

An Urban Organizer Wants ‘Race off the Table’

‘America is thirsty to reward grace and virtue,’ the Woodson Center’s retiring president says. ‘There’s going to be a revival coming soon.’

By Jason Willick

Oct. 15, 2021 5:17 pm ET



Robert Woodson

ILLUSTRATION: BARBARA KELLEY

Washington

At first glance, Robert Woodson and I seem to have nothing in common. He grew up in a segregated black Philadelphia neighborhood; I was reared in affluent Palo Alto, Calif. I finished college in 2015; at 84, Mr. Woodson is preparing to retire as president of an organization he founded in 1981, before I was born.

The Woodson Center’s objective, he says, is to rejuvenate “indigenous” civil society in impoverished neighborhoods. The group’s signature approach is to look for people in a community whom others “turn to in times of crisis” and “try to

resource them so that they can scale up,” thereby strengthening “informal networks” responding to problems of crime, addiction and family breakdown. His approach is usually described as conservative—a label he accepts, although he plays down politics and ideology in favor of a practical approach.

When we sat down to discuss the lessons of his long career, I was conscious that when it comes to race and poverty, I came from what progressives call a “place of privilege.” Yet I was struck by the way Mr. Woodson’s approach to social problems is universal enough that I could recognize his insights in my own milieu.

When Mr. Woodson was 9, his father, a veteran of World War I’s segregated Harlem Hellfighters, died. When a boy loses his father, “you cleave to the fathers of other boys,” Mr. Woodson says. “Kids tend to look for fathering in other places—if you can’t get it in a concentrated form, you take a little from those around you to compensate for it.” That observation informs the Woodson Center’s efforts to pair fatherless inner-city youngsters with male mentors. It also resonates with my own experience. My father died when I was in elementary school, though I was lucky enough to grow up in a community with enough social capital that no program was needed.

Mr. Woodson has also taken note of a spate of 10 teen suicides, many committed on train tracks, that shook my hometown of Palo Alto between 2009 and 2015. He likens that tragedy to the epidemic of murders in many U.S. cities. “If you devalue your life, you’ll either take your own, or you’ll take someone else’s,” Mr. Woodson says. “But they’re different sides of the same coin.” In both cases, young people “are dying in acts of self-hatred.”

As these examples show, Mr. Woodson doesn’t see the problems of black America through a racial prism. The institutions and traits that make healthy communities are the same for all human beings. “Tell me how ending institutional racism is going to prevent a kid in Silicon Valley from taking his life, or a kid in Appalachia taking drugs, or a kid from shooting somebody in the head,” he says. Mr. Woodson wants to “deracialize race”—to make it an incidental category in social-improvement projects rather than the salient one.

It was highly salient when Mr. Woodson was young. He joined the military at 17, excelled at aptitude tests, and was sent to airborne electronic training school. “So

here I am, Northern kid,” flying after training in New York “to Biloxi, Mississippi—Deep South in ’54, ’55,” he recalls.

In Philadelphia, he says, there had been “certain swimming pools you couldn’t go into, amusement parks.” But the extent of segregation in the South took him by surprise. On the first day, he recalls, he and a white friend from basic training “got in a cab to go in town and have a beer,” forgetting where they were. Once they got outside the gate of the Air Force base, “the cabdriver said, ‘I can take you or him, but not both of you,’” Mr. Woodson recalls. “You didn’t have that kind of stuff in Philly.”

After his last day in the military, a young Mr. Woodson waited at the window of a nearby train station to check his bags for the journey home. He was first in line on the “colored” side of the window. An hour later, he was still waiting as departing white soldiers were served first. Then he was told it was too late to check his bags.

“I was furious, and that happened a lot,” he says. “But the black porters saw my situation” and “seven of them came and each grabbed a bag within three minutes and put it in their living quarters.” That’s an example of “how blacks cooperated with other blacks during segregation, to mitigate the impact,” Mr. Woodson says. “When whites were at their worst,” he says, “we were at our best.”

Back in Pennsylvania, Mr. Woodson earned a math degree at Cheyney State, the oldest black college in the U.S. He expected to work in the military’s aerospace program but found his calling working between classes at a juvenile jail, where young men were held for everything from “gang murder to truancy.” Out of 60, “there were six of these young men I would have adopted if I had the money to do so. I just fell in love with these kids, because they reminded me of myself.”

Mr. Woodson changed course, earned a master’s in social work at Penn, and in the early 1960s led neighborhood protests against segregation in West Chester, Pa., as head of a local human-relations council. “The civil-rights movement had its own tea-party movement,” he says, and Mr. Woodson sided with younger activists who favored civil disobedience. But later he clashed with the local civil-rights leadership who favored busing schoolchildren to achieve racial balance. He says he was told, “ ‘Your position is consistent with the Klan and the John Birch Society,’ and I said, ‘I don’t care.’ ”

Mr. Woodson says he eventually migrated to conservatism not out of an “ideological embrace,” but because conservatives “have strategic interests that are compatible with the poor.” He explains: “If you own a restaurant, you need 100 people who can come in and wait on tables and be trustworthy and reliable.” As an advocate for the poor, “I have 100 people who need jobs to feed their families,” so “you and I have the foundation of a strategically beneficial relationship,” he says. “I don’t care whether you’re racist or not.”

The “crown jewel” of the Woodson Center model was its 1980s partnership with Kimi Gray, an enterprising single mother of five who reformed Washington’s Kenilworth-Parkside public housing project where she lived. Her tenants’ council “imposed rules” and “drove out the drug dealers,” Mr. Woodson says. The community “sent 600 kids from one public-housing project to college over the course of 12 to 15 years.” Ms. Gray’s achievement, and Mr. Woodson’s support, spurred President Reagan to sign a 1988 reform of federal public-housing laws to encourage tenant management.

Another point of pride is Mr. Woodson’s work with the Alliance of Concerned Men, also in Washington, which brokered a lasting truce between warring gangs in meetings at Mr. Woodson’s offices following the 1997 murder of a 12 year-old boy (four gang members were convicted). Mr. Woodson says the 16 combatants, some of whom wore bulletproof vests to his office, “needed an excuse to be peaceful.” Local gang violence sharply declined after the intervention, and other cities have adopted similar strategies to defuse gang escalation.

Mr. Woodson is skeptical of those “left and right of center” who believe “well-educated professionals” should be the architects of social renewal. “You can’t go to any state and tell me which political party’s in power, based upon the state of poor people there,” he says. “I encourage blacks not to become Republicans” but instead to “become swing voters.”

The Woodson Center’s latest project, 1776 Unites, is an answer to the New York Times’s “1619 Project,” Critical Race Theory and other leftist educational approaches. The essays celebrate “the resilience and perseverance of blacks in the past under some of the worst conditions,” Mr. Woodson says. America’s history of racial oppression should be studied not just in a spirit of moral accusation, but to understand black Americans’ “resistance to it, their resilience.”



In an August letter to the National School Boards Association, the center describes its free curriculum as standing “in unqualified opposition to any curricula that depict America as irredeemably racist; teach that the legacies of slavery, racial segregation, and other appalling crimes are insurmountable; or fail to provide examples from history of black achievement against the odds.”

When I ask Mr. Woodson how much race remains a factor in American life today, he responds with a parable. A farmer leads his mule to a stream, “and the stream is 3 feet high, moving at 20 miles an hour.” The farmer “forces the mule in, and they both get swept a mile down the stream.” A year later, the farmer and the mule return. The river has receded to 6 inches. “But the mule refuses to go in, because the mule has good memory but poor judgment.”

Those who focus on systemic racism know their history, Mr. Woodson suggests, but they aren’t accurately judging the present. “Name one job in America that a black person cannot occupy,” he says. “Name one place in America where a black cannot purchase a home.”

At the same time, Mr. Woodson worries that aspects of the pre-civil-rights racial order are returning in different form. When he was growing up, “whenever a black created a crime against another black, it was ignored and minimized, right?” Similarly, “if a white committed a crime against a black, it was ignored. But if a black committed a crime against a white, it was harshly treated.” That, Mr. Woodson says, is “what we fought against” in the civil-rights movement.

Today, black crime victims in majority-black areas also don’t get much attention. And “whenever you hear about an Asian being a victim of a hate crime, you never hear them mention the race of the perpetrator,” he says. “Why? That’s when you know it’s black.”

Similarly, progressives are campaigning to achieve “diversity” at elite high schools and colleges by eliminating standardized tests. Mr. Woodson considers that “more lethal” than old-fashioned bigotry, as it suggests “the presence of blacks means there’s the presence of incompetence and diminished agency.”

Mr. Woodson, who was raised Baptist and says his work with grass-roots leaders deepened his faith, turns to Christianity to explain America’s racial polarization. “You’ve got those who are crucifixionist, who look at life through the lens of crucifixion—slavery, then Jim Crow.” They would “limit America’s definition” by its past sins. “Then you’ve got the people on the right who want to only look at resurrection.” That’s a mistake because “the resurrection has only had relevance when it’s understood against the crucifixion.”

He’s hopeful of redemption even though he says “continued emphasis on race is taking us toward chaos.” He says the 1776 curriculum has been downloaded 21,000 times and alludes to a sermon by Bishop Fulton Sheen (1895-1979) who preached that just as eagles push their young out of the nest and rescue them before they hit the ground, God is deliberately “bringing us to the brink of danger” ahead of our ascent.

“America is thirsty to reward grace and virtue,” Mr. Woodson says. “I believe that there’s going to be a revival coming soon, and that revival is going to come from low-income black neighborhoods, because those neighborhoods are untouched by wokeness.” No one there, he says pointedly, claims that “fathers are not relevant.”

Mr. Woodson’s successor at the center hasn’t been chosen. He says he wants to “let some younger leadership take it over the next 40 years”—that is, until 2061. Mr. Woodson’s hope for the future is that America can “get race off the table, so we can deal with the moral and spiritual free fall that is consuming all races of people,” he says. “The emphasis on race now is acting as a primary barrier for us to address the deeper malaise facing this country.”

Mr. Willick is a Journal editorial page writer.

Appeared in the October 16, 2021, print edition.