

DINESH  
D'SOUZA



WHAT'S SO  
GREAT ABOUT  
AMERICA

PENGUIN BOOKS

# THE REPARATIONS FALLACY

## What African-Americans Owe America



Other revolutions have been the insurrection of the oppressed; this was the repentance of the tyrant.

—EMERSON

**I**T SEEMS CLEAR THAT AMERICA WORKS PRETTY WELL FOR immigrants, but does it also work well for domestic minority groups, such as African-Americans? This was a topic on which I debated the Reverend Jesse Jackson a few years ago at Stanford University. Jackson began by asserting that America is and always has been a racist society. To demonstrate this, Jackson evoked the painful history of slavery and segregation. He also cited a contemporary list of horrors—the Rodney King beating, the role of Mark Fuhrman in the O. J. Simpson case, racist comments at Texaco, the blacks who couldn't get served at Denny's, and several other examples of continuing racism against black Americans.

I did not deny that racism exists, and conceded that in a big

potent enough and widespread enough that it could prevent me, or him, or my daughter, or his children, from achieving their basic aspirations? Where is that kind of racism, I said—show it to me. Jackson hemmed and hawed, wrinkled his forehead, played with his mustache. He was thinking deeply.

Finally he admitted that he could provide no such evidence. But its absence, he went on to argue, in no way demonstrated that racism had abated. No, America was in his view just as racist as in the past. The only difference is that racism has gone underground; it has become institutionalized, so that in an invisible but no less insidious way, it continues to thwart blacks and other minorities from achieving the American dream. "Racism used to be overt," Jackson said. "Now it is covert." He went into a rhyme sequence. "I may be well dressed, but I'm still oppressed." And so on.

I found the concept of this rich, successful man—who arrived by private jet, who speaks at the Democratic National Convention, whose son is a congressman—identifying himself as a victim of oppression a bit puzzling and amusing. But I suppressed the urge to chuckle. I reminded myself that Jackson's indignation was quite genuine, and that I was witnessing a clash between two perspectives, what may be termed the immigrant perspective and that of the leadership of indigenous minority groups. I use the term "indigenous" loosely to refer to African-Americans and American Indians. These are groups that have been in America even longer than most European immigrants.

That there is a clash of views between immigrants and indigenous minorities will come as news to some advocates of multiculturalism, who like to portray nonwhites, women, and homosexuals

as allied in a grand coalition against that oppressive enemy of humanity, the white male heterosexual. There are many problems with this morality tale, but perhaps the most serious is that non-white immigrants and indigenous minorities see America very differently. Ideologically, if not geographically, they are poles apart.

Immigrants today are mostly "people of color": this they have in common with African-Americans. But this is where the similarity ends. The immigrant comes here from South Korea, Nigeria, or the West Indies and finds America to be a terrific place. Then he runs into the likes of Jesse Jackson, who tell him that he is completely wrong, he doesn't know anything, he should stick around for a while, he will soon discover the baleful influence of racism.

Why, then, do nonwhite immigrants and the leadership of indigenous minority groups see America so differently? The immigrant typically compares America to his home country. "In Nicaragua I have to work for \$6 a day. You mean that McDonald's will pay me \$6 an hour? Where do I sign up for overtime?" By this comparative or historical standard, America comes off looking good. Patriotism comes easily to the immigrant who has chosen to become an American.

African-American leaders, by contrast, use a utopian standard in judging the United States. Their argument is not that the United States is a worse place for them to live than Haiti or Ethiopia, but that the United States falls short in comparison to the Garden of Eden. "Why should I work for \$6 an hour? That's slave labor. Look at the guy in the high-rise office building who gets \$75 an hour. If I'm not making as much as he is, then I am oppressed." This is a very different psychology.



So who is right: the immigrants, who have come recently, or the indigenous minorities, who have been here a long time? In our debate, Jackson addressed this question by pointing out that African-Americans could not be compared with immigrants, because the immigrants for the most part came voluntarily, while African-Americans came to the United States in chains. This is a good point, although its contemporary relevance is unclear. Jackson also said that earlier generations of immigrants—the Jews, the Irish, and the Italians—could easily assimilate because they were white. Blacks, he added, don't have this option.

This argument seems reasonable, but it relies for its plausibility on anachronism. Today we often have trouble distinguishing between members of ethnic groups from various parts of Europe. This, however, is only because of their high rates of intermarriage. But intermarriage between Irish-Americans and Italian-Americans, or between Protestants and Catholics, or between Christians and Jews, has only become popular in recent years. In 1850 it was quite easy to identify an Irish immigrant. That's the only way "No Irish Need Apply" rules could be enforced.<sup>1</sup>

So the notion that the old immigrants had it easy because they could pass for white is wrong. Indeed, the experience of new generations of immigrants—the Chinese, the Pakistanis, the Cubans, the Nigerians—is virtually identical to that of earlier generations of European immigrants. The problems of the newcomers—difficulties with the English language, lack of credit, a feeling of isolation—are precisely the problems that the Irish, the Italians, and the Jews had. True, it is easier to identify a Pakistani than an Italian, but what does this prove? Prejudice and hostility against the European immigrants was vastly greater than

anything endured by today's Asian, African, and Latin American immigrants.

Indigenous minorities, then, are a special case. They, not the immigrants, are the moral and political force behind the multicultural agenda. They are the ones pressing for multicultural education, and racial preferences, and reparations. African-Americans and American Indians are the only groups for whom patriotism is a problem. I do not mean this in an accusatory way; theirs is the natural ambivalence of any people who are deeply convinced that their life in America has been shaped by oppression.

For instance, it is commonplace among American Indians that the white man arrived on these shores with an incorrigible bigotry toward native peoples and then put into effect a policy of exterminating the Indian population. If "America" represents a country that is guilty of unmitigated hatred and genocide, how can the native Indians who were victims of this viciousness and slaughter be expected to salute the flag and sing "God Bless America"? If the white man is guilty as charged, they obviously cannot.

But is the white man guilty as charged? Even on the count of racism against Indians, the evidence is ambiguous. Many whites considered blacks to be racially inferior but they did not feel the same way about American Indians. In this respect Thomas Jefferson is typical: while entertaining doubts that blacks were as intelligent as whites, he confidently stated that any backwardness on the part of the Indian was entirely the result of circumstance.<sup>2</sup> True, the white man frequently portrayed the Indian as a "noble savage," but the accent here is on the word *noble*. There is a long tradition in the West of admiring the noble savage as harkening from an age of innocence, before the corruptions introduced by

civilization.<sup>3</sup> It is highly significant that several leading figures during the founding period (Patrick Henry, John Marshall, Thomas Jefferson) proposed intermarriage between whites and native Indians as a way to integrate the Indians into the mainstream. "What they thought impossible with respect to blacks," political scientist Ralph Lerner writes, "was seen as highly desirable with respect to Indians."<sup>4</sup>

But this is just talk about the white man's feelings; we also need to discuss the white man's actions toward the native Indians. Aren't the European settlers guilty of genocide? As a matter of fact, they are not. Millions of Indians perished as a result of contact with the white man, but for the most part they died by contracting his diseases: smallpox, measles, malaria, tuberculosis. There are isolated instances of European military commanders attempting to vanquish hostile Indian tribes by giving them smallpox-infected blankets. But as William McNeill documents in *Plagues and Peoples*, the white man generally transmitted his diseases to the Indians without knowing it, and the Indians died in large numbers because they had not developed immunities to those diseases. This is tragedy on a grand scale, but it is not genocide, because genocide implies an *intention* to wipe out an entire population. McNeill points out that, a few centuries earlier, Europeans themselves contracted lethal diseases, including the bubonic plague, from Mongol invaders from the Asian steppes. The Europeans didn't have immunities, and the plague decimated one-third of the population of Europe.<sup>5</sup> Despite the magnitude of deaths and suffering, no one calls this genocide, and they are right not to do so.

None of this is to excuse the settlers' injustices, or to diminish the historical misfortune of the American Indians. In his

famous "Essay on the Three Races," Tocqueville contrasts the situation of the native Indian with that of blacks. Tocqueville's essay makes revealing reading because we are taught by multicultural educators to regard the circumstances of blacks and native Indians as very similar: both suffered miserably at the hands of the white man. But Tocqueville captures a nuance that has eluded our present-day ideologues. The Indian, he writes, never wanted Western civilization, but the white man was determined to shove it down his throat. In short, the Indian is faced with the problem of *forced inclusion*. Blacks, Tocqueville said, want nothing more than to share the privileges of white society, but whites will not allow them to do so. In short, blacks are faced with the problem of *forced exclusion*.

The charge of forced exclusion is the more serious one, and in this chapter I focus on African-Americans. Most blacks believe that they have suffered, and continue to suffer, terrible injustice at the hands of the white man. The great black scholar W. E. B. DuBois said his life in America was defined by a kind of double consciousness, resulting in a divided loyalty. DuBois wrote, "One ever feels this two-ness: an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."<sup>6</sup>

The problem of patriotism for black Americans was even more dramatically stated in the late nineteenth century by the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass. "This fourth of July," he said, "is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. I have no patriotism. I have no country. What

country have I? The institutions of this country do not know me, do not recognize me as a man. I have not—I cannot have—any love for this country, as such, or for its constitution. I desire to see its overthrow as speedily as possible.”<sup>7</sup> Douglass’s statement borders on treason, yet it is an honorable treason. His argument is one that Aristotle would recognize. What he is saying is that one cannot be a good citizen in a bad country.

The United States military is disproportionately made up of black Americans. These men and women are apparently ready and willing to fight for their country, but it is not unreasonable to wonder why. If Douglass is right, this is not their country, it has not treated them well, it continues to treat them badly, so they are at best (as the popular T-shirt has it) “Africans in America.” To speak in the language of Malcolm X, are blacks in the armed forces nothing more than “house Negroes” foolishly risking their lives to protect the master’s plantation? This seems a very harsh assessment, but it is undoubtedly true that there is very little in the black literary tradition, and very little said by contemporary black leaders, that makes the case for why black Americans should love America and fight for America. Why, then, should they?



**L**eading black scholars such as John Hope Franklin say that the problems of African-Americans go back to the beginning—to the American founding. Franklin argues that the founders “betrayed the ideals to which they gave lip service.” They wrote “eloquently at one moment for the brotherhood of man and in the next moment denied it to their black brothers.” They chose

to “degrade the human spirit by equating five black men with three white men.” The consequences have been unremittingly painful for African-Americans. “Having created a tragically flawed revolutionary doctrine and a Constitution that did not bestow the blessings of liberty on its posterity, the founding fathers set the stage for every succeeding generation to apologize, compromise, and temporize on those principles of liberty that were supposed to be the very foundation of our system of government and way of life.”<sup>8</sup>

Such views have become commonplace among African-Americans, and they are routinely promulgated in multicultural textbooks. Interestingly Franklin’s criticism of the founders relies on the same reasoning that Justice Taney relied on in the infamous *Dred Scott* decision. Writing for the majority in this notorious 1857 case upholding slavery, Taney argued that since several of the founders, including Jefferson, were slave owners, these men could not have really meant that “all men are created equal.” They may have written “all men,” but what they really meant was “white men.” As for black slaves, Taney concluded that they have “no rights that the white man is bound to respect.”<sup>9</sup>

Are Franklin and Taney right? Are the founders guilty as alleged? Let us consider the evidence fairly, beginning with the notorious “three-fifths” clause to which Franklin alludes. To the modern mind, this is one of the most troubling pieces of evidence against the founders. And yet it should not be, because the clause itself has nothing to say about the intrinsic worth of blacks.

The origins of the clause are to be found in the debate between the northern states and the southern states over the issue of political representation. The South wanted to count blacks as

whole persons, in order to increase its political power. The North wanted blacks to count for nothing—not for the purpose of rejecting their humanity, but in order to preserve and strengthen the antislavery majority in Congress. It was not a proslavery southerner but an antislavery northerner, James Wilson of Pennsylvania, who proposed the three-fifths compromise. The effect was to limit the South's political representation and its ability to protect the institution of slavery. Frederick Douglass understood this: he called the three-fifths clause "a downright disability laid upon the slaveholding states" which deprived them of "two-fifths of their natural basis of representation."<sup>10</sup> So a provision of the Constitution that was antislavery and pro-black in intent as well as in effect is today cited to prove that the American founders championed the cause of racist oppression.

Refuting the myth that the three-fifths clause degrades black humanity does not absolve the founders of the charge of hypocrisy. We still have to meet Franklin and Taney's argument that the founders claimed to be antislavery while approving a Constitution that permitted the continuation of slavery. Despite Jefferson's impressive fulminations against slavery, the fact remains that he owned some two hundred slaves and did not free them. Does it not follow that the author of "all men are created equal" could not have meant what he said?

It should not be surprising that Jefferson, a Virginia planter, owned slaves; in this he was a man of his time. What is surprising is that, as a southern slave owner, Jefferson made no attempt to justify slavery by contending that it was good for the slave. On the contrary, he repeatedly denounced slavery in the strongest terms. Even if blacks could be shown to be intellectually inferior to

whites, Jefferson denied that this would provide a just basis for their enslavement. "Whatever be their talents, it is no measure of their rights."<sup>11</sup> Jefferson was one of the least religious of the founders, but strikingly he consistently adopted prophetic biblical language in condemning slavery. "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that His justice cannot sleep forever."<sup>12</sup>

Given Jefferson's firm repudiation of slavery, a view shared by most of the framers, why didn't these men move rapidly to free their slaves and insist upon a Constitution that would immediately secure equal rights for all? To answer this question, we must understand something about the relationship between slavery and democracy, and about the practical dilemma faced by the framers in Philadelphia.

For millennia, slavery was an accepted part of society. In numerous civilizations both Western and non-Western, slavery needed no defenders because it had no critics. The major religions of the world, including Christianity and Islam, permitted slavery. True, Christianity and Islam both hold that all persons are equal in God's sight. But for centuries this was considered a spiritual truth, inapplicable to the hierarchies of this world. But starting in the seventeenth century, certain segments of Christianity—initially the Quakers, then the evangelical Christians—began to interpret biblical equality as forbidding the ownership of one man by another. Only then, for the first time, did slavery become a political problem.<sup>13</sup>

Before that, slaves were typically captured in warfare or bought and sold in slave markets, and the greatest thinkers of antiquity condoned slavery. Aristotle distinguished between those who were "slaves by nature," i.e., those who lacked the mental



capacity to rule themselves, and "slaves by convention," i.e., those who had the misfortune to be captured and enslaved. While Aristotle did not attempt to defend conventional slavery in terms of justice, he did allow it on grounds of expediency. In every society, he said, there is dirty work to be done, and someone has to do it. If slaves do the hard labor, Aristotle theorized, then there would be leisure for others to engage in higher pursuits like art and philosophy and politics.

In his debate with Abraham Lincoln in the mid-nineteenth century, Stephen Douglas offered a version of the Aristotelian argument in defense of the slave system of the American South. "The civilized world has always held that when any race of men have shown themselves to be so degraded by ignorance, superstition, cruelty, and barbarism, as to be utterly incapable of governing themselves, they must, in the nature of things, be governed by others, by such laws as are deemed to be applicable to their condition."<sup>14</sup> The careful reader will also recognize in this statement echoes of Plato's argument for why the wise should rule.

We might regard Stephen Douglas's argument to be crude and despicable, but Abraham Lincoln did not. He agreed with Douglas: it is absurd to construct a regime in which the foolish are in charge. Thus democracy poses a problem that the American founders and Lincoln all recognized: how can the wise—who are by definition the few—be reliably identified and chosen to rule by the many? Representative government is based on the hope that the majority will exercise their power on behalf of right—that they will choose others to govern who are wiser than themselves. Yet modern democracy introduces a crucial qualification to the claim of the wise to rule: such rule is only legiti-

mate when it is vindicated by popular consent. The requirement of consent is necessary to ensure that the wise do not rule simply for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of the unwise.

"The only distinction between freedom and slavery," Alexander Hamilton wrote, "consists in this: in the former state, a man is governed by laws to which he has given his consent; in the latter, he is governed by the will of another."<sup>15</sup> Here we can see what the American founders saw instantly: that the argument for democracy and the argument against slavery are one and the same. Both are based on the political doctrine that no man may rule another man without his consent.



Since blacks are human beings, slavery is against natural right and should be prohibited. But how? Here is where Jefferson and the founders faced two profound obstacles. The first was that virtually all of them recognized the degraded condition of blacks in America and understood it posed a formidable hurdle to granting blacks the rights of citizenship. By contrast with monarchy and aristocracy, which only require subjects to obey, self-government requires citizens who have the capacity to be rulers. Jefferson and the founders were legitimately concerned that a group that had been enslaved for centuries was not ready to assume the responsibility of democratic self-rule.

Jefferson was also aware of the existence of intense and widespread white prejudices against blacks which, whatever their cause, seemed to prevent the two peoples from coexisting harmoniously on the same soil. Madison, who shared this view,

developed a plan for the U.S. government to raise money to repatriate blacks to Africa. These so-called colonization schemes seem bizarre today, but in the eighteenth century they were supported by many abolitionists, white as well as black. Lincoln himself echoed Jefferson's concerns, and prior to the Civil War he endorsed colonization as a way for blacks to live free and unmolested in a country of their own.

The deference of Jefferson and the American founders to popular prejudices strikes many contemporary scholars as an intellectual and moral scandal. Some, like John Hope Franklin, suggest that popular convictions simply represented a frustrating obstacle that the founders should have dealt with resolutely and uncompromisingly. But in a democratic society, the absence of the people's agreement on a fundamental question of governance is no mere technicality. The case for democracy, no less than the case against slavery, rests on the legitimacy of the people's consent. To outlaw slavery without the consent of the majority of whites would be to destroy democracy, indeed to destroy the very basis for outlawing slavery itself.

The men gathered in Philadelphia were in a peculiar predicament. For them to sanction slavery would be to proclaim the illegitimacy of the American revolution and the new form of government based on the people's consent; yet for them to outlaw slavery without securing the people's consent would have the same effect. In practical terms as well, the choice facing the founders was not to permit or to prohibit slavery. Rather, the choice was either to establish a union in which slavery was tolerated, or not to have a union at all. Any suggestion that the southern states could have been persuaded to join a union and give up slavery can

be dismissed as preposterous. As Harry Jaffa puts it, had the founders insisted upon securing *all* the rights of *all* men, they would have ended up securing *no* rights for *anybody*.<sup>16</sup>

Thus the accusation that the founders compromised on the Declaration's principle that "all men are created equal" for the purpose of expediency reflects a grave misunderstanding. The founders were confronted with a competing principle that is also present in the Declaration: governments derive their legitimacy from the "consent of the governed." Both principles must be satisfied, and when they cannot be, compromise is not merely permissible but morally required.

The framers found a middle ground, not between principle and practice, but between opposition to slavery and majority consent. They produced a Constitution in which the concept of slavery is tolerated in deference to consent, but not given any moral approval in recognition of the slave's natural rights. Nowhere in the document is the term "slavery" used. Slaves are always described as "persons," implying their possession of natural rights. The founders were also careful to approve a Constitution that refuses to acknowledge the existence of racial distinctions, thus producing a document that transcended its time.

None of the supposed contradictions that contemporary scholars have located in the founding documents were unrecognized by the founders. Many of the framers justified their toleration of slavery on prudential grounds, for in the 1770s and 1780s they had reason to believe that slavery was losing its commercial appeal. In this they were wrong, because Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin in 1793 (which the founders could not have anticipated) revived the demand for slavery in the South.

Even so, the test of the founders' project is the practical consequence: did the founding strengthen or weaken the institution of slavery? The American Revolution should be judged by its consequences. Before 1776, slavery was legal in every part of America. Yet by 1804 every state north of Maryland had abolished slavery either immediately or gradually; southern and border states prohibited further slave importations from abroad; and Congress was committed to outlawing the slave trade in 1808, which it did. Slavery was no longer a national but a sectional institution, and one under moral and political siege.

Abraham Lincoln not only perceived the founders' dilemma, he inherited it. The principle of popular rule is based on Jefferson's doctrine that "all men are created equal," yet the greatest crisis in American history arose when the people denied that "all men are created equal" and in so doing denied the basis of their own legitimacy. Lincoln had two choices: work to overthrow democracy, or work to secure consent through persuasion. Conscious that he, too, must defer, as the founders did, to prevailing prejudices, Lincoln nevertheless sought to neutralize those prejudices so they did not become a barrier to securing black freedom. In a series of artfully conditional claims—"If God gave the black man little, that little let him enjoy"—Lincoln paid ritual obeisance to existing racism while drawing even racists into his coalition to end slavery. He made these rhetorical concessions because he knew that the possibility for securing antislavery consent was far better in his time than in the 1780s.

Commenting on the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln said of the founders: "They intended to include all men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects. They

defined with tolerable distinctness in what respects they did consider all men created equal—equal in certain inalienable rights. They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. They meant simply to declare the *right*, so that the *enforcement* of it must follow as fast as circumstances should permit.”<sup>17</sup> By working through, rather than around, the democratic process, Lincoln justified the nation’s faith in the untried experiment of representative self-government. In vindicating the slave’s right to rule himself, Lincoln also vindicated the legitimacy of democratic self-rule. Thus it is accurate to say that Lincoln gave America a “new birth of freedom.”

Lincoln’s position came to be shared by Frederick Douglass, who had once denounced the Constitution but who eventually reached the conclusion that it contained antislavery principles. “Abolish slavery tomorrow, and not a sentence or syllable of the Constitution needs to be altered,” Douglass said. Slavery, he concluded, was merely “scaffolding to the magnificent structure, to be removed as soon as the building was completed.”<sup>18</sup> Douglass came to understand what contemporary multiculturalists apparently do not—that the best antislavery program is not necessarily support for the grandest impractical scheme but rather “is that which deals the deadliest blow upon slavery that can be given at a particular time.”<sup>19</sup>

It took a civil war to destroy slavery, and more than half a million whites were killed in that war, “one life for every six slaves freed,” C. Vann Woodward reminds us. But for Lincoln as for Douglass, the greatest white and black statesmen of the

time, the triumph of the union and the emancipation of the slaves represented not the victory of might over right, but the reverse. Justice had won out over expediency, and the principles of the American founding had at long last been realized. The founders exercised wisdom and prudence in producing a charter for a society immeasurably better than the one in which they found themselves. History has vindicated their philosophical statesmanship. Black Americans and indeed all of us owe the American founders a profound debt of gratitude.



**H**aving examined the issue of slavery, let us now discuss racism. Racism is a doctrine of innate or biological superiority. In its classic form, it leads to discrimination, which deprives members of victimized groups the equal protection of the laws. While slavery ended in the United States nearly a century and a half ago, racism continues to exist. Many African-American leaders insist that it is as bad as, if not worse than, it ever was. "Racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment," says Nobel laureate Toni Morrison.<sup>20</sup> "Racism is an integral, permanent and indestructible component of this society," writes legal scholar Derrick Bell.<sup>21</sup> These writers hold societal racism responsible for the current problems of blacks. Is America to blame because African-Americans are not doing as well as members of other groups?

As an immigrant, I am constantly surprised by how much I hear racism talked about and how little I actually see it. (Even fewer are the incidents in which I have experienced it directly.)

When one examines the policies of universities, companies, and the government, one finds that they actually discriminate *in favor* of African-Americans and other minority groups, and against white males. Socially most Americans go out of their way to cater to, and to avoid offending, blacks. Such measures seem unlikely in a racist society. There are specific incidents of racism and specific victims, to be sure, but the very fact that we can identify them proves that they are not typical, and the ensuing outcry shows the degree to which racism has become stigmatized in American society.

For the past several years I have been speaking at American colleges on the issue of affirmative action. Inevitably some student or professor will harangue me about how indispensable racial preferences are at that particular school because of the pervasiveness of racism and discrimination. I then ask, "Do you know of any bigots in your admissions office who are trying to keep blacks and Hispanics out?" Not once has my question led to the identification of any bigots.

Where, then, is the racism? At this point my interlocutor typically makes the Jesse Jackson maneuver: having failed to locate overt racism, he insists upon the pervasiveness of covert racism. The absence of individual racism inspires the allegation of "institutional racism." And in this case the culprit is the admissions standard used by the selective college to decide who gets in. In particular, the villain of the story turns out to be the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT). This test, we hear, is racially and culturally biased.

I took the SAT myself in the late 1970s, and it didn't seem to me that it had been prepared by the Ku Klux Klan. The SAT seeks



to measure verbal ability, reading comprehension, mathematical skill, and logical and reasoning aptitude, all of which seem quite relevant to performing well in college. It is conceivable that some questions on the verbal section of the test are biased, in that they refer to material outside the normal experience of inner-city blacks. But let us focus, for a moment, on the math section. The typical question goes like this: "If an automobile can go at a speed of 75 miles per hour, how far can it go in 40 minutes?" No one can maintain with a straight face that simple equations are racially biased, or that algebra is rigged against Hispanics. Yet the performance gaps between blacks and whites are greater on the math section than on the verbal section.

What this suggests is that the test is accurately measuring not innate capacity but differences of academic performance. And on those measures of merit that selective colleges typically use, not all racial groups do equally well. So far I have focused on a single test, so let me expand my argument by asking you to envision any test that measures intellectual achievement or economic performance. It may be a reading test given to six-year-olds, or a math test given to fifteen-year-olds, or the law school admission test, or the graduate record exam, or the business school test, or the firefighters test, or the police sergeant test, or the civil service exam. It doesn't matter—you name the test. Now if your chosen test is today administered to a hundred randomly selected members from each of four groups—white, black, Hispanic, and Asian-American—I will tell you in advance the result. Whites and Asians will do the best, Hispanics will fall in the middle, and African-Americans, alas, will do the least well.

For the past several years, I have challenged leading African-American scholars to give me a single example of a test that violates the pattern of results that I have identified here. None of them have been able to do so. This is a serious problem for those who blame racial bias for the comparatively poor test results of African-Americans. It is conceivable that this test or that test is flawed or biased, but to maintain that every test, in every subject, in every part of the country, is conspiratorially biased in the same way—this is absurd.

The simple truth is that merit, not racism, is responsible for performance differences on the test. Merit, not racism, is the primary obstacle to enrolling larger numbers of blacks and Hispanics in selective universities. This realization has come as a surprise to many leaders of the civil rights movement. In the 1950s and 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. championed the cause of merit against that of nepotism and racial favoritism. All we are asking, King said, is that we be judged on our merits as individuals, based on the content of our character and not the color of our skins.

Eventually the leaders of the United States agreed to this. There were strong pockets of resistance, especially in the South, but the heroic persistence of King and his supporters was vindicated. There was a series of landmark rulings and laws—*Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act, the Fair Housing Bill—which established equality of rights under the law for all citizens. Merit became the operating standard, just as King demanded. King fully expected that merit would produce diversity and that equality of rights for individuals would lead to equality of results for groups.

It has been a generation since King's death, and we now see that King's premise was false. Equality of rights for individuals has not led to equality of results for groups. Merit, like racism, produces inequality. And inequalities produced by merit are far more justifiable than inequalities produced by favoritism or racism. Consider the example of the National Basketball Association. African-Americans are 12 percent of the population but more than 75 percent of NBA players. Why, then, do we not hear demands for more Jews and Asians to be represented on the courts? Presumably because it is merit that is producing this racially disproportionate result. If coaches are picking the best dribblers and passers and shooters, then who cares if one group has more players and another group has less?

If this seems like a sensible approach, it should also be applied to universities, and corporations, and government jobs. But here the civil rights leaders face a nightmare scenario. They know that merit standards, applied in a neutral or color-blind way, are likely to result in a kind of racial hierarchy, with blacks at the bottom. The prospect of this upsets many blacks and embarrasses many whites. Racial preferences are a way to appease black discontent and reduce white embarrassment. They have nothing to do with fighting racism. Not a single one of the black or Hispanic students preferentially admitted to colleges over the years has shown that he or she has been victimized by racism. Nor have any of the white and Asian students who have been turned away, despite better grades, test scores, and extracurricular talents, been shown to have discriminated against anyone.

A just social policy seeks to benefit those who have been harmed and impose the cost on those who have done the harm-

ing. This is not what racial preference policies do. They seek to camouflage the performance differences between racial groups and to benefit less-qualified members of some groups at the expense of more-qualified members of other groups. By applying two different standards—a higher one to Asians and whites, and a lower one to blacks and Hispanics—admissions officers and corporate recruiters can show a diverse outcome and pretend that all groups are performing equally well. The racial caste society is averted, but at the expense of undermining two bedrock American principles—the principle of merit and the principle of equal rights under the law.



**P**references create the illusion that blacks are competitive with whites, but wouldn't it be better for blacks in fact to be competitive with whites? To see how this is possible, we must candidly discuss the reasons for the merit gap. Why is it the case that on virtually every measure of academic ability and economic performance, African-Americans do poorly in comparison with other groups? In this debate there are three positions.

The first position can be identified with *The Bell Curve*, the controversial book by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray. In it the authors contend that there may be natural, biological differences between the races that account for their unequal levels of performance.<sup>22</sup> *The Bell Curve* was written as an argument against racial preferences, although to my mind it offers the strongest possible argument in *support* of such preferences. After all, if group differences are large, innate, and ineradicable,

then the only alternative to a racial caste society is to set up multiple measures of performance (a kind of Special Olympics) so that all groups can enjoy a measure of reward and recognition. Let us call the argument advanced by Herrnstein and Murray the genetic position.

The genetic position has been challenged, for the better part of a century, by what may be termed the liberal position. The liberal position, argued by scholars such as Andrew Hacker, Christopher Jencks, and William Julius Wilson, says that the reason for group differences in academic achievement and economic performance is that society artificially creates such differences. In this view, societal oppression, and specifically racism, causes group inequalities that otherwise would not exist.

The genetic and the liberal view have been at odds for decades, and they operate like a seesaw: when one is up, the other is down. In the early part of the twentieth century, the genetic view was predominant. Most people assumed that there were natural differences between groups that explained why some did better than others. But in the 1950s and 1960s, the genetic view came under sustained assault. The liberals said: How can you say that blacks are doing poorly due to some supposed natural deficit? Look at all the discrimination to which they are subjected. This argument was entirely plausible, which is why the genetic view began to lose support and the liberal view became the conventional wisdom.

Today, however, the liberal view has become intellectually bankrupt. To see why this is so, consider the SAT. Both on the verbal and the math section of the test, Asian-Americans and whites who come from poor families—let us say, families earning below \$20,000 a year—score higher than African-Americans who come

from well-off families—say, families earning over \$60,000 a year.<sup>23</sup> This fact, which is easy to verify and is not denied by any informed person in the race debate, destroys the old canard that tests are mere calibrators of socioeconomic privilege. But it also poses a grave challenge to the liberal position itself. Recall that the liberal view attributes group differences in performance to racism. But how could racism operate in such a way that it enables poor whites and Asians to score higher on math tests than upper-middle-class African-Americans? When I pose this question to liberal scholars, they usually call me insulting names.

So the debate is at a tragic standoff between two unacceptable alternatives: the genetic position and the liberal position. To break the deadlock, a group of scholars—including Thomas Sowell, Orlando Patterson, and Shelby Steele—has offered a third position that I support. This may be called the cultural position. This view holds that there are cultural, which is to say *behavioral*, differences between groups. These are observable in everyday life, they can be measured by the usual techniques of social science, and they can be directly related to academic achievement and economic success.

A few years ago sociologist Sanford Dornbusch and his colleagues were puzzled by the persistence of large differences in academic performance between Asian-Americans and African-Americans. They were disturbed by the possibility that these differences might be due to natural or genetic factors. So Dornbusch and his colleagues conducted a comparative study of white, black, Hispanic, and Asian-American students. Here is what they found: "In general Asian-American students devote relatively more time to their studies, are more likely to attribute their success to hard

work, and are more likely to report that their parents have high standards for school performance.... In contrast, African-American and Hispanic students are more cavalier about the consequences of poor school performance, devote less time to their studies, are less likely than others to attribute their success to hard work, and report that their parents have relatively lower standards."<sup>24</sup>

Obviously this doesn't settle the issue; one may ask, "But why do Asian-Americans and African-Americans show these differences in attitude and behavior?" Undoubtedly many complex factors are involved, but one that is worth mentioning is the two-parent family. It seems obvious that two parents will have, on average, more time than a single parent to invest in a child's upbringing, discipline, homework supervision, and so on. What is the illegitimacy rate in the Asian-American community? Less than 5 percent. In the African-American community? Nearly 70 percent!

I mentioned these facts at a recent conference, and one of my fellow panelists erupted in anger. "Yes, but who do you think caused the decline of the black family? Clearly it is the result of slavery." He went on to remind me that in no southern state were slaves legally permitted to marry and that masters periodically broke up families and sold off children. All of this is sadly true. And the argument sounds so reasonable that it is only by looking at the facts that we see that it is largely erroneous. In the early part of the twentieth century W. E. B. DuBois published his study of the black family in which he pointed out that the illegitimacy rate for blacks in the United States was around 20 percent.<sup>25</sup> From 1900 to 1965 the black illegitimacy rate remained roughly at that figure.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in 1965 Daniel Patrick Moynihan did his

famous report on the Negro family and announced a national scandal: the black illegitimacy rate had reached 25 percent.<sup>27</sup>

Let us concede that slavery was primarily responsible for that figure. After emancipation, however, African-Americans made strenuous attempts to reunite and rebuild their families. This is a black success story that is not well known. (Black activists don't publicize it because it disrupts the profitable narrative of victimization.) Ironically, it is during the period from 1965 to the present—a period that saw the Great Society, the civil rights laws, affirmative action, welfare, and other attempts to integrate blacks into the mainstream and raise their standard of living—that the black family disintegrated. Today that disintegration has reached the point that the typical African-American child is born out of wedlock.

The African-American sociologist William Julius Wilson concedes the existence of cultural pathologies like illegitimacy and high crime rates in the black community. He blames these not on slavery but on racism, poverty, and unemployment.<sup>28</sup> Wilson points out, for example, that a young black man who doesn't have a job is in no position to support a family. Who should be surprised, therefore, that he gets a girl pregnant and refuses to marry her? The problem with Wilson's analysis is that it ignores the historical record. Consider the period of the 1930s in the segregationist South. Racism, poverty, and unemployment were rampant. Yet what was the black illegitimacy rate? It remained at 20 percent! The black crime rate? It was a lot lower than it is now. Neither Wilson nor anyone else has explained why, at a time when economic and social conditions have greatly improved for blacks, these cultural problems have worsened.





Let me summarize my argument by reexamining the debate in the early twentieth century between W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. Although the debate focused on black Americans, it is relevant to the question of how any group starting out at the bottom can advance in society. DuBois, a distinguished scholar and cofounder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), argued that African-Americans in the United States face one big problem, and it is racism. Washington, who was born a slave but went on to become head of the Tuskegee Institute, maintained that African-Americans face two big problems. One is racism, he conceded. The other, he said, is black cultural disadvantage. Washington said that black crime rates were too high, black savings rates were too low, blacks did not have enough respect for educational achievement.

DuBois countered that these problems, if they existed, were due to the legacy of slavery and racism. Washington did not disagree, but he insisted that, whatever their source, these cultural problems demanded attention. What is the point of having rights, Washington said, without the ability to exercise those rights and compete effectively with other groups? To put the matter in contemporary terms, there is little benefit in having the right to a job at General Motors if you don't know how to do the job. Washington further argued that if these cultural deficiencies were not addressed, they would help to *strengthen* racism by giving it an empirical foundation.

The civil rights movement, led by the NAACP, fought for decades to implement the DuBois program and secure basic rights for black Americans. This was a necessary campaign, and ulti-

mately it was successful. The laws were changed, and blacks achieved their goal of full citizenship. Obviously enforcement remained an issue, but at this point, it seems to me, the DuBois program was largely achieved. At this crucial juncture the civil rights movement should have moved from the DuBois agenda to the Booker T. Washington agenda.

Unfortunately, this did not happen. It still hasn't happened. Even today the NAACP and other civil rights groups continue to "agitate, agitate, agitate" to achieve black progress. This is the approach that Jesse Jackson has perfected. It draws on the language and tactics of political struggle to make gains. But how significant are those gains? A few years ago I was in Washington, D.C., and there was a big march on the mall. All the major civil rights groups were represented. Several speakers ascended the podium, thumped their fists, and said, "We've got to go to Bill Clinton and demand 300,000 new jobs." Now this was during the impeachment controversy, and anyone who had been following the news knew that Bill Clinton had found it incredibly difficult to get *one* job—for Monica Lewinsky. Where did the man have 300,000 jobs to give anyone? The fact is that the civil rights leadership continues to pursue a strategy that has run its course, that no longer pays real dividends.

Meanwhile, there is another group that is following the Booker T. Washington strategy, and that is the nonwhite immigrants. I don't mean just the Koreans and the Asian Indians; I also mean black immigrants—the West Indians, the Haitians, the Nigerians. All are darker than African-Americans, and yet white racism does not seem to stop them. The immigrants know that racism today is not systematic, it is episodic, and they are able

to find ways to navigate around its obstacles. Even immigrants who start out at the very bottom are making rapid gains, surging ahead of African-Americans and claiming the American dream for themselves. West Indians, for instance, have established a strong business and professional community, and have nearly achieved income parity with whites.<sup>29</sup>

How is this possible? The immigrants don't spend a lot of time contemplating the hardships of the past; their gaze is firmly fixed on the future. They recognize that education and entrepreneurship are the fastest ladders to success in America. They push their children to study, so that they will be admitted to Berkeley and MIT, and they pool their resources and set up small businesses, so that they can make some money and move to the suburbs. There are plenty of hurdles along the way, but the immigrant is sustained by the hope that he, or his children, will be able to break the chain of necessity and pursue the American dream.

Thus we find that any group that is trying to move up in America and succeed is confronted with two possible strategies—the immigrant strategy and the Jesse Jackson strategy—and it is an empirical question as to which one works better. So far the evidence is overwhelming that the immigrant approach of assimilating to the cultural strategies of success is vastly better for group uplift than the Jesse Jackson approach of political agitation.

One of the blessings of living in a multiracial society is that we can learn from one another. Black Americans have contributed greatly to America by pressuring the country to live up to its highest principles. As an immigrant, I owe a tremendous debt to the black civil rights movement for opening up doors that would otherwise have remained closed. All Americans have a lot to learn

from African-Americans about suffering, about dignity, about creativity, and about charm. But it is also a fact that the black leadership can learn a lot from the immigrants, especially black immigrants. African-Americans can move up faster if they focus less on manufacturing representation and more on building intellectual and economic skills. In this way blacks can achieve a level of competitive success that is ultimately the best, and final, refutation of “rumors of inferiority.”

Martin Luther King once said that ultimately every man must write with his own hand the charter of his emancipation proclamation. What he meant by this is that in a decent society, citizens will be granted equality of rights under the law. We do have that right, but we do not have any more rights than this. African-Americans were not always granted legal equality, but now they have it, and it is all that they are entitled to. King's point is that what we do with our rights, what we make of ourselves, the kind of script that we write of our lives, this finally is up to us.