
Introduction

THE AMERICAN RACIAL and ethnic landscape has been fundamentally transformed in recent decades. But public understanding has lagged behind new realities. Our gaze is often fixed on the rearview mirror, and even that view is distorted. A color line seems to bifurcate the nation. Blacks appear as permanent victims; white racism looks ubiquitous. Asian and Hispanic Americans, who together now outnumber blacks, are but a shadowy presence hovering in the background. Their experience as “people of color” is portrayed as little different from that of African Americans.

White racism, of course, was ubiquitous not that long ago. And it has not entirely disappeared. But the past is not the present. We have been moving forward. Much of the territory that now surrounds us is unfamiliar, and yet old notions persist. The ethnic and racial categories themselves—white, black, Asian, and Hispanic—never made much sense and are, in any case, dissolving. Half of native-born Asian Americans are now marrying whites. A third of all Hispanics marry non-Hispanic whites. The black intermarriage rate is slowly creeping up. A generation ago blacks had much less education and much poorer jobs and were much more likely to live in

solidly black neighborhoods than they are today. Differences persist, but they now have multiple and complex causes.

America's changing racial and ethnic scene is the central theme of this volume. In essays on topics ranging from religion and immigration to family structure and crime, the authors seek to illuminate where we have been, where we are, and where we are heading. They share a common vision: the color line transcended. One nation, indivisible is still America's unrealized dream.

The Color-Blind Vision

Pessimism is strikingly pervasive in civil rights circles today. In the heyday of the civil rights movement, by contrast, those who fought for racial equality were optimists, and that optimism seemed vindicated by events. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act a year later, the civil rights movement achieved its main political objectives. As Bayard Rustin, a close adviser to the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., noted at the time, the "legal foundations of racism in America" had been "destroyed" with dizzying speed. The "elaborate legal structure of segregation and discrimination" had "virtually collapsed."¹ Most Americans—not just those directly involved in the movement—celebrated.

Indeed, the 1964 election returns were a smashing victory for civil rights proponents. Barry Goldwater, the Republican candidate for president who opposed the Civil Rights Act, was resoundingly rejected. Democrats gained an additional thirty-seven seats in the House and one more in the Senate, giving them majorities of more than two-thirds in both chambers. It was a partisan imbalance the like of which has not been seen since.

It is no coincidence that in 1965 the United States also abandoned the discriminatory national origins quotas that had governed its immigration law since the 1920s. The notion that only citizens from countries like Great Britain or Germany would make good Americans lost popular support in the increasingly tolerant and cosmopolitan America of the postwar period.

Congress amended the Immigration and Nationality Act to open the doors to prospective immigrants from all countries on an equal basis.

Immigration reform and the two landmark civil rights bills—the most important since Reconstruction—all rested on a central moral principle: it is wrong to judge Americans on the basis of race, color, creed, sex, or national origin. People are individuals with equal rights, not fungible members of groups. The Constitution is “color-blind,” John Marshall Harlan had declared in his famous dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 Supreme Court decision that upheld “separate but equal” railroad accommodations.² It was the message of the civil rights movement from before the Civil War to the 1960s.³ Dr. King dreamed of the day when Americans would be judged solely by the “content of their character,” not by “the color of their skin.”⁴ President John F. Kennedy invoked this core principle in supporting the passage of a sweeping civil rights bill that would demonstrate the nation’s commitment to “the proposition that race has no place in American life or law.”⁵

The Reversion to Color-Consciousness

The clarity of this moral vision was lost, however, in the turbulent and chaotic years of the late 1960s. In 1965 President Lyndon B. Johnson took the first step in a radically different direction. “You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line in a race and then say, ‘you are free to compete with all the others,’” Johnson argued. Opening “the gates of opportunity” would not suffice; racial “equality as a fact and as a result” had to be the nation’s goal.⁶ Although Johnson did not use the term “affirmative action,” his image of blacks as crippled by racism laid the foundation for a generation of racial preferences—race-conscious measures designed to ensure “equality as a fact.” Handicapped citizens were entitled to compete under different rules.

The rationale for the racial preferences that came to be embedded in policies involving employment, education, and public contracting was

most famously articulated by Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun in 1978. “In order to get beyond racism,” he said, “we must first take account of race. There is no other way. And in order to treat some persons equally, we must treat them differently. We cannot—we dare not—let the Equal Protection clause perpetuate racial supremacy.”⁷ It was not clear why policies that were explicitly race conscious were the only alternative to racial supremacy; in the extraordinarily long debates on the 1964 Civil Rights Act, no one ever made Justice Blackmun’s argument. The framers of that statute had envisioned aggressive enforcement of its race-neutral antidiscrimination provisions. But by 1978 the vaguely Orwellian notion that it was necessary to treat some persons “differently” in order to treat them “equally” became civil rights orthodoxy.

The Misguided Diagnosis of the Kerner Report

How did race-conscious policies become so accepted by 1978? The answer, in part, is the racial crisis that erupted in the nation’s cities within three months of Johnson’s June 1965 speech. In August, the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles exploded in flames, kicking off four “long, hot summers” of looting, burning, and fighting in predominantly black areas of cities across the land.

The riots came to an end in 1968, as suddenly and mysteriously as they appeared, and what caused them is still open to debate. But the explanation offered by President Johnson’s Kerner Commission was a sweeping indictment of American society. Indeed, the Commission’s central finding became, and remains, conventional wisdom in the civil rights community, academia, and the national media. The 1968 report portrayed America in stark—literally black-and-white—terms. The American drama was a play with only two characters: bigoted whites and victimized blacks. Whites were mostly living in suburban comfort, while blacks were trapped by white prejudice in decaying, dead-end inner-city neighborhoods. Curiously, the report barely mentioned the great civil rights statutes that had

already irrevocably changed the status of blacks in both South and North. It portrayed the nation as moving backward, “toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.” The riots were natural and inevitable protests against “the racial attitudes and behavior of white Americans toward black Americans.” An “explosive mixture” had accumulated in the cities “since the end of World War II,” and it was not surprising that the powder keg had at last detonated. America would be marked by “deepening racial division” and “ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic values” until “white racism” disappeared.⁸

As an analysis of what had triggered the ghetto riots of the mid-1960s, the Kerner report was useless. Increasing inequality could not have been the explanation; by every conceivable measure the status of African Americans had improved. Their average incomes were rising more rapidly than those of whites—no surprise, given how far behind they had been. In years of schooling, occupational status, quality of housing, and life expectancy, the racial gap was narrowing significantly. The political power of blacks was expanding, and they had an array of new legal rights.⁹

Of course, African Americans were still more likely than whites to live in poverty and suffered from higher unemployment rates, but those conditions were just as pervasive in the cities that had not experienced riots. Moreover, the riots ended in 1968. Why? Inner-city neighborhoods had not been transformed, white racism had not suddenly disappeared, and in the few months that elapsed between the Kerner report and the last racial disturbance, the federal government had not begun the program of massive new spending that the Commission had recommended.

Looking Backward: Liberal Orthodoxy Today

In spite of these and other glaring flaws, the portrait drawn by the Kerner Commission has had a remarkable life. Its findings are frequently cited as equally valid today. For instance, in December 1999 the attorney general of Massachusetts looked at student scores on statewide

tests and recalled the Kerner Commission's "pessimistic conclusion that our nation was 'moving towards two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal.'"¹⁰ Although the Kerner findings were barely mentioned explicitly, the report of the Race Advisory Board appointed by President Clinton and chaired by Dr. John Hope Franklin was a warmed-over version of the Kerner report with updated rhetoric. Its findings were a prime example of what Orlando Patterson has called the "forever racism" mindset.¹¹

New demographics compelled the Franklin Commission to acknowledge the large and rapidly growing presence of Asians and Hispanics, though it did so largely by conflating the experience of all "people of color." The United States, it said, is still governed by an oppressive "system of racial hierarchy" in which whites hold all the power and members of "every minority group" face "significant barriers to opportunity." "Racial and ethnic oppression . . . persist." "Racial stereotypes" and "racist concepts" abound, as ugly and primitive as ever; no area of life is free of "subtle biases."¹²

A similarly gloomy and strident note was struck in a recent address by Julian Bond, the chairman of the NAACP. Though he conceded that African Americans had made some advances since the 1960s, he insisted that the Kerner Commission's "indictment of white America" was still sound. "Everywhere we look we see clear racial fault lines that divide America now as much as in the past." Within a few short years of the Kerner report, a "backlash in the discourse over race" had set in, Bond claimed. Its findings were rejected by "a curious mix of whites and a few blacks, academics, journalists and policy makers," engaged in "blame-shifting" and determined to pervert reality. These "new racists," he said, see continuing black-white disparities as the consequence of "family breakdown," a "lack of middle-class values," a paucity of "education and skills," and the "absence of role models." But "these are symptoms. Racism is the cause; its elimination is the cure."¹³

Looking Forward

The two dozen contributors to this volume disagree about many things; they were not chosen because they follow a particular party line on racial and ethnic issues. But they all reject the civil rights orthodoxy expressed by Julian Bond and the Franklin Commission. The Kerner report was a highly imperfect guide to the American picture when it was first released, and by now it is about as reliable as a telephone directory issued thirty years ago. The ritualistic evocation of a color line perpetuated by old and new racists is futile and counterproductive. The drive for racial equality is unfinished business, yet the civil rights community has almost nothing fresh to offer.

What follows is a guide to the new territory shaped by seismic shifts in American society over the past three decades. How are various groups faring economically, both in absolute terms and in relation to each other? What are the social conditions in the new communities of color? What progress have we made in closing the gap in educational outcomes? How is the law changing? How much has the sharp increase in marriages across racial lines blurred the boundaries between groups and diminished the salience of racial identifications? How are shifting attitudes—white, black, Asian, Hispanic, American Indian—reflected in the nation's politics? Are voters crossing racial lines in casting ballots for candidates?

The twenty-five brief essays offered here address these questions and more. The authors are scholars, journalists, and activists who specialize in the areas they write about. Grounded in research and close observation, almost every chapter shatters an old stereotype.

Many of the essays offer either explicit or implicit public policy recommendations. A common theme unites them: new realities require new thinking—a new civil rights agenda. It is undeniable that serious race-related problems persist—most obviously for black Americans. But the causes of those problems entail complexities of which the Kerner Commission never dreamed. White racism does not work as the simple expla-

nation for the relatively poor academic performance of most black students in contexts ranging from affluent suburbia to black-run school districts. Too many black children live in poverty, but almost all are in single-parent households; how can we encourage young women to postpone pregnancy until they are married or well positioned to support a family? The problems of poverty, inadequate education, high unemployment, among others, appear unchanged, but the facade of continuity is deceptive, and old civil rights strategies will not solve today's problems.

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Notes

1. Bayard Rustin, "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement," *Commentary*, February 1965, reprinted in Rustin, *Down the Line: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), p. 111.
2. 163 U.S. 537 (1896).
3. See Andrew Kull, *The Color-Blind Constitution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).
4. Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream," speech, 1963 March on Washington. Reprinted in James Melvin Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), p. 219.
5. Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights," June 11, 1963, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, January 1 to November 22, 1963* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964), pp. 468–71.
6. Lyndon B. Johnson, "To Fulfill These Rights," address at Howard University, June 4, 1965, reprinted in Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, eds., *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1967), p. 126.
7. *Regents of the Univ. of Calif. v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265, 407 (1978).
8. *National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* [Kerner Commission] *Report* (New York: Bantam, 1968), pp. 1, 2, 10.
9. The data on black progress in this period are assembled in Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), chaps. 3–6.
10. Thomas F. Reilly, "Separate and Unequal Education," *Boston Globe*, op-ed, December 11, 1999, p. A19. For other claims that the Kerner Commission's findings were still correct, see Fred R. Harris and Roger W. Wilkins, eds., *Quiet Riots: Race and Poverty in the United States: Twenty Years After the Kerner Report* (New York: Pantheon, 1988); Douglas S. Massey and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 211; and Charles Bullard, J. Eugene Grigsby III, and Charles Lee, eds., *Residential Apartheid: The American Legacy* (Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Afro-American Studies, 1994), pp. 1–2.
11. The Patterson phrase is cited in Jim Sleeper, "Al Gore, Racial Moralist," *New Republic*, March 2, 1998, p. 21.
12. President's Initiative on Race Advisory Board, *One America in the 21st Century: Forging A New Future* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998), pp. 36, 43–44.
13. Julian Bond, "Hostility to Civil Rights, 'Color Line' Problems to Continue," *Charlestown Gazette*, April 1, 1999, p. 5A.