

The Education of an American Sage

Thomas Sowell discusses his own rise from poverty and the country's 'degeneration' into 'grievance culture.'

By

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Thomas Sowell is sitting in my chair. He'd driven in to Stanford University from his home 50 miles away, and since he's 86 years old, the least I could do was to let him choose between the two seats in my office. So he parks behind my desk on the lovely chair that swivels, and I face him, hunched and immobile, on the other side—a fitting way to interview one of America's great sages.

This feels like the perfect time to ask Mr. Sowell to ruminate on the things that have mattered most to him. He'd announced, at the end of 2016, that he would give up the newspaper column he'd written for Creators Syndicate for more than 25 years, a retirement that suggested the end of an era. Before that Mr. Sowell, an economist and conservative, had written columns for another news service, [Scripps-Howard](#), but had quit after an editor changed a line about carbon monoxide emissions to read as one about "carbon dioxide." This caused an indignant Mr. Sowell to terminate his contract—perhaps the original source of his fearsome reputation among editors. (When I, as an editor for this page, was handed a Thomas Sowell piece to work on back in 2001, my boss whispered to me: "Careful, it's Sowell. Don't change anything.")

Thomas Sowell was born into poverty in North Carolina, in 1930. At age 9, he moved with his mother to Harlem, in New York, to live with relatives who promised a better life for the boy. There he visited a library for the first time, and though he's not entirely sure, he thinks the first books he borrowed from this "wondrous" institution were "The Story of Doctor Dolittle" and "Alice in Wonderland."

A family friend called Eddie—a boy roughly Mr. Sowell's age—had taken it upon himself to help the callow little Southerner navigate his new metropolitan minefields. "I was assigned to a junior high school in a really very bad part of Harlem, and Eddie told me, 'You don't have to go

there. You can ask to be sent to a different school.’ That’s what he’d done. And then I followed him to Stuyvesant”—a selective high school for smart kids. “He led me. If you take Eddie out of my life, there’s virtually no way I could have followed the same path that I did.”



Having dodged a calamitous education solely on the advice of a worldly child, it isn’t surprising that Mr. Sowell—who went on to earn degrees from Harvard, Columbia and the University of Chicago before teaching at some of the country’s finest universities—has had a lifelong distaste for the “ideologues” who have come to run America’s schools.

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The nomination of Betsy DeVos as education secretary, and the possibility of promoting charter schools nationwide, so energized Mr. Sowell that he “briefly came out of retirement to write two columns in support—because I thought that this is a moment that might not come again in our lifetime, and I mean even the younger people’s lifetime. If we lose it now, we may have lost it forever.”

Mr. Sowell has what he calls “my reservations” about Donald Trump, but he gives the president credit for being “the first Republican who’s made any serious attempt to get the black vote by addressing problems that affect most blacks who are trying to do the right thing—such as education, which is such low-hanging fruit.” Republicans have “no reason whatever to be worried about teachers unions, because the teachers unions aren’t going to vote for them anyway,” he says. “They’re spending millions of dollars trying to get Democrats elected.”

But the good that can be done is obvious to Mr. Sowell. “The most successful schools for educating black kids have been a few charter schools,” he says. “There are literally tens of thousands of kids on waiting lists for charter schools in New York alone. You needed somebody who was going to fight to break through these caps that have been put on the number of charter schools.”

Mr. Sowell has stopped swiveling in my chair, and he looks straight at me to make his next point. “You see, in order to get these reforms, you would have to go against the dogmas not only of educators, but of the American intelligentsia in general,” he says. “The teachers unions complain that charter schools really have skimmed off the cream. Of course that’s nonsense, because people are chosen by lottery. In another sense, there’s a point there, because these are the parents who care about what’s going to happen to their kids. These people are just desperate to get into the charter schools. They don’t want to be raising a bunch of little thugs.”

If a Republican could manage to enact school choice, Mr. Sowell says, “he would have some hope of beginning the process of peeling away black votes from the Democrats. It doesn’t have to be a majority of the black vote. If there’s a narrow race for Congress, and you can reduce the black support for the Democrats from 90% to 80%, that could be the difference.”

How has America changed over Mr. Sowell’s lifetime? “Oh my God,” he responds, “that is truly a depressing subject.” He laments the “huge degeneration” and what he sees as the spread of “the grievance culture to low-income whites—and even to places like Great Britain.”

An idea has taken root “that you’re entitled to certain things, that you don’t necessarily have to earn them,” he says. “There’s a belief that something’s wrong if you don’t have what other people have—that it’s because you’re ‘disadvantaged.’ A teenage dropout mother is told she has a disadvantage. But if you’re going to call the negative consequences of chosen behavior ‘disadvantage,’ the word is corrupt beyond repair and useful only for propaganda purposes.”

Has there been any change for the better? “Oh, yes, yes, yes,” he says. “In fact, for blacks who have education and who have not succumbed to a new lifestyle—the grievances, and the coarseness represented by rap music—it’s gotten tremendously better. What’s disheartening, though, is that when you study ethnic groups around the world, the ones that are lagging behind are those where their leaders always tell the same story: that it’s other people holding you back, and that therefore you need to stand against those other people and resist their culture. But that culture may be the key to success.”

Here Mr. Sowell pivots to 18th-century Scotland and the philosopher David Hume: “Hume urged Scots to learn the English language,” he says. “He didn’t do that because his job was that of an ethnic leader. He did it because he was an intellectual.” Yet it helped bring progress to his homeland. “One of the most miraculous advances of a people occurred in Scotland from the 18th century into the 19th,” Mr. Sowell says. “A wholly disproportionate share of the leading British thinkers was Scottish. I mean Adam Smith in economics, Hume in philosophy, Sir Walter Scott in literature, James Watt in engineering. You can run through the whole list. A people who were really far behind in one century had suddenly come out of nowhere and were on the forefront of human progress.”

Could black Americans one day be like the Scots? “They can be,” says Mr. Sowell, “and for those who haven’t gotten into this corrosive new culture, they’re already doing that. But it’s going to be very hard. Both the media and academia promote the idea that people fall behind because others are holding them back.”

I ask Mr. Sowell to talk about some of the public figures he’s admired: “Oh, Milton Friedman, certainly. He was one of the few people I know who had both genius and common sense.” (Friedman, who died in 2006, was Mr. Sowell’s colleague at the Hoover Institution, where I also work.)

Growing up, Mr. Sowell admired Joe DiMaggio, Joe Louis and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Later, he says, he “realized what tremendous damage FDR had done. But I think two out of three is not bad!”

I press him on the sportsmen, wondering how they came to be the idols of a cerebral economist. He talks with visible awe of DiMaggio. “There’s a famous moment in the World Series—1947—between the Yankees and the Dodgers. The Dodgers are leading. Joe DiMaggio comes up with runners on the base, and he hits a blast, 415 feet to left field. The Dodgers outfielder catches right up against the 415-foot sign. If that had been a home run, that would have put the Yankees ahead.

“DiMaggio by this time is rounding second base. He gives a little kick of the dust and goes on back in. That was the biggest outburst there had been from DiMaggio in his career. It wasn’t that violent a kick, just enough to barely raise a little dust. I still remember that self-control all these years later.”

And Joe Louis? “He was a gentleman, who carried himself in a certain way that inspired respect. I’m not a big fan of the role model thing, but it has its effect.”

Mr. Sowell recalls a time when he was “quite young, maybe 5 years old, down in North Carolina.” One day, a kid told him that he had “some big secret down in his basement that he wanted to show me. I said, ‘What’s down there?’ and he said, ‘Just go down in the basement, you’ll see.’ He had me go down first—which I shouldn’t have done, but I did, and he ran back upstairs, closed the door, and locked me in that pitch-black basement.”

The furious young Tom pushed and kicked at the door, and forced it open. “I think I was angrier than I ever had been—that I’d ever been before or since. He was standing there and I came at him and just hit him as hard as I could. The punch must have landed just right, because he went down and out. He was prone on the ground, limp as a dishrag, and I was going to hit him again. I could have killed him. But something stopped me, a thought in my head.

“‘Joe Louis wouldn’t do that,’ I said to myself.”

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