

COLUMNS

Neighborhood enterprise can restore hope to the inner city

Eventually the United States will realize there is only one solution to the problems of our inner cities: restoring opportunity and responsibility to the people who live there. Government must stop treating inner-city residents as wards of the Nanny Welfare State.

Such is the message of Robert Woodson, founder and president of the National Center of Neighborhood Enterprise and chairman of the Council for a Black Economic Agenda.

In a recent visit to the *Register*, Woodson was most stirring when he talked about the injustices inflicted on blacks by government taxation and coercion.

For decades the Davis-Bacon Act, for example, has been heralded as landmark legislation to help American "workers." In fact, Woodson reminded us, when debated and passed in the 1930s in the US Congress, the act was called the "anti-nigger bill" because it froze out black workers who were producing better work at lower cost than white workers.

He also decried the situation in the 1990s:

"Today, we have an entire industry that decides how the poor live. The only free market left in the inner city is the drug trade."

Too many poor people spend their lives subsisting on government-provided welfare, attending government day-care centers and schools, and too often landing in government jails.

Even a poor person getting a job faces many hurdles: Minimum wage laws that eliminate entry-level jobs. Social Security taxes that seize 15.3 percent of income (including the so-called "employer portion," really paid by the poor worker). No wonder so many people find that crime pays, and pays tax-free.

But though Woodson insisted that we look at the government's assault on the poor, he didn't dwell on the negative. He said he's looking for positive solutions. The government "spends billions of dollars on social studies that only study failure. We can turn that around. We must ask, How do half the parents still stay together and send their kids through schools?"

John Seiler



He called such sturdy families "community antibodies" that must form the nucleus of any action to restore prosperity and community. That's why his group stresses "neighborhood enterprise."

The government bureaucrats and poverty pimps demand vast new programs. Yet over the past 25 years government has wasted \$2.5 trillion — that's *trillion* — of taxpayers' money for the "war" on poverty, only to make things worse.

Woodson called for the opposite approach: "The people inside are the leaders on the scene. They're fragmented, struggling to do what they do, and are uncon-

cerned about politics. Their condition hasn't improved regardless of who is in the White House and Congress. They're so busy trying to survive. We at the National Center come in and provide a floor of hope.

"The locus of empowerment cannot be the intermediaries. It's got to be the local people. Small, social entrepreneurs are the source of the most solutions. You have to provide them with the training and the seed capital."

Not surprisingly, Woodson supports choice in education, which would allow inner-city families to replace the bad educations their kids get in the public schools with safe schools instilling high standards.

Woodson told of one gang killer who entirely reformed himself after attending Bible classes. Clearly, the secularistic public schools, which by US Supreme Court decree ban even private Bible classes, cannot solve the problems of the inner cities. Violent gang activity will end only with the re-establishment in each young heart of the morality, provided by religion and

family, which stresses self restraint and accountability before God.

Under true school choice, it is likely that, in inner-city areas, many of the new private schools that would spring up would be attached to black Christian churches that now form the centers of real community.

"What works?" asked Woodson about stopping gang violence. His answer: "Faith works — God-centered, changing faith works. People need to be called to themselves. When we rush in with government programs, thinking programs transform people — that's what liberals believe. But you need to rehabilitate the person first."

If you would like to support Woodson or get more information on his work, write to: the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, 1367 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20036. Or call: 202/331-1103.

Mr. Seiler is a *Register* editorial writer.

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