Charlotte's Girl

CLEAN SLATE FOR THE BLACK STATE

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It wasn't so long ago that I allowed my mind to slip into the muddied issue of the black image. The portrayal of Black America is a hot and often debated topic; the consensus usually being that our image is skewed, tainted, and overall, inaccurate. However, past that initial point, which we all seem to find agreeable, opinions are complex, varied, and arguable. With the recent passing of Nelson Mandela—South Africa's first black president and anti-apartheid leader—it seems fitting to spark some dialogue regarding black identity here in the states.

While Mandela was not American and though South Africa's plight was not the same, it was similar. He was still exalted as a great "black" leader and was one of the few prominent civil-rights figures remaining. He overcame great, if not extreme opposition—27 years of imprisonment—and spent the entirety of his life working towards the goal of equality in South Africa. For those of us born later, we missed much of the critique and backlash. We were either not yet alive or not yet alert enough to hear his status discussed as anything other than iconic.

His presence was not lost on us, just as conversation of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., and others are likely sewn into the fabric of history to last the test of time. What does this have to do with Black America today? Well, we seem to be lacking a few things that existed in the past: a concise understanding of our issues and position, an agreed upon standard of excellence, and a deeper respect for those at the forefront of our issues. They all go hand in hand.

A concise understanding of our issues. The diversity of Black America is one that allows us to have such complex and at times, opposing, views of one another. Even the mention of "the black community" is cause for confusion. Our communities are not homogenous. The belief that we are, causes us to attempt to tackle issues through a single lens. Additionally, it makes it difficult to pinpoint and prioritize problems. We are no longer in the grip of the civil rights era fighting for basic rights. And though intense prejudice and outward racism persist in many parts of the country, many of us have been afforded and are aware of all of the many opportunities we have. For so long we have been defined by our struggle. Perhaps it is the case that without a single glaring obstacle to overcome, we have lost all sense of purpose.

An agreed upon standard of excellence. A deeper respect. It's likely never been the case that we seeped perfection through and through. However, the recorded history of our prized leaders and figures—from the realm of entertainment, sports, and politics—showcased a certain standard. They were poised, vocal, and intellectually in tune with our issues. The mouthpieces of the black community outwardly represented a standard. There are plenty of black positive activists and political figures that exist today—not to mention our president, Barack Obama. However, many of our most outspoken and respected figures now seem to derive from the entertainment sphere. With a multitude of problematic messages finding their way to the forefront of our popular culture—profanity, brawls, lack of responsibility, broken families—our standards have become unclear. How are we supposed to attempt to define ourselves if we have not yet concluded what is acceptable?

Collectively, we have contributed to the complexity of our image with the overwhelming and unbalanced uplifting of those who represent only one aspect of our people. Upon defining an issue and coming to a consensus of what we would like the end result to be, we must understand who is equipped to speak on our behalf. Credentials, motives, and credibility are components which must always be examined. We cannot give our respect away to just anybody.

Many of us care about our representation. What do you think it will take to improve it?