

Black Americans and Mitt Romney

Written by Dr. Benjamin Chavis
Thursday, 09 February 2012 09:12



Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney's recent statement, "I'm not concerned about the very poor....We have a safety net.... If it needs repair, I'll fix it" has caused once again considerable debate about poverty in America. But for millions of impoverished Black Americans the focus should be on encouraging education, self-empowerment and economic development as a means of getting out of poverty rather than waiting on some non-caring presidential candidate to patch a gaping hole in the so-called poverty-prevention safety net.

In a democracy all citizens should have the right to run for President. Of course qualifications and experience are factors that voters should weigh when making a decision about who to vote for and to support. For over 45 million Black Americans, the 2012 elections are extremely important. We cannot afford to sit on the sidelines and to take the November 2012 elections for granted. I keep emphasizing that it is counterproductive for Black people in the United States to be cynical or non-involved in the national political debate concerning the issues that affect the quality of life in the Black community across the nation.

Mitt Romney's confession did more than expose his seemingly insensitivity toward the poor. It revealed Romney's comfort with a certain percentage of the population that will according to his logic always remain in poverty in need of a safety net. Romney rhetorically joined the likes of Fox News commentator Bill O'Rielly who condescendingly reminded a national television audience that in the Bible it says, "The poor will always be with us." African Americans do not always have to be poor! Again, what Romney said or what O'Rielly said should not come as a shock. Those statements just remind us that if we do not get ourselves up out of poverty, there will be no others that we should depend on to change the situation of poverty that too many continue to face in our communities.

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Noted scholar and author Earl Ofari Hutchinson raised an appropriate question with respect to the absence of Black Americans who have some noticeable role in the Romney presidential campaign staff or support. Hutchinson observed, "The scorecard then reads like this: Gingrich, Santorum, and Paul, all have asked for and gotten endorsements and support from African-Americans. There is no record or evidence that the supposed more moderate Romney has asked for or gotten any black support or even taken a photo-op with some dutiful blacks. The question that will loom even larger as Romney closes in on the GOP nomination is. Where are Romney's blacks?"

Romney's comments on poverty, therefore, were not a mere slip of a politician's tongue during the heat of a tense campaign. He is not in touch with the reality that most Americans have to endure in 2012. And in particular, Romney is so far out of the loop of reality when it comes to Black Americans' state of existence, that it is cause for serious concern. The fact is for Black children and youth the poverty rate is nearly 40% as a direct of the systematic underdevelopment of the African American community during the last 50 years. Too many African Americans live in poverty today at a rate greater than one out of every four persons. Of course our economic and social predicament is not the result of statements by Mitt Romney. The point here is, however, that for the vast majority of Black people in America and throughout the African world, the candidacy of Romney for President raises serious implications about his stated sense of inclusion and of 'caring' and empathy for poor people in general and for poor Black people specifically.

Regardless of who emerges as the Republican nominee, Black Americans have to take a proactive responsibility to ensure the largest voter turnout in American history come this November. To all of the "playa haters" some of whom are White and Black who are trying to seduce Black people into the self-destructive lethargy of not voting, copping out, and non-civic engagement: "We will not be put asleep. We will remain wide awake. We are going to mobilize voter participation in record numbers in the face of voter repression in more than 30 states across the nation."

Please do not underestimate the power and the importance of every vote this year. We have to join with others who share our interests for a better future for ourselves and for all people. The worst form of oppression is self-destruction and the fear of liberation. Mitt Romney has made clear where he stands. Where do you stand? How will you vote?

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