Shelby Steele, English professor, has written little significant literary scholarship. He is nevertheless known for his book *The Content of Our Character*, in which he castigates blacks for underperforming, harboring low self-esteem, and guilt-tripping whites. According to the book’s front cover, Steele presents “A New Vision of Race in America.”

Although Carter and Kennedy have each defended Steele and relied upon his work, Steele’s rhetoric of individualism goes significantly beyond their own. Steele proclaims, for instance, that “the individual is the seat of all energy, creativity, motivation, and power.” African American cultural affinity is, for Steele, a “bondage to collectivism at the expense of individual autonomy.” Steele’s alternative to this bondage, offered with no mitigating irony, is “an Adam Smith vision of culture” in which individuals are freed from the fetters of group identity. Yet the affinities Steele calls limiting are perceived differently by others. Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison has remarked, for instance, that “my world did not shrink because I was a black female writer. It just got bigger.”¹

Steele, far from Morrison, is nearer James Joyce’s character Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Under Joyce’s gently ironic gaze Dedalus, like Steele, champions the idea that culture might emerge from the individual soul’s presumably spacious crucible. Stephen’s audacious goal is “to forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race.” However, even as Dedalus here proclaims his uncompromising independence and untetheredness, he lets slip that “Mother is putting my new second-hand clothes in order.”²

James Joyce’s ironic awareness of the (perhaps regrettable) limits of heroic individualism is entirely absent in Shelby Steele’s earnest pursuit of
an “Adam Smith” model of culture and an America that is “passionately raceless.” Steele’s ideal people might well resemble what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has called “bodiless vapor trails of sentience” such as might appear on a Star Trek episode. Steele’s vision of a bloodless ethnic cleansing proved, in the end, too much even for Tough Stephen Carter. Carter’s Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby included “a dissenting view about dissenting views” specifically to distance himself from Steele. Carter embraced “racial solidarity” as an opportunity rather than a curse: “It does not strike me as either plausible or desirable for intellectuals to say, in effect, ‘We put behind us all that we are. We have no interest in our backgrounds, in our communities and cultures that gave us birth.’ Besides, to put the matter bluntly, our people need us.”

Again, Steele wishes to free African American individuals from what he tendentiously calls “the tyranny of wartime collectivism in which they must think of themselves as victims in order to identify with their race.” Yet Tough Love lawyer Randall Kennedy apparently rejects Steele’s assumption that group identity is always victimology. Kennedy characterizes society’s major problems as collective difficulties and appropriates Steele’s militaristic vocabulary for benign ends. Kennedy urges that poverty “just like war constitutes a collective challenge.”

For Stephen Dedalus and Shelby Steele, by contrast, the culture necessarily tyrannizes the intellectual. The young Dedalus proclaims, “My art will proceed from a free and noble source. It is too troublesome for me to adopt the manners of these slaves. I refuse to be terrorized into stupidity.” Steele echoes, “Each race has its politics and its party line that impose a certain totalitarianism over the maverick thoughts of individuals.” Whereas Joyce’s authorial voice ironically and sympathetically undermines Stephen Dedalus’s pretensions, Shelby Steele’s view appears entirely in earnest. “Every jackass going the roads thinks he has ideas,” comments young Dedalus’s activist school friend in Joyce’s book. Further discussion of Shelby Steele’s cultural vision would be uninteresting and, at least since James Joyce, superfluous.

What remains interesting is the quiet audacity of Steele’s project. When Steele’s book offers the content of our character, we should not underestimate his descriptive ambitions. Steele presents his vision as fact, not a jackass idea. Steele assures us that while ideas generally come a dime a dozen, he has discovered the right fit of ideas and reality. How? Steele credits his wife’s “specialized knowledge” as a clinical psychologist. With his wife’s science, Steele is able to distinguish mere “hyperbolic correlatives” of oppression
from “actual oppressive events.” With his wife’s science, Steele can see that in reality the civil rights movement is behind the times, like a person wearing a coat in the spring because she remembers being cold in the winter. With his wife’s science, Steele parleys a personal schoolyard humiliation from his childhood into an anguished and universal black antiself (a solemn term of art that Steele italicizes in his own text). Steele summarizes the wisdom of his wife’s science with this stern and opaque aphorism: “Denial and recomposition always deliver illusion and distortion.” Dr. Spock has spoken.

Steele’s indebtedness to his wife’s scientific expertise and acknowledgment that without her help his ideas would have no fit with reality both increase the importance of an otherwise utterly, utterly irrelevant fact: Steele’s wife is white. This is of central importance given Steele’s own statement that she “helped immensely” in his search for “the human universals that explain the racial specifics.” Steele’s scientific diagnosis of the objective neuroses of African America is underpinned by his wife’s specialized knowledge of psychology. That is the way Steele chooses to validate his wife’s influence on his work, whereas there are other ways he might have done so. Steele, however, makes no claim that his wife’s authority is based on any affinity with African American culture. Steele’s wife’s influence is, declaredly, based on her supposedly neutral scientific knowledge. Steele does not see the irony, in this context, of calling such knowledge “specialized.” Steele is thus behind in his own literary studies, for it is nearly twenty years since Edward Said’s Orientalism showed up the dangers of scientific-anthropological forays into alien cultures. Steele nevertheless immobilizes Negroes beneath an outsider’s “specialized” microscope, then presents his vision as a vital corrective to the prattlings of deluded civil rights campaigners. And in what is surely his most ironic claim, Shelby Steele, the ferocious uberindividualist and resident of a pleasant California suburb, accuses these sweaty campaigners of pursuing “escapist racial policy.”