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OPINION ■ COMMENTARY

The president must take the lead in addressing the race question

WASHINGTON — The Army's attempt to confront its problems with sexual harassment is being enormously complicated — and perhaps compromised — by accusations that it is being driven by racism.

This is not surprising. Charges of racism have become a common element of controversial situations that seem to juxtapose whites in positions of authority against blacks as victims — even when the evidence of racism is as flimsy as, for example, it was in the O. J. Simpson murder trial.

President Clinton has signaled that he intends to confront the broad problem of race relations in America today, perhaps with the appointment of a blue-ribbon study commission or a series of

GERMOND & WITCOVER

speeches or a special White House conference.

The charges of racism have not been limited to the military. Many black politicians have been convinced that there has been a racist pattern in investigations of corruption charges against mayors and other elected officials.

In some cases, those suspicions appear to have some solid foundation. In others, they do not. But the effect is to cast doubt on the validity of many of the corruption cases without regard

to whether they were reasonable or not. The same result is likely in the cases involving the military — a cloud of suspicion hanging over everything.

The Army's campaign to deal with sexual misconduct in the ranks has offered an obvious opening to those, including such prominent African-American politicians as Rep. Maxine Waters, who choose to raise the racism issue. Most of the cases have involved black noncommissioned officers and white recruits.

Convincing evidence

The evidence in some of these cases appears substantial. The evidence against Staff Sgt. Delmar G. Simpson at the Aberdeen Proving Ground appeared to both the jury and outsiders to be extremely convincing. Simpson was sentenced to 25 years in a

military prison after being convicted of raping six women.

But his lawyer and some politicians have depicted the case as based on racism — a charge not likely to have been made if the races of the drill instructor and the young women under his command had been reversed. But it is also a charge that might not have been made if any white drill instructors also faced similar charges at the same time.

No one who knows anything about the military imagines this is a problem peculiar to African-American NCOs. But it is difficult for other African Americans to accept the idea that the fact only blacks have been charged is the luck of the draw rather than the product of racist policy — even though Secretary of the Army Togo West is himself an African American. Both whites

and blacks know that the upper echelon of all the armed services is still predominantly white.

The situation has been further complicated by the Army's bringing charges against its most senior enlisted man, Sgt. Major of the Army Gene C. McKinney. He has been accused of adultery with one woman and propositioning three others. Citing the fact that he is black and the four women white, Sergeant McKinney issued a statement that race is "driving this investigation and the way it is being conducted."

Public-relations standpoint

A spokesman for the Army investigators disputed that, but perhaps the Army would have been better off, at least from the public-relations standpoint, if the accused and his accusers had been of the same race.

In a better world, the race question wouldn't be as omnipresent as it seems to be today in so many areas of American life. But African Americans suffer from discrimination often enough that it isn't surprising that they believe it is a driving force even more often.

No one has a better bully pulpit than the president to take the lead in confronting the race question. It is a touchy business with all sorts of obvious political hazards to be skirted. But this is just the kind of issue on which a strong national leader can make a critical difference to his constituents of all races.

Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover report from The Sun's Washington bureau.

Clifford Alexander

Declare War on Bigotry

Each day we hear more about President Clinton's desire to have a positive effect on race relations in the United States. He has gingerly put his toe in the water and found it gentle and soothing.

He spoke at Shea Stadium about an American hero, Jackie Robinson, on the 50th anniversary of his breaking baseball's color barrier. He apologized on May 16, 1997, to the few surviving victims of the inhumane, government-sponsored Tuskegee syphilis experiment. On both occasions he sounded caring and eloquent, as he has when he preaches in black churches.

But his words would have much greater import if he spoke instead in white board rooms to those who can really bring about change. The president should urge those corporate leaders, bully them, convince them of what is in the best interest of corporate America.

Sadly, however, Bill Clinton still does not get it. If he wants to be a champion of justice, he must show courage and impatience. He must

become downright ornery with those who perpetuate bigotry in our society.

Much difficult work needs to be done. This country still perpetuates a negative image of black people. We are the poverty "problem," or at least television says so. Twenty-nine percent of America's poor are black, but when television shows us poverty, 65 percent of the faces are black. African Americans still can't hail a cab, acquire and progress in a job, or rent an apartment where they choose with the same ease as white Americans. Only one black man and one black woman have occupied United States Senate seats in the 20th century.

Bill Clinton's mission, should he accept it, is different, and requires a courage he has yet to display. He needs to utilize government power against those who discriminate in the workplace. He should stop pussyfooting about affirmative action and support it fully, while he

eradicates the few abuses of racial preferences that are present in federal programs.

He must go right in the face of bigots on condominium boards in New York City as well as those who restrict the black poor to our urban ghettos. When public accommodations do not serve black people, we should see Bill Clinton take to the bully pulpit.

But most of all, he must do more than acknowledge that there still is a problem and tell us that he feels our pain. He must look and act like a president who really wants and expects to do something to change business-as-usual right away. Black people have been patient too long. White people, particularly white leaders, need to show their contempt and impatience with the many pockets of bigoted behavior that still exist in 1997 America.

No more learned studies are required. It is not about black and white people hand in hand

singing "We Shall Overcome." It is about leadership—leadership that takes on bigoted behavior and punishes its perpetrators.

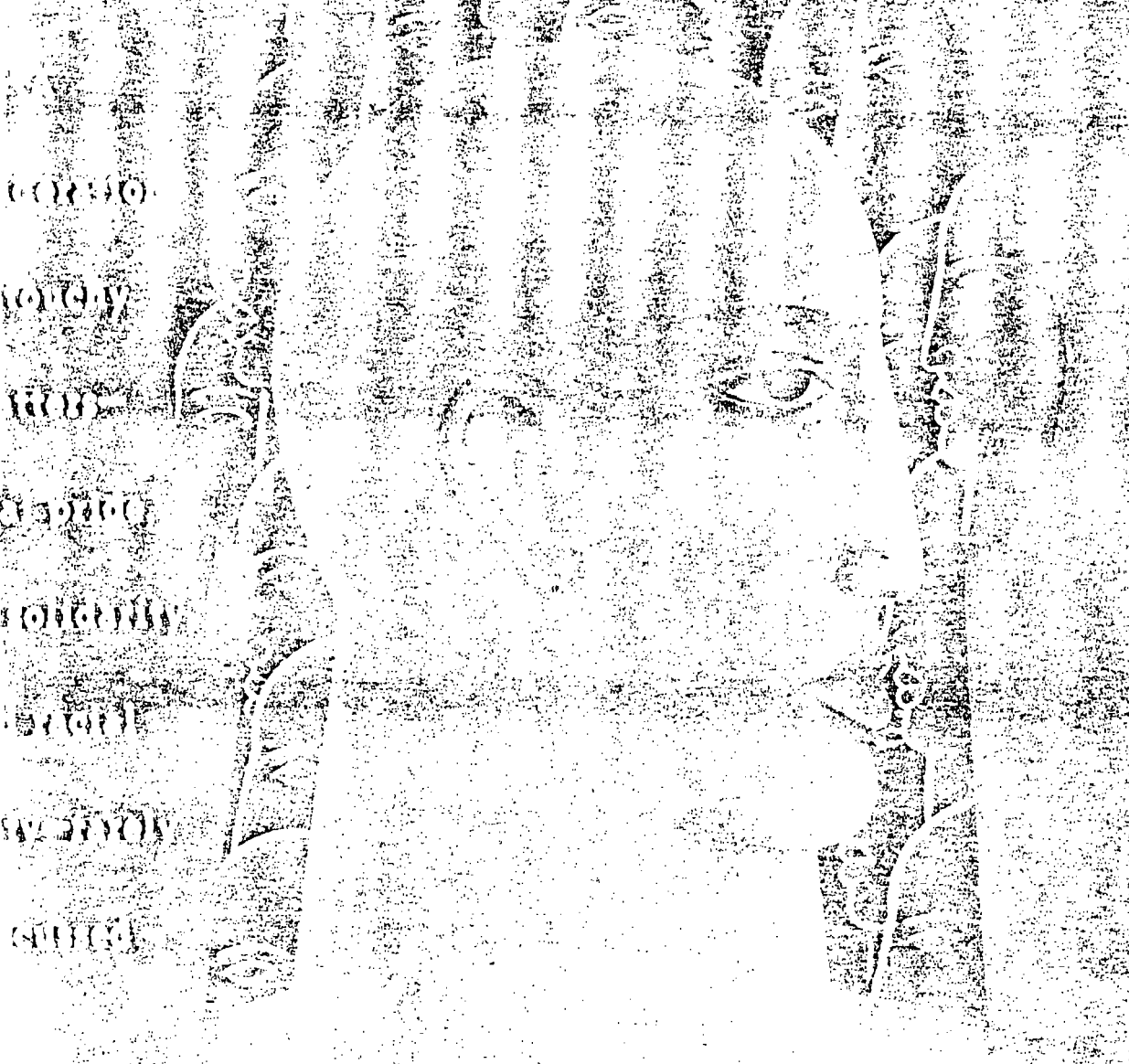
Stop praying for change and become an agent of change, Mr. President. Put your best aides, black and white, to work and develop action plans for change. Use your voice to condemn that which you cannot address with the power of existing federal law.

Set the agenda, don't take another poll. Tell Americans what you expect of them, and when it is in your power to challenge bigoted actions, use every resource at your disposal to do so. You haven't much time left. Use it and use it well.

The writer is president of a management consulting firm specializing in work force inclusiveness. From 1967 to 1969 he was chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

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RACE PROBLEM AND OURS



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*A consideration of touchy matters—
racial pride, racial solidarity, and racial loyalty—rarely discussed*

MY RACE PROBLEM— AND OURS

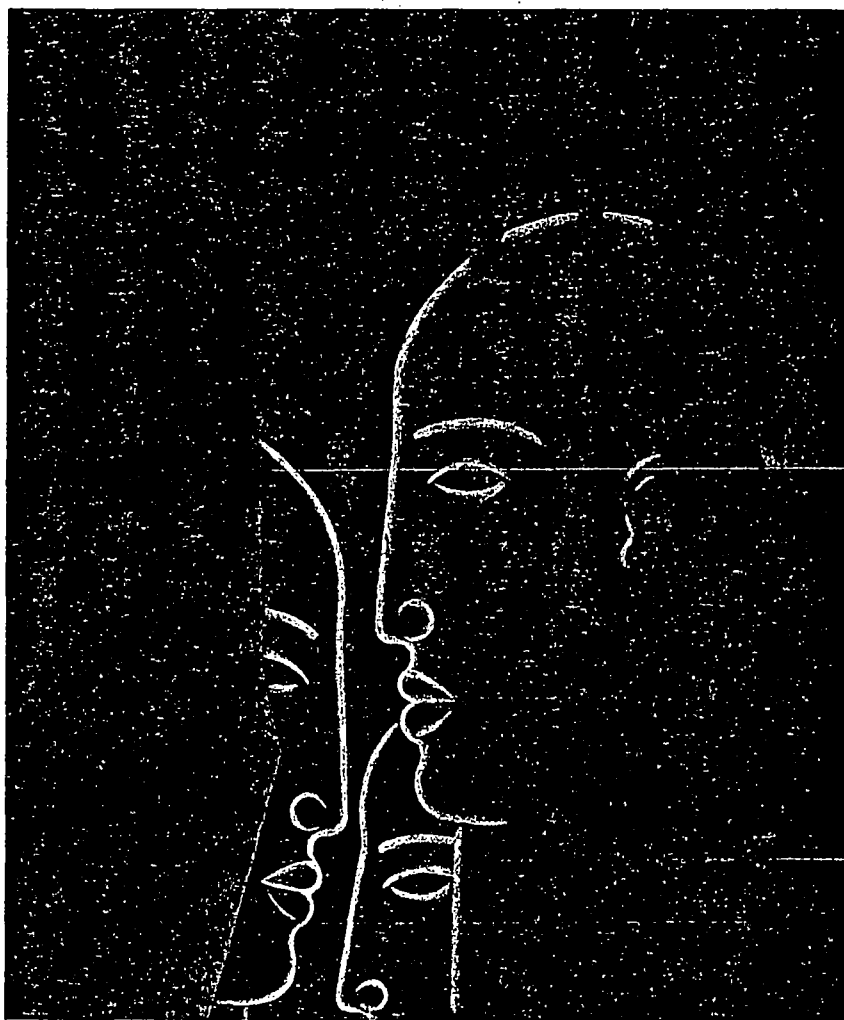
by RANDALL KENNEDY

WHAT is the proper role of race in determining how I, an American black, should feel toward others? One response is that although I should not dislike people because of their race, there is nothing wrong with having a special—a *racial*—affection for other black people. Indeed, many would go further and maintain that something would be wrong with me if I did not sense and express racial pride, racial kinship, racial patriotism, racial loyalty, racial solidarity—synonyms for that amalgam of belief, intuition, and commitment that manifests itself when blacks treat blacks with more solicitude than they do those who are not black.

Some conduct animated by these sentiments has blended into the background of daily routine, as when blacks who are strangers nonetheless speak to each other—

“Hello,” “Hey,” “Yo”—or hug or give each other a soul handshake or refer to each other as “brother” or “sister.” Other manifestations are more dramatic. For example, the Million Man March, which brought at least 500,000 black men to Washington, D.C., in 1995, was a demonstration predicated on the notion that blackness gives rise to racial obligation and that black people should have a special, closer, more affectionate relationship with their fellow blacks than with others in America’s diverse society.

I reject this response to the question. Neither racial pride nor racial kinship offers guidance that is intellectually, morally, or politically satisfactory.



RACIAL PRIDE

I ESCHEW racial pride because of my conception of what should properly be the object of pride for an individual: something that he or she has accomplished. I can feel pride in a good deed I have done or a good effort I have made. I cannot feel pride in some state of affairs that is independent of my contribution to it. The color of my skin, the width of my nose, the texture of my hair, and the various other signs that prompt people to label me black constitute such a state of affairs. I did not achieve my racial designation. It was something I inherited—like my nationality and socio-economic starting place and sex—and therefore something I should not feel proud of or be credited with. In taking this position I follow Frederick Douglass, the great nineteenth-century reformer, who declared that “the only excuse for pride in individuals . . . is in the fact of their own achievements.” If the sun has created curled hair and tanned skin, Douglass observed, “let the sun be proud of its achievement.”

It is understandable why people have often made inherited group status an honorific credential. Personal achievement is difficult to attain, and the lack of it often leaves a vacuum that racial pride can easily fill. Thus even if a person has little to show for himself, racial pride gives him status.

But maybe I am misconstruing what people mean by racial pride; perhaps it means simply that one is unashamed of one's race. To that I have no objection. No one should be ashamed of the labeling by which she or he is racially categorized, because no one chooses her or his parents or the signs by which society describes and sorts people. For this very same reason, however, no one should congratulate herself on her race insofar as it is merely an accident of birth.

I suspect, however, that when most black people embrace the term “racial pride,” they mean more than that they are unembarrassed by their race. They mean, echoing Marcus Garvey, that “to be [black] is no disgrace, but an honor.” Thus when James Brown sings “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud,” he is heard by many blacks as expressing not just the absence of shame but delight and assertiveness in valuing a racial designation that has long been stigmatized in America.

There is an important virtue in this assertion of the value of black life. It combats something still eminently in need of challenge: the assumption that because of their race black people are stupid, ugly, and low, and that because of their race white people are smart, beautiful, and righteous. But within some of the forms that this assertiveness has taken are important vices—including the belief that because of racial kinship blacks ought to value blacks more highly than others.

RACIAL KINSHIP

I REJECT the notion of racial kinship. I do so in order to avoid its burdens and to be free to claim what the distinguished political theorist Michael Sandel labels “the unencumbered self.” The unencumbered self is free and independent, “unencumbered by aims and attachments it does not choose for itself,” Sandel writes. “Freed from the sanctions of custom and tradition and inherited status, unbound by moral ties antecedent to choice, the self is installed as sovereign, cast as the author of the only obligations that constrain.” Sandel believes that the unencumbered self is an illusion and that the yearning for it is a manifestation of a shallow liberalism that “cannot account for certain moral and political obligations that we commonly recognize, even prize”—“obligations of solidarity, religious duties, and other moral ties that may claim us for reasons unrelated to a choice,” which are “indispensable aspects of our moral and political experience.” Sandel’s objection to those who, like me, seek the unencumbered self is that they fail to appreciate loyalties and responsibilities that should be accorded moral force partly because they influence our identity, such that living by these attachments “is inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are—as members of this family or city or nation or people, as bearers of that history, as citizens of this republic.”

I admire Sandel’s work and have learned much from it. But a major weakness in it is a conflation of “is” and “ought.” Sandel privileges what exists and has existed so much that his deference to tradition lapses into historical determinism. He faults the model of the unencumbered self because, he says, it cannot account for feelings of solidarity and loyalty that most people have not chosen to impose upon themselves but that they cherish nonetheless. This represents a fault, however, only if we believe that the unchosen attachments Sandel celebrates should be accorded moral weight. I am not prepared to do that simply on the basis that such attachments exist, have long existed, and are passionately felt. Feelings of primordial attachment often represent mere prejudice or superstition, a hangover of the childhood socialization from which many people never recover.

One defense of racial kinship takes the shape of an analogy between race and family. This position was strikingly advanced by the nineteenth-century black-nationalist intellectual Alexander Crummell, who asserted that “a race is a family,” that “race feeling, like the family feeling, is of divine origin,” and that the extinction of race feeling is thus—fortunately, in his view—just as impossible as the extinction of family feeling.

Analogizing race to family is a potent rhetorical move used to challenge those who, like me, are animated by a liberal, individualistic, and universalistic ethos that is skeptical of, if not hostile to, the particularisms—national, ethnic, re-

ligious, and racial—that seem to have grown so strong recently, even in arenas, such as major cosmopolitan universities, where one might have expected their demise. The central point of the challenge is to suggest that the norms I embrace will, or at least should, wobble and collapse in the face of claims on familial loyalty. Blood, as they say, is thicker than water.

One way to deal with the race-family analogy is to question its aptness on the grounds that a race is so much more populous than what is commonly thought of as a family that race cannot give rise to the same, or even similar, feelings of loyalty. When we think of a family, we think of a small, close-knit association of people who grow to know one another intimately over time. A race, in contrast, is a conglomeration of strangers. Black men at the Million Man March assuredly called one another brothers. But if certain questions were posed (“Would you be willing to lend a hundred dollars to this brother, or donate a kidney to that one?”), it would have quickly become clear that many, if not most, of those “brothers” perceived one another as strangers—not so distant as whites, perhaps, but strangers nonetheless.

However, I do not want to rest my argument here. Rather, I want to accept the race-family analogy in order to strengthen my attack on assumptions that privilege status-driven loyalties (the loyalties of blood) over chosen loyalties (the loyalties of will). In my view, many people, including legislators and judges, make far too much of blood ties in derogation of ties created by loving effort.

A vivid illustration is provided by the following kind of child-custody decision. It involves a child who has been separated from her parents and placed with adults who assume the role of foster parents. These adults nurture her, come to love her, and ultimately seek legally to become her new parents. If the “blood” parents of the child do not interfere, the foster parents will have a good chance of doing this. If, however, the blood parents say they want “their” child back, authorities in many jurisdictions will privilege the blood connection and return the child—even if the initial separation is mainly attributable to the fault of the blood parents, even if the child has been with the foster parents for a long time and is prospering under their care, even if the child views the foster parents as her parents and wants to stay with them, and even if there is good reason to believe that the foster parents will provide a more secure home setting than the child’s blood parents. Judges make such rulings in large part because they reflect the idolatry of “blood,” which is an ideological cousin to the racial beliefs I oppose.

Am I saying that, morally, blood ties are an insufficient, indeed bad, basis for preferring one’s genetic relatives to others? Yes. I will rightly give the only life jacket on the



Racial pride and racial kinship offer no guidance to the intellect



sinking ship to my mother as opposed to your mother, because I love my mother (or at least I love her more than yours). I love my mother, however, not because of a genetic tie but because over time she has done countless things that make me want to love her. She took care of me when I could not take care of myself. She encouraged me. She provided for my future by taking me to the doctor when appropriate, disciplining me, giving me advice, paying for my education. I love her, too, because of qualities I have seen her exhibit in interactions with others—my father, my brother, my sister, neighbors, colleagues, adversaries. The biological connection helped to create the framework in which I have been able to see and experience her lovable qualities. But it is deeds, not blood—doing, not being—that is the morally appropriate basis for my preference for my mother over all other mothers in the world.

SOLIDARITY WITH VIOLA LIUZZO

SOME contend, though, that “doing” is what lies at the foundation of black racial kinship—that the reason one should feel morally compelled by virtue of one’s blackness to have and show racial solidarity toward other blacks is that preceding generations of black people did things animated by racial loyalty which now benefit all black people. These advocates would contend that the benefits bestowed—for instance, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and affirmative-action programs—impose upon blacks correlative racial obligations. That is what many are getting at when they say that all blacks, but particularly affluent ones, have a racial obligation to “give back” to the black community.

I agree that one should be grateful to those who have waged struggles for racial justice, sometimes at tremendous sacrifice. But why should my gratitude be racially bounded? Elijah Lovejoy, a white man murdered in Alton, Illinois, in 1837 for advocating the abolition of slavery, participated just as fervently in that great crusade as any person of my hue. The same could be said of scores of other white abolitionists. Coming closer to our time, not only courageous black people, such as Medgar Evers, Vernon Dahmer, and James Chaney, fought white supremacy in the shadow of death during the struggle for civil rights in the Deep South. White people like James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo were there too, as were Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner. Against this history I see no reason why paying homage to the struggle for racial justice and endeavoring to continue that struggle must entail any sort of racially stratified loyalty. Indeed, this history suggests the opposite.

intellectually, morally, or politically satisfactory.

"ONE'S PEOPLE"

THUS far I have mainly argued that a black person should not feel morally bound to experience and show racial kinship with other blacks. But what do I say to a person who is considering whether to *choose* to embrace racial kinship?

One person who has made this choice is Stephen L. Carter, a professor at Yale Law School and a well-known author. In a contribution to an anthology titled *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation*, Carter writes about his racial love-for black people, declaring at one point that "to love one's people is to crave a kind of familyhood with them." Carter observes that this feeling of racial kinship influences his life concretely, affecting the way in which he values people's opinions of him. "The good opinions of black people . . . matter to me more," he writes, than the good opinions of white people. "That is my choice, and I cannot imagine ever making another." In *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby*, Carter gives another example of how racial kinship affects his life.

Each December, my wife and I host a holiday dessert for the black students at the Yale Law School. . . . our hope is to provide for the students an opportunity to unwind, to escape, to renew themselves, to chat, to argue, to complain—in short, to relax. For my wife and myself, the par-

ty is a chance to get to know some of the people who will lead black America (and white America, too) into the twenty-first century. But more than that, we feel a deep emotional connection to them, through our blackness: we look at their youthful, enthusiastic faces and see ourselves. There is something affirming about the occasion—for them, we hope; but certainly for us. It is a reminder of the bright and supportive side of solidarity.

I contend that in the mind, heart, and soul of a teacher there should be no stratification of students such that a teacher feels closer to certain pupils than to others on grounds of racial kinship. No teacher should view certain students as his racial "brothers and sisters" while viewing others as, well, mere students. Every student should be free of the worry that because of race, he or she will have less opportunity to benefit from what a teacher has to offer.

Friends with whom I have debated these matters object to my position, charging that I pay insufficient attention to the complexity of the identities and roles that individuals assume in society, and that I thus ignore or minimize the ability of a black professor to be both a good teacher who serves all his students well *and* a good racial patriot who feels a special, racial affection for fellow blacks. These friends assert that I have no valid basis for complaint so long as the professor in his official duties is evenhanded in his treatment of students. By "official duties" they mean his conduct in the classroom, his accessibility during office

THE EMBRACE

You weren't well or really ill yet either;
just a little tired, your handsomeness
tinged by grief or anticipation, which brought
to your face a thoughtful, deepening grace.

I didn't for a moment doubt you were dead.
I knew that to be true still, even in the dream.
You'd been out—at work maybe?—
having a good day, almost energetic.

We seemed to be moving from some old house
where we'd lived, boxes everywhere, things
in disarray; that was the *story* of my dream,
but even asleep I was shocked out of narrative

by your face, the physical fact of your face:
inches from mine, smooth-shaven, loving, alert.

Why so difficult, remembering the actual look
of you? Without a photograph, without strain?

So when I saw your unguarded, reliable face,
your unmistakable gaze opening all the warmth
and clarity of you—warm brown tea—we held
each other for the time the dream allowed.

Bless you. You came back so I could see you
once more, plainly, so I could rest against you
without thinking this happiness lessened anything,
without thinking you were alive again.

—MARK DOTY

hours, and his grading of students' academic performance. If these duties are met, they see no problem if the black professor, paying homage to his feelings of racial kinship, goes beyond what is officially required in his dealings with black students.

I see a variety of problems. For one thing, I find it inconceivable that there would be no seepage from the personal sphere into the professional sphere. The students invited to the professor's home are surely being afforded an

white teachers. I never perceived a racial difference in the way that the best of these teachers treated me in comparison with my white classmates. Neither John McCune nor Sanford Levinson nor Eric Foner nor Owen Fiss ever gave me reason to believe that because of my color I took a back seat to any of my classmates when it came to having a claim on their attention. My respect for their conduct is accompanied by disappointment in others who seemed for reasons of racial kinship to invest more in white than in black students—who acted, in other words, in a way that remains unfortunately “normal” in this society.

Am I demanding that teachers make no distinctions between pupils? No. Distinctions should be made. I am simply insisting that sentiments of racial kinship should play no role in making them.

Am I demanding that teachers be blind to race? No. It seems to me bad policy to blind oneself to any potentially useful knowledge. Teachers should be aware of racial differences and differentiations in our society. They should be keenly aware, for instance, that historically and currently the dominant form of racial kinship in American life, the racial kinship that has been best organized and most destructive, is racial kinship mobilized in behalf of whites. This racial kinship has been animated by the desire to make and keep the United States “a white man's country.” It is the racial kinship that politicians like Patrick Buchanan and Jesse Helms openly nurture and exploit. This is also the racial kinship that politicians take care to avoid challenging explicitly. A teacher should be aware of these and other racial facts of life in order to satisfactorily equip stu-

opportunity denied to those who are not invited—an opportunity likely to be reflected in, for instance, letters of recommendation to Judge So-and-So and Law Firm Partner Such-and-Such.

Another problem is that even in the absence of any tangible, dollars-and-cents difference, the teacher's racial distinctions are likely to make a difference psychologically to the students involved. I have had the great benefit of being taught by wonderful teachers of various races, including

students with knowledge about their society.

The fact that race matters, however, does not mean that the salience and consequences of racial distinctions are good or that race must continue to matter in the future. Nor does the brute sociological fact that race matters dictate what one's response to that fact should be.

Assuming that a teacher is aware of the different ways in which the race problem bears down upon his students, how should he react? That depends on the circumstances.



The difficulties disproportionately afflicting black

Consider a case, for instance, in which white students were receiving considerable attention from teachers while black students were being widely ignored. In this case it would be morally correct for a professor, with his eyes focused on race, to reach out with special vigor to the black students. In this circumstance the black students would be more in need than the white students, whose needs for mentorship were already being abundantly met. This outreach, however, would be based not on racial kinship but on distributive justice.

OUR PROBLEMS

THE distinction is significant. For one thing, under the rationale of giving priority of attention to those most in need, no racial boundary insulates professors from the obligation to attend to whatever maldistributions of mentorship they are in a position to correct. White professors are at least as morally obligated to address the problem as are black or other professors.

This is a point with ramifications that reach far beyond the university. For it is said with increasing urgency by increasing numbers of people that the various social difficulties confronting black Americans are, for reasons of racial kinship, the moral responsibility of blacks, particularly those who have obtained some degree of affluence. This view should be rejected. The difficulties that disproportionately afflict black Americans are not "black problems" whose solutions are the special responsibility of black people. They are *our* problems, and their solution or amelioration is the responsibility of us all, irrespective of race. That is why it is proper to object when white politicians use the term "you people" to refer to blacks. This happened when Ross Perot addressed the NAACP annual convention during the 1992 presidential election campaign. Many of those who objected to Perot's reference to "you people," however, turned right around and referred to blacks as "our people," thereby replicating the racial boundary-setting they had denounced.

A second reason why the justification for outreach matters is that unlike an appeal to racial kinship, an appeal to an ideal untrammelled by race enables any person or group to be the object of solicitude. No person or group is racially excluded from the possibility of assistance, and no person or group is expected to help only "our own." If a professor reaches out in response to student need, for instance, that means that whereas black students may deserve special solicitude today, Latino students or Asian-American students or white students may deserve it tomorrow. If Asian-American students have a greater need for faculty mentorship than

black students, black professors as well as other professors should give them priority.

Some will argue that I ignore or minimize the fact that different groups are differently situated and that it is thus justifiable to impose upon blacks and whites different standards for purposes of evaluating conduct, beliefs, and sentiments. They will maintain that it is one thing for a white teacher to prefer his white students on grounds of racial kinship and a very different thing for a black teacher to prefer his black students on grounds of racial kinship. The former, they will say, is an expression of ethnocentrism that perpetuates racist inequality, whereas the latter is a laudable expression of racial solidarity that is needed to counter white domination.

Several responses are in order.

First, it is a sociological fact that blacks and whites are differently situated in the American polity. But, again, a brute fact does not dictate the proper human response to it. That is a matter of choice—constrained, to be sure, but a choice nonetheless. In choosing how to proceed in the face of all that they encounter, blacks should insist, as did Martin Luther King Jr., that acting with moral propriety is itself a glorious goal. In seeking to attain that goal, blacks should be attuned not only to the all too human cruelties and weaknesses of others but also to the all too human cruelties and weaknesses in themselves. A good place to start is with the recognition that unless inhibited, every person and group will tend toward beliefs and practices that are self-aggrandizing. This is certainly true of those who inherit a dominant status. But it is also true of those who inherit a subordinate status. Surely one of the most striking features of human dynamics is the alacrity with which those who have been oppressed will oppress whomever they can once the opportunity presents itself. Because this is so, it is not premature to worry about the possibility that blacks or other-historically subordinated groups will abuse power to the detriment of others.

Moreover, at long last blacks have sufficient power to raise urgent concerns regarding the abuse of it. Now, in enough circumstances to make the matter worth discussing, blacks are positioned to exploit their potential racial power effectively. Hence black attorneys wonder whether they should seek to elicit the racial loyalties of black jurors or judges in behalf of clients. Black jurors and judges face the question of whether they should respond to such appeals. Black professors face the question of whether racial loyalty should shape the extent to which they make themselves available to their students. Black employers or personnel directors face the question of whether racial loyalties should shape their hiring decisions. Were blacks wholly bereft of power, as some commentators erroneously assert,

g black not "black problems." They are our problems.

these and similar questions would not arise. Thus I evaluate arguments in favor of exempting blacks from the same standards imposed upon whites and conclude that typically, though perhaps not always, such arguments amount to little more than an elaborate camouflage for self-promotion or group promotion.

A second reason I resist arguments in favor of asymmetrical standards of judgment has to do with my sense of the requirements of reciprocity. I find it difficult to accept that it is wrong for whites to mobilize themselves on a racial basis solely for purposes of white advancement but morally permissible for blacks to mobilize themselves on a racial basis solely for purposes of black advancement. I would propose a shoe-on-the-other-foot test for the propriety of racial sentiment. If a sentiment or practice would be judged offensive when voiced or implemented by anyone, it should be viewed as *prima facie* offensive generally. If we would look askance at a white professor who wrote that on grounds of racial kinship he values the opinions of whites more than those of blacks, then unless given persuasive reasons to the contrary, we should look askance at a black professor who writes that on grounds of racial kinship he values the opinions of blacks more than those of whites.

In some circumstances it is more difficult for blacks to give up the consolations of racial kinship than for whites to do so, insofar as whites typically have more resources to fall back on. But that should not matter, or at least should not matter decisively, if my underlying argument—that the sentiments and conduct of racial kinship are morally dubious—is correct. After all, it is surely more difficult for a poor person than for a rich one to give up the opportunity to steal untended merchandise. But we nevertheless rightly expect the poor person to give up that opportunity.

A third consideration is prudential. It is bad for the country if whites, blacks, or any other group engages in the politics of racial kinship, because racial mobilization prompts racial countermobilization, further entrenching a pattern of sterile racial competition.

BEYOND RACIAL LOYALTY

I ANTICIPATE that some will counter that this is what is happening, has happened, and will always happen, and that the best that blacks can expect is what they are able to exact from the white power structure through hard bargaining. In this view, racial unity, racial loyalty, racial solidarity, racial kinship—whatever one wants to call it—is absolutely essential for obtaining the best deal available. Therefore, in this view, my thesis is anathema, the most foolhardy idealism, a plan for ruination, a plea for unilateral disarmament by blacks in the face of a well-armed foe with a long history of bad intentions.

This challenge raises large issues that cannot be exhaustively dealt with here. But I should like to conclude by suggesting the beginning of a response, based on two observations.

First, it is noteworthy that those who have most ostentatiously asserted the imperatives of black racial solidarity—I think here particularly of Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, and Louis Farrakhan—are also those who have engaged in the most divisive, destructive, and merciless attacks on “brothers” and “sisters” who wished to follow a different path. My objection to the claims of racial pride and kinship stems in part from my fears of the effect on interracial relations. But it stems also in large part from my fears of the stultifying effect on intraracial relations. Racial pride and kinship seem often to stunt intellectual independence. If racial loyalty is deemed essential and morally virtuous, then a black person’s adoption of positions that are deemed racially disloyal will be seen by racial loyalists as a supremely threatening sin, one warranting the harsh punishments that have historically been visited upon alleged traitors.

Second, if one looks at the most admirable efforts by activists to overcome racial oppression in the United States, one finds people who yearn for justice, not merely for the advancement of a particular racial group. One finds people who do not replicate the racial alienations of the larger society but instead welcome interracial intimacy of the most profound sorts. One finds people who are not content to accept the categories of communal affiliation they have inherited but instead insist upon bringing into being new and better forms of communal affiliation, ones in which love and loyalty are unbounded by race. I think here of Wendell Phillips and certain sectors of the abolitionist movement. I also think of James Farmer and the early years of the Congress of Racial Equality, and John Lewis and the early years of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. My favorite champion of this ethos, however, is a person I quoted at the beginning of this article, a person whom the sociologist Orlando Patterson aptly describes as “undoubtedly the most articulate former slave who ever lived,” a person with whose words I would like to end. Frederick Douglass literally bore on his back the stigmata of racial oppression. Speaking in June of 1863, only five months after the Emancipation Proclamation and before the complete abolition of slavery, Douglass gave a talk titled “The Present and Future of the Colored Race in America,” in which he asked whether “the white and colored people of this country [can] be blended into a common nationality, and enjoy together . . . under the same flag, the inestimable blessings of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, as neighborly citizens of a common country.” He answered: “I believe they can.”

I, too, believe we can, if we are willing to reconsider and reconstruct the basis of our feelings of pride and kinship. ☉

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TOWARD AN END OF BLACKNESS

An argument for the
surrender of race consciousness

By Jim Sleeper

Last January, not long after the national furor over the decision by an Oakland school board to recognize "Ebonics," I happened upon a C-SPAN telecast of the awarding of seven Congressional Medals of Honor to black World War II veterans; each of whose "gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life" had been ignored for more than fifty years. President Clinton strode across the East Room of the White House to present the medals to Vernon Joseph Baker, seventy-seven, the only recipient still living, and to the others' families. "History has been made whole today," the President told the assembly. The honorees, he said, had "helped us find a way to become a more just; more free nation . . . more worthy of them and more true to its ideals."

History has not been made whole for American blacks, of course, and yet something almost archaic in the recipients' bearing and in the ceremony itself reminded me that none of us in the younger generations can say with certainty what an American wholeness might be or, within any such presumed wholeness, what blackness and whiteness might mean. If we have trouble thinking about race, possibly it's because we no longer know how to think about America itself.

At least Second Lieutenant Baker seemed to have less trouble fifty-two years ago than we do now. In April 1945, he single-handedly wiped out two German machine-gun nests in Viareggio, Italy, drew fire on himself to permit the evacuation of wounded comrades, and led his segregated battalion's advance through enemy minefields. Asked by reporters after

Jim Sleeper, a former political columnist for the New York Daily News, is the author of The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York. This essay has been adapted from his new book, Liberal Racism, which will be published by Viking this summer.

WE FEAR THAT IF RACE
DISAPPEARED FROM OUR SOCIAL
EQUATIONS, WE WOULD HAVE
NOTHING OF VALUE TO SAY
OR GIVE TO ONE ANOTHER

the East Room ceremony whether he had ever given up hope of winning the medal, he "sounded surprised . . . as if the question presumed arrogance," said one report. "I never thought about getting it," Baker said. Asked why he had joined the army in the first place, Baker responded, "I was a young black man without a job." Ah, yes, *that*. Prodded to comment on having risked his life for his country while in a segregated unit, he answered, "I was an angry young man. We were all angry. But we had a job to do, and we did it. . . . My personal thoughts were that I knew things would get better, and I'm happy I'm here to see it."

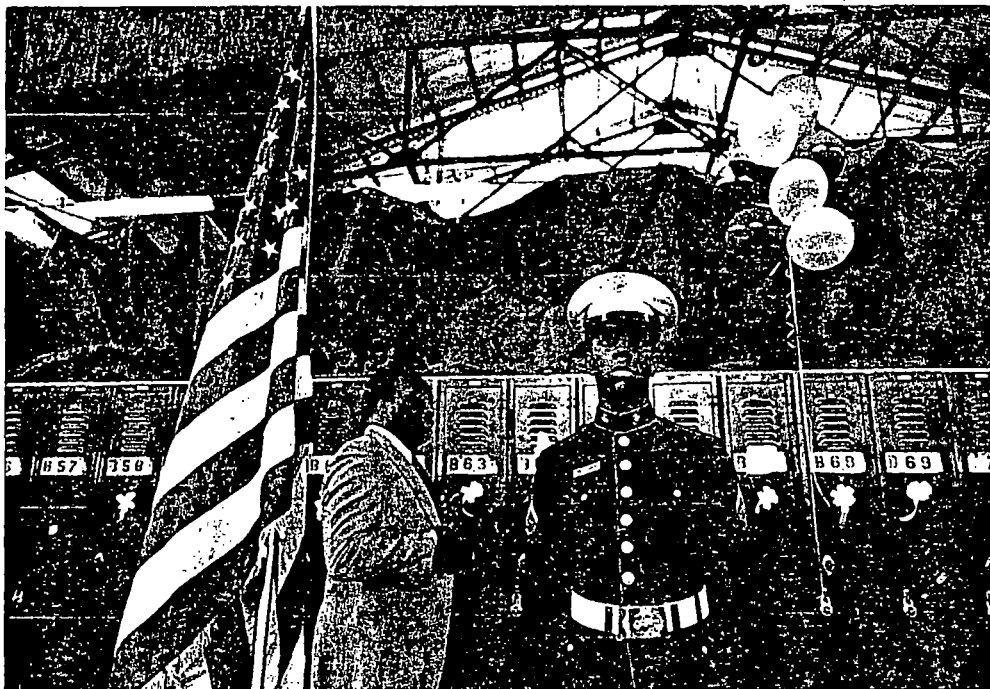
Asked what the ceremony meant to her, Arlene Fox, widow of First Lieutenant John Fox, who died in Italy in 1944, said, "I think it's more

than just what it means to this family. I think it sends a message . . . that when a man does his duty, his color isn't important."

Even in the prime of their anger, Baker and Fox, as well as the black leaders and writers of their generation, such as A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, did not urge the importance of color as much as they found color imposed on them in ways that affronted something in them that wasn't "of color" at all. Proud though they were of what blacks had endured and would overcome (as Baker "knew" they would), they believed, before most of

the rest of us, that after a long dalliance with a white manifest destiny the American republic would recognize no black or white sanction from God. In Baker's black 92nd Infantry Division, in Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and in countless churches, blacks found it within themselves to treat a society torn by racism not as inherently, eternally damned but as nevertheless worth joining and redeeming. Blacks who thought and acted that way shared with whites an important belief: not, alas, a consensus that racism was wrong but a deep certainty that, despite it, they were all bound passionately to the promise of the nation.

But what was that promise? It seems a long time now since the Smothers Brothers crooned "The Lord is colorblind" to what CBS must have assumed was a reasonably receptive national audience in the late 1960s. Today many of us would think such an audience naive or hypocritical, if not racist; it is almost as if any assertion that color isn't important insults what has come to be known as black pride. It is almost as if we fear that if race lost all weight in our social equations or disappeared entirely through interracial marriages and offspring, we would have nothing of value to say or give to one another. The problem is not that racism has grown stronger; it is that American civic life has become weaker—and not primarily because of racism. If we find it difficult to say that a black person's color isn't important, that is because we no longer know how to say that being an "American" is important—important enough to transcend racial identity in a classroom, in a jury room, or at the polls.



4HONOR GUARD, HARLEM, 1991

Photographs by Eli Reed/Magnum Photo, from *Black in America*, published by W. W. Norton. The photos were on display this winter at the Leica Gallery in New York City.

"An individual's moral character is formed by narrative and culture," writes the sociologist Alan Wolfe. "Contracts between us are not enforced by laws or economic incentives; people adhere to social contracts when they feel that behind the contract lies a credible story of who they are and why their fates are linked to those of others." But what is America's story, when Vernon Baker's and Arlene Fox's descendants can climb to the very summit of the American Mt. Parnassus only to find there Dick Morris, *Vanity Fair*, Dennis Rodman, Time Warner Inc., and a retinue of dancing pollsters? The old American story of white manifest destiny, thankfully gone, was coherent enough to give blacks enough moral footing and traction to undo its moral affronts. By comparison, our new stories (the space shuttle *Challenger*? *Forrest Gump*? curricular gardens of multicultural delight?) are incoherent—much like Bill Clinton, truly a man of our time. In 1963, James Baldwin wondered aloud why any black American would want "to be integrated into a burning house." Obviously, he was not proposing resegregation. What, then? How were black Americans to think about themselves? Baldwin's emigration to France left the question open. And so have we all.

For a short while twenty years ago, Alex Haley's *Roots* seemed to offer an answer. Turning on an intrepid black American's report of an astonishing encounter with his African past, it promised to weave a recovered, emblematic black story into the American national narrative, whose promise, whatever it was, would become more coherent for resolving the contradictions in its black story line. The story of Haley's story is worth retracing, because *Roots* wound up demonstrating both that blackness has no reliable myth of its own and that the summit of the American Parnassus is bare.

Published late in 1976, *Roots* became the next year's top nonfiction bestseller (selling some 1.5 million copies in one year) after a record 130 million Americans saw the twelve-hour ABC miniseries it inspired. At least 250 colleges began offering credit courses based significantly on *Roots*. Travel agencies packaged back-to-Africa "Roots" tours. Even before TV had anointed Haley, I watched him tell a rapt audience of Harvard undergraduates, many of them black, of his meeting with the *griot*, or oral historian, of a village in Gambia from which, Haley said, his ancestor Kunta Kinte had been abducted to America in 1767. When he noted, as he had in the book, that the *griot* "had no way in the world to know that [his story's particulars] had just echoed what I had heard all through my boyhood years on my grandma's front porch in Henning, Tennessee," there were gasps, and then the packed Quincy House dining hall was awash in tears.

With this unprecedented return by a black American to the scene of the primal crime against his West African forebears—"an astonishing feat of genealogical detective work," Doubleday's original dust jacket had called it—the long, tortuous arc of black dispossession and yearning for a historic reckoning seemed, at last, to come home. *Roots* wasn't just Haley's own story; it was "a symbolic history of a people," he told a British reporter who raised doubts about its accuracy. "I, we, need a place called Eden. My people need a Pilgrim's Rock."

Indeed they did. The sudden lurch toward integration in the 1960s had disrupted old black coping strategies, scrambling the coordinates of an uneasy racial coexistence and confounding pious hopes for a smooth transition to the integration envisioned by so many of Baker and Fox's generation. Some white-ethnic Roman Catholics and Jews, who had resisted

THE SUDDEN LURCH TOWARD INTEGRATION, DISRUPTED BLACK COPING STRATEGIES, SCRAMBLING THE COORDINATES OF AN UNEASY RACIAL COEXISTENCE



LINDA BROWN (*BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION*), 1995

ALEX HALEY'S TV-FRIENDLY
DOCUDRAMA OF BLACK
DISPOSSESSION BECAME THE NEXT
"MYTH FOR A DAY," AN UPBEAT
STORY FOR THE MASS MARKET

their own assimilation into Anglo-Saxon norms, now intensified the sub-cultural revivals of "unmeltable ethnics." Responding to these assertions and, at the same time, to the equally unsettling prospect of black dissolution into whiteness through integration, a retaliatory black parochialism surfaced in public life for the first time in decades, assailing blacks whom it deemed too accommodating and forcing even assimilationist whites to acknowledge their own hyphenated Americanism.

Appearing amid the confusion, *Roots* at first startled, then relieved, pessimists on both sides of the color line. By the grace of Haley's pilgrimage, it seemed, blacks could recover and share the true story of their dispossession. His mythopoetic triumph tugged at people's hearts, strengthening hopes for a decorous pluralism of peoples and a decent integration of persons. Americans of all colors were transfixed, even as charges emerged that Haley had taken too many folkloric and fictional liberties with material he'd claimed was historically true. (He settled out of court for \$650,000 with author Harold Courlander, passages of whose novel *The African* Haley had pretty much copied.) Yet while *Roots* was denounced as a scholarly "fraud" by the historian Oscar Handlin, it was defended as an irresistible historical novel and pedagogical tool by other historians, including David Brion Davis, who told the *New York Times*, "We all need certain myths about the past, and one must remember how much in the myths about the Pilgrims or the immigrants coming here has been reversed." Haley received a "special" Pulitzer Prize and a rare "Citation of Merit" from a National Book Awards panel. ABC produced a second miniseries, *Roots: The Next Generations*, based on his new book *Search*, which chronicled his family's later tribulations and triumphs, including Haley's own work on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. "Now, as before," wrote Frank Rich in *Time*, "*Roots* occupies a special place in the history of our mass culture: it has the singular power to reunite all Americans, black and white, with their separate and collective pasts."

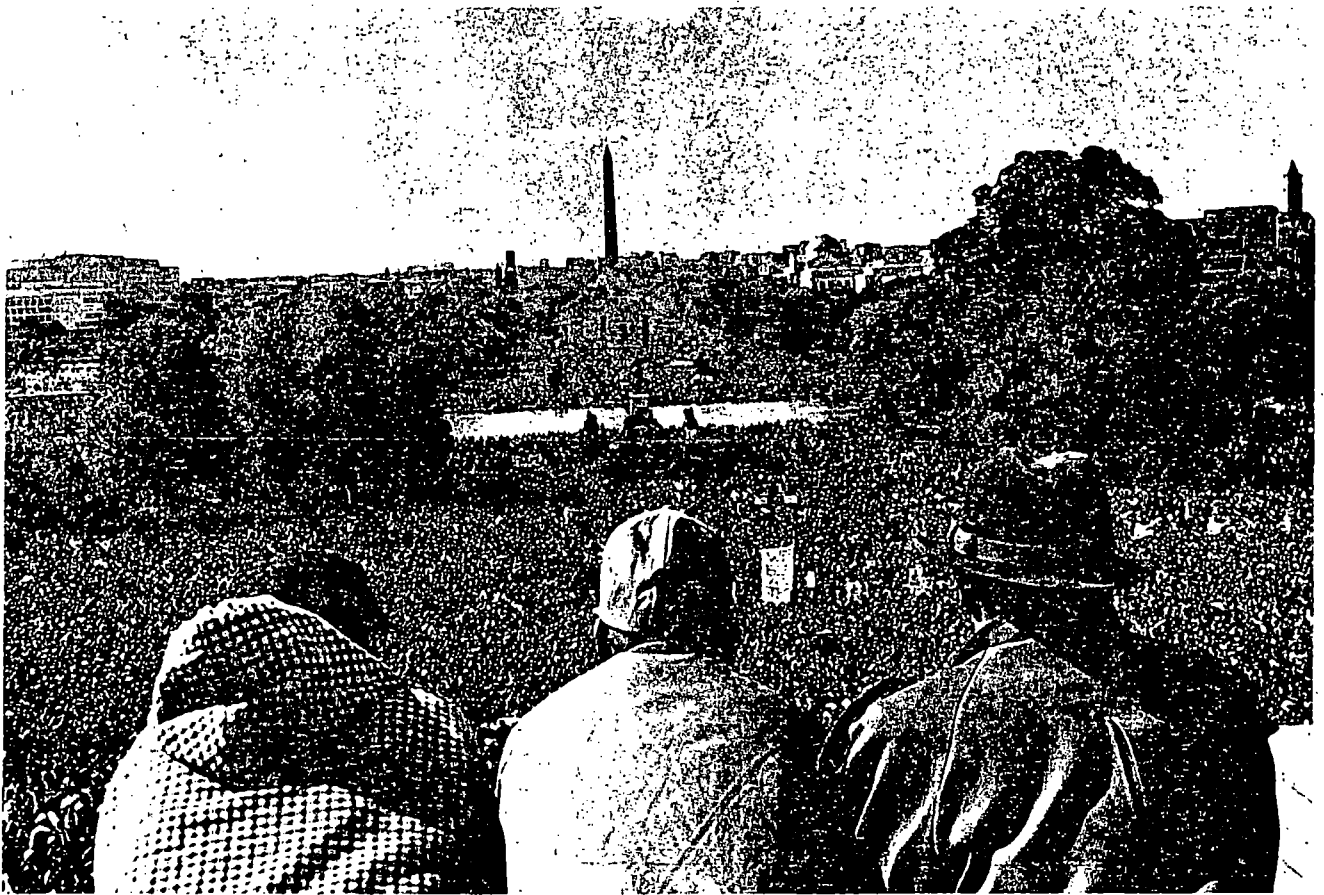
Today *Roots* is seldom mentioned. The History Channel's twentieth-anniversary broadcast in February was little remarked by viewers or print commentators. The book is still in stores—Doubleday calls it "an important title on the Dell backlist"—but it's not much read in college or high school courses. Few books on American racial matters mention Haley (who died in 1992). "*Roots*?" laughs the black religion scholar C. Eric Lincoln. "It's disappeared! Alex Haley was my friend, and I can tell you, he was a journeyman freelance writer, not a political writer or historian. He was given a status he didn't expect."

Roots's virtual disappearance can't be explained with the observation that it accomplished its mission by transforming the consciousness of a generation. Nor is it enough to say that *Roots* shortchanged women by portraying them as passive helpmates; Haley's misconstruals have been redressed by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and others. What drained *Roots* of its power with blacks as well as whites was a disillusionment in at least three dimensions. First, Haley idealized an Africa and a blackness that had been so overwhelmed (indeed, defined) by European invasion that they flourished only as negations of whiteness. Second, so complete was this submergence that Haley himself idealized American blacks' white abductors, if only implicitly, by telling blacks' own story in Western terms. In doing so he met his third pitfall: he tried to skirt Western mythology's tragic sense of life by telling an upbeat story for the mass market. *Roots* became the next "myth for a day," turning immense historical pain into immense profit. That was what slavery had done, and it was what *Roots* was meant to counter. But Haley's TV-friendly, docudramatic tale of black dispossession subtly reinforced the moral neutrality of classical liberalism, where markets are stronger than myths and history is not so much falsified as tamed.

In Africa, Haley depicted a precolonial Eden that hadn't existed, created his account of Kunta Kinte's youth there more out of current anthro-

pology than history, paired all of this with the tale of his own communion with village elders in postcolonial Gambia, and inflated black Americans' expectations of sub-Saharan Africa, past and present. For American blacks, there was no there there: "Whatever Africans share," writes the Ghanaian intellectual Kwame Anthony Appiah, "we do not have a common traditional culture, common languages, a common religious or conceptual vocabulary. . . . [W]e do not even belong to a common race . . ." When Americans making visits inspired by Haley's epiphanies got past their African hosts, they found strangers as indifferent or hostile to them as "fellow whites" in my grandparents' native Lithuania might be to me were I to visit there now—strangers who may resemble me racially but

AMERICAN AFROCENTRISTS
SEEKING A ROMANTIC FOIL TO
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THE SAME "ETHNIC CLEANSING"
UNDER WAY IN AFRICA



MILLION MAN MARCH, WASHINGTON, 1995

whose religion, myths, and current interests have little in common with those of my Jewish "tribe," which they drove out or exterminated in the 1940s. American Afrocentrists (and liberal whites) seeking a romantic, Pan-African foil to a racist America found the same "ethnic cleansing" furiously under way in Nigeria, Rwanda, Zaire, and the Sudan. The very designation "black" was no more useful a moral, political, or cultural identification than is "white" in Lithuania or the Balkans.

"Blackness" did have one use: as a foil to whiteness. It is hard to exaggerate—yet hard for some blacks to acknowledge—how overwhelming was the European presence in Africa. Even the work of such celebrated Pan-African writers as Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe presupposes what Appiah calls "the recognition that a specifically African identity began as the product of a European gaze." They write and are read almost exclusively in English and French. Some apparently indigenous African traditions were concocted in response to, and sometimes with the tactical support of, white colonizers, and in order to construct so-called national-

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OF THEIR NEWFOUND LAND

liberation movements. Africans had to devise "national" identities with European military, economic, philosophical, and linguistic tools.

For Americans, especially, the tie to Africa proved, in the words of the black economist and social critic Glenn Loury, "an empty hope, all remnants and echoes." American black luminaries who pursued those echoes only to fall for African dictators' charms might do well to heed the black writer Albert Murray's comment last year on C-SPAN that the Jeffersonian idea that all are equal didn't come from Africa, where others were also enslaved. The blacks on the Underground Railroad "weren't trying to get back to the tribal life in Africa . . . they have no birthrights anywhere in the world except in America." Black Americans' only coherent memories and myths begin in the holds of the slave ships to which other Africans had consigned them—a point that haunted Maya Angelou on a visit to Ghana, as she wondered whether some of her hosts' ancestors had arranged to sell her own.

By assigning two white men to kidnap Kunta Kinte, Haley wasn't just distorting African history (in which the majority of slaves were captured and sold to whites by blacks); he was juggling European archetypes, borrowing Western literary themes meant to appeal to whites as well as blacks. He formulated sub-Saharan Africa's diffuse cultural attitudes into a Western myth of "exile" or "pilgrimage" for a black American audience that had internalized such notions from the Old Testament and for other Americans who needed to understand, in both Christian and Enlightenment terms, what their own forebears had perpetrated or suborned. But the African slaves had no signs that an African god was punishing them for their sins with an exile like that of the Jews, or blessing their "errand into the wilderness" like that of the Puritans. *Roots* wasn't a product of its protagonists' own mother culture; it was the work of a thoroughly Western, Christian, American writer who took as much from Hebrews and Puritans as from Africans. The novel is a Western account of a monstrous Western crime—a crime only according to Western religious and political standards that triumphed later to abolish slavery, as no African authority had done and as the Sudan hasn't done yet.

The irony, of course, is that the Western Enlightenment principles that supported African colonial liberation failed to prevent colonialism in the first place. And the ghastly, bloody misadventures in Europe since 1914 remind us that Western "values" often only ratchet up the human struggle with evil into unprecedented levels of barbarity. Even the notion that skin color is destiny derives from the ignorant scientific and cultural prejudices that draped nineteenth-century European imperialist states in all their clanking, blundering glory.

If there is any glory for the West in all this, it lies not in Western power but in Western thought, which projects triumphs out of tragedies and which, for all its misuses, nourishes the capacity for rational self-contradiction that alone has put such words as "democracy," "liberation," and "human rights" into the minds and hearts of peoples on all five continents. The West's true Eden is not Haley's bucolic African village but the garden in which a serpent-corrupted two human beings with the apple of knowledge. Haley's distortions—like those of countless Western writers before him—misrepresented the West as much as they did Africa. When people of any color imagine their origins as racially pure and their heroes as morally infallible, they shrink from the tragic Western truth rooted in the story of The Fall.

They also misunderstand that if the West has any hope of improving on its work, that hope is in America. *Roots* showed, yet could not quite proclaim, that blacks brought as slaves into the American national experiment were so thoroughly uprooted from African sources that they were obliged to accept—for lack of anything else—the transcending liberal and Christian promises of their newfound land. Blacks internalized those promises and re-

heard their implementation long before Vernon Baker joined the 92nd Infantry Division in Italy. Precisely because they had not chosen to join this society, could not dominate it, and could not leave it, they had the highest possible stakes in redeeming its oft-stated, oft-violated ideal.

In that sense, surely, blacks became, for better or worse, the most "American" of us all. In a nation born of fraught departures, clean breaks, and fresh starts on new frontiers, they had to construct their moral universe, again in the words of Glenn Loury, "almost out of nothing, almost heroically, in the cauldron of slavery. Or, as my friend Nathan Huggins puts it, 'We're not an alien population, we're the alienated population. We're after getting our birthright. We're the son who hasn't been acknowledged.' See, *that binds you*. You can't turn back from it. Part of what I want is an acknowledgment of my place, my legitimacy, my belonging." The special depth of this need is what makes blacks "America's metaphor," as Richard Wright called them—moral witnesses to a self-creating America, as well as the country's harshest, sometimes most nihilist, assailants.

No wonder whites at first felt relieved by the *Roots* story: it had an ending happy enough to make whites as well as blacks feel better about themselves. Although Haley didn't make much of the point in the book, white Americans had responded to black fortitude and resistance not only with cross burnings and guns but with the Abolitionist crusade, the great pedagogical project that sent W.E.B. Du Bois and hundreds of New England schoolteachers South during and after Reconstruction to "uplift" freed slaves. Despite all of their cruelties, condescensions, and overweening moral self-regard, white Americans participated in a civil-rights movement that combined black Baptist communalism with a race-transcendent, New England Calvinist theology of personal responsibility and justification by a faith beyond color.

So, if there was any real nobility in Haley's effort to weave blacks more vividly into the American tapestry—to make Kunta Kinte a mythic American like Paul Revere—it consisted of the tragic but potentially redemptive fact that the author had to use the abductors' language and metaphysical looms. If *Roots* hasn't helped a new generation of American blacks to fit itself into the national tapestry, we must find something else that can, for separating the black thread would harm all of us even more than hiding it deep in the weave, as we've done in the past. Even Louis Farrakhan knows this, no matter how strenuously he insists on the separatist claims of the Nation of Islam. Not for nothing did he hold his march on the Washington Mall, amid all those white monuments, rather than in the part of the Mississippi Delta that the enthusiasts of his predecessor, Elijah Muhammad, once designated as the provisional seat of the Republic of New Africa. Had Farrakhan gone there, many fewer black men would have followed.

Yet *Roots* failed to forestall the ascendancy of Farrakhan not only because Haley dissembled about Africa and juggled tragic Western myths to tell a black story but also because those myths are losing their traction against the forces of a global market that employs the techniques of mass marketing to guarantee the liquidity of collective amnesia. The relentless logic of the market overwhelms not only the worst racist pretensions, white as well as black, but also the best American civic cultural traditions. Commitments to reason, individual rights, and freedom of contract aren't "Eurocentric" ruses meant to co-opt and subordinate nonwhites; they embody historic human gains, and it would be folly to abandon them for fantasies of racial destiny.

When Vernon Baker said, "I knew things would get better," surely he did not think they would get "blacker" in the sense that blacks would become so protective of blackness that whites' enthusiasm at the prospect of Colin Powell's running for president would engender marked black am-

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bivalence about it. Nor, surely, did Baker's "better" characterize extenuated rationalizations of Ebonics, gangsta-rap celebrations of black self-immolation, or widespread black support for O. J. Simpson's acquittal and the "black" jurisprudence and epistemology invoked to excuse it.

Similarly, when Arlene Fox said, "When a man does his duty, his color isn't important," she was not applauding some recent efforts to redefine "duty" in ways that make one's skin color one's destiny all over again. Three years ago, while defending race-norming in college admissions and a dizzying array of campus "diversity" programs that transform everyone with a dark skin into a walking placard for disadvantage, Rutgers University president Francis Lawrence slid, infamously, into lingo about blacks' "genetic hereditary background." It was an all too emblematically liberal Freudian slip, born of believing that the best way to overcome racism's legacies is to create separate, remedial tracks for blacks while denying that one is doing anything of the sort by enshrining and embellishing disparities as cultural "differences."

On the other hand: Colin Powell could yet become president, and Oprah Winfrey could own a movie studio; black candidates keep winning in white-majority districts, and more blacks and nonblacks are marrying, which explains why many of the novels in black bookstores are about multiracial relationships. Many blacks, in fact, have anticipated and met a challenge now facing everyone else in the country; we are all being "abducted" from our ancient ethnic moorings by powerful currents we no longer control or fully comprehend. Thanks significantly to blacks, who started from "nothingness" here, other Americans have a better start on what now has become a more general problem. Europeans sometimes say that white Americans walk and talk "black."

The observation fits neatly with the feeling among some Africans that black Americans are not "black" at all. America needs blacks not because it needs blackness but because it needs what they've learned on their long way out of blackness—what others of us have yet to learn on the journeys we need to take out of whiteness.

For all its wrong turns and dead ends, the quest by black Americans for acknowledgment and belonging in our national life is the most powerful epic of unrequited love in the history of the world. "Afrocentrism," Gerald Early has written, "is a historiography of decline, like the mythic epic of the [lost, antebellum] South. The tragedy is that black people fail to see their 'Americanization' as one of the greatest human triumphs of the past 500 years." Even if every broken heart could be mended and every theft of opportunity be redressed, there would remain a black community of memory, loss, and endurance. Yet the country's special debt to blacks cannot be paid by anything less than an inclusion that brings the implosion of the identity of blackness—and, with it, of whiteness. The most that blacks can expect of the rest of us (and the most that Vernon Baker and Arlene Fox have expected) is that we will embrace and judge blacks—and let ourselves in turn be embraced and judged by them—as individual fellow participants in our common national experiment. As brothers, some used to say.



DAY CARE CENTER, TEXAS, 1990

June 97

M E M O I R

WHILE WATTS BURNED

Remembering a riot and a boy's fear

By Don Wallace

We'd barely pitched our tents at summer camp—an annual gathering of Boy Scout troops on the slopes of the San Bernardino Mountains, high above the steaming City of Angels—when we began to behave like the boys in *Lord of the Flies*. We teased the shy and fearful, ran amok at night, and mocked our Eagle Scout leaders, those feathered and beaded braves who danced hey-na-na in buckskin G-strings around ceremonial campfires.

We were so bad we were beginning to scare ourselves. I know I was frightened when I found myself captive, tied up, lashed to a resinous pine by two brothers, Vaughn and John, who'd improved their forest-green Scout uniforms with swastikas of black electrician's tape. Sons of a chapter head of the John Birch Society, the

Don Wallace is the author of Hot Water, a novel. He lives in New York City.



brothers were teenaged chips off the old block, forever spouting white supremacist slogans and saying things like "Hitler was right." In 1965 southern California, such views, while considered indelicate, were not enough to warrant expulsion or even censure from the Scouts.

I'd hated those brothers ever since a Joshua Tree campout during which they'd broken into some desert rat's home, stolen his cache of naturalist magazines, and then, when the theft was discovered, tried to pin the crime on me, who had merely come into the possession of a single issue of "art studies." But I also envied them: their father, it was known, had a weapons collection that included rifles, shotguns, and a Mauser machine pistol, and the boys got to shoot everything. As the son of an Annapolis graduate gone inexplicably soft on guns, I had spent fruitless years nudging my dad's conscience with National Rifle Association membership forms, *Boys' Life* articles on "Your Son's First Gun," and lists of friends whose fathers weren't too busy to take them shooting. But Dad was the pious sort of father who could ignore the fact that he'd gotten to blast away on the range with a .45 auto-

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matic, not to mention commanding a battery of 12-inch guns on a battleship, as if simply saying that he no longer "liked" guns was sufficient excuse.

Vaughn and John shuffled up behind me, one on each side, like altar boys, and a black strip of tape was looped around my head and cinched tight over my lower lip, baring my teeth. Then a second piece was secured across the bridge of my nose, and I had a cold premonition of being X'd out, strand by strand.

A gust of wind bent the pines, moaning through the massed needles, and I looked unblinking at a strip of black approaching directly toward my eyes like a horizon rushing to greet me. The moan of the wind changed key, became a chord. The chord swelled majestically into a wailing of what sounded like horns. The black horizon wavered. Now the horns were distinct, a discordant multitude merging into a great drone. The brothers murmured to each other. I heard them picking up their things. Their steps crunched on sandstone, and—an afterthought—the rope at my back slackened.

Wiggling myself free, stripping off the tape, I staggered back to camp in time to join an anxious throng staring down the narrow black-topped road. Still blaring, a stately procession of station wagons breast-ed the hill, radiators steaming in the height of summer's heat. Chevrolets, Fords, Buicks—wood-paneled, bright chrome grilles big as surfboards—all station wagons, and all empty, except for the dad at each wheel.

The cars pulled over, and the fathers marched straight to Klaus "the Kraut" Fosterson's tent. Our Scoutmaster staggered out, still buttoning up his shirt from a midday snooze. We watched, lip-reading. Rumors spread fast, like a dry Santa Ana: war, assassination, invasion, Fosterson's dismissal.

Fosterson mounted a picnic table and waved for quiet. "Listen up," he growled. The camp was closing. We were going home in the station wagons. Suddenly I wanted to know where my father was, and why he hadn't come. The situation seemed

uncomfortably close to one he and my mother often discussed, with us children in the audience: how, when the Communists took over, children would be separated and sent to live apart, girls to work in beet fields, boys in pig-iron foundries.

The forest went utterly still, as if we'd all drawn in our breath, creating a momentary vacuum.

"The reason for this—this situation—is because of something, some trouble, back home. Not at your home," Fosterson corrected himself, with a quick peek at the row of fathers. One of them gave a slight nod.

Fosterson chopped down with his right hand. "Not at home, but in a place—someplace in the South. Georgia, Mississippi. They started it down there. They've called in the National Guard. To stop the Negroes, who are burning this place down. Burning Watts."

"—Georgia," interjected a father, loudly.

"Affirmative. Watts, Georgia," said Fosterson. He folded his clammy white hands over his khaki shirt and stared up into the midday sky. He cleared his throat. "Let us join hands for the Scout Prayer." As usual, Fosterson didn't open his eyes to see if we were actually holding hands. We weren't. But the row of fathers couldn't help but see, if they cared to. This made me nervous, until I realized that they weren't holding hands either.

"And now, may the Great Father of All Scouts be with us till we meet again. *Wo-he-lo*." Fosterson opened his eyes warily.

The boys began to surge forward, carrying me with them.

"Wait!" Fosterson cried out. "Wait till I call your names!"

Soon I found myself in a crowded station wagon driven by somebody's father. As we made our way down the San Bernardino Mountains into the yellow foothills, our tires squealed on every hairpin curve, and the dad deflected our questions and refused to allow us to play the radio. We couldn't figure out why he was so tense if the trouble was in Georgia, light-years away. We climbed the slow grade up to the sleepy town of Corona and the pass

over the hills to the Los Angeles Basin, arguing and pushing for space, forgetting in our candy-bar-induced daze that we were fleeing camp for a reason, and a mysterious one at that.

Then we topped the ridge. The dad kept driving, kept his eyes on the road. By the time we had looked at the horizon ahead and then back at him, there was nothing he could say that would lessen the impact of this, not after telling us not to worry for the past two hours. The sight—dense black pillars of smoke rising from the center of the horizon—silenced all of us for a moment. But we were boys: we had to talk. Someone noted the drivers of the other cars on the freeway, how grim they were and how they ignored the speed limit, racing past and rocking us in their wakes.

"Boys," the dad said. "Listen up." He took a deep breath as if knowing he had to give the speech of a lifetime. We were not a friendly audience, we knew what it was like to be lied to: it was only two years ago that they'd said Kennedy was unhurt, then only wounded.

"It's like they went crazy." He sighed. "We'll be home soon." And then he switched on the radio.

—exploding violence flaring bullets loading you're old enough to kill but not for voting—

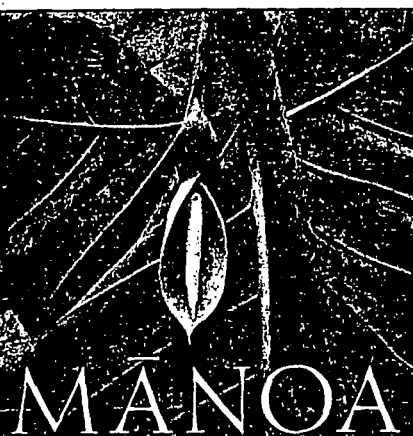
And he switched it off.

"I can't believe anybody listens to that garbage."

"But it's 'Eve of Destruction,'" one of us protested. Someone added laconically, "It's really cool."

That shut the dad up, probably even scared him. Approaching from the east, we skirted the mysterious smoky center of Los Angeles as convoys of police cars and fire trucks ripped down the fast lane every five minutes or so, overtaking us in a wail of sirens. As we neared the outskirts of Long Beach, a black and white patrol car pulled alongside our little wagon train. The unsmiling officer eyeballed us, then accelerated to the next car to do the same. "Checking for outside agitators," our driver told us.

At home we found my father standing before the television in the



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Photograph by Franco Salmoiraghi

den. My mother and two sisters were on the sofa, mesmerized by herky-jerky images: firemen dragging hoses, sprays of water, flaming buildings, sweaty faces. "Somebody's house is burning," my little sister said. Time passed, and my family and the newscasters took turns filling me in about the man arrested for drunken driving, his mother screaming at the police to stop beating her son, the crowd gathering, the mother arrested, the first bottle thrown. Tear gas was lobbed into the crowd in return. Molotov cocktails answered the tear gas, and shots were fired by the police. Last night the violence had moved to the sniper phase, and roving bands had set fires from Watts to Compton, a distance of a hundred blocks, much of it along Atlantic Avenue.

We had just moved to a larger house on a corner lot. The nearest big street, two blocks away: Atlantic Avenue. The next town north: Compton. South of our house, in the heart of Long Beach, also clustered around Atlantic Avenue, was our own ghetto, twenty blocks away.

My brother, Alex, and I were more thrilled than scared when Dad said he thought "they" would come tonight. In the manner of children everywhere, we craved participation in the dangerous games of history. On that hot August afternoon in 1965, we were definitely ready for the apocalypse. For me, gunless and throbbing for the consummation of fantasy and reality, the prospect of a pitched battle among the suburban lawns of Long Beach seemed like a gift from boy heaven.

The phone rang. My mother left to answer it, then returned to beckon for Dad, who went out.

Mom stared into our expectant faces. "Mrs. Jennings is trapped in the projects," she said. "Fires are breaking out all around her."

Mrs. Jennings was our baby-sitter, a strong-willed, canny sergeant-major in a Blue Willow housedress. An Elizabeth—just like my mother—Mrs. Jennings had assisted greatly in raising us children, freeing the other Elizabeth to maneuver her way up through the ranks of the Girl Scouts, PTA, Junior League, and the DAR.

With her ship-worker son, she'd just moved to a small house in South-Central Los Angeles, but with the Wallace kids shuttling in and out of sleep-away camps all summer, she'd had to pick up work in the nearby projects. And now there were flames visible from outside her window, and she was afraid.

Of course we felt responsible.

"Can't the police . . . ?" asked my mother.

"Their hands are full." Dad turned to Alex. "We'll take the Buick."

I stood up and edged in close to my brother, intending to ride his slipstream out the door if necessary.

But my father said nothing against my presence. In fact, my older sister, Anne, was also given permission to come along, in keeping with her status as the family's best athlete. To my intense anguish, at her just completed summer camp in the Sierras she had earned a marksman's medal with a .22, something I suspected I would never do.

We set out in the blue Buick, symbol of solidity, a cruiser of automobiles. My father, ex-lieutenant of the USS *Columbus*, wore his light blue Navy trousers, his windbreaker, and even, as I recall, his officer's cap with the gold scrambled eggs above the bill. It was a cap for boating and for certain manly tasks such as visiting the great flaming garbage dumps in the hills. Certainly, given his penchant for strategizing, I could well imagine his deciding on a military appearance on this day, a Navy man's instinct for impressing the indigenous population.

We drove down Atlantic ten blocks to the San Diego Freeway, rode that for a half-mile north to the Harbor Freeway, L.A.'s femoral artery. Driving straight toward smoke pillars that seemed to be holding up an opalescent ceiling scorched by fire, we found ourselves alone for giant stretches on the white pavement, an event almost unprecedented in daylight hours. From our elevated roadway we could see all around us calm tracts of houses, brown strips of flood control, pumping oil wells; then flashing lights and feverish activity at an intersection would catch our

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eyes, but we'd be going too fast to see what it was.

As the first pillar of smoke came too close for comfort, oily and wet-wool-smelling, a police car rocketed past, traveling without lights or siren. "Must be going a hundred miles an hour," said my father.

Now on this underpopulated roadway there loomed a traffic slowdown. Five or six cars were traveling in a pack, keeping their distance from two cars, older, jacked-up Chevies, that wove back and forth in front, crossing lanes with a lazy freedom that was both mesmerizing and shocking. "Probably drunk or hopped-up," pronounced Dad.

Slowing down to little more than a crawl, we heaped scorn on the timid drivers ahead of us. Finally, Dad laid back from the pack, then floored the accelerator, taking an inside curve and riding right up on the shoulder, past the herd of cowed commuters, roaring through the gap before the blockading team knew we were upon them.

We sailed down the freeway, laughing. Returning to a respectable sixty-five, we began to count exits to the one where Mrs. Jennings would be waiting beside her window, the phone in her hand and the line open to our house back in Long Beach.

"GET DOWN!" thundered Dad.

We turned to see the two Chevies bearing down on us.

"Down on the floor," snapped Dad. We obeyed smartly. After a moment I heard the blatting of a glass-packed muffler approaching on my left. It drew even. "Stay down," said Dad. At least a minute passed: now two mufflers muttered alongside us. Slowly, as if by common agreement—but really because we couldn't help ourselves—the three of us children raised up and peered out the window.

We found ourselves staring at a carload of black men, their jaws jutting toward us out of the open windows with an air of deliberate menace. Their eyes were slits, their expressions closed in a fierce implacability; they were shirtless, and they wore porkpie hats. Even their jacked-up, steeply raked car conveyed a threat. My father, meanwhile, was leaning back in his seat,

left arm resting on the open window, right hand on the wheel, his cap tilted back on his head: a sailor out for a Sunday drive.

What did the black men think of us? I can only conjure up a surreal Norman Rockwell painting of the freckled, pigtailed girl, the two wide-eyed boys, the deliberately insouciant father with a whistle on his lips, blithely sailing, somehow disarming these wrathful, desperate rebels.

"I'm keeping my hands in sight so they won't think I have a gun," Dad said in a conversational tone. "I'm not making eye contact. Giving them an excuse to cut and run without losing face. Making it nice and easy."

The men shot us a last blazing glare as their car sped up and pulled ahead, then suddenly sharked across our bow and down an exit ramp in one smooth move, thrashing a tail of dark exhaust behind it.

After that, picking up Mrs. Jennings was anticlimactic, especially when the projects where she'd been baby-sitting turned out to be quite removed from the violence. Still, after dropping her off at her house we scooted home quickly and huddled behind our screen of dense shrubbery, shutters shut, curtains drawn, and watched the television screen.

As before, a phone call pulled our father out of the room. Again, he returned, beckoning Alex into the hall. But this time when I moved to join them, he made a face and told me to stay put. "Why?" I asked. "Just do as I say," he replied, his skin flushed dark.

Sensing a scene with potential, I stood my ground.

Mom came to see what the fuss was about. Dad pulled himself together. "I'm going down to see a friend about a gun for tonight," he said.

"A gun?" cried my mother.

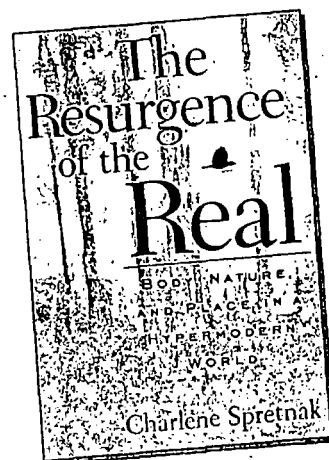
Her dislike of firearms was pronounced but forgivable; my father's was to my mind perverse.

Now here he was going for a gun without me. Standing in the tiled hallway under the curving wrought-iron banister, I placed myself be-

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tween my father and the front door, angry beyond words. I'd never understood how hypocritical, how cruelly manipulative my father could be: if ever a situation called for a responsible, informed arming of the general populace, this was it. And he was telling me that I couldn't be trusted to join him and Alex at the front lines of our home defense. Obviously, if this were Concord on that fateful April morning in 1775, my father would have left me home with the women. To churn butter or something.

"It's not fair," I said.

He hesitated to lay hands on me, I could see. But still I feared his anger.

"I don't see what you need a gun for," said Mom.

That did it. Any further delay would have meant weakening his course of action. "Okay," he said, lunging for the doorknob. I barely got out of the way in time.

We only needed to drive four blocks. To my surprise, we pulled up before a house I knew, a modern split-level with a shingle roof, picture windows, a thick green lawn. Why, I'd trick-or-treated here! It seemed astonishing that such a bland facade could harbor a secret armory. But then, ever since World War II, Long Beach had prided itself on being "The Arsenal of Democracy."

The street was full of cars. Bixby Knolls was the sort of place where you did not wash your car in the driveway but took it to the car wash. Yet here we were on this secluded, shady street, where picture windows looked out at mature elm and locust trees, and cars were double- and triple-parked everywhere. Men were everywhere. Many were dressed for the suburban weekend, others were in yard clothes or coveralls; some in white T-shirts and jeans. Besides the professional class that belonged to Bixby Knolls, there were oil workers, dockworkers, and aerospace engineers, men with meat on their bones, men with bristling crew cuts. Men who washed their own cars in their own driveways.

The scene on the lawn was busy but calm. The living room, on the

other hand, pulsed with the noise and energy of a stag night or a prizefight. The television was on full blast. There was a large, gleaming steel coffee urn. No women were present. Men milled around, peering into one another's faces, clapping one another on the back, braying loudly. Cans of beer and pint bottles of whiskey were passed from hand to hand. The point of our being here seemed lost in the bath of enforced camaraderie, the release of tension.

In the midst of all this a man came out of a back room and wove through the crowd holding a shotgun in each fist, barrel-up. He looked grim until someone in the crowd said something that made everybody laugh, and his stern features dissolved into a pleasure so unmistakable I felt it with him. I felt a part of something.

Being young and crew-cut, I was coming in for some attention now. Men smiled or, even better, nodded judiciously as if sizing me up for active duty. Out of the blue, someone slapped my back; another gave my head a fast knuckle-rub.

But soon I realized that our father was distinctly unhappy with the scene, or rather with our witnessing it. Dad was no snob. He had a healthy appetite for the group experience, whether it was taking us out on charter fishing boats for the bonita run, attending our semipro football team's games, or taking the entire sign-toting family along to a Goldwater for President rally. It could even be said that, in his civic life, he was democracy itself in action, devoting himself to the Scouts, to local government, to the Rotarians, the Elks, the Kiwanis Club.

Yet this democratic nature often alienated others. Quite without intending it, he was "too clean" for many people's comfort. Pure Protestant uplift came naturally to him. He was a product of Long Beach's pre-war heritage as a seaside Chautauqua town, a regular stop on the summer "tent circuit" of the 1890s, which offered the people a genteel and edifying program of music, lectures, and religious education. That is how the Wallaces came here, among the thousands of families from the Mid-

west: as summer people to a temporary town, transported by the Southern Pacific Railway, which sought to promote its large California real estate holdings. It made sense to escape the Midwest to bathe in the sea and the delightfully unhumid air, especially when you could claim it as moral improvement. A Methodist conception of Paradise, right down to the bloomer bathing dresses worn by the ladies, Long Beach then was clean and flat and empty—a bare canvas in an optimistic age. The yearly encampments constructed house-size tents along the high bluff overlooking what was proudly called the finest beach in southern California. Modesty and respectability were prized, turning what to us might seem a potentially risible situation into a festival that practically flaunted its high-mindedness.

The scene at the gun dispenser's house, on the other hand, was chaotic, lacking in discipline, aswirl with giddy currents. When the television newscast switched to coverage of a section of Watts that was burning, those watching began to shout abuse. Men gestured obscenely at the screen; every other word seemed to be "nigger," the sound of which would excite other men to say it—like a spell, an enchantment—again and again. When an actual black person was shown, the men would shake their fists at the flat image on the screen and roar like apes impatiently caged at a zoo.

Although he was recognized and greeted, my father seemed stiff, and his discomfort did not go unnoticed. By now I had adjusted to the disorderliness and was watching a heavy-set man admit people to the room where the guns were. When my father's turn came, this man greeted him loudly. "How are ya? Isn't this really something?" His small talk was flushing Dad out into the open, forcing him to declare himself. They knew each other by sight from the neighborhood, I figured, through Little League or the Scouts, but they weren't natural allies. "Well, are we finally going to show the niggers?" he asked.

"We live so close to Atlantic Avenue that . . . to be on the safe side,

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"I know! They're gonna come pouring in tonight! You're on the front lines!" The man looked around him triumphantly. There were locker-room cheers. "So, what can I do for you?" Bragging about his suppliers, he reeled off the names of a coalition of groups, some respectable—the NRA and the National Guard—others those my father and mother had always firmly identified as extremist, like the Minutemen and George Lincoln Rockwell's American Nazi Party. When he flatly claimed to be in touch with the police, my father nodded, as if he knew this already. The noise level in the room made eavesdropping difficult, but Dad must have questioned the affiliation with those other, more extremist groups then, because our neighborhood Paul Revere raised his voice in righteous indignation:

"You think the niggers aren't organized? You think this wasn't all planned?"

Dad said something that could have meant yes, could have meant no.

"Well, they have another thing coming. Right? We're all in this together. Right?" he demanded, leaving no doubt that Dad had to reply, one way or another.

"Right," my father said, briskly. It seemed as if he would say more, but he didn't. Our neighbor shrugged. "Okay, what can I get you? How about a pump 12-gauge?"

"That'll do some damage," said one of the living-room rowdies, half of whom had turned from the television to watch our exchange. I enjoyed their attention. For me, this was a rich and associative moment, a ceremony in which my father's elusive military ardor would show itself in full gleaming array, like Achilles emerging from behind the tittering women. Of course, I also foresaw being initiated into the suburban militia.

Dad nodded, but his expression was pained. I had seen this face before, when someone unexpectedly cursed or told an off-color joke. Despite his size—six-foot-three, two-hundred-odd pounds—and his hearty manner,

Dad was usually unconvincing when playing the role of a man's man. Raised to exacting standards by his parents, he had escaped being infected with cynicism through some back path in the culture that I sensed was already closed to me, even at the age of thirteen. In a way, his innocence would always be greater than mine.

By this time, I was actually feeling sorry for him. I wanted to tell him to relax, to not be afraid of this dangerous moment. At least it was real, a far cry from the ersatz ceremonials of Scouting and the cashmere-cardigan rigors of the golf course. But Dad's sincerity was not simpleminded. It was of a piece with his belief in the righteousness of Long Beach, of California, of America. His own life was proof that the system worked to the advantage of "the good guys," as he called them. A good student and a good athlete, he went to Stanford—a jump in class over the state universities—at age sixteen; then the war offered him an immediate promotion, a spot at the Naval Academy that in peacetime could never have been his. From there he went back to Stanford Law School, worked hard, married his high school sweetheart, and came home to raise his family.

The system worked for my father, just as it had for at least four generations of our family, ever since the destitute Wallace clan had come over from Scotland, via Venezuela. Five sons had ended up as bank tellers. It had worked for my father's father, Don Sr., who built a radio in a barn at age six and by nineteen was running President Woodrow Wilson's communications at the Paris Peace Conference. Selling his own radio sets, Don Sr. took the Depression in stride, becoming ever more successful and recognized internationally as an inventor and amateur radio ambassador. He spent hour upon hour chatting with fellow hams around the world, enthusiasts whose names had been replaced by call signs like his own, W6AM, and whose language was always Morse Code, so that nationality and race and dialect were always secondary. To W6AM there was no color; only the strength and clarity of your signal.

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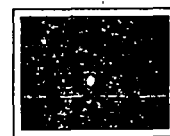


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All this made Don Sr. a sterling example but a hard act to follow. Yet, in his own way, my father was trying—and this singular afternoon in August would be, as it turned out, a crossroads.

A knowing smile on his face, our neighborhood arms supplier stepped back into a plainly decorated bedroom. Tilting my head, I could just see a double bed with a green bedspread that matched the dark green wallpaper. Laid out on it were ranks of long-barreled guns, dully glinting in the half-light; cardboard boxes at the base of the bed were filled with packages of cartridges.

The man came back and handed Dad a shotgun and a box of cartridges. "Ever use one?" he asked.

"Dove hunting."

"Then I don't have to tell you what to do. Right, boys?" The boys responded with suggestions of their own. "Now, how about this one?" he asked, squinting at my brother. "I think a 20-gauge. Less of a kick. Double-barreled. Easier to operate."

Dad raised a dismissive hand. "I don't really—"

The man looked him in the eye. "You think you can handle a whole tribe of Zulus yourself, huh? You think they're carrying spears out there?"

Those watching gave vent to some Tarzan yells. But my father didn't smile. Then the man asked, "You willing to bet your wife and children on that?" And he pressed the 20-gauge into Alex's outstretched hands.

When Dad didn't tell Alex to give it back, I edged forward, so anxious not to lose this opportunity that I actually started to tremble.

Staring up at the man, who resembled ever so slightly my favorite comic-book hero, Sergeant Rock, I was rewarded when one of his large hands landed on my shoulder, where it began kneading the muscle against the bone, slowly, a little painfully but with affection.

He peered into my face. "So, little man, you want to protect your Mama from the niggers, too?"

Dad said, "We've got enough, we're fine. Thanks."

My hopes now rested with the man, with Sarge.

"Nah, don't let the boy down. I've got a nice .410 shotgun, real light, practically no recoil to speak of. Over and under. Perfect for when they come swarming over the back fence."

Dad shook his head. Sarge's finger and thumb pressed deep into my shoulder until it burned, a hot spot the size of a half-dollar.

"No."

Despairing, at last I spoke. "Dad!"

"No." He shifted his gun to the other hand and shook with Sarge, who gave me a pitying, sympathetic look and ruffled my hair one more time. We passed through the cacophonous living room and into the bright sunlight, I near tears, my brother tactfully silent.

At home, outside the house, after we'd parked the Buick in the garage, my father paused to examine our property. Built by a corrupt former harbor commissioner, it was an authentic Spanish Mission hacienda, which meant that life was directed inward, to the patio and garden. The smooth exterior walls and slanting tile roofs, designed for a defensive purpose in a world long gone, seemed newly comforting.

We started inside, locking doors and gates as we went. Mom greeted us in the kitchen, nervous, unable to take her eyes off the guns. Now, however, Dad seemed preternaturally calm, as if the experience had put him through such a gauntlet of emotions that he'd recovered a less apocalyptic perspective.

The guns were laid down on the carpet. Placing the living-room sofa across the bottom of the picture window, then stacking all available pillows and cushions upon it, Dad explained that we would show no lights tonight, that no one would walk directly in front of any windows or peer out into the street. "I'll be sitting right here," he said, pointing to an overstuffed chair he'd dragged over to the wall between the front door and the picture window. "With both guns—unloaded."

And that was all the discussion he allowed. Henceforth, we understood, any chatter about the riots, hysterical or otherwise, was out of bounds. When darkness finally fell, even the

television was turned off, and a velvety August dusk filled the cool chambers and hallways. As Dad took up his position, I had the eerie realization that he was settling into the same chair, in the same resigned manner, that he adopted on Christmas Eve, when there were many unwrapped presents and empty stockings to fill before he could sleep.

Now came the last pang: saying good night and going upstairs with my sisters and our mother, upstairs with the women, while downstairs Dad and Alex sat down to share the graveyard watch. Dad's last words: "Nobody comes downstairs until I say so. There are not going to be any accidental shootings tonight. You hear me, Donny?"

Singled out, I gave the answer that he demanded and went to my room. It was lighter upstairs. Again and again as I sat cross-legged on my bedspread I heard the sirens rising, warbling in strange, electronic harmony and shifting tone as they went away. Usually a faint milky white, the night sky had a reddish hue toward Los Angeles—or was I only imagining it, tinting with my heart what deserved to be visible? I looked at my walls—hung with weapons, including a Tunisian scimitar, a cutlass, a Japanese officer's sword, a boomerang, and an ironwood spear from New Guinea, tipped with a nasty barbed point—and saw that my dream life of war's ennobling deeds had come crushingly, humiliatingly, down to this. Pressing my hands to my eyes, rocking on my bed, I let go and sobbed my heart out, so that when morning came I awoke without a sense of time's passage.

But as the night had passed, so had the danger. Roaring like angry wraiths through the streets, cars with heavy-throated mufflers had surged back and forth, again and again, crisscrossing the neighborhood with sirens wailing in their wake. At one point, a great glow had gone up in the sky. Dad and Alex had loaded their weapons. Now, tired and spent, they sat at the dining-room table sipping coffee together and reading the newspapers that had somehow managed to get delivered.

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To: James T. Edmonds/WHO/EOP, Carolyn Curiel/WHO/EOP

cc:

Subject: FYI

Cultural diversity breaks down black-white divide -- An outmoded vocabulary of race

By Eric Liu
MSNBC CONTRIBUTOR

Language, of course, describes the world. It also, in matters of race, creates the world. We might call someone "black" because that roughly describes the hue of her skin. We might also call her "black" even if she has light skin — but just "one drop" of blood from an African ancestor. Such is the power of language, not only to reflect the order of things, but to impose it.

This interplay between the word and the world matters now — matters more than ever — because America today is in the midst of a demographic revolution. By 2050, the Census Bureau projects, non-Hispanic whites will decline from 74 percent of the population to a bare majority. Hispanics, now more than 10 percent of the population, will rise to 25 percent; Asian Americans, too, from less than 4 percent to more than 8 percent. Meanwhile, the rate of interracial marriage is skyrocketing, the ranks of mixed-race children are expanding, the flow of non-European immigrants pulses on.

But put aside the statistics. You can sense the revolution in the texture of your daily life: from the strange languages you hear while channel surfing; from the eyes and skin of those who sit beside you on the bus; from the placid, blended visage of Tiger Woods; from the spices and sauces that adorn your every meal.

What's happening, in short, is that the very meaning of American identity is being rewritten. Yet in the face of such upheaval, we cling to the vocabulary of another era — a simpler, whiter era. We insist, by force of habit, that the sun circles the earth, even as evidence mounts that it's the other way around. The result is cognitive dissonance, a failure to communicate, and silent racial estrangement. Can we talk honestly about race? Yes — but we must first redefine our terms.

From B&W to Technicolor. We can begin by acknowledging the obvious: that "race relations" in America consists of more than black-white interactions. To be sure, blacks have a distinct moral and historical claim on the

national conscience. And tensions between blacks and whites are the most dramatic symptoms of ills that pervade our society. But we cannot go on pretending — as publishers, politicians and pundits do — that the race question reduces to the black condition. Asians and Hispanics are moving from the margins to the mainstream, and their presence will force us to take a more variegated view of integration and racial politics.

Races are not boxes. It's one thing to point out the many colors of America. It's another thing, though, to perpetuate the myth of the census — that people can or should jam themselves into one of five ethno-racial boxes, and stay there. Tiger Woods, by insisting on his mixed identity, has led us to confront the artificiality — and arbitrariness — of racial categories. But the way so many of us still regard him as "black" — and the fact that so many parties, from Nike to the NAACP, have an interest in doing so — suggests old habits will die hard. Just remember: race is not a fixed, foreordained concept; it's a shifting, man-made construct.

Assimilation doesn't mean whitening. There was a time, of course, when "Americanization" meant Anglo-morphing, when mimicking WASPs was the way to acceptance. Two groups today still believe this is the case: an old guard of white conservatives, and an avant-garde of minority activists. But everyone else knows, or suspects, that they're misguided. The mainstream has always been, in Albert Murray's apt phrase, "mulatto"; the immigrant today partakes from an ever-widening array of cultural influences. Indeed, it is this very sensibility — this disregard for purity — that marks him as an American. Does something get lost when the minority assimilates? Yes — but something is gained as well. And it won't do to call the end result "white."

Color is not culture. When we talk about blacks in the ghetto — or Asians at Harvard — we often make an insidious assumption: that virtue can be color coded. Something intrinsic to blacks makes them prone to urban pathology, goes the innuendo, just as something intrinsic to Asians makes them the new "whiz kids." Well, it's true that behavior counts — it's true, say, that dropping out of school hurts one's prospects, while working hard in school helps. But it's not true that the behavior in either case is inherently "black" or "Asian." It takes a partial blindness to think color correlates with virtue (for it filters out middle-class blacks and welfare-dependent Asians, both on the rise). It takes total blindness to think color actually determines virtue.

Colorblindness is a goal, not a reality. The more

diverse society becomes, the more we hear about the colorblind ideal. Rightly so: The rule of law, and the measure of merit, should ideally be administered without regard to race. But let's not confuse the world as we'd like it with the world as it is. This is the fallacy of the right — of those who believe, sentimentally and often sincerely, that the mere statement of a principle is enough to undo the inequities of the real world. Race matters because, up till now, race has mattered. We break that cycle not by wishing it away, but by ensuring that especially for poor people of color, race doesn't harden into caste.

Is a new vocabulary of race enough to ensure social harmony? Of course not. Talk is ultimately just talk. Alone, it cannot change power relations — or forestall an emotional backlash to the country's changing complexion. But whatever the limits of language, this much is true: We will not improve the world of race until we know, properly, how to name it.

MSNBC contributor Eric Liu is at work on a book about Asian-Americans.

TE -
From the
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I haven't
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"A New Race"?

At the beginning America was seen as a severing of roots, a liberation from the stifling past, an entry into a new life, an interweaving of separate ethnic strands into a new national design. "We have it in our power," said Thomas Paine for the revolutionary generation, "to begin the world all over again." The unstated national motto was "Never look back." "The Past is dead, and has no resurrection," wrote Herman Melville. "... The Past is the text-book of tyrants; the Future the Bible of the Free."

I

And the future was America—not so much a nation, Melville said, as a world. “You can not spill a drop of American blood without spilling the blood of the whole world. On this Western Hemisphere all tribes and people are forming into one federated whole. . . .” For Ralph Waldo Emerson too, like Crèvecoeur, like Melville, America was the distillation of the multifarious planet. As the burning of the temple at Corinth had melted and intermixed silver and gold to produce Corinthian brass, “a new compound more precious than any,” so, Emerson wrote in his journal, in America, in this “asylum of all nations, the energy of Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles, & Cossacks, & all the European tribes—of the Africans, & of the Polynesians, will construct a new race . . . as vigorous as the new Europe which came out of the smelting pot of the Dark Ages. . . .”

Melville was a novelist, Emerson an essayist; both were poets. But George Washington was a sternly practical man. Yet he believed no less ardently in the doctrine of the “new race.” “The bosom of America,” Washington said, “is open . . . to the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations and Religions.” But immigrants who nestled as clannish groups in the national bosom retained the “Language, habits and principles (good or bad) which they bring with them.” Let them therefore settle as individuals, prepared for “intermixture with our people.” Then they would be

“assimilated to our customs, measures and laws: in a word, soon become *one people*.”

John Quincy Adams, another sternly practical man, similarly insisted on the exclusiveness of the new American identity. When a German baron contemplating emigration interviewed Adams as secretary of state, Adams admonished his visitor that emigrants had to make up their minds to one thing: “*They must cast off the European skin, never to resume it. They must look forward to their posterity rather than backward to their ancestors. . . .*”

But how could Crèvecoeur’s “promiscuous breed” be transformed into a “new race”? How was Emerson’s “smelting pot” to fuse such disparate elements into Washington’s “one people”? This question preoccupied another young Frenchman who arrived in America three quarters of a century after Crèvecoeur. “Imagine, my dear friend, if you can,” Alexis de Tocqueville wrote back to France, “a society formed of all the nations of the world . . . people having different languages, beliefs, opinions: in a word, a society without roots, without memories, without prejudices, without routines, without common ideas, without a national character, yet a hundred times happier than our own.” What alchemy could make this miscellany into a single society?

The answer, Tocqueville concluded, lay in the commitment of Americans to democracy and self-government. Civic participation, Tocqueville argued in *Democracy in America*, was the great educator and the great unifier.

How does it happen that in the United States, where the inhabitants have only recently immigrated to the land which they now occupy, and brought neither customs nor traditions with them there; where they met one another for the first time with no previous acquaintance; where, in short, the instinctive love of country can scarcely exist; how does it happen that every one takes as zealous an interest in the affairs of his township, his country, and the whole state as if they were his own? It is because everyone, in his sphere, takes an active part in the government of society.

Immigrants, Tocqueville said, become Americans through the exercise of the political rights and civic responsibilities bestowed on them by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Half a century later, when the next great foreign commentator on American democracy, James Bryce, wrote *The American Commonwealth*, immigration had vastly increased and diversified. Bryce's European friends expected that it would take a very long time for America to assimilate these "heterogeneous elements." What struck Bryce, on the contrary, was what had struck Tocqueville: "the amazing solvent power which American institutions, habits, and ideas exercise upon newcomers of all races . . . quickly dissolving and assimilating the foreign bodies that are poured into her mass."

A century after Tocqueville, another foreign visi-

tor, Gunnar Myrdal of Sweden, called the cluster of ideas, institutions, and habits "the American Creed." Americans "of all national origins, regions, creeds, and colors," Myrdal wrote in 1944, hold in common "the *most explicitly expressed* system of general ideals" of any country in the West: the ideals of the essential dignity and equality of all human beings, of inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and opportunity.

The schools teach the principles of the Creed, Myrdal said; the churches preach them; the courts hand down judgments in their terms. Myrdal saw the Creed as the bond that links all Americans, including nonwhite minorities, and as the spur forever goading Americans to live up to their principles. "America," Myrdal said, "is continuously struggling for its soul."

II

The American Creed had its antecedents, and these antecedents lay primarily in a British inheritance as recast by a century and a half of colonial experience. How really new then was the "new race"? Crèvecoeur's vision implied an equal blending of European stocks, and Emerson's smelting pot generously added Cossacks, Africans, and Polynesians. In fact, the majority of the population of the 13 colonies and the weight of its culture came from Great Britain.

Having cleared most of North America of their French, Spanish, and Dutch rivals, the British were free to set the mold. The language of the new nation,

its laws, its institutions, its political ideas, its literature, its customs, its precepts, its prayers, primarily derived from Britain. Crèvecoeur himself wrote his book not in his native French but in his acquired English. The "curse of Babel," Melville said, had been revoked in America, "and the language they shall speak shall be the language of Britain."

The smelting pot thus had, unmistakably and inescapably, an Anglocentric flavor. For better or worse, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant tradition was for two centuries—and in crucial respects still is—the dominant influence on American culture and society. This tradition provided the standard to which other immigrant nationalities were expected to conform, the matrix into which they would be assimilated.

But as the nineteenth century proceeded, non-Anglo immigration gathered speed. European peasants who may never have dared go twenty miles from their birthplaces now undertook the unimaginable adventure of a journey across perilous seas to a strange land in search of a new life. The land was indeed strange; and they could not but feel a need for reassurance and security. So at first they tended to cling to their compatriots and to the language, schools, churches they brought with them. These ethnic enclaves served as staging areas for regrouping and basic training before entry was made into the larger and riskier American life.

These immigrants came principally from western and northern Europe. The Anglos often disliked the newcomers, disdained their uncouth presence, feared

their alien religions and folkways. Germans and Scandinavians were regarded as clannish in their fidelity to the language and customs of the old country. The German fondness for beer gardens and jolly Sundays excited puritanical disapproval. The Irish were regarded as shiftless and drunken; moreover, they were papists, and their fealty to Rome, it was said, meant they could never become loyal Americans. They were subjected to severe discrimination in employment and were despised by genteel society. W. E. B. Du Bois, the black scholar, testified that when he grew up in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in the 1870s, "the racial angle was more clearly defined against the Irish than against me."

As the flow of immigrants increased, so did resentment among the old-timers. By the 1850s immigrants made up half the population of New York and outnumbered native-born Americans in Chicago. Nativist organizations sprang up, like the Supreme Order of the Star-Spangled Banner and its political front, the American Party, calling for a lengthened naturalization process and curtailment of the political rights of the foreign-born. They were referred to as Know-Nothings because members of the Supreme Order, when asked about their secret oaths and rituals, would reply, "I know nothing."

In 1856 the Know-Nothings even ran a former president, Millard Fillmore, as their presidential candidate. "Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid," observed Abraham Lincoln. "As a nation, we began by declaring that '*all men are created equal*.' We now practically read it '*all men are*

created equal, *except negroes.*' When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read 'all men are created equal, except negroes, *and foreigners, and catholics.*' "

But the Know-Nothing party fell as quickly as it rose. In the century and a half since, despite recurrent xenophobic outbursts, no nativist political party has appeared to take its place. However prejudiced white Anglo-Saxons were in practice, they were ashamed to endorse nativism in principle. Equally important, an expanding economy in an underpopulated country required a steady influx of new hands. Immigration alleviated the labor shortage, and economic need overpowered moral and aesthetic repugnance.

The pre-Civil War immigrants steadily turned into Americans. "The frontier," in the words of its great historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, "promoted the formation of a composite nationality. . . . In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics." In the crucible of the cities too assimilation proceeded apace. Even "the Irish immigrant's son," Bryce reported in 1888, "is an American citizen for all other purposes, even if he retain, which he seldom does, the hereditary Anglophobia."

III

After the Civil War came the so-called "new" immigration from southern and eastern Europe. Over 27

million arrived in the half-century from Lee's surrender at Appomattox to America's entry into the First World War—more than the total population of the country in 1850. The new immigrants—Italians, Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Russians, Jews—settled mainly in the cities, where their bizarre customs, dress, languages, and religions excited new misgivings.

Yet the old faith in the power of Bryce's "amazing solvent" to fulfill Washington's conception of Americans as "one people" held fast. However much they suffered from social prejudice, the newcomers were not barred from civic participation, and civic participation indoctrinated them in the fundamentals of the American Creed. They altered the ethnic composition of the country, but they preserved the old ambition to become Americans.

The fastidious Henry James, revisiting his native land in 1904 after many years abroad, was at first dismayed by the alien bustle of Ellis Island. But he soon understood and appreciated "the ceaseless process of the recruiting of our race, of the plenishing of our huge national *pot-au-feu*, of the introduction of fresh . . . foreign matter into our heterogeneous system." Though he wondered at times what immigration would do to Americans "ethnically, and thereby physiognomically, linguistically, *personally*," though he saw at times "the 'ethnic' apparition" sitting like a skeleton at the feast, he was more impressed by the "colossal" machinery that so efficiently converted the children of immigrants into Americans—the political and social habit, the common school, the newspaper,

all so reliably producing what James called "the 'ethnic' synthesis." He spoke with something like awe about "the cauldron of the 'American' character."

New race, one people, smelting pot, *pot-au-feu*, cauldron—the original faith received its most celebrated metaphor a few years after James's visitation. In 1908 a play by Israel Zangwill, an English writer of Russian Jewish origin, opened in Washington. *The Melting-Pot* tells the story of a young Russian Jewish composer in New York. David Quixano's artistic ambition is to write a symphony expressing the vast, harmonious interweaving of races in America, and his personal hope is to overcome racial barriers and marry Vera, a beautiful Christian girl. "America," David cries, "is God's crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming! . . . Here you stand in your fifty groups, with your fifty languages . . . and your fifty blood hatreds. . . . A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American."

The climactic scene takes place on the roof garden of a lower-Manhattan settlement house. In the background the Statue of Liberty gleams in the sunset. The composer, alone with Vera, gestures toward the city:

There she lies, the great Melting-Pot—listen! Can't you hear the roaring and the bubbling? Ah, what a stirring and a seething! Celt and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian,—black and yellow—

VERA (*softly nestling to him*): Jew and Gentile—

DAVID: Yes, East and West, and North and South, the palm and the pine, the pole and the equator, the crescent and the cross. . . . Here shall they all unite to build the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God. Ah, Vera, what is the glory of Rome and Jerusalem where all nations and races come to worship and look back, compared with the glory of America, where all races and nations come to labour and look forward! . . . (*Far back, like a lonely, guiding star, twinkles over the darkening water the torch of the Statue of Liberty. From below comes up the softened sound of voices and instruments joining in 'My Country, 'tis of Thee.' The curtain falls slowly.*)

When the curtain fell in Washington and the author walked onstage, President Theodore Roosevelt called from his box: "That's a great play, Mr. Zangwill, that's a great play." "I'm not a Bernard Shaw man or Ibsen man, Mrs. Zangwill," T. R. later told the playwright's wife. "No, *this* is the stuff." Zangwill subsequently dedicated the printed play to Roosevelt. *The Melting-Pot* played before rapt audiences across the country. Jane Addams of Hull-House in Chicago observed that Zangwill had performed "a great service to America by reminding us of the high hopes of the founders of the Republic."

IV

Yet even as audiences cheered *The Melting-Pot*, Zangwill's metaphor raised doubts. One had only to stroll around the great cities, as Basil March did in William Dean Howell's *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, to see that the melting process was incomplete. Ethnic minorities were forming their own *quartiers* in which they lived in their own way—not quite that of the lands they had left but not that of Anglocentric America either: Little Italy, Chinatown, Yorkville, Harlem, and so on.

Nor was the WASP culture showing great inclination to ease their access into Anglo-America. And when it did, when barriers fell, when new immigrants gained acceptance through money or celebrity, there loomed the prospect of intermarriage. In having his drama turn on marriage between people of different races and religions, Zangwill, who had himself married a Christian, emphasized where the melting pot must inexorably lead: to the submergence of separate ethnic identities in the new American race.

Was such a result desirable? Many immigrants doubtless thought so. In the early twentieth century, most of their children certainly did. But soon ethnic spokesmen began to appear, moved by real concern for distinctive ethnic values and also by real if unconscious vested interest in the preservation of ethnic constituencies. Jewish reviewers castigated Zangwill: "All the worse for you and me, brother," wrote one,

"A New Race"?

"who are to be cast into and dissolved in the crucible." Even some of Anglo-Saxon descent deplored the obliteration of picturesque foreign strains for the sake of insipid Anglocentric conformity.

The impression grew that the melting pot was a device to impose Anglocentric images and values upon hapless immigrants—an impression reinforced by the rise of the "Americanization" movement in response to the new polyglot immigration. Americanization programs, benign in intent, sought to expedite assimilation by offering immigrants special education in language, citizenship, and American history. The outbreak of war in 1914 gave Americanization a more coercive edge. Even presidents as friendly to immigrants as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson worried whether in crisis "hyphenated" Americans might not be more loyal to the old country than to their adopted land.

Three days after a German submarine sank the *Lusitania*, Wilson addressed an audience of recently naturalized citizens in Philadelphia. "You cannot become thorough Americans," he told them, "if you think of yourselves in groups. America does not consist of groups. A man who thinks of himself as belonging to a particular national group in America has not yet become an American."

"We can have no 'fifty-fifty' allegiance in this country," Theodore Roosevelt said two years later. "Either a man is an American and nothing else, or he is not an American at all." He condemned Americans who saw the world from the standpoint of another nation. "We Americans are children of the crucible,"

T. R. said. "The crucible does not do its work unless it turns out those cast into it in one national mould."

V

"One national mould"? Not everyone agreed. In 1915 Horace Kallen, a Jewish-American philosopher, wrote an essay for *The Nation* entitled "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot." The melting pot, Kallen argued, was valid neither as a fact nor as an ideal. What impressed him was, on the contrary, the persistence of ethnic groups and their distinctive traditions. Unlike freely chosen affiliations, Kallen said, the ethnic bond was both involuntary and immutable. "Men may change their clothes, their politics, their wives, their religions, their philosophies, to a greater or lesser extent: they cannot change their grandfathers. Jews or Poles or Anglo-Saxons, in order to cease being Jews or Poles or Anglo-Saxons, would have to cease to be. . . ."

Ethnic diversity, Kallen observed, enriches American civilization. He saw the nation not as one people, except in a political and administrative sense, but rather "as a federation or commonwealth of national cultures . . . a democracy of nationalities, cooperating voluntarily and autonomously through common institutions . . . a multiplicity in a unity, an orchestration of mankind." This conception he came to call "cultural pluralism."

Kallen was unclear on the question of how to encourage ethnic separatism without weakening the

original ideal of a single society. One critic warned that cultural pluralism would "result in the Balkanization of these United States." But Kallen made his attack on Anglo-centered assimilation at a time when critics of the melting pot could reasonably assume the solidity of the overarching framework. Because he considered political unity a given, he put his emphasis on the protection of cultural diversity.

The gospel of cultural pluralism was at first largely confined to academics, intellectuals, and artists. The postwar years saw much popular disenchantment with Europe, a Red Scare directed largely against aliens, the rise of the anti-Catholic Ku Klux Klan, and a campaign, realized in the Immigration Act of 1924, to freeze the ethnic composition of the American people. The new law established quotas on the basis of the national origins of the population in 1890, thereby drastically reducing the flow from southern and eastern Europe.

The xenophobic nationalism of the 1920s was followed in the 1930s by crises that, on some levels divisive, nevertheless strengthened the feeling that all Americans were in the same boat and might as well pull together. The Great Depression and the Second World War showed the desperate necessity of national cohesion within the frame of shared national ideals. "The principle on which this country was founded and by which it has always been governed," Franklin D. Roosevelt said in 1943, "is that Americanism is a matter of the mind and heart; Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race and ancestry. A good American is one who is loyal to this country and to our creed of liberty and democracy."

VI

Gunnar Myrdal in 1944 showed no hesitation in declaring the American Creed the common possession of all Americans, even as his great book *An American Dilemma* provided a magistral analysis of America's most conspicuous failure to live up to the Creed: the treatment by white Americans of black America.

Noble ideals had been pronounced as if for all Americans, yet in practice they applied only to white people. Most interpretations of the national identity from Crèvecoeur on were for whites only. Even Horace Kallen, the champion of cultural pluralism, made no provision in his "democracy of nationalities" for black or red or brown or yellow Americans.

Tocqueville was an exception in factoring persons of color into the American equation. With his usual prescience, he identified racism as the irremediable flaw in American democracy. This "most grasping nation on the globe" had doomed the red man to extinction; and the presence of a black population was "the most formidable of all the ills that threaten the future of the Union." The more optimistic Emerson and Zangwill had thrown nonwhite nationalities into their smelting or melting pots, but Tocqueville saw racist exclusion as deeply ingrained in the national character.

History supported this judgment. White settlers had systematically pushed the American Indians back, killed their braves, seized their lands, and se-

questered their tribes. They had brought Africans to America to work their plantations and Chinese to build their railroads. They had enunciated glittering generalities of freedom and withheld them from people of color. Their Constitution protected slavery, and their laws made distinctions on the basis of race. Though they eventually emancipated the slaves, they conspired in the reduction of the freedmen to third-class citizenship. Their Chinese Exclusion acts culminated in the total prohibition of Asian immigration in the Immigration Act of 1924. It occurred to damned few white Americans in these years that Americans of color were also entitled to the rights and liberties promised by the Constitution.

Yet what Bryce had called "the amazing solvent power" of American institutions and ideas retained its force, even among those most cruelly oppressed and excluded. Myrdal's polls of Afro-America showed the "determination" of blacks "to hold to the American Creed." Ralph Bunche, one of Myrdal's collaborators, observed that every man in the street—black, red, and yellow as well as white—regarded America as the "land of the free" and the "cradle of liberty." The American Creed, Myrdal surmised, meant even more to blacks than to whites, since it was the great means of pleading their unfulfilled rights. Blacks, new immigrants, Jews, and other disadvantaged groups, Myrdal said, "could not possibly have invented a system of political ideals which better corresponded to their interests."

The Second World War gave the Creed new bite. Hitler's racism forced Americans to look hard at their

own racial assumptions. How, in fighting against Hitler's doctrine of the Master Race abroad, could Americans maintain a doctrine of white supremacy at home? How, with China a faithful American ally, could Americans continue to forbid Chinese to become American citizens? If the war did not end American racism, at least it drove much racial bigotry underground. The rethinking of racial issues challenged the conscience of the majority and raised the consciousness of minorities.

Emboldened by the Creed, blacks organized for equal opportunities in employment, opposed segregation in the armed forces, and fought in their own units on many fronts. After the war, the civil rights revolution, so long deferred, accelerated black self-reliance. So did the collapse of white colonialism around the world and the appearance of independent black states.

Across America minorities proclaimed their pride and demanded their rights. Women, the one "minority" that in America constituted a numerical majority, sought political and economic equality. Jews gained new solidarity from the holocaust and then from the establishment of a Jewish state in Israel. Changes in the immigration law dramatically increased the number arriving from Hispanic and Asian lands, and, following the general example, they asserted their own prerogatives. American Indians mobilized to reclaim rights and lands long since appropriated by the white man; their spokesmen even rejected the historic designation in which Indians had taken deserved pride and named themselves Native Americans.

The civil rights revolution provoked new expressions of ethnic identity by the now long-resident "new migration" from southern and eastern Europe—Italians, Greeks, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians. The ethnic enthusiasm was reinforced by the "third-generation" effect formulated in Hansen's Law, named after Marcus Lee Hansen, the great pioneer in immigration history: "What the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember."

Another factor powerfully nourished the passion for roots: the waning American optimism about the nation's prospects. For two centuries Americans had been confident that life would be better for their children than it was for them. In their exuberant youth, Americans had disdained the past and, as John Quincy Adams urged, looked forward to their posterity rather than backward to their ancestors. Amid forebodings of national decline, Americans now began to look forward less and backward more. The rising cult of ethnicity was a symptom of decreasing confidence in the American future.

VII

Ethnic as a word has had a long history. It originally meant "heathen" or "pagan" but soon came to mean anything pertaining to a race or nation. In this sense everyone, even the Lowells and the Cabots, were ethnics. By the time Henry James used the word in *The American Scene*, however, "ethnic" had acquired an association with foreignness. As applied since the

1960s, it definitely means non-Anglo minorities—a reversion to the original sense of being beyond the pale.

The noun *ethnicity* meanwhile made its modern debut in 1940 in W. Lloyd Warner's Yankee City series. From its modest beginning in that sociological study, "ethnicity" moved vigorously to center stage in popular discourse. The bicentennial of American independence, the centennial of the Statue of Liberty, the restoration of Ellis Island—all turned from tributes to the melting pot into extravaganzas of ethnic distinctiveness.

The pressure for the new cult of ethnicity came less from the minorities en masse than from their often self-appointed spokesmen. Most ethnics, white and nonwhite, saw themselves primarily as Americans. "The cravings for 'historical identity,'" Gunnar Myrdal said at the height of the ethnic rage, "is not in any sense a people's movement. Those cravings have been raised by a few well-established intellectuals, professors, writers—mostly, I gather, of a third generation." Few of them, Myrdal thought, made much effort to talk to their own ethnic groups. He feared, Myrdal added with a certain contempt, that this movement was only "upper-class intellectual romanticism."

Still, ideologues, with sufficient publicity and time, could create audiences. Spokesmen with a vested interest in ethnic identification repudiated the ideal of assimilation. The melting pot, it was said, injured people by undermining their self-esteem. It denied them heroes—"role models," in the jargon—from their own ethnic ancestries. Praise now went to "the unmeltable ethnics."

In 1974, after testimony from ethnic spokesmen denouncing the melting pot as a conspiracy to homogenize America, Congress passed the Ethnic Heritage Studies Program Act—a statute that, by applying the ethnic ideology to all Americans, compromised the historic right of Americans to decide their ethnic identities for themselves. The act ignored those millions of Americans—surely a majority—who refused identification with any particular ethnic group.

The ethnic upsurge (it can hardly be called a revival because it was unprecedented) began as a gesture of protest against the Anglocentric culture. It became a cult, and today it threatens to become a counter-revolution against the original theory of America as "one people," a common culture, a single nation.