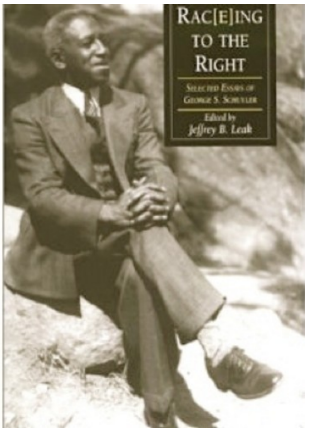
Written by **Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.** on July 2, 2012

Black and Conservative: A Tribute to George Schuyler



George Schuyler was quite possibly among the greatest editorialists that America ever produced.

Born in 1895 in Rhode Island, Schuyler lived in Syracuse, New York, with his family until he was old enough to enlist in the United States Army. Upon the completion of World War I, he returned to civilian life, taking up residence in Harlem, where he remained until his death in 1977. It was during the decade of the 1920s when, from a thirst for intellectual stimulation rather than the appeal of its ideas, Schuyler joined the Socialist Party and began to travel within circles that would subsequently be identified with "the Harlem Renaissance." It was also during this decade that he began establishing for himself quite the reputation as a writer. Throughout his life, in addition to authoring what has been called the first black science fiction novel, *Black No More*, Schuyler wrote as well for a plethora of other publications, black and white, including *American Mercury*, founded and edited by H.L. Mencken, the largest of literary giants of that time. Schuyler was a tireless champion for racial equality and a vehement opponent of communism. From 1922 until 1964, he was the editor for the *Pittsburgh Courier* the largest black newspaper publication in the country. In 1966, Schuyler composed his autobiography, *Black and Conservative* (pictured above, left).

In spite of the distinction that he enjoyed during his time — even the black leftist academic, Cornel West, acknowledges that Schuyler's autobiography is a "minor classic" in "African-American letters" — Schuyler has been all but forgotten. This, though, is a phenomenon that has been brought about by design. Schuyler, you see, is ideologically inconvenient, for with the greatest of ease, and with equally great frequency, he routinely shattered the ideas that have by now become integral components of the zeitgeist.

In other words, Schuyler is as Politically Incorrect a figure as any.

And he is Politically Incorrect because he was a black conservative who routinely took to task those of his contemporaries who our generation has long since deemed unassailable.

Though Schuyler never spared an occasion to decry the injustices to which whites subjected his fellow blacks, he was equally unsparing in his criticism of the immoral conduct of the latter.

Jeffrey B. Leak, editor of *Rac[e]ing to the Right* (pictured above, right), a collection of Schuyler's essays, couldn't be more mistaken in his contention that Schuyler had always longed to be "a race man." He was equally critical of the idiocies and immoralities of blacks and whites precisely because he resoundingly eschewed the sort of blind loyalty — or, perhaps, any loyalty — to race that marks the "race men" with whom we are all too familiar.

More specifically, Schuyler saw himself (as well as others), first and foremost, as an *individual*. He was as unabashed an advocate of individuality as any could be found. His moral vision in turn not only informed his philosophy of race; it is as well inseparable from his politics—the politics of *liberty.*

Schuyler, then, was most certainly not the "reactionary" that Leak and other "progressives" would have us think he was. He was no more a reactionary than any other champion of parliamentarianism or federalism. If Schuyler was reactionary, then all of the nemeses of socialism, communism, and every other species of collectivism are equally reactionary.

The keys to understanding Schuyler's positions are the morality of individuality and the politics of liberty on behalf of which he labored inexhaustibly. It is by virtue of these moral and political-moral commitments that he argued against the Civil Rights Act of 1964, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on July 2, 1964.

One year before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted into law, Schuyler made a compelling case against it. Although he believed that the white majority's "attitude" toward blacks was "morally wrong, nonsensical, unfair, un-Christian and cruelly unjust," federal laws designed to coerce it out of existence are at once impracticable, unnecessary, and unacceptable.

Laws like the Civil Rights Act of '64 we will be able to add to the voluminous body of "largely unenforceable legislation [that] has everywhere been characteristic of political immaturity" generally and the United States in particular. Schuyler writes:

> "New countries have a passion for novelty, and a country like America, which grew out of conquest, immigration, revolution and civil war, is prone to speed social change by law, or try to do so, on the assumption that by such legerdemain it is possible to make people better by *force*." (Emphasis in original.)

However, this belief "has been the cause of much misery and injustice throughout the ages."

In reality, "it takes lots of time to change social mores, especially with regard to such hardy perennials as religion, race and nationality, to say nothing of social classes."

The Civil Rights Act of '64, like all "civil rights" laws, is also unnecessary. Encouraging changes in American race relations have been transpiring since the abolition of slavery, Schuyler insisted. They have been slow in coming, but they have been "marked." Yet "civil rights laws, state or federal, have had little to do with it." On those rare occasions when these laws were capable of being enforced and when they appear to have had some effect it is only because "the majority" didn't resist them. Otherwise, they "generally lain dormant in the law books."

"In short," Schuyler concludes his argument, it is "custom" — not legislative policy — that "has dictated

the pace of compliance."

Finally, the main consideration against the Civil Rights Act of '64 is the threat that it poses to *liberty*

Any federal civil rights law is but "another encroachment by the central government on the federalized structure of our society." Schuyler knew that the liberty that Americans have traditionally prized is not some universal abstraction. Rather, it is a concrete, historic achievement located in the wide diffusion of authority and power of which "the federalized structure of our society" consists. "Armed with this law enacted to improve the lot of a tenth of the population, the way will be open to enslave the rest of the population."

This last line may sound dramatic, but Schuyler explains himself. It is worth quoting him at length:

> Under such a law, the individual everywhere is told what he must do and what he cannot do, regardless of the laws and ordinances of his state or community. This is a blow at the very basis of American society which is founded on state sovereignty and individual liberty and preference. We are fifty separate countries, as it were, joined together for mutual advantage, security, advancement, and protection. It was never intended that we should be bossed by a monarch, elected or born.

Schuyler closes out his case against what was then still the bill that the following year would become the Civil Rights Act of 1964. When the latter, along with like legislation, become predominant, "the United States as a free land will cease to exist."

When we become reacquainted with Schuyler's views, it becomes almost axiomatic that it was by design that he has been flushed down the memory hole.

Related Articles:

A Forgotten Black Conservative: Another Look at George S. Schuyler

A Forgotten Black Conservative: A Closer Look at George S. Schuyler