



The Arrival of the Thrivals

By Nat Irvin II

Futurist thinker and professor Nat Irvin II writes about an emerging generation of blacks dictating a new future for themselves, free from the history of victimization and oppression.

A new and powerful force is beginning to emerge from within the black community and is in the process of changing forever the future of blacks in the United States and around the world. The world is witnessing the arrival of a new urban tribe that I call the *thrivals*.

They are the first generation of blacks who will aggressively compete in the battle to shape the images, ideas, and the future of global culture, business and commerce, science and technology, education, politics, the environment, the arts, and the role of nongovernmental organizations.

Thrivals are critical thinkers, technically adept, worldly, sophisticated, entrepreneurially driven, highly competitive; they are able to see the world through a global lens unfiltered by their own nationality, ethnicity, or culture. They believe international travel to be an essential part of one's basic human education. They are often bilingual—at the least. And when it comes to a test—any test—they are not about to complain. What they want is simply to ace the test.

For thrivals, the world is theirs for the taking and they will not be denied. Instead of asking why, they ask why not? Quite simply, they view the world differently from their predecessors and many of their contemporaries, both white and black, and say quite emphatically, "I am not going to let you keep me from seeing what I see, just because you can't see it."

For thrivals, there are no limits. And for the world's black community, they have arrived not a minute too soon. With problems such as far too many black males caught up in the U.S. criminal-justice system, the persistence of educational and earn-

ings gaps between blacks and whites, and AIDS ravaging black communities worldwide, thrivals are an answer to generations of prayers.

What Drives the Thrivals

Thrivals are the manifestation of a profound but subtle shift in awareness within the American black community and blacks worldwide: a shift from the consciousness of *survival* to that of *thrival*. For blacks, *thrival* represents a transformation of the soul, a transition from seeing oneself and one's community as being the victims of history and oppression. Thrivals have moved from living in a survival mode, fighting for basic human rights, to embracing a new worldview—a renaissance where succeeding generations, through imagination, self-determination, leadership, and legacy, see themselves as forces capable of *shaping* the future rather than being *shaped* by the forces of the future.

Among the forces driving the emergence of this new global tribe are:

- Dramatic growth in the eco-



thri•vals \ 'thri -velz \ n. pl.

The post-struggle generation of Africans and African Americans, characterized by a keen awareness of and appreciation for multiculturalism, globalization, and change. Drawing on strengths derived from historical victimization and oppression, they actively participate in global economics and politics and are a strong influence on social change. Individuals are typically competitive, critical, savvy, and educated, and have an outlook that is international and multicultural.

conomic clout of American blacks.

- Continued increases in black educational achievement.
- Extraordinary escalation in the diversity of America, including within the black community itself.
- A decline in the significance of race and continued improvements in race relations in America.
- An overall decline of white majorities throughout Europe as a result of unprecedented changes in worldwide patterns of immigration between developing countries and developed metropolises.
- An explosion in the number of democratic nations around the world.
- The steady growth of urban areas worldwide resulting in a number of megacities.
- Growth and expansion of multinational corporations and affiliates. More than 50,000 corporations with nearly half a million affiliates have emerged as a result of governments deregulating their economies, privatization of state-owned enterprises, liberalized financial markets, and trade.
- Increased international study

among blacks worldwide.

- The global influence of the hip-hop culture phenomenon.

Economic Clout

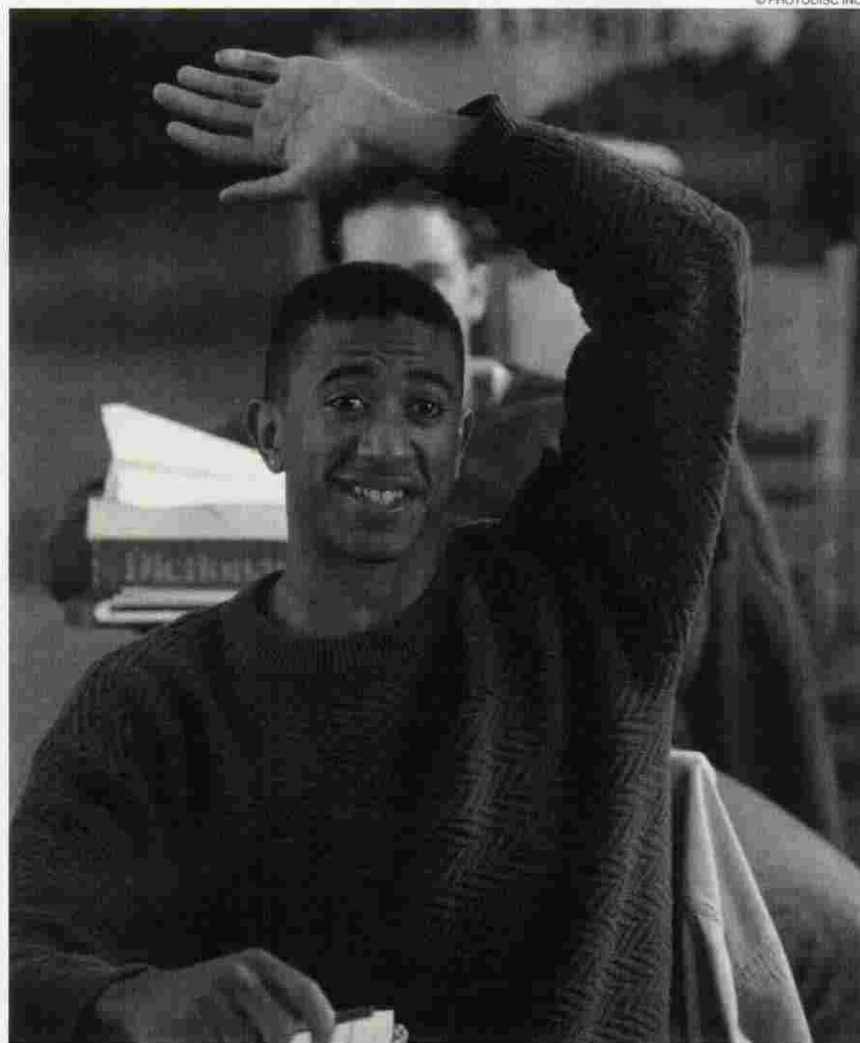
Thirteen percent of Americans identify themselves as black or African American, a total of 34.7 million people, making blacks the second largest minority group in the United States, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. From 2015 on, more blacks will be added to the total population annually than non-Hispanic whites. By 2050, the black population is projected to reach 61 million, an increase of 83%.

As population numbers increase, so too will economic strength. Black buying power is expected to increase by some 34% from \$688 billion in 2003 to \$921 billion in 2008, according to the Selig Center for Economic Growth at the University of Georgia. In 1998, African-American buying power alone was five times larger than the value of U.S. exports to the European Union. The Selig Center estimates that buying power for minorities (African Americans,

Asians, and Native Americans) in 2008 will be more than triple the 1990 level, exceeding \$1.5 trillion (a gain of \$1.1 trillion or 231%). The combined buying power of these groups will account for 14.3% of total U.S. buying power in 2008, and together will grow much faster than the white market. And as buying power strengthens, poverty continues to lessen its grip. The poverty rate for African Americans was 22.1% in 2000, according to the Census Bureau, the lowest measured since 1959.

But it is not just in buying power where economic growth is occurring. According to the Kauffman Foundation, black men between the ages of 25 and 35 with some graduate school education start more businesses than any other group in the country. In 2002, black women were owners of some 365,110 businesses, part of a larger trend where in 2002 women of color started businesses at a faster rate than for other women and all businesses, according to the Center for Women's Business Research.

Economic growth and buying power are not limited to the United



Education is essential to establishing the thrivals' worldview, understanding the past, and conquering the future.

States, nor is this growth being tapped to its fullest potential. According to the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising, Britain's minority communities have some £32 billion of disposable income that companies are failing to attract. In London alone, the figure is probably nearer £15 billion, says Chris Mullard of Focus Consultancy, a business consultant studying minority markets.

Educational Achievement

As thrivals establish and strengthen their economic base and watch it grow by leaps and bounds, they continue to be aware of the importance of education and its place in the transition from mere survival to true thrivalism. In the United States and

abroad, educational accomplishments are being made at all levels. At the same time, an awareness of the importance of an international outlook continues to expand.

The high-school completion rate for African Americans increased from 68% to 76% over the past 20 years. Between 1980 and 2000, the percentage of African Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 attending two- and four-year colleges rose to 37% for black men and 43.9% for black women. From 1990 to 2000, the share of blacks in the 24- to 29-year-old group with college degrees rose from 13.4% to 17.5%, according to the American Council on Education.

British residents of African origin have attained the highest level of education of any ethnic group in the

United Kingdom, including whites and Asians, according to the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. U.S. Census Bureau figures from 1990 also show that African-born residents of the United States achieved levels of educational attainment greater than all foreign-born residents of the United States who have emigrated from other continents. The *Journal* reports that more than 57% of all African-born immigrants residing in the United States over the age of 25 were college graduates.

Thrivals believe in seeing the world as it is, not as it is told to them. As a result, education beyond the local toward an expanded worldview is vitally important to achieving that goal. Thrivals are world travelers, likely to have traveled to all the world's important centers of commerce and communication on every continent.

"Travel beyond one's own borders is an essential part of one's education," says 21-year-old Davonda Burton of Virginia, who has traveled extensively to West Africa. "When it comes to war and even charitable acts, I find myself trying to listen to the other side, trying to understand why people do what they do. Suicide bombers? Why would somebody do that? I am not satisfied with Americans who are so quick to dismiss others as being wrong. That is why I must travel out of the United States. I want to see why people think like they think."

Over the past five years, the number of U.S. students who studied abroad for academic credit has increased by 55%, according to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. Historically black colleges and universities are also contributing to the increase in international study, including Florida A&M University, which has recently established an international program and is part of a 14-member college consortium encouraging more students and faculty to travel abroad. Dillard University, Hampton University, Winston-Salem State University, Kentucky State University, and Bethune-Cookman College have similar programs.

As a result of the sea change in world demographics, barriers of race and ethnicity will not limit thrivals.

Indeed, thrivals are the first generation of blacks of the future who will have a *legitimate* chance to compete for the best opportunities on the basis of their individual merit, skill, and preparedness. And they know it.

Describing the Thrivals

Think of the thrivals as the group who sits out on the cusp of a tsunami, the leading edge of a global wave of multiculturalism. The essential cultural and economic base of the thrival phenomenon is in the United States, and its values are being transmitted and shared through four major venues: the electronic mass media, hip-hop culture, the Web, and international study and travel.

Some may see thrivals as being the postmodern future of the Talented Tenth espoused by W.E.B. DuBois a hundred years ago. These were the blacks who were considered the best and the brightest of the black population, whose responsibility was to emphasize the necessity for higher education among the masses in order to achieve political and civil equality. In some ways, thrivals are not so much the best and the brightest—I believe that is too narrow a description. Instead, thrivals are people who have both the ability and the courage to take charge of their own futures and not accept what is handed to them.

For DuBois, black Americans struggled with the dilemma of *twoness*. Being American and being black, they had “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” Unlike those of DuBois’s generation wrestling with twoness, thrivals have resolved the dilemma to create a new archetype: They see themselves in the context of a global identity, not just in terms of a single nationality struggling between their American identity and their African diaspora roots. Instead, they use their respective bases of ethnic and cultural identity as a base of a pyramid, the top of which becomes something global in its cultural, ethnic identity and understanding.

It would be a mistake, however, to describe thrivals as somehow being middle class, upper class, or elite, or even to use the distinction of economic class as a marker. Thrivals represent something much more, indeed a large and growing movement among various black peoples that transcends class. It is a global movement where blacks of all ages—worldwide—are primarily gathering in the world’s large urban clusters near schools and colleges and centers of learning and commerce, in response to greater economic and social opportunities.

Manifestly international and urban in their geographical makeup, thrivals could just as easily call home cities like Kingston, São Paulo, Berlin, Houston, Kigali, London, and Rio de Janeiro as Richmond, Virginia; Winston-Salem, North Carolina; or Camden, New Jersey.

Their ideas of race, ethnicity, and culture are much broader and more nuanced than those of any generation in history, and they are much more likely to have friends and family from a wide range of ethnic and social groups, including multiracials.

They can be found throughout

Europe, having emigrated from places like the British West Indies, Algeria, Senegal, Morocco, Tunisia, Ghana, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, and Somalia. They are part of what political scientist James Kurth describes as the “post-imperial immigration” pattern that has been under way for five decades, where the former colonial peoples migrate into the European metropolis. Tanzania, Ghana, Senegal, the Ivory Coast, Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Africa are among the countries that have seen the greatest increase in emigrants.

Thrival Values

Thrivals are loosely bound by a common set of ideas, cultural symbols, and heritage, including a single powerful meme: the *struggle*, having common ancestors who have struggled to overcome oppression. Indeed, thrivals are the first of future generations—the postmodern children—to emerge from the grips of the struggle, whether that be overcoming the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, segregation, and legal disenfranchisement in Amer-

My Daughter the Thrival

A black mother describes her daughter:

“She is fluent in German, and the friends she hangs out with and is closest to would make a life poster of ‘multiculturalism’: Asians, Pakistanis, Native Americans, whites.

“Her interests range from computers and anything at all technologically advanced to extreme sports to forensic pathology/biomedical engineering and pre-law to foreign travel. She’s starting an all-girls extreme snowboarding club at Michigan State University called ‘Board Broads’ and she is the only African American in the sport.

“She plans to study abroad in Germany next spring. She is not into the dating scene and has

never been hung up on boys. Her thing is more the group ‘tribe’ type gatherings. Instead of going on one-on-one dates, her multicultural crew gets together in ‘tribal gatherings’ over food and deep conversation about race, life, and music.

“I’ve been thinking about my daughter’s ways for a while and the new thinking of young people. Just watching her and her peers interact is an excellent case study waiting to happen. It’s a different world, and they do see the world in a totally unique way and respond to it accordingly. It’s extraordinary.

“You’ll find she’s a wonderful, amazing, compassionate, and brilliant girl.”

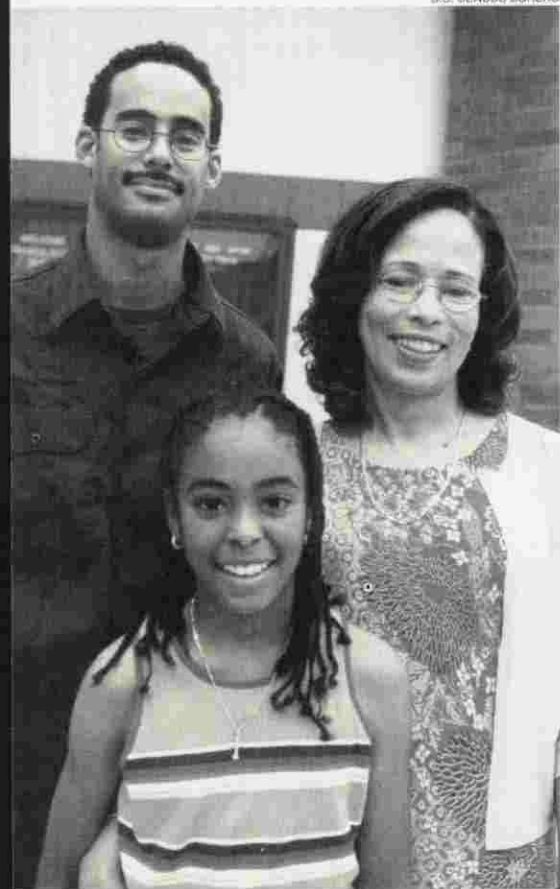
—reported by Nat Irvin II

ica, or colonialism, imperialism, and corrupt government officials elsewhere. But rather than a hindrance, thrivals see the struggle as a gift from the past, a kind of cold fusion of abounding energy that aids them in their drive to succeed in the future.

They are the first of future waves of generations who are able to contextualize the struggle of their ancestors in perspective with the future by refusing to be the victim. As 21-year-old Nigerian student Yinka Oyelaren says, "Nothing is going to stop me from going for what I want." North Carolinian Adrienne Barnes echoes his statement, saying, "To see myself as a victim would be giving in. I don't think that you can handle things well that way. I don't want to be stuck in that way. You expect people to do things for you instead of being responsible for what happens to you. I am not doing that."

Not only do thrivals share the

U.S. CENSUS BUREAU



Families that recognize the importance of both the past and the future are one of the sources of thival strength.

struggle as a common historical bond, they also embrace a common set of universal principles they believe are the best ideas for economic and political development in the future. They share such Jeffersonian ideas as the belief in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They believe in capitalism, the free market, and the due process of law that supports commerce, the rights of women, universal access to public education, free speech, and freedom of the press. They see science and technology as the engine of social growth. In other words, thrivals are committed to the principles of an American style of liberal democracy where the market, the rule of law, and a commitment to improving the lives of others regulate and influence commerce.



The multicultural and international style of singer Cree Summer appeals to the thrivals' sensibility: an awareness of world culture and a fusion of styles that speak to the past and the future.

Thrival Culture

A thival reading list may include Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, George Orwell, Richard Wright, bell hooks, Guadeloupean novelist Gisele Pineau, Patrick Chamoiseau, or Caryl Phillips. Favorite titles range widely, including *Harry Potter*, *The Clash of Civilizations* by Samuel Huntington, *Middle Passage* by Charles Johnson, *The Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela, *Erasure* by Percival Everett, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*.

Thrivals' musical tastes are equally global and wide-ranging, from reggae legend Bob Marley to New Age artist Enya to gospel musician Donnie McClurkin. Artists who combine jazz, R&B, rock, and other styles, including Erykah Badu, Lenny Kravitz, Lauryn Hill, Goapele Mohlabane, Seal, and Cree Summer, will also get a thival's attention.

And while thrivals may celebrate the power of the hip-hop movement, they do not embrace hip-hop culture blindly. They see the so-called bling-bling lifestyle as shallow, crass, and excessive, a celebration of material wealth that comes at the expense of

the global image of blacks while degrading black women and children. They have serious reservations about how the global mass media portray black women and how these often degrading images negatively impact the perceptions of blacks worldwide, both now and in the future.

"I find it hard to argue against issues of racism when a lot of videos reinforce the stereotypes of black men and women," says Samuel Imende, a 21-year-old Kenyan. "I find myself trying to address the issues behind the lyrics, and why they promote violence. I try to put it in context of the struggle. I try to divert it to other artists who are less popular who have purer messages." As 21-year-old Benin native Omolola Soumonni says, "Hip-hop is a very strong means to expressing your views, even to people you would not think are listening. Some of the messages are positive but some are just selling records and don't make any sense."

Thrivals are fans of film directors Spike Lee, Martin Scorsese, Francis

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Ignoracism

Ignoracism is the feigned indifference to the reality of race and its continuing impact on the social fabric of society.

Unlike racism, which holds that one group is genetically and socially superior to another and upon which many people base their social, political, and economic decisions, ignoracism begins with the principle that all people are genetically created equal. However, ignoracism also holds that social differences between groups *may* cause people to make conscious and unconscious decisions to limit interacting with members of other racial and ethnic groups based on their race.

Ignoracism allows people to discriminate in how they live their lives, such as in choosing what neighborhood to live in, where they will shop, with whom they will socialize, whom they will marry, where they will worship, or to otherwise bring persons within the closest proximity of relationships.

For example, whites who would not regard themselves as holding racist views may be quite willing to live their lives in such a way that they essentially limit the ethnic and cultural variety of peoples they interact with to people who look and behave as they do and who share the same

basic values and beliefs.

Within the workplace, ignoracism is much more prevalent than racism. Even though most people no longer find it acceptable or feasible to hold or act on racist views, either publicly or privately, they still hold on to preferences. And because all groups—including ethnic minorities—prefer to interact with members of the same group, a sort of stand-off develops in the social marketplace.

Ignoracism allows one to stand one notch above the degrading plank of racial hostility and superiority with some measure of self-dignity, safe in the knowledge that one has not been unfair to someone else on the basis of ethnicity. However, anyone who participates in such behavior faces the legal and, more importantly, the personal crisis that comes with knowing that he or she has violated a personal tenet of basic human growth and decency.

Challenging our tendencies toward ignoracism is mostly a personal struggle. Fighting against our own tendencies requires introspection and self-examination, followed by willingness to move beyond our comfort spaces and challenging and encouraging others within our social groups to do the same.

—Nat Irvin II

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Ford Coppola, the Coen brothers, John Singleton, Stephen Spielberg, Federico Fellini, and Jean-Luc Godard, among others. They love media that mix cultures and help open eyes to the world of different cultures, including films like those by documentary filmmaker Regge Life, who produced and directed *Struggle and Success*, a story of being black in Japan. When asked about television, thrivals commonly say that they don't watch it, but when they do, they tune in to the Discovery Channel, History Channel, Animal Planet,

CNN, BBC, and other news channels. On the Internet, they visit places like *Africana.com*, *BlackVoices.com*, *BlackPlanet.com*, and similar places for community information.

Thrivals are very careful about the people they select as their heroes. In addition to their parents, family members, and other close friends, their heroes include Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., the Dalai Lama—and even Nigerian jazz-artist and activist Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. Thrivals believe that world leaders should exemplify

the highest of ethical standards, regardless of who they are. Thrivals are quick to point out local heroes for inspiration and role models. For example, Omolola Soumonni cites Koubourat Ossen, a woman who grew up in the poorest part of Nigeria but who nevertheless pursued her studies to become a doctor, later earned an MBA, and became the minister of health in her country.

Imende cites his parents, Thomas and Rebecca, as heroes. Raised in villages in Uganda and Kenya, the couple met abroad and has since dedicated their lives to the service of others. "They took their hearts and committed their lives to this work," says Samuel. "They don't get hung up on a lot of the socioeconomic or material issues that I deal with. Their vision is on the important things of life."

Thrivals are very specific and intentional in naming their progeny. Look for them to name their children in honor of a specific ancestor who was an early visionary or someone who worked hard making it possible for others to survive. Soumonni, for example, believes that names definitely should have meaning, and she is considering a name such as "Oluwatimileyin" ("God is pushing me from behind") or "Mayowa" ("bring me joy"). Tsungi Hungwe, 22, born in Zimbabwe, likes the name "Norudo" ("love").

Thrivals are also very specific about their selection of friends. "I like people who have opened minds and good spirit," says Adrienne Barnes. "I don't like people who have filthy mouths. I like people who can have a good time and who want to have direction in their lives."

"I am a serious person and I am interested in people that are also serious-minded," says Illinois native Charles Joseph. "I don't like negative people—people smoking, wasting time doing drugs—people that don't do anything."

Even with their optimism about the future, they are not naïve when it comes to race and its role in the future. As Joseph says, "Race will play a factor even when we get ready to go to Mars." But that will not stop the thrivals whose mantra is simply a commitment to their ancestors to



As thrivals travel the world, they experience different cultures and attitudes. In the process they expand their horizons and increase their awareness of the global community.

carry on, to live in a positive manner, and to make sure that the sacrifices of others were not done in vain.

What Thrivals Bring to the Future

The arrival of the thrivals will pose a major challenge to the status quo within the black community as more members of this new global tribe begin to establish their identities in the social, political, economic, technological, and environmental arenas of the future. For example, thrivals may be ambivalent about such programs as affirmative action, which is seen by many American blacks as being essential to social and economic success in the future. Thrivals may choose to vote for or run as independent candidates, drawing from a base of support that is more appealing to a multiplicity of racial and ethnic groups, and in the process shun the Democratic Party, seen by many American blacks as the party more closely reflecting their values.

In education, thrivals will stress greater preparation and the development of fundamental skills in math, reading, and writing. As they become parents, they will lead the

global debate about black images the world over and will help spur a recreation of a much healthier, prosperous, and a more values-centered black community. They will do this by appealing to successful examples of local heroes who, in the face of great odds, were able to overcome significant challenges to become leaders in their field. With a worldwide registry of contacts, they will be able to stand for public office and will be leaders in the development of some of the world's nongovernmental organizations, pushing for economic and social reform to the underdeveloped countries. But not only will thrivals influence the future of American public policy, they will also play a key role in shaping global politics, advocating the greater integration of developing-world nations into the global economy.

Thrivals believe in social justice and equal rights and will be in a position to express support for such global initiatives as the wars on AIDS, hunger, and malnutrition, as well as for environmental regulations and new trade agreements with developing countries. Indeed, they will push for greater environmental

safeguards for developing countries. Because of their technical experience, they will seek greater use of biotechnology to help the countries of the world fight poverty and disease. They will actively support the United Nations and support the need for greater interdependence among nations.

And by 2020, the fifth century of the American black experience, thrivals will have had a significant influence on American public policy, responsible in part for the election of the first black president of the United States of America—Sheniqua Nakada Herrera Kenyatta Hiawatha Jones. □



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