

BLACK AND WHITE IN THE NEW CENTURY

Many of us remember being told that politics, religion and sex were not appropriate topics for a social gathering. Today, those are often the first topics the young wish to discuss, unless it is sports or entertainments, which really interest them.

Today, “race” and “social class” are the taboo subjects, so sensitive and controversial that a veil of discreet silence has been drawn over them.

We find little open discussion, no frank exchange of views on topics of immense importance. As a result, there is no forthright dispassionate examination of social policies that have succeeded (and why), that have failed (and why) or that have been counterproductive (and why).

Tonight I would like to present some observations that may prove thought provoking and which, like a bright flame, give maximum light with minimum heat.

I believe that there are three keys to understanding race relations in America today.

First is the realization that, historically, revolutions take place not when conditions are worsening but when they are improving, although not quickly enough.

Second, just as W.E.B. Du Bois noted that the problem of the 20th century was “the color line,” he might note today that the problem of the 21st century is “self-identity.”

The third key is an awareness that the philosophical and psychological differences across the racial divide are deeper and more emotional than most of us imagine.

At the start of this new century, white Americans look complacently, even smugly, at how far we've come; many black Americans look resentfully, even hostilely, at how far we have to go. Optimistic whites extrapolate into the future the progress that has been made; apprehensive blacks fear a backlash that will deprive them of what they have. Thoughtful observers understand the power of a self-fulfilling prophecy and pray that all parties will think and act constructively.

For the short run, at least, the prospects for a color neutral society-to which non-blacks look forward with hope, but which growing numbers of blacks believe is impossible-appear to be receding.

A visitor from outer space, considering our present social turmoil, might report home on insensitivity and even obtuseness on the white side and cynicism and even paranoia among blacks, compounded by a condition called "political correctness" which substitutes polite non-communication for meaningful discourse which could mitigate problems, if not solve them.

Let's start with the first premise-that of progress for those middle class blacks able to avail themselves of current opportunities.

- Between 1970 and today, the number of black college professors more than doubled, the number of black physicians tripled, the number of black engineers almost quadrupled and the number of black attorneys is up more than six fold.
- The U.S. Department of Education reports that in 1997 (the latest figures available) there were 1,551,044 blacks enrolled in the nation's colleges, comprising 10.7% of all students. Of these, 131,000 were in graduate schools.
- The number of doctoral degrees earned by black Americans increased from 787 in 1987 to 1,467 in 1998.
- The percentage of blacks on college faculties nationally stands at 4.9%, with Columbia University at 7.2% and Emory

University at 7.1%.

- Black students make up 13.2% of law school enrollment at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and over 11% at the law schools of the University of Illinois, Columbia University, University of Southern California, Vanderbilt, George Washington and Duke.
- Black law faculty are 12.5% at Duke, 12.5% at the University of Illinois, 10% at Columbia and 10% at Stanford.
- Nearly 58% of all black American college students are enrolled full time, almost identical to the rate for white students.
- In World War II, blacks served in segregated military units. Today, not only has the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs been black, but so are 11% of all U.S. Army officers with 58 black generals on active duty, comprising 8.5% of all Army generals. Throughout the military, blacks routinely supervise whites without comment or incident.
- Black students compose 8% of the cadets at the U.S. Military Academy, 6% at the U.S. Naval Academy and 4.9% at the U.S. Air Force Academy.
- In 1940, 60% of employed black women worked as domestic servants. In 1999, that number was 2.2%; and 60% of employed black women today hold white-collar jobs.
- In 1963, 50% of whites told the Gallup Poll that they would relocate if a black family moved next door; today slightly more than 1% tell that to the pollsters.
- In government today, the Congressional Black Caucus has 40 members (out of 435 Representatives) and President Clinton's administration has an all-time high of nearly 400 black Americans in senior positions. In 1998, 445 blacks served as U.S. mayors, several in the nation's largest cities; and the black political figure, Douglas Wilder, served as Governor of Virginia, whose capitol, Richmond, was the seat of the old Confederacy.
- Marriages between blacks and whites have more than tripled in the last 30 years, and in 1990 some 6% of black households

had non-black spouses.

- The proportion of black families earning more than \$75,000 annually (adjusted for inflation) has tripled since 1970, reaching 9%.
- The number of blacks with a net worth of \$10 million or more has skyrocketed; some, like Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan and Bill Cosby, have net worth in nine figures.
- While only a twinkling of an eye ago no blacks were seen in the higher reaches of the business world, today black Americans serve as President or Chairman of mega- corporations such as American Express, Time-Warner, Maxwell House Coffee, Avis Rent-a-Car, Godfathers Pizza and Maytag, among others.
- Between 1982 and 1992, the number of black police officers nationwide more than doubled, to reach 60,000. The nation's 50 largest police departments increased the number of black officers by nearly 500%, and black police chiefs or commissioners have been appointed in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Detroit, among others.
- The unemployment-rate today of college-educated black men is just over 3%.

While black two-parent families have lower incomes than comparable white families, the income differential is now 13%, a figure that is significant, but not earth-shattering.

These statistics reflect the condition of those black Americans able to take advantage of what our society now offers. They have completed their education through college, have married and have embarked on fruitful careers.

I believe that if the black leadership of half a century ago (A. Philip Randolph, Whitney Young, Walter White, Roy Wilkins, Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King, Jr.) heard these numbers -and only these numbers - they would exult, and say, "We did it! We ushered in a Golden Age for our people!"

But, of course, we all know that these are not the only statistics

we have about black Americans. The other set of numbers relates to those who have not been able to take advantage of what society has to offer. Those numbers are horrendous.

No one in this room can paint a clearer picture than can I of the heartbreaking educational failures, criminal justice encounters, health disparities and social pathologies of those who have been “left behind.”

If those numbers only were to be shown to the black leaders of half a century ago, they would be appalled. And when they learned that over ONE TRILLION DOLLARS had been spent by our government on well-intentioned social programs over the last decades, they would ask with bewilderment, “What went wrong?”

What would we tell them? Concerned people should ponder that question, ask what lessons have been learned and where we should go from here.

Now we turn to the second key to understanding our present social scene, the question of personal identity.

As individuals, we each must struggle with the question of “Who am I?” We have multiple, complex identities; and the ethnic factor is one of many.

Erik Erikson, who coined the term “identity crisis,” knew that we all need a positive sense of self, that we all can be open to feelings of alienation or self-doubt or self-hate, and that we all struggle with the concept of authenticity. This is a universal problem of our time and no one group has a patent on it.

The problem of creating a positive sense of self was hard enough for the immigrant Irish, the Italians and Jews. When marginal social status is compounded for blacks by skin color discrimination, the challenge to overcome a lessened sense of self is compounded, but as a society, we must learn to overcome it.

Few whites can understand fully the destructive psychological effect of racial disparagement or harassment, or the inadvertent racist signals our society routinely sends out.

Facing the problem of racial prejudice squarely, analyzing it, dis-

cussing it and acting on it are things that we all must do. And helping each individual to understand himself and live comfortably with himself is a continuing and long-term challenge.

As for “group identity,” we have three distinct American models, the first being the Amish (or Pennsylvania Dutch) who reject and turn their backs on mainstream society; the second is the German, who have been totally assimilated into the mainstream, with no remaining distinctive identity; and the third is those groups who make appropriate accommodation with mainstream mores, but retain a distinctive identity.

The Amish want nothing from the rest of the world and ask only to be left in peace.

The German Americans (who, according to U.S. census figures, constitute the largest single ancestral group in the United States) have blended so completely that no one today thinks of President Dwight Eisenhower or of General Norman Schwarzkopf as German. The only German cultural impact left is in words like “kindergarten” or “delicatessen”; today in all of New York City one is hard-pressed to find a decent sauerbraten or a genuine apple pancake. So far as German Americans are concerned, they are no longer German.

The rest of us, who don’t want to isolate ourselves like the Amish or disappear like the Germans, just muddle through.

Black commentators often see the world in black/white terms; white Americans see a nation in which Latinos and Asians combined will soon outnumber all other groups. Furthermore, while black commentators usually see the white world as a homogeneous and hostile whole, white Americans know their world consists of John Cardinal O’Connor and the Lubovitcher Rebbe, Boston brahmins and Mississippi rednecks, the Marlboro Man and Woody Allen, the KKK and the ACLU.

Heavy immigration and steadily increasing rates of intermarriage among ethnic groups are creating a society in which Tiger Woods will soon be a more common model than Jackie Mason or Archie Bunker. Will the child of a Kennedy/Cuomo marriage think of him/herself as

Irish, Italian, both or neither?

Today, law professor Lani Guinier publicly identifies solely with her black father; how much more interesting and socially productive might it have been had she identified strongly with her Eastern European Jewish mother as well? It would serve to highlight today's social complexity.

Self-identity will be the problem of the 21st century, for us as individuals and as members of groups, and our answers over time will be many and varied. Perhaps the focus will turn from what divides us to what unites us. It seems likely that public sentiment, interpretations of law, and government interventions will over time acknowledge economic rather than ethnic difference; and that may weaken minority group cohesiveness. But we will still have to ask, "Who am I?"

The third key to understanding today's social situation is awareness of the profound philosophical and psychological differences across the racial divide and the depth and intensity of feelings about them; on that, I can only nod sadly and silently.

The unasked questions, the unexamined premises, the painful misunderstandings and confusion on all sides, are the fearful penalty we pay for our inability to communicate.

To advance the discussion along non-controversial lines, I would like to point out two situations from which valuable lessons can be learned.

The first is the condition of destitute whites in the Appalachian coal fields and hollows of West Virginia and in the Yazoo Delta of Mississippi; the second is the remarkable, but generally unanalyzed and undiscussed record of success of recent arrivals in New York City from African countries such as Gambia and Ghana, Senegal and Sierra Leone.

In Appalachia and in the Mississippi Delta, submerged white populations have been studied by Ken Auletta and described in his book *The Underclass*. Cynthia Duncan's recent book, *Worlds Apart-Why Poverty Persists in Rural America*, confirms Auletta's observations and conclusions.

The same lack of exposure to the world of work, the same violence

in the home, the same absence of positive role models, the same dependency and rage at a degrading welfare system, the same lack of self-confidence, the same sense of hopelessness and despair, the same weakened family structure and prevalence of female-led families, the same hostility or passivity, the same poor work habits and low self-esteem, the same alcoholism and drug addiction prevail in those rural settings as in many urban areas.

Both Auletta and Duncan note that those submerged whites who somehow make it to college join mainstream America, while those who do not enter college tend to stay mired in poverty. If we can solve the problems of Appalachia, the lessons can be applied elsewhere.

The other case worthy of study is that of recent arrivals from Central or Western Africa who come to New York City seeking better lives for themselves and, more significantly, for their children. Like other immigrants, these recent arrivals take any jobs offered, no matter how arduous or low paid. They save their money, pool their savings, and invest them in the purchase of taxi medallions, the opening of small restaurants and clothing stores or the starting of small service businesses. Their housing conditions are terribly over-crowded with newly arrived friends or family members, but in due course they move up to improved accommodations. Most important, they know that education is the key to their children's success. They not only encourage their children to perform well, but they themselves try to learn along with the children. As a result, the children of recent arrivals from Africa frequently outperform in school the children of longtime U.S. residents.

The sharp contrast between the upward mobility of recent African immigrants and the stagnation of Appalachian whites should give pause to those who still confuse attributes of "social class" with those of "race."

Economist Gary Becker, who won the Nobel Prize for his groundbreaking work on "human capital," writes, "Schooling raises earnings and productivity mainly by providing knowledge, skills and a way of analyzing problems; ... [for potential employers] degrees and educa-

tion convey information about the underlying abilities, persistence and other valuable traits of people.” The highly regarded *Journal of Blacks In Higher Education* says bluntly, “Completion of higher education accomplishes more than any other force in our society to close the personal success gap between blacks and whites.”

Twenty-first century American society will be multi-ethnic, highly technical and highly credentialed; the painful economic and social gap between the less-skilled and more-skilled will increase. Those members of any group with college degrees and appropriate social capital are destined to prosper in the mainstream and those without them will struggle at the margins of society.

Machiavelli observed that in the Bible the armed prophets succeed, but the unarmed ones fail. Today, he could say the same about a college education and he would be correct.

And helping inner-city children to and through college is the mission of the Harlem Educational Activities Fund. (www.heaf.org)

*Pierson College Fellows Forum
Yale University
April 5, 2000*