

THE HARD QUESTIONS

Double talk

It is no great secret that, thanks to the rapid growth of America's Latino and Asian populations, whites of European descent stand to become a minority in this country sometime in the next century. So when President Clinton invoked this demographic prediction as partial justification for his national conversation on race, few observers took notice. After all, Clinton was hardly the first to suggest that the nation's race problem was mostly a problem of Americans—primarily white Americans—coming to terms with the nation's growing diversity.

But is tolerating greater diversity, in general, really the issue? Given that the vast majority of Americans descend from people who were once outsiders—because of their language, religion or country of origin—what is so uniquely problematic about the fact that the nation's racial makeup is increasingly varied? This nation of immigrants has faced the problem of absorbing successive waves of foreign newcomers before. And, despite difficulties along the way, we have generally succeeded in meeting this challenge. On the other hand, we have been less successful in our efforts to incorporate the rural, Southern, low-caste peasantry that originated with the importation of enslaved Africans. For sure, we have made stunning progress. Over the last half-century, as a consequence of legal changes and shifting public attitudes, blacks have made dramatic advances in the areas of voting rights, access to jobs, educational attainment and general social prestige. Yet, as a cursory inspection of the nation's welfare rolls, special education classes and prison populations will reveal, there is a great deal of unfinished business here.

The tendency to conflate these two distinct issues—the increase in American diversity and the plight of black Americans—is mischievous, and it raises troubling questions about the direction of the president's race commission. It is the pariah status of the Negro in America—not really an alien population, more an indigenous yet profoundly alienated one—that has given the phenomenon of race its peculiar power in our political and cultural imaginations.

The very definition of the majority

against which these racial minorities are counterposed is, historically speaking, a product of the nation's confrontation with the African "other" in its midst. The European ethnics—the Germans, Irish, Jews, Poles and Slavs whose descendants make up the so-called "non-Hispanic white" majority—had merely to immigrate to American shores in order to become "white." Their socially constructed "whiteness" has its origins in the fact that their immigrant ancestors, however foreign, were not black.

In some ways, the Asian and Latin American immigrants of recent decades are even less "foreign" to our contemporary society than were the Eastern and Southern European newcomers who arrived early in this century. We have experienced no historically unprecedented difficulties in assimilating the largely non-European immigrants of the last quarter-century into American society. They are, on the whole, doing what previous waves of new Americans have done—they are finding their way, regardless of the continent from which they came.

Certainly their presence in growing numbers does not create a "burden of race" requiring presidential leadership to be dispelled. The clearest proof of this point is to be found in the statistics on intermarriage. The 1990 Census revealed that, among native-born, married Americans 25-34 years old, over two-fifths of Hispanics and one-half of Asians had spouses who belonged to a different ethnic or racial group. By contrast, fewer than 10 percent of married black men, and about 5 percent of married black women, have non-black spouses.

The race problem that deserves national attention concerns the bottom third of the black population, which is locked in ghettos at the center of our great cities and remains shut out from access to the engines of social mobility in our society. Consider that 42 percent of black children lived in poverty in 1995, a rate that has remained essentially unchanged for a quarter-century. And, while patterns of unwed childbearing among blacks are a principal cause of this depressing reality, the fact remains that a great many black youngsters never really have a chance to properly develop their God-given talents.

It is the internal migration of this indigenous peasantry—out of Southern agriculture and into the urban industrial centers of the Northeast and Midwest—that has presented us with an historically unprecedented problem of assimilation. It is this problem that should command

the attention and the energies of the president's ill-defined dialogue. Unless we candidly acknowledge that a pathological and debilitating subculture exists within our inner cities—a culture that robs its adherents of any chance to break away from their marginal status—we will be wasting our time.

Let us suppose that the president wants to provide genuinely historic leadership on this issue—that he is prepared to put aside his cliché-ridden "diversity" litany and to abandon his alarmist rhetoric about affirmative action. What, then, might the dialogue be about? For my part, I would urge Bill Clinton to consider the example of President Lyndon Johnson, who, in 1965,

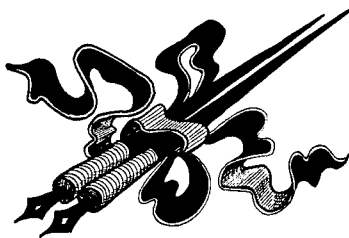
addressed the subject of race in a manner that, even to this day, remains a model of moral clarity and vision. In the most famous passage of that speech, Johnson launched the modern era of affirmative action by declaring: "You do not wipe away the scars

of centuries by saying: Now you are free to go where you want, do as you desire, and choose the leaders you please. You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, 'You are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair."

While the era of racial preferences may be nearing its end, what is refreshing, and still relevant, about Johnson's speech is its candid recognition of a diminished capacity among some blacks to compete effectively with others in society. This historically based, culturally transmitted, diminution characterizes too large a part of the black population, even to this day. One would not speak as Johnson did—in 1965 or today—about immigrants, or about white women, or even about the sons and daughters of the burgeoning black middle class. But there are now those among us for whom an argument of this kind remains compelling and on whose behalf it deserves, even today, to be made.

Perhaps President Clinton, master of the hard sell, could put this question to the "soccer moms" who re-elected him last fall: Do we Americans not bear some collective responsibility, as a society, for the debilitating, even degenerate, cultural milieus that exist among some of the descendants of slaves who live in our midst? This would be a dialogue worth pursuing.

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