values one holds and the traditions and institutions one chooses to recognize and support.

We can convene a hundred conferences on education or jobs, but so long as marriage rates are down and illegitimacy is up, so long as we continue to entertain attacks on religious principles in public life, so long as objective notions of right and wrong are looked upon as the province of bigoted unsophisticates we will find ourselves powerless and continually engaged in gum flapping.

Civil rights has always meant the requirement that this nation live up to the “true meaning of her creed” and secure the inalienable rights to life, liberty and private property for all citizens regardless of race. The victories of the modern civil rights movement were achieved because they were built upon this moral terra firma. Until and unless we regain that footing, civil rights organizations will continue to fight for relevance and we will find further victories few and far between.

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