

Race in America—Through a Glass, Darkly

By Norman Hill

The following essay is a rather discursive look at various aspects of the race question in America. I purposely chose this form because no discussion on race and race relations can honestly avoid the seemingly tangential factors and issues that are all part of the mix that helps bring our society and the multifaceted race debate into better focus. I am sure that the poll results, when taken in total, will also paint an impressionistic view of complex issues, and will be no less edifying for doing so.

It's been some half a century since Swedish scholar Gunnar Myrdal, in his groundbreaking study *An American Dilemma*, concluded that America was plagued by the profound paradox of being putatively committed to the values of liberty, justice and equality while at the same time subjecting its black citizens to injustice and inequality. In 1968, the Kerner Commission, convened by President Johnson to root out the causes of the rioting that seared black neighborhoods in Detroit, Newark and other cities the summer before, reported that America had become a racially divided, separate and unequal society—in a sense, two nations, black and white. And a century ago this year the Supreme Court in *Plessey vs. Ferguson* codified the doctrine of “separate but equal,” the juridical mooring for decades of Jim Crow segregation.

I adduce these signposts of America's race question (or, as some might have it, “problem”) because today, on the eve of a new millennium, many believe race relations or racial polarization in this country are spiraling to new lows. Social analysts maintain that what Myrdal called a “problem in the American heart,” the inner struggle to reconcile the contradictory impulses of righteousness and racism, remains an intractable dynamic of our society. There is evidence to suggest that in many ways black and white America are two solitudes, unable to communicate effectively, talking past each other in a language whose common words are no longer comprehensible to the other. The image of inner-city black ghettos, with their deteriorating infrastructure and inferior schools, rimmed by all-white suburbs often demarcated by private security barriers, evokes an apartheid blatantly avowing the notion, “separate but *unequal*.”

Indeed, if we look at some recent developments through the prism of race, they diffract into two, often conflicting interpretations of the same realities engendering divergent emotions, attitudes and psychologies. Whites, never consciously cognizant of the privileges and dispensations afforded them by their color, could not comprehend the O.J. Simpson acquittal, while many blacks, understandably mistrustful of an all-too-often brutal police force (e.g., Rodney King), re-emphasized in the racist vitriol of the Fuhrman tapes, found the entrapment defense plausible enough to cast a shadow of doubt on his guilt. Last year's Million Man March on Washington

organized by Minister Louis Farrakhan justifiably unnerved many whites mystified and troubled by the fact that a demagogue, bigot and sexist attracted so large a crowd. What many failed to grasp was that it was not the messenger, or even the stated message of self-atonement, that drew so many black men to the site of Martin Luther King's triumphant “Dream” speech 32 years earlier. Even though the march had no tangible political agenda, no real demands, many ordinary black men felt compelled to show America that they were not indolent, vaguely criminal, wife-abandoning sociopaths, to paraphrase what one tearful participant told a reporter. To those in attendance, the main thing was not who called the march; shattering pernicious stereotypes was overarching.

As for blacks, many cannot fully appreciate white hostility to affirmative action and other social programs aimed at rectifying centuries of iniquity. Many whites, citing the ultimate success of impoverished immigrant ancestors in the face of ethnic or religious discrimination and economic distress, cling to their civics class faith, frequently verified by experience, in America as essentially an egalitarian meritocracy. But neither the Irish, the Chinese, the Jews, or others who had to overcome stereotyping and prejudice, were forcibly brought to this country 350 years ago as chattel. None were sold at open auction. None had their families broken up as nonchalantly as separating kittens. None faced the degree of institutionalized racism that saw separate water fountains and waiting rooms. None can fully internalize the visible and invisible psychological and social scars left by a slave status condoned by the founding fathers (despite the self-evident truth that “all” men are created equal), and subsequent centuries of dehumanizing second-class citizen status imposed solely on the basis of race that included denying the most basic rights such as voting, equal accommodation, and education until the not-so-distant 1960s. Most white immigrants effectively assimilated into the

For a special 24-page summary of survey findings on how African Americans and their fellow citizens see the country's race relations and key issues, see pp. 19-42.

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power structures in a few generations, while retaining, when they chose, their culture and language. Yet the perception of losing a job or promotion to affirmative action is by no means assuaged by historical argument in the name of "past discrimination," particularly in times of increasing economic hardship for millions.

Blacks also see a double standard in that the intensity of the opprobrium heaped on Farrakhan and others is not matched by similarly vociferous expressions of outrage by whites at the provocative pronouncements of Pat Buchanan, Rush Limbaugh, Howard Stern, and Charles Murray. The latter's rather mean-spirited book on race, genetics and intelligence is given serious hearing.

I suspect that many blacks, who for so long lived in constant fear of retribution and racist violence, do not fully grasp the fear felt by white Americans, particularly of members of the so-called "underclass." But paradoxically, contrary to what some in the black community may think, the reaction is not automatically racist hostility, flight or knee-jerk retaliation. A friend of mine once told me candidly that every time he saw a young black school kid on the subway he silently prayed that he or she would finish school, not fall victim to the temptations of gangs or drugs. His motives were not all altruistic. He said he (and I would imagine others) wanted blacks to succeed, wanted them to have every chance at making it, simply so he would stop being afraid of them.

I should note here that fear is an important ingredient in the racial dynamic. Following the Civil War, many black fraternal organizations, churches and newspapers, aware that wherever a stratified social structure exists, inevitably those at the bottom fear those at the top, admonished blacks to stand up against fear. W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X and others followed that tradition. But it was Martin Luther

King who shifted the psychological balance between fear and contempt. By leading blacks into the street, hand-in-hand with whites, he demonstrated that fear on the bottom could be overcome simultaneously with the destruction of contempt at the top, a truly remarkable achievement. For whites, clearly on top, fear and attendant antipathy were based on the presumption of black sexual virility (or promiscuity) and putative physical-athletic superiority, based on the rarely spoken conviction that blacks are genetically a more primitive group. One

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suspects that at least part of the reason there has been a dramatic increase in black women professionals (with black males lagging behind 2 to 1) has as much to do with skills as it does with the white male-dominated corporate culture closing a 2 for 1 affirmative action gap (female and black) and avoiding direct competition with black men in what they perceive, whether consciously or subconsciously, rightly or wrongly, as a remaining bastion of white male supremacy.

To be sure, the above observations are and have to be generalizations. Not all blacks cheered the O.J. verdict, or sanctioned Farrakhan's march. Not all whites are hostile to affirmative action, fearful of blacks, or willfully obstructionist to black progress. Most whites were revolted by the Rodney King tape and incredulous at the acquittal of the white policemen. The subsequent series of polls in this volume will certainly contain some surprises and show the diversity of opinion on racial issues. But it must be acknowledged that one reason (though perhaps not the principal one) for the riots and looting that followed the

Rodney King verdict was the increased state of volatile anarchy in parts of the black inner city community brought on by such factors as loss of faith in the justice and police system, the gap between the culture of consumerism and the economic opportunities to be part of that culture, and a steady decline in black civil society, paradoxically partly as a result of civil rights gains. Whites did not riot in the name of Nicole Simpson (after the O.J. verdict, a white friend sarcastically remarked that the police had better cordon off white neighborhoods to preclude "white rage"), precisely because most whites still trust the police and the justice system, believe they have economic opportunity and control, and maintain the belief that their civil society is intact.

But while racism remains a divisive and virulent constant in the American drama, an increasing number of whites are becoming disillusioned with institutions and structures they once trusted. White Americans, albeit for not always congruent reasons, are also losing faith in our political system and are increasingly disaffected from society. The rise of armed militias, the Oklahoma bombing, the distrust of the federal government and enforcement agencies in the wake of the fatal fire at David Koresh's Branch Davidian compound and Ruby Ridge, recall the rhetoric and the tactics of the leftist militants and Black Panthers in the 1960s, who saw the American system as the enemy. Less extreme but not less fanatical are strident right-wing ideologues within the system. If Ronald Reagan thought government should get off our backs, these post-Reaganauts see government as the enemy, coddling special interests, protecting welfare queens, adulterating our society. Both groups have underlying racialist motives or agendas. The first essentially see blacks, immigrants, and minorities as part of the problem diluting American (read Western) values and culture. The politicians couch their animosities in the language of fiscal responsibility and budget-balancing while maintaining that the solution to the prob-

lems of blacks or the disadvantaged and the legacy of discrimination can be overcome, and inclusion in the mainstream hastened, by such behavioral factors as self-help, individual responsibility for one's actions, and moral reorientation. Ironically, black separatists parrot the same behaviorist line, eschewing government assistance as paternalistic and debilitating while ignoring larger structural factors such as overall economic performance and politics.

Again, paradoxically, even as black and white Americans continue to talk past each other in shrill and hardened tribal tones across an apparently widening racial divide, an overwhelming majority share the same basic concerns, aspirations, values and expectations in an albeit imperfect society. Analysts have found that primary issues for both groups are crime, the quality of public education, economic security and jobs. Working men and women, the bulk of both groups, want a secure old age, affordable medical care, education for their children, and safe streets. They believe in strong family mainstream values and share the same fundamental moral underpinnings. (See pp. 38-41.) A majority of

both groups, despite breathtakingly rapid, technology-driven systemic changes in the economy and, to a degree, social politics, continue to have faith in the American system as the best vehicle for facilitating advancement. Indeed for many whites, Gen. Colin Powell not only embodied these values, but seemed to confirm the preconceived idea that race is less a factor than merit in our society.

What is truly remarkable is that blacks, who bear the legacy of slavery, segregation, oppression, exclusion, and the daily indignities of racism are, in many ways, the most resilient archetypal Americans, still holding on to the notion that perseverance and hard work will give them a real shot at opportunity and equality. (See pp. 34-35.) Put another way, what is surprising is that the sense of injustice and outrage is relatively muted. How would white citizens react if cabs routinely refused to pick them up or take them to their neighborhoods, or if police regularly stopped them on the street without just cause?

But if blacks and white Americans share the same basic goals and hopes, they diverge on some of the means of attaining them. The modern civil rights movement and the struggle for economic justice confirmed for blacks the principle that government and the public sector are critical catalysts for change and guaranteeing opportunity for social and economic progress. Many whites of all classes seem to feel that government, particularly the federal government, has become a meddling obstacle constraining their traditional power and poten-

tial. Judging by some of today's political rhetoric and the recent racially loaded assaults on social programs like summer jobs for low income youth, social services for the homeless, special education of disadvantaged elementary school students, legal services for low-income citizens, so-called radical reformers have forgotten an important truth. As one scholar so eloquently stated, a federal government too weak to threaten our liberties may by that very fact be too weak to secure our rights, let alone our shared purposes.

But if persistent racist attitudes and disparate views on the role of government have driven a wedge between whites and blacks, it is economic factors and the concomitant rise of the so-called black 'underclass' that have escalated mistrust and frustration. A hallmark of the black civil rights struggle in the 1950s and 1960s was its simplicity. At issue was the straightforward imperative to overcome racist barriers to normal participation in American society: the right to vote, the right to attend public schools, full access to public accommodations. All but hard-core segregationists were eventu-

ally swayed by the moral force of the movement as a way to reconcile the dilemma of righteousness and racism. But the movement, inter-racial and non-violent, asked little of the American people in economic terms. With the exception of the minimal cost of establishing civil rights enforcement mechanisms, the demands of the movement cost the taxpayer very little indeed. Even the subsequent anti-poverty and social programs of the Great Society were relatively inexpensive given the overall robustness of the economy approaching full employment. Jim Crow was essentially legislated away at the stroke of a pen.

The next phase of the struggle, economic empowerment, is more problematic and difficult to attain. Poverty cannot be legislated away by the stroke of a pen (hence the failure of the unfocused, agenda-less Poor People's Campaign). And while industrial, mainly unionized, jobs had offered semi-skilled black (and white) workers inroads into the middle class, those jobs are rapidly disappearing due to technological and structural economic changes. At the same time, working and middle-class blacks, once confined to ghettos, have used their new-found mobility to move into the newly integrated society, leaving behind the poor, the underclass and a badly weakened civil society (churches, businesses, community groups, newspapers, etc.), long a breakwater against anarchic, anti-social behavior. A bitter irony of these developments was that blacks had been increasingly capturing political power in an institution—the urban political machine—just as large cities found themselves in economic and social recession, leading to white

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flight and the flight of better-educated, upwardly mobile blacks.

These factors coalesced with growing political conservatism that absolved government of its social responsibility for the general welfare and sought to apply marketplace solutions to the country's economic woes. As wages stagnated and millions lost their jobs, ordinary whites felt the tenuousness of their hold on a shrinking share of the economic pie. But even as the new economic order led to a social bifurcation of the new corporate elites and increasingly hard-pressed working and middle classes, whites tended to place blame for their economic problems along racial rather than class lines, scapegoating blacks and other minorities—who in fact have been disproportionately hurt by economic dislocation (last hired, first fired).

Moreover, the rise of the pathologies among the economically depressed black underclass were attributed to race alone, and projected to all blacks. It didn't matter that such pathologies as out-of-wedlock births substance abuse, single-parent households, were present, as studies showed, among the white jobless in Philadelphia's deindustrialized white neighborhoods, among those who never knew the degradations of slavery and Jim Crow. Many whites simply blamed racial inferiority as the problem,

an idea "verified" by William Shockley and, later, Charles Murray in *The Bell Curve*.

In this essay, I have provided a scatter-shot look at several aspects and paradoxes of America's racial dilemma. I also believe that race and racism will likely always be an issue in a multi-ethnic society. Today, blacks and whites, to borrow a phrase from St. Paul, look at each other through a glass, darkly. That glass is the prism of a long, complex, often troubled history of racial attitudes, practices and habits. It is a prism that too often diffuses and distorts and separates. Today, black Americans, particularly those too young to recall the civil rights movement, face their own dilemma, their own "problem in the heart," trying to reconcile the often conflicting demands of an ill-defined "black culture," believing in possibility and promise of America, while confronting barriers to that faith. Some will opt for black nationalism and separateness, responding to the seductive message of black pride and white inferiority that has cropped up from Marcus Garvey to Farrakhan. But the battle for social and economic justice in today's increasingly interdependent global, information-age world can never be fought and won in isolation. Malcom X seemed to be nearing this position. This lesson should also be heeded by whites who want to retreat to the Idaho mountains or to walled-in ex-

urbs. Nationalism can only sunder, not improve our social fabric, threadbare as it may seem to some.

Sensitivity, tolerance, respect and understanding, in and of themselves, cannot be forced or legislated nor are they sufficient to bridge the racial divide. What is needed is the mutual understanding that most of the economic and social factors that dictate our lives are driven mainly by class and not race issues. Black economic progress is contingent upon the national economy performing well for all Americans. Common economic needs, and common problems, can form the basis of a common, non-racial agenda, and perhaps galvanize coalitions to rebuild what black labor leader A. Philip Randolph called "the material foundation" of our social and political freedom.

The racial prism will always be with us. Our common history, too often ignoble, cannot be rewritten or forgotten. Whites, by their numbers and superior position in the pecking order, may never fully understand the O.J. verdict. Blacks may never fully internalize white fear and, yes, envy, or continued white resistance to remedies that seek to redress past grievances. Whites may never fully grasp the depths of black rage, and blacks may never again accept the notion that white concern for their plight is not paternalism or condescension. But for those, black and white, who still retain a faith in America's ability or desire to live out the meaning of its founding principles, who share the same hopes and aspirations, who continue to grapple daily with the American dilemma in their own hearts, there is a chance for a shared destiny that need not end in blind conflict.



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