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Racial politics, black and white.

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## A NEW AMERICAN DILEMMA

BY GLENN C. LOURY

**F**ORTY YEARS AGO the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal argued in *An American Dilemma* that the problem of race in the United States cut to the very core of our definition as a people. Myrdal described America as a nation which, although founded on the ideals of individual liberty and personal dignity, could not bring itself—through either law or social practice—to treat the descendants of slaves as the equals of whites. The dilemma for white leaders in particular was that these racial practices were so deeply ingrained that even if they wanted to get rid of them, it seemed politically impossible to do so. In 1944 Myrdal hardly could have foreseen the extent to which the United States would confront and begin to resolve this great dilemma. As recently as twenty years ago many conservatives denied as a matter of principle that the government should interfere in private decisions in order to assure equal opportunity for black people. (Ronald Reagan, for example, opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act.) Two decades later that position has been completely discredited, both legally and morally.

The old racism is not gone, but the disparity between American ideals and racial practice has narrowed dramatically. Today the civil rights debate is dominated by the issue of affirmative action, in which the question is whether the history of racism warrants special—not simply equal—treatment for blacks. Whereas blacks were once excluded from politics by subterfuge and the threat of violence, they now constitute a potent political bloc with often decisive influence on local and national elections. Martin Luther King Jr., whose passionate, relentless, and compelling articulation of black aspirations made him the nemesis of Presidents, governors, and F.B.I. officials alike, is now honored as a national hero. The moral victory of the civil rights movement is virtually complete.

And yet racial divisions remain. Today we are faced with a new American dilemma, one that is especially difficult for black leaders and members of the black middle class. The bottom stratum of the black community has compelling problems which can no longer be blamed sole-

ly on white racism, and which force us to confront fundamental failures in black society. The social disorganization among poor blacks, the lagging academic performance of black students, the disturbingly high rate of black-on-black crime, and the alarming increase in early unwed pregnancies among blacks now loom as the primary obstacles to progress. To admit these failures is likely to be personally costly for black leaders, and may also play into the hands of lingering racist sentiments. Not to admit them, however, is to forestall their resolution and to allow the racial polarization of the country to worsen. If the new American dilemma is not dealt with soon, we may face the possibility of a permanent split in our political system along racial lines.

It is deeply ironic that this dilemma has arisen in the wake of the enormous success of the civil rights movement. In little more than a generation, the United States has changed from a country callously indifferent to the plight of its black citizens into one for which that plight is a central feature of our political life. A new middle class of well-educated and well-placed blacks has emerged, whose members can be found in technical, managerial, and professional positions throughout the leading institutions of the nation. Differences in earnings between young, well-educated black and white workers have diminished dramatically; and something approximating parity in economic status has been achieved for young, intact black families.

Yet, in general, even this class of blacks does not view itself as being in the American mainstream. There is a keen appreciation among blacks of all social classes that at least one-third of their fellow blacks belong to the underclass. There is no way to downplay the social pathologies that afflict this part of the black community. In the big-city ghettos, the youth unemployment rate often exceeds 40 percent. It is not uncommon for young men to leave school at age 16 and reach their mid-20s without ever having held a steady job. In these communities, more than half of all black babies are born out of wedlock. (In Central Harlem the most recently reported figure is 79.9 percent.) Black girls between the ages of 15 and 19 constitute the most fertile population of that age group in the industrialized world; and their birth rate is twice as high as any other group of women in the West. (See "Children As Parents," by Ann Hulbert, *TNR*, September 10.)

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The undeniable progress of the black middle class has been accompanied by the undeniable spread of these problems. Today nearly three of every five black children do not live with both their parents. The level of dependency on public assistance for basic economic survival in the black population has essentially doubled since 1964. About one-half of all black children are supported in part by transfers from the state and federal governments. Over half of black children in public primary and secondary schools are concentrated in the nation's twelve largest central city school districts, where the quality of education is notoriously poor, and where whites constitute only about a quarter of total enrollment. Only about one black student in seven scores above the 50th percentile on the standardized college admissions tests. Blacks, though little more than one-tenth of the population, constitute approximately one-half of the imprisoned felons in the nation.

Among those great many blacks who have entered the middle class in the past twenty years there is, understandably, a deeply felt sense of outrage at the injustice of conditions endured by the black poor. Somewhat less understandable is their reluctance to consider their own success as evidence of the profound change that has taken place in American attitudes, institutions, and practices. The position of poor blacks is perceived as being inherently linked to the racist past of the nation, as proving that the historic injustice of which Myrdal spoke still flourishes.

Moreover, middle-class blacks do not generally look to their own lives as examples of what has become possible for those blacks still left behind. Talented black professionals, who in decades past would have had scant opportunity for advancement, now, in the interest of fairness and racial balance, are avidly sought in corporate board rooms or on elite university faculties. Nonetheless they find it possible, indeed necessary, to think of themselves as members of an oppressed caste.

**T**HE GREAT MAJORITY of Americans do not see the situation of blacks in this way. Whereas black politicians and intellectuals consider the ghetto and all that occurs there to be simple proof that the struggle for civil rights has yet to achieve its goals, others are repelled by the nature of social life in poor black communities. Though most are too polite to say so, they see the poverty of these communities as substantially due to the behavior of the people living there. They are unconvinced by the tortured rationalizations offered by black and (some) liberal white spokesmen. They do not think of themselves or their country as responsible for these dreadful conditions. Most nonblack Americans know something of hardship. Most were not born wealthy; many have parents or grandparents who came here with next to nothing, and who worked hard so that their children might have a better life. Most aren't hostile or even indifferent to the aspirations of blacks. In fact they point with pride to the advancement that blacks have made, to the elaborate legal apparatus

erected since 1964 to assure racial fairness, and to the private efforts undertaken by a great number of individuals and institutions to increase black participation in their activities.

A recent Gallup poll conducted for the Joint Center for Political Studies, a black think tank in Washington, revealed the dimensions of the gulf between black and white perceptions. More than two out of three whites said they believe that "all in all, compared with five years ago, the situation of black people in this country has improved," compared to only about one in three blacks. Nearly one-half of the whites polled were "satisfied with the way things are going at this time," but only one-seventh of blacks were. One-half of blacks felt that "blacks should receive preference in getting jobs," compared to one in eleven whites. Some 72 percent of blacks but only 31 percent of whites thought of Ronald Reagan as "prejudiced."

The 1984 Presidential election made distressingly clear why this gap is not likely to be bridged. Two-thirds of all whites voted for Reagan, while nine-tenths of all blacks voted against him. And black leaders went beyond merely opposing the President. Roger Wilkins lambasted the Administration for engaging in a "concerted effort to constrict the democratic rights" of blacks, an effort which Coretta King said was aimed at "turning back the clock" on black progress. Benjamin Hooks declared that the Administration had to be "eliminated from the face of the earth."

It strains credulity to attribute Reagan's broadly based landslide to a resurgent racism among whites. Much broader forces are evidently at work—just as there are forces broader than racism sustaining and encouraging the social pathology of the ghetto. But black leaders, like their constituents, cannot seem to bring themselves to admit this. They prefer to portray the problems of the ghetto as stemming from white racism, and to foster racial politics as the primary means of fighting it. Within the Democratic Party, racial splits such as the one created by Jesse Jackson's Presidential candidacy or the civil war between Chicago Mayor Harold Washington and his white opponents may well be a sign of things to come. The already tense sparring between New York Mayor Ed Koch and his black foes could grow into bitter confrontation in next year's mayoral campaign. By casting their political battles in starkly racial terms, black leaders help to promote a racial schism in American political life, without necessarily addressing the most fundamental problems of their constituents.

**U**NFORTUNATELY, neither Democratic leaders nor Republican leaders nor black leaders have much incentive to prevent this political fracas from exacerbating the general racial division of American society. The Democrats, having just finished a campaign in which a quarter of the votes for Walter Mondale were cast by blacks, appear to have a big stake in the perpetuation of racial schism. Far from viewing the "color gap"

with alarm, Democratic strategists have come to depend on it. Yet under electoral pressure the Democrats have had to keep their distance from the black leadership. The Democrats' chief problem is how to maintain the enthusiasm of black supporters without alienating white supporters. Witness one of the central dilemmas of the Mondale candidacy: how to keep Jesse Jackson close enough to win blacks but far enough away to placate whites.

The Republicans and President Reagan cannot, in the short run, expect to win much support from blacks, no matter what they do. Moreover, any such overt appeal to blacks by Reagan would risk alienating the right wing of his constituency. Some right-wing Republican candidates are not above exploiting the vestiges of racism. (Jesse Helms, for example, managed to mention Jesse Jackson's name twenty-four times in a fund-raising solicitation during his recent reelection campaign.) Thus, from Reagan's point of view, the benefits of rapprochement will seem slight, and the costs as potentially great. Representative Jack Kemp's speech at the Urban League convention last summer—in which he made an overt appeal for black support, pledging to include the black poor in his "new opportunity society"—was a hopeful exception to the Republicans' indifference.

**B**UT OF ALL the actors in this drama, black leaders play the most important role, and the most problematic. The prevailing ideological cast of many prominent black leaders and intellectuals is considerably to the left of the national mainstream, and often of the black community itself. Because of the long history of racist exclusion, many blacks place group solidarity above mere philosophical differences when deciding whom to support. A black ideologue of the left (or, for that matter, of the right—Louis Farrakhan, for example) is almost immune from challenge by another black, since it is precisely in ideological terms that whites most often oppose him. By posing the challenge, the black critic seems to ride with whites against his own race. The black challenger may thus forfeit black political support if he expands his appeal to white voters by criticizing incumbent black leadership. The opposition of whites to the black incumbent is taken by other blacks as proof that he is "sticking it to the man," and thus deserves support. The black challenger winds up appearing, in the eyes of his own people, to be an agent of forces inimical to their interests.

As a result, many black leaders act in ways which exacerbate their isolation from the American political mainstream without fear of reproach by more centrist blacks. The way in which the Voting Rights Act has come to be enforced compounds the problem. To avoid redistricting battles in courts, legislatures routinely create overwhelmingly black, electorally "safe" districts for black incumbents. As a result, most nationally prominent black politicians do not require white support to retain their prominence. Those blacks who do require white

support—Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, for example—are discernibly closer to the center of the Democratic Party.

The results can be bizarre. Jesse Jackson actually campaigned in the Deep South urging local politicians to join his Rainbow Coalition so that, working together, they might enact the Equal Rights Amendment, eliminate state right-to-work laws, and secure a nuclear freeze. Most candidates running in the South on such a platform have short political careers. Lasting alliances between poor southern blacks and whites, if they are to emerge at all, will not emerge with this as the substance of the black politician's appeal. Yet southern whites who are repulsed by such "progressive" candidates are written off as racists. And the incentive for the emergence of a centrist black leadership which might someday achieve significant white support is diminished even further.

**P**HILOSOPHER Robert Nozick once gave a lecture at Harvard entitled, "Why Do Intellectuals Hate Capitalism?" and found one intellectual's answer scribbled on a poster announcing the talk: "Because we're smart!" One way black leaders might answer the question, "Why are you so undifferentiated in expressed philosophical perspective?" is: "Because we're smart"—smart enough to understand black interests and to uniformly recognize them to be well served by a left-liberal politics.

This argument, while not implausible, is not necessarily correct. An alternative explanation for the ideological posture of black leaders is this: the outcome of the internal struggles among black elites for leadership is sharply affected by the general perception of the black community on the quality of race relations. When most blacks think that things are going poorly for the group (as they do now), relatively radical forces in the leadership will be strengthened. When the American political establishment, liberal or conservative, reacts negatively to these radical leaders, it becomes all the more difficult for moderate blacks to challenge them.

This is what happened in 1984. Last summer Jesse Jackson's candidacy came under severe criticism from Democrats and Republicans alike. There was talk of not permitting him to speak at the Democratic Convention unless he repudiated Farrakhan. Conservative commentators were extremely critical of his post-primary junket to Central America and Cuba. At the convention, many blacks were disappointed by the limited concessions Mondale offered Jackson supporters. Their discomfort was enhanced by the adoption in Dallas of the most conservative major party platform in the last fifty years. As a result, the black leadership was fiercely critical of both Mondale and Reagan (for different reasons, of course), but virtually silent about some of Jackson's more extreme views. It would have required great courage for any black leader of prominence to publicly criticize, say, Jackson's foreign policy positions, or to publicly acknowledge the serious problem of black anti-Semitism

during the campaign—and virtually none did.

This alternative explanation accounts for two central features of black politics today that the "Because we're smart" retort cannot. First, it suggests why black political debate, though by no means non-existent, is so truncated. Consider that between 1965 and 1979 the number of low-income blacks who were victims of robbery rose by 1,266 per 100,000; among middle-income whites the increase was 359. But the residents of inner-city Detroit, who face one of the highest criminal victimization rates anywhere, regularly return to Congress John Conyers, who uses his position as chairman of the House Subcommittee on Criminal Justice to crusade against police brutality and white-collar crime, but spends little time publicly addressing the plight of the victims of street crime. No serious challenge to Conyers has ever been waged by a black attacking him for failing to represent the community's interest in reducing crime. Here is a case where, arguably, blacks' interests are not served by Conyers's traditional left-liberal perspective. What blacks in Detroit need is less, not more, uniformity of opinion.

What conceivable justification can black leaders offer for such limited debate among the victims of crime about Conyers's views on crime? To argue that ordinary black people identify with and excuse the criminals who brutalize them would be to plumb the depths of fatuity and condescension. And yet consider how the N.A.A.C.P., the largest and oldest civil rights organization in the country, characterizes the inner-city crime problem in the April 1983 issue of its magazine, *The Crisis*:

Blacks make up . . . 12 percent of the nation's total population . . . an incredible 50 percent of the total prison population . . . [but] only 4 percent of the nation's law enforcement personnel. . . . Why are so many blacks in prison and . . . so few blacks in law enforcement? One inescapable answer applies to both questions: racism. Superficially, it would appear that blacks commit more crimes than anyone else . . . [but the] only explanation for this . . . discrepancy is conscious choices of key decision makers to focus on crimes committed more frequently by blacks.

If the common ideology of the black leadership is this reticent to express principled opposition to the damaging criminal behavior of a relatively few young black men, it simply does not serve the welfare of blacks.

Second, the "Because we're smart" argument cannot explain the ubiquitous coolness that nationally prominent black politicians exhibit toward the defense of American interests abroad. The most vulnerable segment of the American population to any major setback abroad are the black inner-city poor. If vital raw materials become scarce, who will suffer first and most? If markets abroad disappear, if trading partners can no longer afford to buy our goods, who will be unemployed? Of course, factors beyond the narrow interests of constituents should determine one's foreign policy positions. Still, the answers to these questions are sufficiently uncertain that those advocating the interests of the inner-city poor would do well to consider them carefully.

Again, they do not seem to be doing so, which only widens the schism between blacks and the American mainstream. It is unhealthy that NBC correspondent Marvin Kalb could feel obliged to ask Jesse Jackson, before a television audience of millions, whether his loyalties were first to America or first to black people—especially when the answer was the latter. When Jackson ended his speech at the University of Havana with "Long live Cuba! Long live the United States! Long Live President Castro! Long live Martin Luther King! Long live Martin Luther King! Long live Che Guevara! Long Live Patrice Lumumba!" the clear suggestion was that Martin Luther King's movement and Che Guevara's movement are on the same moral and political plane. Such cavalier use of King's moral legacy will only squander it. And yet while the rest of the electorate gasps, blacks seem to slumber.

To be sure, ordinary black people feel a genuine ambivalence about their American nationalism. Blacks find themselves in America only because their ancestors were kidnapped and brought here as slaves. In the century following emancipation, black artists and intellectuals—whose legacy continues to exert a powerful influence on educated young blacks—found they could only gain freedom of action and the recognition for their accomplishments by exiling themselves. The complicity of the federal and state governments in sustaining Jim Crow laws and the de facto system of racial caste, and the ubiquity of racist assumptions and practices throughout American life have left deep scars. There can be no forgetting that Martin Luther King Jr. was hounded as a suspected enemy of the state by the F.B.I., even as he was helping to effect the nation's great moral awakening. Today, when the Reagan Administration seems to flinch from condemning the ugly racism of South African apartheid, it makes many blacks even more reluctant to embrace fully their American nationalism.

**T**HUS WHITE LEADERS too, if they do not seek to understand the nature and sources of black political alienation and respond sensitively to it, are in danger of making our racial dilemma worse. White Democrats and white Republicans who are elected to office without black support will be tempted, as all politicians are, to reward their friends (i.e., whites), and punish their enemies (i.e., blacks). If they succumb to this temptation, they will make it infinitely harder for black leaders to adopt positions that make mutual compromise and accommodation possible.

This is the great problem confronting President Reagan, as great in its own way as the deficit problem. Even in the absence of any short-term political gain, he must seek to reach out to the blacks and include them in his new majority. The President need not pretend to be a liberal Democrat. In a manner consistent with his social philosophy, he should act on the statement he made in 1982 to the National Black Republican Council: "No other experience in American history runs quite parallel to the black experience. It has been one of great hardships, but also of great heroism; of great adversity but also great

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achievement. What our Administration and our party seek is the day when the tragic side of the black legacy in America can be laid to rest once and for all, and the long, perilous voyage toward freedom, dignity, and opportunity can be completed, a day when every child born in America will live free not only of political injustice, but of fear, ignorance, prejudice, and dependency."

The President must recognize the damage that is done to the country by poor judgment in policy decisions of powerful symbolic importance. Two examples of this problem from Reagan's first term come to mind. The Administration appeared to support segregationist Bob Jones University in its efforts to gain a tax exemption; and it failed to give early support to a compromise version of the bill to extend the Voting Rights Act, and thus permitted itself to be portrayed as opposing the measure. Such mistakes served only to insult and further alienate a tenth of the population.

Reagan must also push with greater vigor and urgency those initiatives he already supports: enterprise zones, a sub-minimum wage for the hard-to-employ, ownership possibilities for responsible public housing tenants, and

support for the development of a strong black entrepreneurial class. He has to show he is willing to take some risks, and make some compromises to see that these and other initiatives are enacted. In his first term the President seemed reluctant to appear before black audiences—perhaps because he feared an ugly reception. Yet, by taking blacks seriously enough to directly seek their support, he can take the lead in healing the country's racial wounds.

Should Reagan be prepared to take these steps, a historic opportunity will present itself to the black leadership. The black underclass cannot afford another four years of wishful thinking from its leaders about the drift of political ideas in contemporary America. Those leaders must find the courage and wisdom to heed the growing signs of racial political isolation, and to seek accommodation and compromise. They need not become conservative Republicans. What is required is that black leaders, from a mature and varied set of ideological positions, adopt strategies consonant with the shifting political realities. Until they do so, the new American dilemma will be perpetuated by blacks and whites alike.

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## How preferential treatment works against blacks.

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# AFFIRMATIVE RACISM

BY CHARLES MURRAY

**A** FEW YEARS AGO, I got into an argument with a lawyer friend who is a partner in a New York firm. I was being the conservative, arguing that preferential treatment of blacks was immoral; he was being the liberal, urging that it was the only way to bring blacks to full equality. In the middle of all this he abruptly said, "But you know, let's face it. We must have hired at least ten blacks in the last few years, and none of them has really worked out." He then returned to his case for still stronger affirmative action, while I wondered what it had been like for those ten blacks. And if he could make a remark like that so casually, what remarks would he be able to make some years down the road, if by that time it had been fifty blacks who hadn't "really worked out"?

My friend's comment was an outcropping of a new racism that is emerging to take its place alongside the old. It grows out of preferential treatment for blacks, and it is

not just the much-publicized reactions, for example, of the white policemen or firemen who are passed over for promotion because of an affirmative action court order. The new racism that is potentially most damaging is located among the white elites—educated, affluent, and occupying the positions in education, business, and government from which this country is run. It currently focuses on blacks; whether it will eventually extend to include Hispanics and other minorities remains to be seen.

The new racists do not think blacks are inferior. They are typically longtime supporters of civil rights. But they exhibit the classic behavioral symptom of racism: they treat blacks differently from whites, because of their race. The results can be as concretely bad and unjust as any that the old racism produces. Sometimes the effect is that blacks are refused an education they otherwise could have gotten. Sometimes blacks are shunted into dead-end jobs. Always, blacks are denied the right to compete as equals.

The new racists also exhibit another characteristic of racism: they think about blacks differently from the way they think about whites. Their global view of blacks and

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