



**THE MAKINGS OF
A RACE MAN
IN BUSINESS**

Steven S. Rogers

On June 1, 2019, the
Boston Globe headline read
“At Harvard Business School,
Diversity Remains Elusive.”¹

The story was about my retirement from HBS, where I taught a course titled “Entrepreneurial Finance” and created a new course titled “Black Business Leaders and Entrepreneurship” in response to the absence of content about Black business-people in almost every course at the school.

I left my alma mater in protest of this failing, frustrated and disappointed with its anti-Black attitudes and practices. Almost one year before retiring, I wrote a letter to Larry Bacow, the president of Harvard University.

I left my alma mater ... frustrated and disappointed with its anti-Black attitudes and practices.

Here are some excerpts: ²

From: Rogers, Steven
Sent: Wednesday, August 15, 2018 12:59 pm
To: Bacow, Lawrence S.

Dear President Bacow,

My name is Steven Rogers and I teach at the business school, where I am a Senior Lecturer. I have a pressing concern, but I'd like to begin with a short story:

On April 2, 1981, I was working as a purchasing agent at the North Carolina-based Consolidated Diesel Company (a \$500 million joint venture between J.I. Case and Cummins Engine Company) when the plant manager told me he'd received a call from the director of the North Green Golf Club. The director informed him that I had lunch at the club, using the company's corporate membership, but in the future I would not be allowed to eat in the dining room because the club had a policy that forbade Black people from eating there. He said that if I wanted to dine at the golf club in the future, I, unlike the company's White employees, would have to eat in the kitchen where the Black workers ate their meals.

Two years later I began my wondrous relationship with Harvard Business School (HBS) as a student ('85), a member of the Visiting Committee (2002), and a faculty member (2012-).

Since arriving at HBS, I have taught entrepreneurial finance in our executive programs and created a new course, titled “Black Business Leaders and Entrepreneurship,” which has enrolled students from 9 of Harvard University’s 14 schools. I created this course after researching and discovering that our curriculum virtually did not include African Americans. Specifically, I learned that we had published approximately 10,000 case studies and only 60 (less than 1%) had a Black protagonist. I further learned that approximately 300 case studies were taught to our first-year students in the required curriculum and only 2 (less than 1%) had a Black protagonist.

It occurred to me that we were not teaching our students the full spectrum of business leaders. Our students were not being exposed to the business and leadership brilliance, as well as challenges, of Black men and women, many of whom had matriculated at HBS.

In an effort to quickly address this exclusion, I met with each of the 10 department course heads, shared my findings, and asked them to include at least one case study with a Black protagonist in their curriculum. I also offered to help them identify three Black protagonist candidates and they could select one whom they could include in a case study.

In response, virtually nothing was done. Therefore, I created my course and wrote 20 new case studies with Black protagonists to address this omission of Black businessmen and women in our curriculum. This was the first course of its kind—one that specifically highlighted Black business leaders—at Harvard or any other business school in the country.

This exclusion of Blacks in our curriculum, as well as Blacks in almost every area of the business school, is reminiscent of the bias against Blacks that I experienced in North Carolina.

While there are no explicit anti-Black policies, the results are practically the same. There is an institutionalized racism at HBS that keeps Blacks out of almost every aspect of the school. It is virtually the same today as it was more than 30 years ago when I was a student. Progress in this regard at HBS has been glacial.

There are no Blacks in any position of leadership, including associate or assistant deans. There are only 2 Black tenured professors and less than 3% of the entire 300-plus member faculty are Black.

President Bacow, there is something terribly wrong at HBS. It desperately needs to change. It has a leadership and intellectual apartheid mindset that promotes Black exclusion and teaches our students, through its lack of racial inclusiveness, that qualified, brilliant, talented, and accomplished Black people are not important, nor are we worthy of fair and equal opportunities.

This school that I dearly love needs to change. True inclusion is not organic; it comes from purposeful leadership because it requires change and disruption. HBS's leadership is doing exactly the opposite: allowing the status quo to reign, which perpetuates the organizational norm of excluding qualified Blacks.

President Bacow, I hope that you agree that we can no longer afford for HBS to operate this way, and that a major overhaul is required if HBS is to truly be the greatest business school in the world.

Steven Rogers

THE ANATOMY OF RACE MEN AND RACE WOMEN

My departure from Harvard Business School was not a surprise to those who knew of my lifelong commitment to uplifting the Black community using the tools of business and, specifically, Black entrepreneurship. When I joined the HBS faculty, I told the dean that one of my objectives was to make HBS a significant and meaningful contributor to the Black community, locally, nationally, and internationally. The school's only impact up to that point was producing the same number of Black graduates that it produced when I was a student 30 years earlier, and most of those graduates went to corporate jobs, versus creating jobs for other Black people as entrepreneurs. This melding of business and uplifting the Black community is a powerful combination with huge potential impact on the latter.

I am proud of my commitment to the Black community, which led to the dean of faculty calling me a "race man." I was pleasantly surprised when she, a young White person, properly used that moniker to describe me because it was a badge of honor in the Black community that dates back to the late 19th century. A "race man" or "race woman" is "a Black man or woman who strongly advocates for the rights of Black people."³

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RACE MEN AND WOMEN IN HISTORY

There have been plenty of race men and women throughout U.S. history and continuing into the present, but there are a few whose impact on my personal and professional life has made me the person I am today.

Historically, a preeminent example of a race woman was Ida B. Wells, who publicly and persistently protested against the lynching of Blacks during the early 1900s.⁴ Her brilliance and fearlessness as a journalist are reasons why Nikole Hannah-Jones of *The New York Times* and creator of the “1619 Project” called Ida her model. She lauded Ida B. Wells as one of the first reporters using empirical data to tell her stories, such as documenting and reporting the number of Black lynchings. The techniques that she introduced almost a century ago are still commonly used by journalists today. These innovative techniques of investigative reporting single-handedly turned lynching into a national concern. Her outstanding work as a newspaper owner and reporter was posthumously recognized in 2020 with a Pulitzer Prize.

My favorite race woman, due to her bravery, selflessness, and brilliance, is Harriet Tubman, a formerly enslaved woman. She escaped slavery and became known as “Moses” because she successfully and miraculously secretly returned to slave states thirteen times and helped other enslaved people escape. John Brown, the famous White abolitionist, called her General Tubman. She also served as a spy and leader of military expeditions in the Union Army during the Civil War, but never received a military salary. The pension that she ultimately received was from her husband’s military service. She later donated land so that a senior citizens home could be built. She died at 91 years old.

In 2016, the U.S. Treasury announced that her face would be put on the \$20 bill, replacing that of President Andrew Jackson, an American president who owned slaves.⁵

Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois was one of the earliest race men in the country and the first Black American to earn a PhD from Harvard in 1895. The Du Bois medals are awarded to people who represent “Black Excellence” and are bestowed at a major ceremony on the Harvard campus every year, handed out by the famous Black scholar Henry Louis “Skip” Gates. Recipients include Colin Kaepernick, the NFL activist; Lonnie Bunch, the founder of the National Museum of African American History and Culture; Sheila Johnson, the co-founder of Black Entertainment Television (BET); and Robert Smith, the private equity investor who donated \$40 million to Morehouse College.

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Dr. Du Bois was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), one of the nation’s earliest and most effective civil rights organizations for Black people. Interestingly, many of the organization’s other founders and leaders were White. They included Mary Ovington, Charles Russell, William Walling, and Moorfield Storey, the NAACP’s first president. It is the spirit and actions of this kind, in support of the Black community by Whites, that I implore White people to engage in today.

One of the most significant contributions of Dr. DuBois was to our current critique of Reconstruction, the twelve-year period following the abolition of slavery. This was the first time in American history when racial equality was practiced and implemented nationally. Prior to his work, many American historians, politicians, and media argued that Reconstruction had failed because of the indolence and ignorance of recently freed Black people, rather than because of the failure of White society to continue its support of Black civil rights and the necessary and radical restructuring of American society.

Reconstruction was the vision of Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party (which today is the Democratic Party) to establish the reintegration of the eleven Confederate states back into the Union and to establish a way to integrate Blacks into society as full citizens with equal rights. Reconstruction provided Blacks the ability to move about as they wanted, to get education, to own land, and to be paid for their work. The passing of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments were among the strongest efforts the U.S. government made to support Blacks in this period, and, as a practical tool, there was the establishment of the Freedman's Bureau to assist Blacks in their transition to freedom.

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During Reconstruction, another group of race men emerged. These were the first Black elected politicians, including Sen. Hiram Revels, Rep. Benjamin Turner, Rep. Robert DeLarge, Rep. Josiah Walls, Rep. Joseph Rainey, and Rep. Robert Elliott to the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. Yet the backlash in the South was almost immediate. As the old elements of the Confederacy regained their positions of economic and political prominence, there rose the open and violent assault on the gains of the freed Black. When federal troops were withdrawn and control returned to White power interests, there was an increase in the use of violence, intimidation, and coercion against Black and White voters to support pro-White politicians and undermine the pro-Black political and economic efforts of Reconstruction.

The systemic result of this terrorist campaign was the abrogation of all the political gains of Black office holders in the South. A prominent example was Wilmington, North Carolina, in the last decade of the 19th century. Unlike the failed coup d'état of the U.S. government on January 6, 2021, the overthrow of the elected government in this city was successful.

After the Civil War ended, Blacks constituted the majority of the population in the city of Wilmington. Under the aegis of Reconstruction, Blacks were able to parlay this into economic and political gains, electing three aldermen, a member to the Board of Audit and Finance, a justice of the peace, deputy clerk of the court, coroners, policemen, and mail carriers. They were professionals including business men and women, clergy, and teachers. They also owned a Black newspaper. In addition, Blacks were skilled craftsmen, including mechanics, carpenters, stevedores, plumbers, and painters.

As the economic, political, and social fortunes of Blacks rose, so too did the resentment of Whites in Wilmington. This resentment was not limited to poor Whites who competed with Blacks in the job market, but included wealthy Whites who saw Black political power voting against changes in the tax laws that would allow affluent Whites to pay less in taxes. Matters came to a head after the depression of 1892 when White Populists and Black Republicans joined forces to form the Fusion Coalition, a successful political alliance with a platform of self-governance, free education, and equal voting rights for Blacks. The Fusion Party swept the statewide elections of 1894 and 1896. The anti-Black response was the forming of the White Supremacy Club that, in 1898, enacted a coup d'état of the duly elected Fusion Party officials, with the killing of 60 to 300 Black citizens and complete destruction of Black businesses and Black homes. Effectively, these events in Wilmington paralleled those across the South and represented the end of almost all of the Black gains seen during and resulting from American Reconstruction.

CONTEMPORARY RACE MEN AND WOMEN

I have been asked numerous times if there is a difference between contemporary race men and women and those in the more distant past. My answer is that there are virtually no differences. As in the past, today's race people are female and male, old and young, formally educated and street smart, Black and White, and poor and rich. Furthermore, the impact of technology on race men and women is as important today as it was yesterday. For example, in terms of technology, the video of the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, was instrumental in the public elevating of the leaders of the Black Lives Matter protests. The same can be said about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. rising to civil rights prominence as a result of the videos shown on television of "Bull"

Connor, the Commissioner of Public Safety in Birmingham, Alabama. On May 3, 1963, he ordered the use of fire hoses and attack dogs on Black protestors, who were peacefully marching to demonstrate racist treatment of Blacks. This attack was shown on the nightly news throughout the country. In today's world of justifiable unrest and protest, the most prominent race women are Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. They are the 2013 founders of Black Lives Matter.

Being a collegiate football player, my athletic role models were great Black athletes who were racially conscious, outspoken, and cared about the Black community. They included the 1968 Olympic track stars Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who famously raised black-gloved clenched fists overhead as the U.S. national anthem played, recognizing them for winning the 200-meter race.⁶ Like Colin Kaepernick today, who took a knee on the football field, they were protesting systematic anti-Black racism in America.⁷

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Another past great “woke” athlete was Muhammad Ali, aka “The Greatest,” the most famous American boxing champion. After winning the light-heavyweight Olympic gold medal at the 1960 games in Rome, the 18-year-old returned home only to receive anti-Black treatment. It has been reported that in anger and disappointment, he threw his medal into the Ohio River.⁸ At the time his name was Cassius Marcellus Clay, which was also his father’s name. It was also the name of a White abolitionist who fought against the enslavement of Black Americans.⁹ Muhammad threw the medal away after being denied service in a restaurant in his Louisville, Kentucky, hometown, because he was Black. *The New York Times* reported that Whites in Louisville comfortably referred to him as that “Olympic champion nigger!”¹⁰

At the height of his success, on June 20, 1967, as a conscientious objector, he refused to be inducted into the U.S. armed forces. He defended his stance against the Vietnam War this way: “I ain’t got no quarrel with them Viet Cong. No Viet Cong ever called me a nigger,” and “My enemy is the White people, not Viet Cong or Chinese or Japanese. You are my oppressor when I want freedom. You are my oppressor when I want justice. You are my oppressor when I want equality.”¹¹

More recent Black athletes who were advocates for the Black community include LeBron James, Magic Johnson, and Naomi Osaka.

Naomi Osaka, who won the 2021 Australian Open, joined protests in Minnesota following George Floyd’s murder, and boycotted the 2020 Western & Southern Open tennis match in protest of the continued genocide of Black people. “Before I am an athlete, I am a Black woman. And as a Black woman, I feel as though there are much more important matters at hand that need immediate attention, rather than watching me play tennis.”¹²

During the 2020 U.S. Open tournament, to bring greater attention to Blacks who had been killed by police, she wore seven different masks, one for each of her matches throughout the 2020 championship held at Arthur Ashe Stadium. After winning her second U.S. Open title, Osaka said that the masks were a way of using her platform to protest this form of injustice and to advocate the message that Black lives matter.¹³ The following list presents the masks Osaka wore, in order, detailing the names of the individuals and their tragedies:

1. Breonna Taylor, killed by police in Louisville, Kentucky, while asleep in her apartment
2. Elijah McClain, killed after being placed in a chokehold by police in Aurora, Colorado
3. Ahmaud Arbery, killed by three White men who had pursued him while he was jogging near Brunswick in Glynn County, Georgia
4. Trayvon Martin, a teenager pursued and killed by a neighborhood watch volunteer in Sanford, Florida
5. George Floyd, killed by a police officer who kept his knee on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds in Minneapolis, Minnesota
6. Philando Castle, killed by a police officer during a traffic stop in St. Paul, Minnesota
7. Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy killed by police in Cleveland, Ohio

In an interview after her match, an ESPN reporter asked Osaka, “You had seven matches, seven masks, seven names. What was the message you wanted to send?” Osaka responded, “Well, what was the message you got? The point is to make people start talking.”

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Magic Johnson, the Hall of Fame basketball player, proved after retirement that he was not only an athlete but also a race man. He created jobs for thousands of Black people through his entrepreneurial ventures that included Magic Johnson Theatres in 4 cities, 13 Magic Johnson sport health clubs, and over 25 Burger King restaurants. But one of his most impactful actions to benefit the Black community occurred in May 2020 when his company provided \$100 million in Payroll Protection Plan (PPP) loans to Black and other minority businesses, to create jobs for Black and other minority employees.¹⁴ This money was needed desperately to assist Black business owners trying to survive during COVID-19.

But at the top of my list of Black athletes who are race men is LeBron James, widely recognized as the “Face of the NBA.” Unlike most other athletes, LeBron has contributed to the Black community throughout his playing career. He has not retired. He has participated in protests and contributed to Black culture in ways similar to those associated with the previously mentioned athletes and more. But not everyone has loved him for his outspoken support of the Black Lives Matter movement and other causes targeting the improvement of the Black community.

One of the significant, community-focused actions that LeBron has taken was his founding of the I Promise School in his hometown of Akron, Ohio. The school opened in 2018 and was partially funded by the LeBron James Family Foundation. As *The New York Times* reported, “The students at the school were identified as the worst performers in the Akron public schools and branded with behavioral problems.”¹⁵ As an incentive to academic performance, he also provides full scholarships to the University of Akron, so far for as many as 2,300 students.

THE MAKINGS OF A RACE MAN

One of the most memorable days in my life, when I knew that advocating for poor Black people was my calling, occurred when I was 11 years old. It was April 4, 1968, after 6 p.m. I was in my bedroom and could hear my mother crying in her bedroom next to mine. She was watching the report on television that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a great man of peace and an icon to the Black community, had been murdered by a gunshot. It happened as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. I believe that every American should visit this motel, which is now a museum.

The museum tour ends outside of the bedroom where Dr. King stayed, still in the condition that he left it. He was playfully admonishing the young Reverend Jesse Jackson for not wearing a tie as they were departing for dinner and a community meeting afterwards. The next day he was scheduled to lead a protest march supporting the city's Black sanitation workers who were on strike.¹⁶ His last words were to his music director, Ben Branch, "Ben, play 'Precious Lord' in the meeting tonight. Play it real pretty."¹⁷ This was one of Dr. King's favorite songs. The "King of Gospel," Reverend Thomas Dorsey, wrote the song while grieving for his wife, Nettie, who died after giving birth to their son. Dr. King never heard Ben Branch play the song, but legendary gospel singer Mahalia Jackson sang "Precious Lord" at Dr. King's funeral.

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On April 4, 2018, the 50th anniversary of Dr. King's death, I taught a class in my Harvard Business School course Black Business Leaders and Entrepreneurship. Here are the notes that I used in my opening lecture that day:

- Echol Cole and Robert Walker, 2 sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee
- Torrential rain downpour
- Took refuge in back of garbage truck
- Malfunctioned electricity, truck compacter turned on
- Cole + Walker crushed
- Memphis Dept. Public Works refused to compensate their families
- This led to 1,300 Black workers to walk off jobs
- They were paid \$0.65/hour, which is \$4.68 today, no overtime pay, no paid sick leave, injuries led to firing
- Created union to represent them
- As we think about great Black business leaders, many, like A. Philip Randolph, were leaders of labor unions

- Next 2 months these sanitation workers went on strike using massive marches to demonstrate their unity to be treated like a human
- In fact, held signs that said "I AM A MAN"
- On April 3, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. flew to Memphis to lead the march supporting the union
- His flight had been delayed by a bomb scare
- But Dr. King refused to quit. He said, in support of sanitation workers, "What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated counter if he does not have enough money to buy a hamburger?"
- That evening, he spoke to a crowd of Black citizens at the Mason Temple, where he said, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!"
- Less than 24 hours later, at 6:01 p.m. on today's date 50 years ago, as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, a single shot was fired, hitting Dr. King in his right cheek, breaking his jaw and severing his spinal cord.

- As he laid on the balcony floor in a pool of blood, Clara Ester, a young Black teenager who ran to Dr. King's side, said King's face looked relaxed—peaceful. There was a hint of a smile on his lips. His eyes were open as if he was looking to heaven!
- 1968 marked the death of the greatest living leader, outside of Jesus, that I have ever known!
- Today, we recognize the 50th anniversary of Dr. King's death!

As I spoke those final words, I could hear sniffles from some of the students in the class, as they, like me, shed tears. My words did not make me cry. I cried from the memory, a half century earlier, of hearing my mother crying achingly when her heart was broken by the murder of Dr. King!

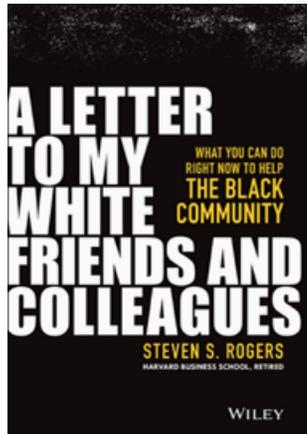
I have chosen the path of business and philanthropy, but I have always, and will always, walk that path as a proud race man. I hope my book, *A Letter to My White Friends and Colleagues*, will help you do the same. 🙏

Adapted from *A Letter to My White Friends and Colleagues*.

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Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven S. Rogers retired from Harvard Business School in 2019 where he was the “MBA Class of 1957 Senior Lecturer” in General Management. He taught Entrepreneurial Finance and his own course, “Black Business Leaders and Entrepreneurship.”

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