

PART ONE

THE BIG PICTURE

The Demography of Racial and Ethnic Groups

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THE UNITED STATES has been a racially and ethnically diverse society from its beginnings. But the conventional wisdom these days is that something radically new is happening now—that demographic changes are fundamentally transforming our society in unprecedented ways. Peering into a crystal ball, many observers have claimed that the groups we currently designate as minorities are destined to become the new majority. By the middle of the twenty-first century, they predict, and perhaps even sooner, whites will have been reduced to minority status and “people of color” will have become the majority. This, it is claimed, will have momentous implications for the nation’s political, social, and cultural life.

Such is the argument, for example, of Peter Brimelow’s *Alien Nation*, a 1995 volume that contended that current population shifts were “so huge and so systematically different from anything that had gone before as to transform—and ultimately, perhaps, even to destroy—the . . . American nation.”¹

Brimelow is a conservative, but many observers on the multicultural

left are equally convinced that a profound demographic transformation is under way. They are cheered rather than dismayed by the prospect, however. They welcome the arrival of a minority majority and see it as evidence of the need for immediate action—for more multicultural education in the schools, continued affirmative action and diversity training programs in higher education and the workplace, and an expanded welfare state.

The demographic projections upon which both sides of this debate depend are too flawed to be taken seriously, as I shall argue later. But the general public seems to have got the message—so it would appear, at least, from the results of a 1995 poll that asked Americans to estimate what proportion of the population belonged to various racial or ethnic groups (see Table 1). This survey revealed that whites (that is, non-Hispanic whites, a distinction to be discussed at a later point) thought that the black population was almost twice as large as it was in fact—24 percent in their minds, just 13 percent in reality—and that there were 50 percent more Hispanics and almost three times as many Asians in the country as the Current Population Survey figures revealed there to be. These three minority groups together, whites thought, made up fully half of the total

Table 1 Public Beliefs About the Racial Composition of the U.S. Population, 1995

<i>Responses by</i>	<i>What percent of the population is . . . ?</i>			
	MINORITY			
	<i>Black</i>	<i>Hispanic</i>	<i>Asian</i>	<i>Total</i>
Non-Hispanic whites	24	15	11	50
Blacks	26	16	12	54
Hispanics	23	21	11	55
Asians	21	15	8	44
Actual 1995 figures	13	10	4	27

SOURCE: Washington Post–Kaiser Family Foundation–Harvard University survey, as given in Richard Morin, “A Distorted Image of Minorities,” *Washington Post*, November 8, 1995, p. A1. Survey results are mean figures. The actual 1995 figures are Current Population Survey estimates reported in U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1997* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997), table 12.

population, when they actually were little more than one quarter. The “minority majority,” in the eyes of whites, was not a possibility in the remote future; whites were already on the brink of losing their traditional majority status.²

It is tempting to interpret this misconception as evidence of widespread white paranoia. But the delusion was not confined to whites. Indeed, blacks and Hispanics were even more prone than whites to exaggerate their numbers. They also greatly exaggerated the size of other minority groups: minorities together, they believed, were already a distinct majority of the population, constituting 54 or 55 percent of the total. Asians were a little better informed than other groups, but they too greatly overestimated the size not only of their own group but also of other minorities. Whatever their backgrounds, most Americans tended to have similar misconceptions about the racial-ethnic composition of the nation’s population.³

It has long been claimed that nonwhite people are socially invisible in American society and that the minority presence deserves to be given far more attention than it receives on television, in the press, in classrooms and textbooks. President Clinton’s Race Initiative was based on the premise that most white Americans do not pay sufficient attention to their fellow countrymen with skins of a different hue. These polling numbers suggest that the opposite may be closer to the truth: Americans have become so attentive to racial divisions and so obsessed with racial matters that they have developed a badly distorted picture of the shape of their society.

The Arbitrary and Unscientific Character of the Official Racial-Ethnic Categories in Current Use

The survey referred to above employed four crude categories: white, black, Hispanic, and Asian. Why are these the relevant categories for subdividing the population into cultural groups? Why are these few groups singled out for attention, while a great many others with some claim to a distinct identity are not? What about Italian Americans, for example,

or Jews? Are divisions among “races” deeper, more fundamental, and more enduring than divisions among “ethnic groups”?

The idea that “race” is a crucial and immutable division of mankind is a product of the primitive social science of the nineteenth century. According to theorists of the day, all the peoples of the world were divided into four distinct races: white or “Caucasian,” black or “Negroid,” yellow or “Oriental,” and red or Indian. White, black, yellow, and red people were profoundly different from each other, as different as robins from sparrows, trout from salmon, rabbits from squirrels. People who belonged to different races were not only distinct physical types; they differed in innate intellectual potential and in cultural development. If they were to mate across racial lines, their offspring would be biological monstrosities.

Since these race theorists were white, it is hardly surprising that they fervently believed that Caucasians were the superior race. Orientals were next in line, with blacks and American Indians at the bottom of the heap. Given this premise, it was only natural that representatives of the “most advanced” race believed that they were entitled to rule over the “lesser breeds.”

Such ideas have long been discredited and are now held only by those on the lunatic fringe. Scientists today agree that the genetic differences that distinguish members of supposedly different “races” are small, and that the races have become so intermixed that few people can claim to be of racially “pure” origins. The range of biological variation within any one race is far greater than the average differences among races.

And yet the government of the United States, remarkably, still utilizes these antiquated and pernicious categories in compiling statistical information about the American people. The entry on the black population in the index to the 1997 edition of the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* gives 230 citations to tables that distinguish African Americans from other Americans. Another 140 citations direct the reader to data on “Hispanics,” a newly invented quasi-racial category whose origins will be traced below. Asians and Pacific Islanders get 42 references, and American Indians and Alaskan natives 47. If you want to know how many African Americans

regularly use the Internet, how many Asians were treated in hospital emergency rooms in the preceding year, how many Hispanics usually eat breakfast, or how many American Indians were arrested for burglary, the answers are all there. The federal government inundates us with data that convey the unmistakable message that Americans of different “races” differ from each other in many important ways.

It is very striking that the American public is not bombarded with similar official statistics on the socioeconomic characteristics of Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and Muslims, and the many denominational subdivisions within those broad categories. Why not? Religious groups in the United States differ, often quite dramatically, in levels of education, income and wealth, SAT scores, unemployment rates, and most other socioeconomic measures. Why shouldn’t the public be able to find out if Jews are much wealthier than Presbyterians, on the average, or if Mormons are more likely to attend college than Southern Baptists? The government of the United States has never inquired into the religious affiliations of individual citizens because religion is regarded as a private matter in American society and not the business of government. If such information did become readily available, the effect might be to heighten tensions between people of different faiths, inspiring some to complain that they did not have their “fair share” of federal judgeships or of seats on the boards of large corporations and that others were “overrepresented” in those positions.

If not religion, why race? The racial categories currently used by the federal government derive from discredited racial theories more than a century old, with only minor changes in nomenclature. “Negroid” has given way to “black” or “African American,” and “Oriental” has been replaced by “Asian.” But the idea that it is meaningful and socially useful to cram us all into one of the four racial boxes constructed by racist thinkers more than a hundred years ago remains unchanged. The previous decennial census, in 1990, still accepted the traditional premise that every American belongs in one and only one of four mutually exclusive racial categories; people of racially mixed ancestry were required to record just one race on the census forms. The Census of 2000 has broken from this tradition and

allowed respondents to give more than one answer to the race question, but for purposes of civil rights enforcement the results will be tabulated in the same old crude categories, rendering the change virtually meaningless.⁴

The issue is not confined to the U.S. Census. Nineteenth-century conceptions of race are also alive and well in the official guidelines that govern the statistical information that all federal agencies must gather. The authoritative statement of current practice is the Office of Management and Budget's Directive No. 15, "Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting," first issued in 1977 and still in effect.⁵ Directive 15 declared that the population of the United States was divided into four "races" and two "ethnic" groups and required all agencies of the federal government to compile data using these categories in order to assess the impact of their programs.

The "racial" groups identified in Directive 15 were the usual ones: whites, blacks, Asians and Pacific Islanders, and American Indians and Alaskan Natives. Even though the old idea of a racial hierarchy with whites on top had lost all intellectual respectability, the guidelines set forth in Directive 15 were designed to subvert that hierarchy. The rationale for requiring all governmental agencies to subdivide the population into these particular racial categories was that these nonwhite groups had been the targets of prejudice in the past. (So had many white immigrant groups, of course, but the guidelines made no mention of that.) It was necessary to monitor how the nonwhite races were faring in the present in order to overcome the allegedly lingering remnants of a history of white supremacy. The three minority races were victim groups that had once "suffered discrimination and differential treatment on the basis of their race." As victims, they were—and are—entitled to a variety of special protections and preferential programs not available to whites.

Does it make sense at the end of the twentieth century to identify "races" as defined by nineteenth-century supporters of white supremacy? The authors of Directive 15 were careful to say that "these classifications should not be interpreted as being scientific or anthropological in nature." True enough, but the admission only makes their decision to utilize them

more dubious. If these categories are not “scientific” or “anthropological,” what are they? Why should the U.S. government distinguish some citizens from others on a basis that is not “scientific” or even “anthropological” (whatever that means) and use those distinctions in allocating public resources?

Perhaps the answer is that the OMB assumed that Americans today habitually draw these crude distinctions in their daily lives, and that recognition of social reality requires the government to do the same. This is a feeble argument. What is the evidence of a societal consensus on precisely these distinctions? Some Americans may see the population as divided into two groups, whites and nonwhites. Some, on the other hand, may make much finer distinctions than these racial categories provide, seeing Japanese Americans as quite different from Korean Americans, for example. It is certainly questionable whether Koreans and Japanese feel a strong sense of kinship and solidarity as “Asians”; there is considerable antipathy between these groups that grows out of the fact that Korea was under Japanese rule for most of the first half of the twentieth century. Immigrants from Ethiopia and Jamaica likewise differ from blacks whose ancestors came to North America as slaves centuries ago, but those differences are obscured when all are thrown together into the black racial category.

Even if it could be shown that these unscientific racial categories did correspond at least moderately well to the way in which the general public perceives the racial landscape, it does not follow that it is wise for the government to insist upon the saliency of race. Justice Harry Blackmun argued two decades ago that “in order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. . . . And in order to treat some persons equally, we must treat them differently.”⁶ But the race-conscious policies that have been pursued in the United States for a generation have plainly not taken us “beyond racism.”⁷

President John F. Kennedy was wiser than Justice Blackmun, I believe, when he said that “race has no place in American life or law.”⁸ To continue to draw racial distinctions in our laws and to compile massive amounts of official statistical data about racial differences among racial groups will not

serve to make race less important in “American life.” We need not go so far as to bar government from collecting any information whatever about the ethnic composition of the population. But the evidence necessary to monitor the socioeconomic progress of groups and to identify problems can be obtained without perpetuating the dangerous fiction of race. The census currently includes a question about the “ancestry or ethnic origin” of respondents, a concept broad enough to include African Americans, Asian Americans, and all other Americans. The answers to this question will yield information about what are now classified as racial groups without contributing to the fallacy that they are fundamentally different from other groups based on a sense of common origins and peoplehood.

Is Racial Victimization Hereditary?

The rationale for making racial distinctions in official statistics is remedial. Directive 15 rests on the premise that being a member of a particular race that was treated unfairly at some point in the past leaves an indelible imprint on everyone with the same “blood.” Is there no statute of limitations for complaints of historical victimization? Does the discrimination experienced by your grandparents, great-grandparents, or even more remote ancestors have any relevance to your life today?

The case for classifying some Americans as belonging to a victim group is, of course, strongest for blacks. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that official racial statistics would still be gathered but for the continuing “American dilemma,” the seemingly never ending problem of how black Americans can be integrated into American society. The situation of blacks in the United States is *sui generis*. Although there are many points of resemblance between African Americans and immigrant groups that also encountered prejudice and discrimination, the differences are fundamental. No other group has such a bitter heritage of centuries of enslavement, followed by several decades of disfranchisement and legally enforced separation and subordination in the Jim Crow South and by intense racist hostility in the rest of the country.

Nonetheless, in spite of this unique history, the assumption that blacks today should still be regarded as victims who must be treated “differently” in order to be treated “equally” is mistaken. African Americans made stunning educational and economic advances in the 1940s and 1950s, which made possible the triumph of the civil rights revolution and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and since then they have continued to make gains. And white racial attitudes have changed dramatically for the better.⁹ Anti-black racism has by no means disappeared altogether, but it is no longer the chief obstacle in the way of further progress by African Americans.

Note, for example, that more than seven out of ten black babies today are born out of wedlock, and that fully 85 percent of black children living in poverty reside with a mother and no father.¹⁰ Suppose that these children had the same mothers and (absent) fathers and lived in the same neighborhoods but had somehow arrived in the world with white skins. If these children were all “white,” would their life prospects be notably better? It seems highly doubtful. Or consider the dismal fact that the average black twelfth-grader today reads at the same level as the average white child in the eighth grade and is about as far behind in math, writing, and science.¹¹ In an economy that increasingly rewards those with strong cognitive skills, this pattern of low educational achievement guarantees that African Americans will be disproportionately concentrated in the least attractive and poorest-paid jobs. Again, if they had the same limited cognitive skills but white skins, it would not improve their job prospects significantly.

With other “racial” groups, the assumption that exposure to discrimination in the past continues to be a major obstacle is even more questionable. During World War II, Japanese American citizens living on the West Coast were presumed to be of questionable loyalty to the United States because of their “blood” ties to Japan, and for that reason they were forced to abandon their homes and businesses and were locked up in relocation camps for the duration of the war. Almost all of them were deprived of their liberty for four years, and many lost valuable property, receiving only partial compensation long after the war had ended. But by 1990 native-

born Japanese Americans had median family incomes 47 percent higher than those of whites, and they were 57 percent more likely to have a college degree.¹² Some doubtless still bore psychic scars from their bitter experience half a century before, but that did not prevent the dramatic upward mobility of the group in the postwar years. By 1990 most of those who been locked up because of their race were retired or dead; two-thirds of the Japanese Americans then alive had been born after the relocation camps had been shut down.¹³ And yet Japanese American entrepreneurs today are given an edge over whites in the competition for federal contracts (and state and local governmental contracts in many places) because they belong to the Asian “race.”

An even more strained historical argument has been made about another Asian group—Chinese Americans—in the recent report of the Advisory Board to the President’s Initiative on Race. The report speaks of “the forced labor of Chinese Americans” as part of “a history of legally mandated and socially and economically imposed subordination to white European Americans and their descendants.”¹⁴ This is a lurid and tendentious description of the “coolie” system, a form of indentured servitude in which Chinese merchants advanced passage money to America to unskilled workers who then paid off their debt through labor. But even if the coolie system was as bad as the quoted characterization, how is the indentured labor of the Chinese in California in the 1870s relevant to the situation of Chinese Americans in the 1990s? Chinese immigrants did indeed encounter horrendous prejudice in the nineteenth century and after, but the 1990 Census revealed that native-born Chinese Americans were even more successful than the enormously prosperous Japanese Americans, with median family incomes some 58 percent higher than those of whites.¹⁵ But Chinese Americans are nonetheless favored over whites in various public contracting programs on the assumption that their “race” remains a major handicap.

If the connection between the coolie system or the internment camps and the Chinese and Japanese Americans of today is tenuous, it shrinks to the vanishing point when this purported link is extended to all persons of Asian “race.” It happens that more than four out of five Asian American

adults living in the United States today were born abroad; indeed, almost all the foreign-born have arrived in the past three decades, at a time when anti-Asian prejudice was disappearing and public commitment to equal treatment for all Americans had brought about strong federal legislation to combat racial discrimination.¹⁶ Many of these newly arrived Asians—Koreans, Cambodians, and Vietnamese, for example—are from countries that sent virtually no immigrants to the United States before World War II, so there was no history at all of racism against their ancestors in the United States. The earlier mistreatment of Chinese and Japanese Americans did nothing to dissuade these newcomers from moving to America in search of greater opportunity, nor should it have. It had no bearing whatever on their prospects for a better life in contemporary America.

The Invention of “Hispanics” as a Quasi-Racial Group

In addition to the three groups presumed to be disadvantaged because of their race, Directive 15 added a fourth—“persons of Hispanic origin.”¹⁷ When the OMB issued its guidelines in 1977, the number of Mexican Americans in the United States had been growing dramatically, and immigration from Central and South America was also accelerating. Disproportionately large numbers of the newcomers from Latin countries had poorly paid unskilled jobs and family incomes below the poverty line.

Were their economic difficulties due largely to prejudice against them, or were they due to the fact that they had arrived in the United States with little education, limited or no command of English, and few marketable skills? The OMB did not even acknowledge the question. Directive 15 assumed that the depressed economic and social position of Hispanics was mainly the result of racism and that federal agencies accordingly must compile statistics on the group and do as much as possible to assist them.

Another problem with the “Hispanic” concept was the attitude of the so-called Hispanics themselves, most of whom did not regard themselves as members of a nonwhite “race.” Although activists from the group insisted

that they were “people of color,” that was not the perception of most of those they claimed to speak for. People of Hispanic ancestry typically identified themselves as whites on the census and other official forms that included a race question—marriage licenses and birth and death records, for example.¹⁸

At one point earlier in the century, Mexican Americans were categorized as nonwhite by the census takers, and the results were instructive. In 1930 the Census Bureau departed from its earlier practice of classifying Mexican Americans as white and instead employed a Mexican “race” category. Enumerators were to use it for “all persons born in Mexico, or having parents born in Mexico” who in their judgment were “not definitely white.”¹⁹ People of Mexican ancestry were lumped together with blacks, Asians, and American Indians in the reported totals for “nonwhites.” After Mexican American organizations and the Mexican government furiously protested the decision to relegate members of the group to the nonwhite category, census officials abandoned the categorization and restored Mexican immigrants and their children to the white column.²⁰

This pattern of racial identification continues today also and applies not only to Mexican Americans but also to other Hispanics. Although Latinos tend to have darker skins than the typical American of European ancestry, a large majority—95.7 percent, according to a 1991 Current Population Survey—report themselves to be white.²¹ And very few of those who reject the white designation identify with any of the other three races; they think of themselves as being of racially mixed origins, rejecting the Census Bureau’s traditional view that everyone belongs in one and only one racial box.

To overcome this awkward difficulty—alleged victims of racism who did not belong to a nonwhite race—the OMB created a new category, “Hispanic.” According to Directive 15, Hispanics were frequently the objects of prejudice and “differential treatment,” not because of their “race” but because of their “ethnicity.” Federal agencies were required to compile data on Hispanics as well as on the three nonwhite races because “ethnicity”

for Hispanics was presumed to be the functional equivalent of race for blacks, Asians, and American Indians.

The concept of “ethnicity” had long been an essential analytical tool for understanding American society, but Directive 15 used the term in a novel, indeed bizarre, way. The common understanding of American society was that immigration had played a central role in its development and that many distinct “ethnic groups” had emerged out of the immigration experience and then faded away as later generations became more integrated into the larger society. Being a stranger in a strange land was difficult, and newcomers naturally felt the need to associate with other people who spoke their native tongue, liked similar food, worshiped in the same way, and had similar customs and values. The *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* describes more than one hundred such ethnic groups, many of them extinct or close to it by now.²²

It is thus remarkable that the official guidelines employed by the federal government maintain that there are just *two* ethnic groups in the United States: persons of “Hispanic origin” and those “not of Hispanic origin.”²³ Several dozen white ethnic groups with distinct identities were suddenly collapsed into a single group with the awkward label “not of Hispanic origin.” All the white ethnic groups had presumably merged into the general population, while Hispanics were taken to be an unassimilable, race-like group that would be as enduring as the “races” that the federal government was so dedicated to enumerating—even though most Hispanics considered themselves, and had always been officially classified as, “white.”

Equally dubious was the assumption that the umbrella label “Hispanic” designated a coherent entity with a common historical experience of oppression at the hands of white Americans. What do Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Argentineans, Colombians, Venezuelans, Chileans, and more than a dozen other immigrant nationalities from Central or South America really have in common? Not even some variant of the Spanish language as their mother tongue, because the label has been defined to include people who trace their origins to Portugal or Brazil and are Portuguese-speakers. And it includes a variety of Indian peoples whose

home language is not Spanish. Perhaps most remarkably, the rubric includes the descendants of roughly three-quarters of a million immigrants from Spain or Portugal, although no one could seriously argue they have encountered more prejudice in the United States than immigrants from countries like France, Italy, Poland, or Greece. The category Hispanic is more like the category European than the category Italian or German, and no scholar considers the dozens of American ethnic groups that derive from Europe a single ethnic group with a common experience.

A majority of the Americans now designated as Hispanic are Mexican Americans, and the case for viewing their history as one dominated by “racism and oppression” cannot withstand critical scrutiny either. The report of the President’s Initiative on Race advances this charge, speaking of “the conquest and legal oppression of Mexican Americans and other Hispanics.”²⁴ This is absurdly oversimplified history. The five southwestern states from New Mexico to California were indeed once part of Mexico and were annexed to the United States at the end of a war between the two nations in the 1840s. But only a tiny fraction of the Mexican American population today can trace their origins to that conquest. A mere 13,000 people born in Mexico were recorded as U.S. residents in the Census of 1850, and they were people who had chosen to remain and live under American rule following the Mexican War.²⁵ Mexican Americans did not become a quantitatively significant element of the U.S. population until well into the twentieth century. As late as 1910, they were no more than 0.4 percent of the total U.S. population.²⁶ The real growth of the group was the result of a huge wave of immigration from Mexico that began during the World War I decade, an immigration that was basically similar to the peasant migrations from eastern and southern Europe early in the century. Another much larger immigration wave from Mexico began in the 1950s and continues today.

The idea that the lives of Mexican Americans are somehow blighted by a legacy of “conquest” makes no sense unless one assumes that the historical memory of having lost territory to the United States a century and a half ago is somehow carried in the blood of everyone of Mexican

American descent. Immigrants from Mexico who arrived in the twentieth century encountered prejudice, of course, but whether the hostility was any greater than that met with by Italians, Poles, or Jews is questionable. Certainly they were not subjected to “legal oppression” comparable to what blacks experienced in the Jim Crow South.

Because of their strong historical concentration in the Southwest and their traditional employment as farm laborers, Mexican Americans tended to have low incomes and limited opportunities to obtain an education that would facilitate their mobility in the larger society. In recent decades, movement out of rural areas and agricultural occupations has gradually resulted in the growth of a Mexican American middle class, at a pace comparable to that of groups like Italians and Poles earlier in the century. The impressive upward mobility of Mexican Americans has been obscured, however, by the continuing influx of large numbers of relatively uneducated immigrants from Mexico, both legal and illegal, whose lowly status pulls down the average for the group as a whole.²⁷

To view American society as divided into four separate, watertight compartments called “races,” with a fifth compartment for a “Hispanic” race that is not quite a race, is profoundly misleading. So is the assumption that public policy should be based on the assumption that three of these races and the Hispanic ethnic group have been oppressed and victimized by the white majority for so long that they need preferential treatment in education, employment, and public contracting into the indefinite future.

The Myth of the Impending Minority Majority

The picture of the American people as divided into oppressors and oppressed racial-ethnic groups is an oversimplification and a distortion. The errors it entails are compounded when we attempt to peer into the future and calculate what the racial and ethnic mix of the American population will eventually be. Projections of precisely this kind have attracted considerable public attention, thanks to a credulous press. The

cover story in the April 9, 1990, issue of *Time* featured a Census Bureau projection that concluded that the United States would have a “minority-majority” population by the year 2050. Since then, the official estimates have been revised slightly, with the latest indicating that the “minority” population (blacks, Asians, Hispanics, and American Indians) will be a shade less than a majority in 2050—49.7 percent of the population.²⁸

Will this in fact happen? Will it matter if it does? The first thing to notice is that demographers have never been much good at prediction. In the 1930s, population experts were unanimous in foreseeing a sharply declining population in the U.S. and other industrial societies. Not one predicted the postwar Baby Boom or the resumption of mass immigration to American shores. In the past half century, instead of declining, the U.S. population has almost doubled. Demographers project future populations on the basis of currently observable patterns of immigration, fertility, and mortality. The more remote the future, the greater the possibility that these variables will change in unanticipated ways.

Indeed, the Census Bureau recognizes some of the uncertainty by issuing a series of different projections of the expected population at various future dates. The projection cited above is based on the “middle series” estimate, which puts the total U.S. population at 394 million in 2050. But the “low series” estimate the bureau makes for that year is just 283 million, and the “high series” estimate is 519 million.²⁹ The high and low estimates vary from each other by a staggering 236 million. Thus the population half a century from now may be nearly double what it is today (approximately 270 million), but it might instead be a mere 5 percent larger than it is now. If there is such great uncertainty about what the total population will be half a century from now, there must be similar uncertainty about the size of the various racial and ethnic subgroups that make up the total.

Why do these projections vary so enormously? Because they necessarily rest on assumptions about the determinants of population growth that may prove mistaken. For example, they require accurate estimates of the level of immigration to the United States thirty or forty years hence. Obviously, we cannot know that with any reliability because our immigration

policy may become far more restrictive than it is now. Laws enacted in the 1920s sharply cut back on the number of new arrivals, and we cannot be sure that a similar anti-immigrant backlash will not again close the door to newcomers from abroad.

Nor can we be at all sure about a second variable that determines how the size of a population changes over time—its fertility patterns. (Changes in mortality rates can also affect population size, but mortality usually does not fluctuate dramatically enough to make a big difference, except in the case of demographic catastrophes like the Great Plague of the fourteenth century.) At the beginning of the twentieth century, a great many Americans of native stock worried about the consequences of their own rapidly declining fertility. Many feared that they were being swamped by huge waves of new immigrants and the large families the new arrivals typically had. Lothrop Stoddard, a leader of the Immigration Restriction League, warned that Anglo-Saxons were committing “race suicide.” According to his calculations, after 200 years 1,000 Harvard men would have left only 50 descendants, while 1,000 Romanian immigrants would have produced 100,000!³⁰

There was nothing wrong with Stoddard’s math. The problem lay with his straight-line projection of the fertility differentials of his day 200 years into the future. He failed to comprehend that in the second and third generations Romanian Americans would adjust their fertility patterns to the American norm and would produce many fewer children than did the immigrant generation.³¹

This process of assimilation to the prevailing national fertility norm continues to operate today. Although the current fertility rate of Mexican immigrant women is twice the national average, Mexican American women born in the U.S. have 23 percent fewer children than did their mothers.³² And Mexican American women who graduate from college have families that are 40 percent smaller than those of their ethnic sisters with less than nine years of schooling.³³ The high average fertility of women of Mexican origin will drop in the future *if* the group does not continue to be replenished by huge numbers of new immigrants and *if* an increasing proportion

of Mexican American females go on to college. Both are big ifs, which indicates how difficult it is to make confident predictions about the demographic future.

Stoddard also erred in his implicit assumption that Romanian immigrants and their children would keep marrying with the group, perpetuating the cultural patterns of their country of origin. Quite the opposite happened. Romanians, like most other immigrants, often married non-Romanians, with the probability rising the longer they lived in the United States. Ethnic intermarriage complicates ethnic identification. Are you still a Romanian American if just one of your four grandparents was Romanian? What if two of the four were? The immigrants of the early twentieth century, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, usually chose mates of the same ethnic background, but many of their children and a great many of their grandchildren did not. The population derived from the great waves of European immigration is by now so thoroughly interbred that their ethnic origins are difficult to disentangle and of little consequence.

Assimilation via the “marital melting pot” has also occurred at a rapid pace among the immigrants of the post–World War II era. Recent evidence as to how many Hispanics are marrying non-Hispanics is lacking, but a classic earlier study of Mexican Americans found that 40 percent of those who wed in Los Angeles County in 1963 chose non-Hispanic mates. By the third generation, indeed, members of the group were more likely to marry non-Hispanic whites than persons of Mexican ancestry.³⁴ The rate may be somewhat lower today because the volume of recent immigration from Mexico has been so high, but it can be expected to climb if and when the influx of newcomers declines. Asian Americans are, if anything, more likely than Mexican Americans to marry outside the group, almost always to whites.³⁵ In the past three decades, the rate of black-white intermarriage has also risen precipitously, though it started from a very low level.³⁶

If intermarriage continues at such high levels, a very large proportion of all Americans in 2050 and even sooner will have some Hispanic, Asian, or African “blood.” But it does not follow that all or even most of these individuals will identify more with their one Hispanic, Asian, or black

ancestor than with those who were non-Hispanic whites. To believe that nonwhite “blood” or Hispanic “blood” trumps all other identities is simply an extension of the traditional and pernicious “one drop” rule, the notion that “one drop of black blood makes you black.” Even in the case of African Americans, the “one drop” rule is no longer unquestioned, as the example of Tiger Woods suggests. And certainly there is no consensus that one drop of Asian, Hispanic, or American Indian blood consigns you to membership in those groups.

The Census Bureau today has more sophisticated techniques for modeling population change than were available to Stoddard, but it has been no more successful than he was at grappling with the reality of ethnic intermarriage, assimilation, and loss of ethnic identity, a reality that fatally confounds all efforts to extrapolate contemporary ethnic divisions into the remote future. Even if the descendants of Romanian Americans and the other “new immigrants” of the early twentieth century who so worried the Immigration Restriction League are now a majority of the population, as Stoddard feared, who could possibly care? By the time that the groups currently classified as “minority” become a majority, if that ever happens, it will be equally irrelevant, because they will no longer be thought of as minorities.

Moreover, if today’s immigrants assimilate into the American stream as readily as their predecessors did at the turn of the century, there will not be any minority majority issue. Whatever their origins, they will have joined the American majority, which is determined not by one’s bloodlines but by one’s commitment to the principles for which this nation stands.

One America in the 21st Century?

Still, assimilation cannot be taken for granted. We cannot reliably predict the shape of the ethnic and racial future of the United States. The historical parallels drawn above may not hold because the melting pot ideal that was once so widely accepted has by now been largely

displaced by the competing ideal of multiculturalism, which implies that racial and ethnic divisions are and should be permanent.

The Clinton administration has optimistically labeled the President's Initiative on Race "One America in the 21st Century," and that phrase was used as the title of the final report of the Race Initiative's Advisory Board. Rhetoric about "one America" is good p.r., but in fact the thinking behind the Race Initiative is likely to lead us toward a balkanized future. Chapter 1 of the Advisory Board's 1998 report is supposed to illuminate the "common values and concerns" that Americans "share, regardless of racial background."³⁷ But only its first section, headed "Americans Share Common Values and Aspirations," makes the point, and it is just one paragraph long and hopelessly vague—no mention at all of common commitment to the Constitution of the United States and to the rule of law, no reference either to the melting pot ideal.

After this perfunctory nod to the notion of common American values, the chapter devotes a full sixteen pages to platitudes such as "dialogue is a tool for finding common ground," "dialogue helps to dispel stereotypes," "the role of religious leaders," "the role of business leaders," "the role of young leaders." The assumption seems to be that genuine national unity cannot be attained unless we all participate in group discussions designed to enhance our "awareness of the history of oppression, conquest, and private and government-sanctioned discrimination and their present-day consequences."³⁸ We are all enjoined to "commit at least one day each month to thinking about how issues of racial prejudice and privilege might be affecting each person you come into contact with."³⁹

Although the report asserts ritualistically that Americans share "common values and concerns," it rejects the idea that a common American culture binds us together. Highlighted in a box is a quotation from a student who said, at a "children's dialogue on race, poverty, and community," "I don't think we need to become one culture. I think we just need to respect the differences of each culture."⁴⁰ The simplistic view that the American people belong to five separate cultures, with all but non-Hispanic whites

the victims of racial oppression, is hardly a recipe likely to make us “one nation, indivisible.”

If the assumptions behind the President’s Initiative on Race continue to shape public policy in the decades to come, the aim of “One America” will not be realized. By continuing race-driven policies in the delusion that they will enable us to “get beyond racism,” we will only ensure the perpetuation of racial and ethnic divisions far into the future.

Notes

1. Peter Brimelow, *Alien Nation: Common Sense About America’s Immigration Disaster* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 1.

2. Lest it be thought that this 1995 poll was an aberration, it should be noted that a 1990 Gallup poll found that white Americans thought that blacks were no less than 32 percent of the population, even further from the mark than the 24 percent estimate of those polled in 1995. Similarly, African Americans in 1990 thought that blacks were 42 percent of the population, 3.5 times as many as there were in fact. See George Gallup Jr. and Frank Newport, “Americans Ignorant of Basic Census Facts,” *Gallup Poll Monthly*, no. 294 (March 1990), p. 2.

3. For some perceptive comments on the implications of this survey, see Orlando Patterson, *The Ordeal of Integration: Progress and Resentment in America’s “Racial” Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Civitas/Counterpoint, 1997), pp. 56–60.

4. Although the Office of Management and Budget has ordered that 63 different racial combinations be tabulated, which becomes 126 when you add Hispanics to the mix, it has ruled that in order to assess possible civil rights violations, those fine distinctions are to be ignored. Persons who report themselves a mixture of white and some other race are all to be put in the other racial category, a reversion to the old “one drop rule.” See Stephan Thernstrom, “One Drop Still—A Racialist’s Census,” *National Review*, April 17, 2000.

5. Office of Management and Budget, Statistical Directive No. 15, “Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Agencies and Administrative Reporting, as Adopted on May 12, 1977,” *Federal Register*, v. 43, 19629–19270. The quotations in this and the following two paragraphs are drawn from this document. For an excellent brief analysis of these guidelines, see Peter Skerry, “Many American Dilemmas: The Statistical Politics of Counting by Race and Ethnicity,” *Brookings Review*, Summer 1996, pp. 36–39. In October 1997 the OMB announced some revisions in its classification scheme. It subdivided the “Asian and Pacific Islander” category into two: “Asian” and “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders,” so there are now five officially recognized races.

And it allowed people of mixed race to select more than one racial designation from the list of five.

6. *Regents of the Univ. of Calif. v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265, 407 (1978).

7. See Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), part III, for a critical analysis of racially preferential policies.

8. As quoted in *ibid.*, p. 138.

9. The history of racial segregation and subordination and the struggle against it are traced in *ibid.*, part I. The enormous progress made by blacks since the 1960s and the sharp decline in white prejudice are reviewed in part II and the conclusion to the work.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 237, 240.

11. The evidence on the racial gap in cognitive skills at age 17 is set forth in *ibid.*, pp. 352–59. Possible explanations for the gap are reviewed in *ibid.*, pp. 359–82.

12. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990 Census of the Population, *Asian and Pacific Islanders in the United States*, 1990 CP-3-5 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), tables 3 and 5; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports, P-60-174, Money Income of Households, Families, and Persons in the United States: 1990* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), table 13; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1991* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), table 43.

13. *Asian and Pacific Islanders*, table 1.

14. President's Initiative on Race Advisory Board Report, *One America in the 21st Century: Forging a New Future* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998), pp. 36, 43.

15. *Asian and Pacific Islanders*, table 5; *Money Income of Households*, table 13.

16. *Asian and Pacific Islanders*, table 1.

17. Some precedent for the creation of this category was provided by the 1970 Census, which identified the "Spanish origin or descent" population by asking respondents whether they were Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or "other Spanish." See A. J. Jaffe, et al., *Spanish Americans in the United States: Changing Demographic Characteristics* (New York: Research Institute for the Study of Man, 1976), pp. 347–48.

18. A March 1991 Current Population Survey found that 95.7 percent of those who identified themselves as of Hispanic origin considered themselves white, 2.2 percent black, 0.4 percent American Indian, and 1.5 percent of "other race"; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports: Special Studies, P23-182, Exploring Alternative Race-Ethnic Comparison Groups in Current Population Surveys* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992), table A. The 1990 Census, by contrast, found that 51.7 percent of Hispanics regarded themselves as white, and 42.7 percent said they

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were of “other race.” The difference is attributable to the fact that the CPS accepts “other race” as an answer only when respondents say they are unable to choose among the four given to them, whereas the census lists “other race” as an option, and indeed frames the race question in a way that encourages Hispanics to check the “other race” box. For a critique of the census race question, see Stephan Thernstrom, “American Ethnic Statistics,” in Donald L. Horowitz and Gerard Noiriel, eds., *Immigrants in Two Democracies: French and American Experience* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), pp. 100, 108.

19. Jaffe, *Spanish Americans*, p. 346.

20. S. Thernstrom, “American Ethnic Statistics,” p. 91.

21. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Exploring Alternative Race-Ethnic Comparison Groups*, table A.

22. Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).

23. Statistical Directive No. 15, 19629.

24. *One America in the 21st-Century*, p. 36. For more sophisticated and nuanced treatments of this group, see Peter Skerry, *Mexican Americans: The Ambivalent Minority* (New York: Free Press, 1993), and the essays in Walker Connor, ed., *Mexican-Americans in Comparative Perspectives* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 1985).

25. Jaffe, *Spanish Americans*, p. 134.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 134–35.

27. For impressive evidence of upward mobility by Mexican Americans in Southern California over the 1980–1990 decade, see Dowell Myers, *The Changing Immigrants of Southern California*, research report no. LCRI-95-04R, Lusk Center Research Institute, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 1995.

28. The latest estimates appear in U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998), table 12.

29. *Ibid.*, table 3.

30. Lothrop Stoddard, *The Revolt Against Civilization: The Menace of the Under Men* (New York: Scribner's, 1923), pp. 112–13.

31. Tamara K. Hareven and John Modell, “Family Patterns,” in S. Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, pp. 348–49. The typical Italian immigrant woman recorded on the 1910 Census gave birth to seven children; their American-born daughters produced an average of five; see S. Philip Morgan, Susan Cotts Watkins, and Douglas Ewbank, “Generating Americans: Ethnic Differences in Fertility,” in Susan Cotts Watkins, ed., *After Ellis Island: Newcomers and Natives in the 1910 Census* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1994), pp. 94–95.

32. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990 Census of the Population, *Persons of Hispanic*

Origin in the United States, 1990 CP-3-3 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), table 1.

33. James A. Sweet and Larry L. Bumpass, *American Families and Households* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1987), p. 135.

34. Leo Grebler, Joan W. Moore, and Ralph C. Guzman, *The Mexican-American People: The Nation's Second Largest Minority* (New York: Free Press, 1970), pp. 408–9.

35. Harry L. Kitano, *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1995), pp. 176–80.

36. Some 12.1 percent of the African Americans who married during 1993 had white mates, as compared with 0.7 of those who wed a generation earlier, in 1963; Thernstrom and Thernstrom, *America in Black and White*, p. 526. Although 12 percent may not seem a very high number, it is much higher than the rate of intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles in New York City and between Japanese Americans and whites in Los Angeles County before World War II; *ibid.*, pp. 526, 536.

37. *One America in the 21st Century*, p. 12.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 26.