Beating the odds: challenges facing black entrepreneurs

By Bill Curtis

Some would say Booker T. Washington was a fool. Yet his legacy of hard work, thrift, and a step-by-step approach to success lives on at Tuskegee Institute. The National Business League is a living testament to the work of a man too many have called a fool. Booker T. Washington serves as one example of the enterpreneurial spirit of Black America.

Such publications as Inc. Magazine and the Washington Post report the most dismal side of blacks in business. To believe these publications is to believe the black entrepreneur is destined to remain stuck at the bottom of the business ladder. Not so. The Black entrepreneur is in the greatest position to serve the marketplace, improve his own life and the life of his community, and ignite the economy of this country.

Tony Brown is on target as he asserts that the color of freedom is green. He points out that, "we have to do something to shore up our economic institutions, to generate jobs within the community. When we take care of that, the other stuff-the family problems, crime, our political needs - will start taking care of itself."

Comparatively, the conditions which prevented northern European barbarians from developing a civilization is similar to the situation facing black entrepeneurs today. The conditions of crime, social paranola, negative self-image, and deterioration of community relations inhibits the economic development of a people.

Into this arena the Black entrepreneur, like his white counterpart of 500 years ago, attempts to chip a niche in the market, build a business, and thereby improve the political economy of his household, his neighborhood, his city, his country, and the world.

Economic strength is the springboard of political power, not vice versa. After conducting studies on both black and Cuban businesses in the Greater Miami area, Tim Mescon, a University of Miami business school professor said, "The Black leadership sees success not in an entrepreneurial context. It's like their whole development is missing a chapter, the one on achieving equality through their own business development."

Ironically, political progress from the human rights advances of the 1950-1958 period inadvertently derailed leadership from economics to politics, from business enhancement to career advancement. Political tolerance opened the doors of society, and without looking back, Black leadership ran blindly into the street. The grass looked greener on the other side.

Consequently, as the pendulum of political intolerance swung against the political gains of the human rights period, black political leadership was exposed as lacking the economic muscle to defend its political position from attack.

Other great ethnic groups, the disapora of other significant civilizations, serve as living examples of how the black entrepreneur can succeed in the American economy, It is like the saying, "The harder I work, the luckier I get."

In the American economy, self-determination does not begin in the collective, but in the individual. Black entrepreneurs can succeed within this political economy, however, the resolve to succeed must be unshakable.

Booker T. Washington makes the point clear. "I have begun every thing with the idea that I could suceed, and I never had much patience with the multitudes of people who are always ready to explain why one cannot succeed. I have always had a high regard for the man who could tell me how to suceed."

Negative thinking breeds a high regard for an inability to achieve. Inversely, the black entrepreneur embodies the characteristics of America's greatest industrialist. He has faith that the business will fly, that despite the political conditions he can achieve, and that nothing can stop an idea whose time has come.

It is interesting to note that when education was denied to

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Inner Harbor Ford: a success story

In just one short year Inner Harbor Ford has nearly completed a full year of service to the Baltimore area. And in just one short year, Inner Harbor Ford has become Baltimore's premier auto dealership boasting one of the highest customer satisfaction indexes in the nation.

Selling for less has allowed Inner Harbor Ford to sell an abundance of fleets as well as obtaining parts accounts averaging over $300,000, including the city of Baltimore.

The service department boasts of a combined 300 man years experience while the body shop uses state of the art equipment and maintains drive-in claim centers for three major insurance companies.

Ranking second, next to General Motors, the Ford Motor Company is said to be the one American car manufacturer that is sensitive to minority businessmen.

Ford radically recruits minority dealers and meets tri-annually, with organizations, such as Black Ford-Mercury Dealers, a national organization — adhering not only with dealership establishment, but with maintenance as well.

There are problems, cites Mr. Minor. "There are problems uniquely related to black dealers; Ford Motor Company's sensitive and responsive."

The Inner Harbor Ford is one of the total 96 minority Ford dealers in the country. "Ford Motor Company has as many black dealers as the entire General Motors Company," said Mr. Minor.

Working his way up from a car salesman in Washington, D.C., Mr. Minor has earned the respect and credibility of many as a deligient and enthusiastic businessman.

A graduate of Virginia State, Mr. Minor insists he has not forgotten "where he is from."

In this light, the Inner Harbor Ford promises, in addition to "quality service with a smile," to do everything possible in trying to secure financing for those with limited credit history and others with particular financial situations.

Uniquely theirs is the "Ladies Only Service Clinic" — a free workshop at Inner Harbor Ford, offered exclusive for women. There, women are taught preventive maintenance, how not to be taken advantage of, etc.

"Women are a vital entity," said Mr. Minor. And the clinic has been such a success, that there is now a demand to increase its frequency from once to twice a month.

Inner Harbor Ford has "more women in more capacities than any other dealer."

Ms. Shirley Tabb, a graduate of the University of Arkansas in Little Rock, and a former beauty queen, once featured in Ebony as Miss Arkansas State, continues to be Inner Harbor Ford's top sales person, selling a total of 23 cars.

Inner Harbor has a large display of new and used cars, trucks and vans, full service and parts (also open on Saturdays). In addition it offers fleet and lease sales.

Mr. Minor believes that the integrity and reputation of the dealer is the one thing to consider in choosing where to purchase a vehicle.

Finally, any time is a good time to purchase a car said Mr. Minor. Good deals can always be found. "The best time to buy a car, is when you need a car."

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IT'S TIME WE STOPPED LOOKING AT THINGS THIS WAY.

Looking at things in simplistic terms divides people. And when people are divided, so are any hopes of growth. America's people can't afford to let that happen. Neither can America's businesses.

Companies today can't just look at what they can "get" from a community. They also have to look at what they can give. Without that kind of cooperation, there's no such thing as growth.

That's why, at Commercial Credit, we encourage employee community involvement and provide financial assistance for their local projects. Projects like the Park Heights Street Academy, D.C. Youth Orchestra, Cape Cod Y.M.C.A. and J.A. of South Texas. That's also why we established a Disadvantaged Student Scholarship Fund and support Baltimore's Blue Chip Jobs for teens.

Commercial Credit has offices in more than 400 communities across the country. Each of those communities has given us a lot. The way we look at it, they deserve to have something given back.

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