

*America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* by Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom (Simon and Schuster, New York, ??pp., \$???)

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## I

That the United States of America, "a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," began as a slave society is a profound historic irony. The "original sin" of slavery has left an indelible imprint on our nation's soul. Hundreds of thousands were slaughtered in a tragic, calamitous civil war-- the price this new democracy had to pay to rid itself of that most undemocratic institution. But, of course, the end of slavery did not usher in an era of democratic equality for blacks. Another century was to pass before a national commitment to pursue that goal could be achieved. Meaningful civic inclusion even now eludes many of our fellow citizens recognizably of African descent. What does that say about the character of our civic culture as we move to a new century? For its proper telling, this peculiarly American story in black and white requires an appreciation of irony, and a sense of the tragic.

White attitudes toward blacks today are not what they were at the end of slavery, or in the 1930s. Neither is black marginalization nearly as severe. Segregation is dead. And, the open violence once used to enforce it has, for all practical purposes, been eradicated. We have made great progress, but we have a long way to go, and we are in deep disagreement about how further to proceed. The problem we have solved is the one Gunnar Myrdal described in his classic 1944 treatise, *An American Dilemma*. There, he contrasted America's lofty political ideals with the seemingly permanent second class status of the Negroes. This framing of the problem shaped the conscience of a generation of American intellectuals and activists coming to maturity in the years 1945-1960. Myrdal urged whites to choose the nobility of their ideals over the comfort of long standing social arrangements. In due course, they did, and that was a great achievement

Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom belong to that post-war generation of racial progressives who believed in Myrdal's vision, and struggled to see it realized. Like a great many others of similar bent, their interest in the subject proved abiding, but they grew ever more estranged from what the "progressive" position on racial issues came to represent. Stephan Thernstrom is the Winthrop Professor of History at Harvard, and a pioneer in the field of quantitative social history. He earned his reputation a quarter-century ago with the publication of *The Other Bostonians*, a now classic study of Boston's immigrant working class. His wife is the political scientist Abigail Thernstrom, best known for her 1987 book, *Whose Votes Count?* That prize-winning work offered a powerful and, in the view of many, compelling critique of federal voting rights law, as it evolved over the two decades following the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

For the past seven years, this superbly qualified team has labored to produce a comprehensive assessment of changes in American race relations in the half-century since the appearance of Myrdal's epic. *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* is the result. It is a large, ambitious book that combines historical narrative and data-driven policy analysis with trenchant social criticism. The three part text treats, respectively, the history of blacks from Reconstruction through the 1960s; economic, political and social progress for blacks over the last thirty years; and, recent, race-oriented public policies affecting education, voting, employment and government contracting. The final two chapters survey the current racial climate, and envision how American race relations might develop in the future.

*America in Black and White* is an important, learned, and searching statement on our age-old social dilemma. It unapologetically celebrates the racial reforms realized by the institutions of American democracy over the last two generations, using a before-and-after narrative to highlight how rapid and extensive the change has been. The argument, buttressed by some two thousand footnotes, rests on an impressive review of the scholarly literatures in history, law, and the social sciences. Even so, the well-crafted prose conveys mastery of the subject without lapsing into jargon. Indeed, the book often moves

seamlessly between commentary on current affairs and scholarly exegesis. Such accessibility is a virtue, of course, but given the authors' evident objectives it is also a necessity. For, more than a survey of social trends and a critical assessment of public policy, *America in Black and White* is also a passionately rendered manifesto, preaching what can fairly be called a conservative line on the race issue.

This is no sin. Nor can it come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the authors' opinion journalism over the past decade. Still, *America in Black and White* is, and seems very much intended to be, a combative book. Reading it, one cannot escape the impression that "the enemy" is being engaged. Although conceived long before President Clinton initiated his national dialogue on racial issues, the book's publication at this moment offers, in effect, an opening salvo from the Right in that proposed debate.

The "enemy" on whom the Thernstroms have fixed their sights is the latter-day public philosophy of racial liberalism--what economist Thomas Sowell once called "the civil rights vision." This is the notion that ongoing white racism is the main barrier to black progress, and that some kind of affirmative action is the appropriate remedy. Another key feature of the civil rights vision, as depicted here, is that it fosters undue race-consciousness by sustaining a sense of grievance among blacks of all classes--encouraging them to "play the race card." The authors pithily refer to this belief in the enduring power of race, following political scientist Donald Horowitz, as "the figment of the pigment."

The Kerner Commission's 1968 report, written in the aftermath of the great urban riots, was an early statement of this brand of racial liberalism. Social critic Andrew Hacker's book, *Two Nations: Separate, Hostile and Unequal*, which was a best seller in the wake of the Los Angeles riot of 1992, represents a more recent example of similar thinking. The Thernstroms' subtitle, *One Nation, Indivisible*, reads like a defiant rejection of Hacker, who, indeed, is not in their class. And, the authors take pains to argue (persuasively) that the Kerner Commission's gloomy forecast of racial apartheid, however plausible at the time, has been nullified by subsequent developments. These turn out to be soft targets. Nevertheless, a great many adherents of the civil rights vision remain at large among us, and the authors seem determined to ferret them out and to prove them wrong.

## II

The civil rights movement, as a force capable of shaping the moral and political sensibilities of the American public on questions of race, was all but finished a quarter-century ago. True, few who noticed were brave enough to say so at that time, but the gaping holes in the intellectual positions of racial liberals have been evident, and widely discussed, for over a decade now. It has been almost twenty years since William J. Wilson's seminal *The Declining Significance of Race*, or James Q. Wilson's incomparable *Thinking about Crime*. Sowell's *Ethnic America* appeared in 1981, Charles Murray's *Losing Ground* in 1984, Shelby Steele's *The Content of Our Character* in 1990. The reality of demographic transformation--the growing importance of Asian and Hispanic ethnics in the country's political culture--has marginalized black liberals in city after city. The prisons are stuffed to overflowing, largely with young black men, and nobody is talking about letting them loose. The federal welfare entitlement, on which a third of black children depend for their subsistence, was terminated in the last session of Congress. Busing is dead as social policy, and affirmative action is tottering.

Who doubts today that blacks have made stunning economic and social progress, relative to their condition before the second world war? Who denies that crime, drugs, poor school performance, and family instability are major barriers to upward mobility in the black lower classes? Who cannot see that racial preferences, minority business set-aside, race-norming of employment tests, and the like are on the way out? Racial liberals, that's who; and they muster voting majorities in only a very few places. The rest of us, including a great many Democrats, now take these positions for granted, by-and-large. So, there is a sense in which the Thernstroms are flogging a dead horse here, though, admittedly, there was more life in the horse when they started this project.

Which is certainly not to say there is nothing new in the voluminous, carefully presented evidence which they have amassed. Part One of the book is an often lyrically written and subtly argued historical

narrative recounting, respectfully but not uncritically, the tribulations and triumphs of American blacks from Emancipation through the 1960s. Woven through the chapters in Part Two is a wealth of evidence, unlike any I have seen elsewhere, on the progressive liberalization of racial attitudes among whites over the last half-century. There is also an exhaustive and valuable exploration of changes in urban residential segregation over the last thirty years, that breaks new ground. And there are, scattered throughout the text and notes, fresh interpretations and close readings of recent social trends (in black college attendance, and concerning the racial gap in academic achievement, for example) which specialists will find provocative.

But there is also a “black hat/white hat” approach to intellectual combat evident in this book. A great deal of effort is expended detailing how assorted usual suspects--the American Civil Liberties Union, academic racial liberals, the National Education Association, black civil rights activists, *The New York Times* editorial page, the loony Afrocentrist left--have with their good intentions only made things worse, or, with their bad intentions, threatened the integrity of our democracy. An oft-repeated theme in the presentation of data is that black failure, not white racism, is the real issue. A frequent assertion, as an article of faith, is that if the government would stop classifying its citizens on the basis of race, blacks would focus less on their racial identity, and socio-political conflicts involving race would be less severe.

While there is some plausibility--some truth--in all of these positions, they do not encompass the whole truth about our racial drama. Reading through these five hundred pages, one hungers for some allusion to the ironic, the paradoxical, and especially, the tragic elements in America’s enduring dilemma. Yet, the authors seem bent on refuting their opponents from the last decade’s culture wars--so much so that they fail to display the subtlety of thought and the generosity of spirit of which they are no doubt capable, and on which an appreciation of irony and tragedy depend.

There are, of course, some real “enemies” with responsibilities in real institutions, whose heads are filled with wrong ideas, and whose hands touch the lives of millions. Their erroneous beliefs richly deserve refutation. Moreover, it is true that some among the power elite--in the federal courts, the national press, the universities, and the Democratic Party--continue to credit the simpleminded civil rights vision, as described above. They, too, warrant criticism. But the larger truth is that a populist backlash against black claims was already evident in the 1970s. And, an intellectual backlash running through the 1980s has now gathered such steam that black unwed mothers, juvenile felons, and poor performing students have increasingly few persons in academic and policy circles concerned to promote their well-being.

*America in Black in White* relies on the creative survey work of Stanford political psychologist Paul Sniderman and his colleagues to argue that this defection of the white majority from racially liberal policy positions does not constitute evidence of their defection from a normative commitment to the ideal of racial equality of opportunity. This is relevant if the question is, “Are whites really as big a bunch of racists as the liberals say?” But, it is much less relevant when the question becomes, as it should, “What, then, must we do with and for the one-third or so of black America that seems to be permanently alienated from the structures of opportunity in this society?” It may be true, as the Thernstroms stress, that if blacks were more like Asians we would have less of a problem. But how is such a counter-factual observation supposed to help?

Being right about liberals having been wrong is an accomplishment, to be sure, but it is no longer good enough. Many among the black intellectual and political elites, are confused, angry, and scared. They lash-out unreasonably, they “play the race card” with abandon, and they long for the moral simplicity of an earlier time. This may be deplorable, but, under the circumstances, it is understandable. Harder to understand is why so many serious students of the race problem in this country are content to start and end their discussion with a demonstration of the fact that racial liberals are confused, angry, and scared. Fixation on this task distorts one’s ethical and scientific judgment; it is bad for the soul. This is a sin, one that is committed over and over again in this book. As a result, despite the many fine qualities which they bring to the task, the Thernstroms have in my view failed to produce a work worthy of Myrdal’s mantle, to guide our public discourse on racial matters into the 21st century.

*America in Black and White* projects a view of the woeful American tragedy now playing itself out in the black underclass which can be paraphrased, I think not unfairly, as follows: If many blacks languish, this is their own fault, raising no policy-relevant issue of racial unfairness. Work is available in the inner-cities; the immigrants can find it, why not the blacks? If the blacks would marry, if they would cut out their disruptive behavior inside school buildings, if they would just stop their lawbreaking, their prospects would brighten. If whites appear not to want to live near blacks, well, who can blame them. Certainly not a black middle class which has no interest in seeing its property values fall, either, making all this fuss about a "black community" dubious, indeed. If blacks would only let go of their racial fixations, abandon the "figment of the pigment," and take the risks of failure associated with unaided competition in American society, America's long struggle with the demon of race might finally come to an end.

While I do not agree with this view, I am not without sympathy for it. But, I believe it is too narrow, too inflexible, too ideological a way of thinking to ever produce genuine wisdom about our racial dilemma. This difference of opinion is, in the end, a matter of taste, or judgment; it does not rest on scientific evidence. But, one's outlook can influence powerfully which evidence one chooses to examine, and how one looks at it. There are times when I believe the Thernstroms' outlook distorts their analysis. Thus, it may be useful to critically review some ways the authors use their data to bolster their broader, thematic narrative. Necessarily, I can touch on only a few of the many topics taken up in *America in Black and White*. I hope not to distort the book's intended argument in so doing.

In their chapter on poverty, the authors describe the relationship between "black crime" (a "loaded phrase," they say, but one that is "hard to avoid") and black poverty as follows: Racial liberals think poverty causes crime. It is more probable that the opposite is true--that "the appallingly high level of black crime" causes poverty, because it discourages business activity in black communities, and leads employers to treat black males with suspicion, thereby increasing black unemployment. So liberals, who need to believe a simple morality tale about the causes of crime since they find the self-destructive reality of "black crime" too painful to face, get the story exactly backwards.

Now, the claim that poverty causes crime is questionable. But the speculation offered in this book that crime is a primary cause of poverty among blacks is weak as an empirical matter, and what is more, the authors' argument for it is logically inconsistent. They (rightly, in my view) dispute the "spatial mismatch" theory (that black unemployment is due to jobs moving from city to suburbs) but then, literally on the next page, they assert that, by driving business from the inner-cities, "black crime" contributes to black unemployment. Both claims cannot be true. Moreover, their hypothesis has been directly investigated, and rejected, in a recent econometric study. Using the High School and Beyond national longitudinal survey to test whether, controlling for the personal traits and family backgrounds of a sample of young adults in the 1980s, the crime level in a person's community affected his or her chances of being unemployed, the study concluded: "There is little or no evidence... that community crime... rates affect the probability of employment for blacks." (Steven Rivkin, "Black/White Differences in Schooling and Employment," *Journal of Human Resources*, Fall 1995, p. 826) In the end their account of black male joblessness as being largely determined by crime rates (and low test scores) strikes this reader as rhetorically effective, but intellectually unpersuasive.

In the same chapter, the authors cite studies finding that children living in single parent homes are more likely to fail in school or end up with juvenile criminal records. Most social scientists are, rightly, skeptical of such findings when the studies in question do not control for family incomes. It may be the absence of money, not of a father, which causes the bad outcome for the child. But the Thernstroms say it "makes no sense" to control for income, because the connections between single parenthood and poverty are so strong that holding income constant is "artificial." Why do they say this, when there are enough poor families with two parents, and non-poor families with one, that controlling for income is a routine, sensible statistical practice? The findings they cite actually survive such controls. But their argumentative tone persists:

It is possible that a careful study would show that college athletes perform as well in the classroom as nonathletes *if* you control for the number of hours per week they devote to studying. But if most

of them don't study nearly as much as other students, their GPA controlled for hours of study is not of great interest. What matters is how well they perform. Likewise, median income in 1996 was only \$15,004 for female-headed black families, little more than a third of what it was in black married-couple families. This is not a fact that should be obscured by controlling for other related factors.

This seems wrong-headed. Nobody is trying to "obscure" anything. Surely it *does* matter whether it is primarily less studying, rather than some other aspect of athletic participation, that depresses the football player's grades. For if it is, the proper response is to mandate an increase in his study time; while, if it is not, the only solution is for him to stop playing ball. Similarly, one wants to know whether a shortage of funds available to single mothers leads, in and of itself, to poor outcomes for their children because, if this were so, then more money for those mothers, with or without husbands, would help those kids.

I mean to do more here than quibble about methodology. The Thernstroms' fixation on refuting liberals can lead them astray on important matters of policy as well. Consider their discussion in the chapter on crime of the impact that a national war on drugs has had on black imprisonment. The number of black males in this country's prisons and jails has more than tripled since 1980. Many observers (including this one) are convinced that the anti-drug effort had only a minor impact on the price and availability of cocaine, but has been of major importance in increasing black incarceration. The authors deny this. While they "offer no brief for or against" the drug policy, they nevertheless claim that "critics who depict the War on Drugs as an unmitigated disaster for young blacks typically exaggerate its impact on black incarceration rates. As Table 2 demonstrated, African Americans are a bit less likely to be arrested for drug offenses than they are for most other crimes."

In fact Table 2 shows no such thing. It provides the per capita arrest rates of blacks *relative* to the population as a whole for various offenses, allowing one to see, for example, that in 1995 a randomly chosen black male was 2.9 times as likely to be arrested for a drug offense and 4.3 times as likely to be arrested for murder as a randomly chosen male from the general population. But this does not mean that, in *absolute* terms, fewer blacks were arrested for drug offenses than for murder. Indeed, just the opposite was true. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 1993 only 3 percent of persons newly admitted to state prisons had been sentenced for murder, but nearly 30 percent had been sentenced for drug offenses. What the authors assert about the relative significance of drug arrests is simply wrong.

Moreover, the direct evidence is overwhelming that the war on drugs, which intensified in the late 1980s, played a major role in the sharp rise in black incarceration that occurred during the same period. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that from 1985 to 1990 the number of people in the custody of state prison authorities whose most serious offense was drug-related (more relevant than arrest figures) skyrocketed from 38,900 to 148,600. At the same time, the number of black male adults held in prisons or jails rose from 309,800 in 1985 to 508,800 in 1990. Furthermore, two thirds of people committed to state prisons in 1992 for drug offenses were black. If this same proportion held during the late 1980s, then the growth of drug imprisonment accounted for more than one-third of the increase in black incarceration between 1985 and 1990, making it in all likelihood the single most important factor. We can, it would seem, safely dismiss the Thernstroms' dismissal of the "critics."

In their chapter on residential segregation, citing sociologist David Armor, the authors dispute the relevance of a number of careful empirical studies of housing discrimination that use "testers"--matched pairs of black and white couples who visit realtors to test whether they receive equal treatment. Such studies, on the whole, find evidence for a non-trivial degree of anti-black discrimination. The authors stress the point that these findings overstate the true extent of housing discrimination as experienced by blacks, since the testers distribute themselves uniformly across the housing market, while black home buyers tend to seek housing only in certain geographic areas, and not in others. Their conclusion, despite the testers' findings, is that housing discrimination is not an important factor in accounting for black/white residential segregation.

There appears to be an obvious conceptual flaw in this argument. Since black home buyers choose where to seek housing based in part on the treatment they expect in different locales, their *non-uniform* spatial distribution is itself, partly, a reflection of the discriminatory practices which the *uniformly* distributed testers have uncovered. For this reason, the testers' findings of discrimination ought not to be minimized. To illustrate, suppose a survey of supermarkets finds blacks overcharged for groceries at certain stores. Is it not likely that fewer black shoppers will visit those establishments? Who would then say that the finding of discrimination against black shoppers is of limited interest? Of course, our society has little at stake in where people shop; but segregated suburban residential patterns are, or should be, a much more serious matter.

The authors' review of trends in the academic achievement of black students serves well as a final illustration. This chapter is, in my view, a microcosm exemplifying the many strengths, and the great weaknesses, of this book. It tells hard truths unsparingly, but it also dwells too long on yesterday's battles. It contains insights deserving a wide reading, along with unfounded speculations that, in my opinion, are best ignored. Its selection and presentation of evidence is at times searching, and at other times tendentious and misleading.

The argument of the chapter runs as follows: The racial performance gap, as measured by a national test of students' knowledge, is huge. This gap had been closing until the late 1980s; it has now begun to widen sharply. Among the chief reasons for black students doing poorly relative to whites is that teachers and administrators do not challenge them to perform to the same standards as whites, perhaps out of a fear that they are incapable of so performing. An additional reason is the desire to achieve racial diversity in the teaching force, implemented through affirmative action hiring of black teachers ("can they teach what they don't know?" the authors wonder), and reflected in the opposition by powerful unions to teacher testing on the grounds that it adversely impacts blacks. Possible reasons that the downward trend in the gap between black and white students' performance reversed in the 1980s include: what the authors call "Afrocentric delusions" said to influence the curriculum offered black youngsters; aspects of black youth culture which create a situation where the "price of popularity" for black students is "to embrace the values celebrated in rap music;" and, a growing level of violence in the schools black youngsters attend. There is "no great mystery about how to get better academic results," they conclude: emulate the Catholic schools, with their emphasis on safety, discipline, and a no-frills curriculum.

Here are some problems with this argument. The complaint about opposition to competency testing is correct, in principle, but of limited relevance to the problem at hand. Legal challenges to these tests have been roundly defeated. Teacher competency testing is now widespread (43 states as of 1996), and it significantly limits the entry of blacks into teaching. Black pass rates are routinely under 50%, and according to Ronald Ferguson of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, most who fail the exam on the first taking never become teachers. It is highly improbable that the intellectual inadequacies of black teachers can account for the trend in the academic achievement of black students. After all, teacher testing swept the nation, keeping low scoring blacks out of the profession, during the mid-to-late 1980s, just about when the racial achievement gap among students began to widen. Moreover, black students are taught overwhelmingly by white teachers. Even in central cities, according to Linda Darling-Hammond of Columbia University, more than three-quarters of public school teachers are white.

Though this may not be the authors' intention, *America in Black and White* ends up casting unfounded aspersions on the abilities of black teachers as a group. Consider its treatment of affirmative action in the teaching profession:

In the 1993-1994 academic year... 7.4 percent of the teachers in the nation's public schools were African-American... African Americans constituted 6.2 percent of those (ages forty to forty-four) with bachelors degrees or more, so they were actually slightly overrepresented among classroom teachers. Moreover, they were more than a little overrepresented in the ranks of school principals. In 1993, 10.1 percent of all public school principals in the United States were African-American, a figure one-third larger than the 7.4 percent share of teaching posts that they held. Since principals are drawn from the ranks of teachers, this substantial disparity suggests that school authorities in a

great many American communities in recent years have given fairly strong preference to black candidates seeking to pursue administrative careers. Black teachers and principals thus have an edge in the competition.

What is odd here is that, should the numbers have shown a modest *under*representation of blacks, the Thernstroms would surely reject an argument of this form in behalf of the claim that blacks were victims of discrimination. That discrimination cannot be proved on the basis of aggregate statistics is one of the first lessons of labor economics. The authors proceed to cite anecdotal evidence to the effect that black education professionals are highly sought after, but this too proves little. Indeed, the evidence of any systematic bias in favor of blacks in the labor market is quite weak. Elsewhere in this book, the authors indirectly endorse this point by citing econometric studies which compare the earnings of blacks and whites. These studies have uniformly found that, once one controls for test scores, racial differences in the rewards to work are quite small, but usually favor whites. The authors fail to note that these very same studies provide evidence against the claim that, because of affirmative action, blacks are widely favored in the labor market. I am not saying no blacks benefit from preferential treatment. I am saying that scholars should be cautious about making this claim, and modest in the extent to which they impute large scale social developments to this particular cause.

So, the numbers cited here do not demonstrate that “fairly strong preference” has been given to black teachers and administrators. It is entirely possible that a greater preference for, or ability at, administrative work among black than white teachers, on average, could account for their 2.7 percentage point “overrepresentation” in the principal’s job. Consider that the age-distribution of black teachers is dramatically different from that of whites. According to the Patterson Research Institute of the United Negro College Fund, among female public school teachers in the 1993-1994 academic year, blacks were only 4.4 percent of those under 30, and fully 10.8 percent of those over 50. In fact, the growth of teacher competency testing, and the opening up of employment opportunities outside of teaching, have probably left blacks *underrepresented* in the ranks of newly entering teachers. (The number of black women earning bachelors degrees grew by over 50% between 1977 and 1994.) Moreover, the strong possibility is that the absence of alternative career paths for college-educated blacks in the past has something to do with their prominence among more senior teachers, and educational administrators. I believe the authors are chasing an affirmative action phantom here.

There are other problems. I carry no brief for Afrocentric education, particularly of the extreme variety cited in the book. But, it is hard to believe that this fringe development among black educators could play anything other than a very minor role in explaining broad trends in black students’ test scores. A fundamental fact which should be kept in mind here is that a large racial gap in academic performance is evident among young children in the earliest years of school. Within a given cohort of students, blacks start considerably behind whites, though this gap widens as the cohort matures. Moreover, a recent scholarly investigation of this question by Larry Hedges and Amy Nowell of the University of Chicago concludes that the racial test score gap among 12th graders has narrowed over time primarily because of changes in the socioeconomic status of black parents. Holding parental status constant, the gap has been essentially the same for a quarter-century. This leaves little room for black “delusions” as a causal factor.

In *America in Black and White*, the entire discussion of the relevance of racial identity for the teaching of black students reads more like a venting of spleen, than a serious analysis. How many kids are actually taught by the Afrocentrists? The authors have no idea. Does the trend in black test scores look any different in the states that have high concentrations of black students in urban settings, compared with states in which the black population is smaller and more dispersed? They don’t say. They just have a feeling that Afrocentrism must be damaging the education of black youngsters, and it may be. But in the context of a discussion of national trends, the claim is a real stretch. In a resounding declaration against their Afrocentric enemies, the Thernstroms announce that “Black children do not need therapeutic strategies” to boost their self-esteem. Perhaps. But how, one wonders, would they know?

That brings me to the issue of race consciousness. *America in Black and White* takes a very strong line in favor of what might be called “racelessness” for blacks (and whites.) They castigate a black high school student for referring publicly to “my people,” in reference to persons of African descent. “His people,” should be simply the American people, they suggest. Would that it were so. Public expressions of racial solidarity by blacks worry them. They call “racially divisive” the slogan one used to see on T-Shirts, “It’s a Black Think, You Wouldn’t Understand.” They go this far: The police in Boston, believing the story of one Charles Stuart, a white man who alleged his wife had been killed by a black, laid down an invasive dragnet in a largely black community seeking the killer. Later it was learned that Stuart, himself, had slain his wife. The Thernstroms argue in this context that the police credulity was understandable, in part because rap music lyrics declare all whites to be the enemy, and worthy objects of black violence.

The Thernstroms know that race relations are not at a happy juncture in America these days. They discuss the O.J. Simpson trial, source of much recent racial disharmony, at length. (All they find to say about that massive expression of race consciousness, the 1995 Million Man March, which drew hundreds of thousands of black men to the nation’s capital, is that the Minister Louis Farrakhan, who called the march, gave a “bizarre speech.”) Their diagnosis of the problem places great weight on what may now be an outmoded syllogism, originally proposed by Shelby Steele: Blacks and whites are supposedly locked into a relationship of mutual psychological dependence, and reciprocal cognitive dissonance. Blacks fear they may be inferior. Whites fear they may be racists. Blacks want status achievement while avoiding true competition, which might reveal their inferiority. Whites want to avoid a confrontation with black claimants over the terms on which black status rests, so as not to appear to be racists. Blacks convey approval to whites, certifying them as morally fit; and whites provide status to blacks, protecting them from the reality of their competitive inadequacies.

This purported symbiosis accounts for blacks’ aggressive displays of their sense of grievance. Thus:

The relentless pretense that almost all whites are an enemy, that white racism remains a constant, serves a purpose. It invites whites who are nervous about their racial rectitude to remain supplicants. The result is an unending game (black anger, white guilt) in which the white score is always zero, and the illusion of power is bestowed upon a group whose members seem to live in constant fear that their hard-earned status is not quite real--that they remain the “invisible” men and women they once so clearly were.

This was a new insight a decade ago. It has not worn well with the passing of years, however. Events like the publication of *The Bell Curve*, the 1994 elections, or the passage in California of ballot Proposition 209 raise questions about the power of white guilt to drive political culture in this country. Is it not enough to cast an eye over the scene unfolding in inner-city America in order to grasp that blacks have real reasons to be angry, and that the white score in the game that counts may be positive after all?

The authors of *America in Black and White* blame the existence of affirmative action--in college admissions, in the drawing of voting districts, in employment--for the excess of race consciousness among blacks. This, they say, gives blacks an incentive to sustain their belief in “the figment of the pigment.” The authors consider doing away entirely with the use of racial categories by official government bodies in the collection of economic and social statistics, but ultimately reject that idea. They note that a group of big city mayors recently asked the U.S. Attorney General to cease collecting crime data by race because this information was of no use to policy, and it fostered harmful stereotypes. These officials reasoned, not without some basis in experience, that if people see that most criminals are black, they may come to think that most blacks are criminal. The Thernstroms chide these mayors for inconsistency, saying the mayors want the bad racial news suppressed, but welcome the collection of employment or educational data which show blacks underrepresented in some desirable pursuit:

The crime statistics had wonderfully concentrated the mayors’ minds. Momentarily, at least, they recalled what liberals had always believed until the late 1960s but had chosen to forget when they were converted to affirmative action: racial classifications perpetuate racism. The mayors did not



object to racial body counts on principle, as liberals once had. They were simply troubled by the publication of statistics that made African Americans look bad.

There is, in my view, a great deal wrong with this posture, more than one can detail here, though I shall try. The fundamental problem is the absence of a sense of tragic irony concerning the role that racial stigma plays in our society and culture. Perhaps I could put it this way: It's not the *figment of the pigment*, it is the *enigma of the stigma* that drives our drama in black and white. Why can the authors not see the difference between the collection of data to identify racial differences in opportunity, and the collection of data calling greater public attention to "black pathology"? Is their "color blind" principle so brittle that it cannot accommodate a concern about high black poverty rates, while at the same time avoiding the racial stereotypes evoked by phrases like "black crime"? That a successful, middle class black man in this country cannot purchase and sell a home, raise and educate his children, or pursue his life's work, without having constantly, and in innumerable ways, to deal with the stigma of race surely has something to do with the survival, in that man's mind, of a fealty to "his people." If you want him to abandon the figment of the pigment, why not lend a hand at dispelling the enigma of the stigma?

The case for racelessness made in this book is abstract, divorced from the texture of social life in the country, made mainly in the service of a color-blind policy argument, and, ironically, ahistorical. The authors like Colin Powell, and so do I. He is, for them, the black-who-doesn't-harp-on-being-black presidential candidate, whose high electoral prospects in 1995 showed that the country was ready to move beyond race. Yet, if one reads Powell's autobiography, and his revealing interview in the *New Yorker*, or if one spends time talking to him as I have done, one discovers that consciousness of race is at the very core of his being. He knows, and freely says, that but for being black he would never have risen to his position; and, having so risen, would never have commanded the political interest which he did. That he is not a race-monger is to his credit. But his biography is no brief for racelessness, quite the contrary. Indeed, just about every effective strategy of which I am aware being carried out in poor black communities to combat the scourges of violence, low academic achievement, and family instability builds positively upon the kind of ethnic consciousness which Powell's biography exemplifies. There is remarkably little in *America in Black and White* about such positive race consciousness.

In order to move beyond race, we must first take race into account. This is the sentiment made famous by Justice Harry Blackmun in the 1978 *Bakke* case, which permitted the practice of affirmative action in public higher education. The opposing notion is that our Constitution is color-blind, making no distinctions among persons on the basis of race. So Justice John Marshall Harlan claimed, in his lone dissent in the 1896 *Plessy* case, which found Jim Crow segregation to be constitutional. Legal scholars, Left and Right, think this debate is about reading the text, and finding constitutional truth. The Thernstroms do a fair amount of that, on the conservative side of course, and the "truth" that emerges is what one would expect. But, argument about the legality of the government's use of race only scratches the surface, because it fails to deal with the manifest significance of race in the private lives of Americans, black and white. I agree with the Thernstroms that the institutionalization of racial preference over the last generation has done harm, to blacks and to the country. There is need for serious reform. But, I find simplistic in the extreme their invitation to blacks to, in effect, "just get over it."

As I have said, this American story of black and white must be told with a keen awareness of irony, and a sense of the tragic. It is ironic that a statue named *Liberty* oversaw the arrival in New York's harbor of millions of foreigners, "tempest tossed" and "yearning to breathe free," even as black Southern peasants--not alien, just profoundly alienated--languished, unfree, at the social margins. It is surely ironic that a racist ideology openly questioning the Negro's human worth, shaping whites' views of blacks and blacks' views of themselves, survived our defeat of the Nazis and abated only when the Cold War rivalry made it intolerable that the "leader of the free world" should be seen to preside over a regime of racial subordination. And now, in part, surely, because of this ignoble history, some black districts in the middle of our great cities vie for the dubious distinction of being the most despairing places in the industrial world. Meanwhile, political and intellectual elites respond by giving increasing voice to their weariness with the race issue, pointing to the comparative success of recent non-white immigrants, and longing for the coming of a post-racial America. This has the makings of national tragedy.

In the brave, new dispensation, “color“ is supposed to be irrelevant, yet everywhere we look in America, people are attending assiduously to race. The most recent U.S. Census revealed that, among married persons 25 to 34 years old in 1990, 70 percent of Asian women, 39 percent of Hispanic women, but only 2 percent of black women had white husbands. Talk about the threat of “black crime” is a staple in suburbia. Racially mixed church congregations are so rare that they make front page news. So culturally isolated are black ghetto teens that linguists find their speech patterns to be converging across great geographic distances, even as this emergent dialect grows increasingly dissimilar from the speech of poor whites living but a few miles away. Conservative advocates of school vouchers--ever opponents of affirmative action but aware that the persuasiveness of their demonstration is enhanced by the race of its beneficiaries--select impoverished black, not white, communities in which to showcase the virtues of choice. Childless white couples travel to Columbia and Viet Nam in search of infants to adopt, while ghetto-born orphans go parentless. True enough, some blacks have tried to impede transracial adoptions. But, more pertinent is the fact that, across the board, the social pitfalls facing adoptive parents are greater for black-white than for other mixed-race families, and this discourages white adoption of indigent black babies.

This litany is not a brief for color-conscious public policies, nor do I intend it as a blanket indictment of American society for being irredeemably racist. What the examples illustrate is how deeply imbedded in the social consciousness of our nation is the racial “otherness” of blacks, and how important can this inherited stigma be for determining the extent of black opportunity. Astute external observers have always stressed this. In *Democracy in America*, De Tocqueville remarked about early nineteenth century America that “the prejudice which repels the Negroes (causes) inequality (to be) sanctioned by the manners while it is effaced from the laws of the country.” A century later, observing Southern society in the 1930s, Gunnar Myrdal stressed the importance of what he called a “vicious circle,” in which black failure justified for whites the very prejudicial attitudes that, when reflected in social and political action, led to black marginalization, and thereby helped to cause black failure. It is my conviction that subtle and complex social processes of this kind are at work among us, even today; and, that we desperately need intellectuals able to analyze such tragic, self-perpetuating processes, while keeping their moral balance, and avoiding the ideological cant of either left or right.

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