

C H A P T E R   T H R E E

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*James Q. Wilson*

RACE IN AMERICA

**I**N THE 1950s, the civil rights revolution was about to get under way. As a graduate student at the University of Chicago doing research in the black community, I was acutely aware that change was coming, but even from press accounts, one could see that monumental events were soon to occur. I asked black leaders, other graduate students, and my professors how blacks and whites should treat each other. Everybody gave the same answer: we should treat every person as an individual. It was a view powerfully reinforced by Rev. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, in which he famously remarked that we should judge people not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. Race should be irrelevant.

These days, we live with the results of the civil rights revolution. Yet the dramatic changes that that revolution has brought about in the laws, culture, economics, and politics of our nation have had a complex effect: racism, though it still exists, is less common; commentary on race, on the

other hand, is more widespread. Hardly anyone tries to exclude blacks from jobs, schools, hotels, restaurants, or the housing market. Yet at the same time, almost everyone argues about quotas, targets, and affirmative action and has views regarding the proper role of race in distributing public goods and services, in the presentation of media commentary, and in making political claims.

In the Supreme Court's *Bakke* case, handed down in 1978, about the time the Manhattan Institute was founded, Justice Harry Blackmun summed up the contemporary state of race relations: "In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race." He made his meaning even clearer: "In order to treat some persons equally, we must first treat them differently." In short, race is not irrelevant. Nowhere was this attitude on race more apparent than in California in 1997. Voters amended the state constitution by referendum to bar state government from discriminating against or granting preferential treatment to any individual or group based on race or ethnicity—seemingly expressing the old civil rights ideal. Those who supported the decision, however, found themselves denounced as racists. The world was stood on its head: to support a colorblind law meant that you were a sinister reactionary.

## Defending the Original Civil Rights Ideal

Against the backdrop of extensive, often angry, public debate and discussion about race, several authors who have written books for the Manhattan Institute over the last two decades or so have argued for the continued importance of the goal of making race and ethnicity irrelevant.

In his 1982 book, *The State Against Blacks*, Walter Williams explains how free-market economics can help us achieve that goal. Market economies tend to ignore race because one person's dollar is as good as anyone else's: people get what they pay for. Politics, by contrast, gives people only what a majority votes for, and this may explain, Williams suggested, why in a poor neighborhood some people drove nice cars (the result of a market transaction) but there were no good public schools (the result of a political transaction).

Similarly, Thomas Sowell, in 1981's *Markets and Minorities*, acknowledged that race makes a difference in group status, but determining how to deal with that reality should be a matter of science and not opinion. It is true that people differ and that these differences are sometimes associated with racial and ethnic descent. And it is true, too, that race and ethnicity may, at the group level, correlate with differences in economic status. But we can make little progress in reducing these inequalities by awarding group preferences, Sowell says, for the simple reason that the variation among individuals is vastly greater than the average differences among groups. It makes little sense, for example, to put under-qualified black students into elite universities and then enroll them in remedial courses to make up for their deficiencies. It makes far more sense to deal with such deficiencies early in life so that individual qualifications need be the only criteria for admission to top-flight colleges.

Coincident with the increase in race-oriented commentary has been a remarkable development: the rise in conservative support for race-neutral integration, on the one hand, and in liberal backing for race-sensitive selectivity, on the other. There are, of course, purely integrationist liberals and some racist conservatives, but support for affirmative action and a race-based distribution of goods and services has become a conspicuously liberal position—as the celebration among liberal elites over the Supreme Court's 2003 rulings reaffirming the constitutionality of some racial preferences underscored.

## Black Progress: Real, Yet Pessimism Grows

This shift in liberal thinking away from integration and toward race-based selectivity explains in part the heated criticism that some reviewers directed at *America in Black and White*, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom's 1997 study of race relations. In this powerful, incisive history, the authors show the real progress that the U.S. has made toward making race less important. We have witnessed a sharp improvement among blacks in economic status, in gaining positions of trust and honor, in winning access to public and private facilities, and in receiving an appropriate level of protection from law-enforcement agencies.

The Thernstroms, of course, recognize the serious problems that remain with respect to black academic achievement, crime rates, and single-parent families. Still, they suggest, race-centered activists frequently ignore the extraordinary achievements *and* the lingering problems, resorting instead to angry denunciations—denunciations that usually reject the value of racial neutrality. Despite racism being less common by any measure in 2004 than it was in the 1950s, these advocates charge that racism is as common as, perhaps even worse than, it once was. In their view, whites are evil and blacks are good—and since whites have the power, blacks can only make progress if whites are defeated.

Passionate racial advocates aren't alone in holding such views: a significant fraction of ordinary black Americans also share them. Fewer blacks today believe in the likelihood of racial progress than they did a year before the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Thernstroms, convinced by their evidence of the remarkable improvement in white attitudes toward blacks, look for possible explanations of this pessimism among blacks. One is that the militant activists have won a large following, however wrong or exaggerated their assertions. Another is that ordinary blacks, because of the kinds of jobs they hold, tend to meet racist whites instead of tolerant ones. A third is the possibility that African Americans who are struggling with the remaining educational and family problems faced by the black community are driven to embrace racist explanations for those problems because no other account seems plausible to them. And a fourth is that, for reasons no one quite understands, a college education makes black Americans more likely than black high-school graduates to believe that the government “deliberately” makes certain that drugs are “easily available” in black neighborhoods—and so as more blacks get college degrees, such conspiratorial notions become more prominent.

## Hispanics: Assimilation or Separatism?

These developments in relations between blacks and whites find an echo to some degree in the struggle over how our society deals with

ethnicity—especially with respect to Hispanics. Linda Chavez, in her 1991 book, *Out of the Barrio*, describes the conflict over what “Hispanic” should mean. In the long perspective of immigration to America, it is possible to view Hispanics as comparable to Italians and Jews: people who can and should assimilate, just as did their predecessors. The new emphasis on race and its burdens (both real and imaginary), however, has led some advocates to insist that Hispanics—Mexican Americans in particular—should remain outside the majority culture. To justify this cultural separatism, the advocates have argued that Hispanics have made little or no progress and thus, like blacks, need special programs aimed at them as a disadvantaged group.

Determining whether Mexican Americans have made progress isn’t easy, given the rapidly changing composition of this group. In 1959, 85 percent of all Mexican Americans were born in the U.S.; by 1990, only two-thirds were born here—and among adults, the proportion of native-born was only half. As Chavez notes, about 50 percent of the increase in the Hispanic population between 1980 and 1990 resulted from immigration. Many of these newcomers were poor and spoke little or no English. It is no surprise, then, that the socioeconomic standing of Hispanics and Mexican Americans might seem stagnant: progress among those who have been here for a while gets obscured by the struggles of those who just arrived.

But this is not the whole story. Some Mexican Americans have lived for generations in certain barrios where educational and economic progress was slow, even for those born here, while others lived in less confined quarters in big cities, where personal advancement took place more rapidly. We have measures of educational progress among Mexican Americans with an eye on nativity: by 1990, about 18 percent of first-generation Mexican males living here had finished high school, while 43 percent of the third generation had finished.

None of these crucial distinctions seems to have entered the worldview or rhetoric of many advocates. It has seemed more important for them to describe Hispanics as the “poorest of the poor” because a racist society has segregated them, thus justifying Hispanic participation in affirmative-action programs.

## The Advocates Against Integration

In her splendid 1998 study, *Someone Else's House*, Tamar Jacoby describes how racial advocacy in politics and culture has often trumped the goals of assimilation and integration. She looks at racial politics in Atlanta, Detroit, and New York, where, decades ago, three sets of leaders used dissimilar strategies to manage race relations. In New York, Mayor John Lindsay supported “community control” of the public schools (actually, radical activist control); Detroit mayor Coleman Young was an enthusiast of black power; and Atlanta mayor Maynard Jackson created a system of racial preferences in jobs and contracts that conferred real benefits on only a few privileged people. Over time, there were changes: Rudy Giuliani came to New York, Dennis Archer to Detroit, and Andrew Young to Atlanta. All three tried to restore something like the integrationist goal.

The core racial problems in these three cities, Jacoby shows, grew not simply because there were radical black activists seeking power but also because guilty white elites were eager to listen to them. Many white business and political leaders thought it a good idea to let black leaders “ventilate.” Some of that ventilation was helpful, since there were indeed racial difficulties that needed addressing. But some of it was empty bluster, more about securing patronage for jobs and contracts, whatever the merits of the claimants, than righting any injustice.

## Is Integration Possible?

Taken together, the Manhattan Institute’s books on race and ethnicity raise a question for which, so far, we have no generally accepted answer: Can people live together decently without regard to skin color or ethnic background? As the Thernstroms note, America has made great progress in the direction of racial and ethnic comity. Race has assuredly become less important in private relationships (there has been a sharp increase in the proportion of blacks and whites who live near, work with, or have friends of the other race). It is progress that one can scarcely detect, however, if one focuses only on the sayings and writings of celebrated spokes-

persons like Derrick Bell, Ellis Cose, and a host of other journalists and professors, as the Manhattan Institute's John McWhorter explains in his book *Authentically Black*, a collection of essays drawn from the institute's quarterly *City Journal* and other publications.

One of the most interesting tables in the Thernstroms' book shows the proportion of people in various countries who tell pollsters that they have unfavorable opinions of an ethnic group in their country. In almost every European country, about four out of ten people say that they dislike a prominent minority group: Bulgarians and Germans dislike Turks, the French dislike North Africans, Poles dislike Ukrainians, Russians dislike Azerbaijanis, and so on. In the United States, by contrast, only one out of every eight Americans dislikes blacks. Even if we assume that Americans have understated their dislike by 50 percent, they are still less than half as likely as Europeans to say they disapprove of a minority group.

Yet though America has made progress, the goal of a race-irrelevant society remains distant and is perhaps unattainable. Middle-income blacks will sometimes feel that race explains why they are less likely to be judged as individuals and more likely to be judged as affirmative-action symbols; for lower-income blacks, especially young ones, race can explain to them why they have not done as well as they would like; both middle- and lower-income blacks may think that any police officer who stops them is engaging in unjustified racial profiling. True or false, these beliefs remind us that, as W. E. B. DuBois put it, blacks feel a "two-ness": they are American and they are black, and so have "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body."

In general, for Hispanics, set apart by no obvious racial features, prospects may be very different—unless, of course, their leaders insist that they think of themselves as a would-be race, with all of the entitlements that government patronage can confer. It is too early to tell if Hispanics will take this route or avoid it.

The progress that America has made in the treatment of racial and ethnic groups ought to be a source of self-congratulation. But there is very little self-congratulation going on. When I was doing research on the politics of black Americans during the 1950s, race wasn't generally

a topic of conversation, even though there was much that cried out for debate. At the time, blacks found themselves residentially segregated, economically deprived, and politically manipulated to a far greater extent than they do now. These days, when things are so much better, we sometimes talk about race as if the nation were stuck in a dark period of unbridled racism. Indeed, despite the research that the Manhattan Institute has sponsored and encouraged, many American leaders go to great lengths to deny the integrationist dream. In Al Sharpton's words, "confrontation works," and so confrontation occurs.

The fundamental flaw of this strategy of antagonism is that, by blaming all black problems on white society, white society can then take credit for all black progress—and, as Orlando Patterson has pointed out, that is absurd. Today no group can impose its will on another group so completely. The advocates deny to successful black and Hispanic Americans the credit they deserve for having relied on education, hard work, and personal responsibility to achieve so much.

## A More Realistic Ideal

In time, I think (actually, I hope) that we shall come to something like the following position. We will abandon the purely integrationist ideal, in which race and ethnicity do not matter, as hopelessly idealistic. Of course, race matters. Human beings, with their limited capacity for extended sociability and their ingrained preference for people like themselves, rarely extend equal consideration to all people. Fifteen-year-olds dislike thirteen-year-olds, Red Sox fans hate Yankee fans (more so now than ever), men make jokes about women and women about men, and most of us prefer to live next door to people who are, in some sense, "like us." Because of this preference for the similar, we will always find neighborhoods that are distinctively Jewish or Italian or black or Vietnamese or Chinese—even though all Jews, Italians, blacks, Vietnamese, and Chinese enjoy a legal right to live anywhere they can afford a house.

Such natural preference for the similar need not entail second-class citizenship for any group. Chinese and Japanese Americans once had

second-class citizenship. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, California courts would not accept Chinese testimony, and laws prevented Chinese immigration into this country and discouraged land purchases by Asians. A gentleman's agreement required Japan to reduce sharply the number of passports issued to Japanese who wished to emigrate to this country. When World War II began, Japanese Americans wound up in relocation centers in the bleakest part of the California deserts. Today, matters for Chinese and Japanese Americans could not be more different—in large measure, I think, because Chinese and Japanese Americans have made extraordinary advances in music, art, science, and business, and because they have so low a crime rate. Hardly anyone moves out of a neighborhood because a Chinese or Japanese family has moved in.

A central problem facing black Americans is that their crime rate, especially for violent offenses, is higher than that of whites and vastly higher than that of Chinese or Japanese Americans. Hispanics also have offense rates higher than whites, though not as high as among blacks. If those high rates fell so that they were lower than white rates, much of the remaining resistance to blacks moving into neighborhoods and most of what passes for racial profiling would disappear.

But whatever one's personal preferences about race or ethnicity and however circumstances may modify them, the legal and moral system of a country must, as the Manhattan Institute's writings on race and ethnicity have argued time and again, be universal, recognizing no racial and ethnic distinctions and making it perfectly clear that whatever preferences people have, everyone must be treated as equal under the law. Identity may govern where we live or what we eat or whom we see, but it must not govern the distribution of public goods and services. So many blacks and Hispanics have taken good advantage of these principles that to undercut them now by official favoritism is an insult to their accomplishments.