

AN AMERICA WITHOUT MINORITIES: The Next Historical Epoch

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A wise man once said, “In troubled times, the duty of the wise is to repeat the obvious”. He might have added, that if the wise do not occasionally repeat the obvious even in untroubled times, then the times can quickly become troubled.

It seems to me that, in large measure, the journalists of today demonstrate unusual wisdom in their reporting upon the status of minorities in America. Things have never been so good; and they are getting better. We all sense it; we all know it; there is the sweet smell of hope in the air. It is so obvious, that sometimes we forget it.

We need fine-tuning in American justice, no doubt, and there are of course problems looming on the horizon. Still, never in the history of the world has there been a time when those who once were shunned, those who once were dispossessed, who once had nothing to pass on to their children and, indeed, who could not even call their children their own—never have the dispossessed had greater cause for hope. Let me give you just a few indications of the meaning of hope for minorities in America, as freely reported in the press:

In the midst of the longest—six years—peace-time economic expansion in history, jobs in general have grown by 2.7% per year. In the past six years:

- for blacks, jobs are up 4.7%
- for Hispanic’s, up 6.8%
- for black teenagers, up 8.2%.¹

These are not “make-work”, public assistance jobs—they are real work, contributing to the wealth of the nation as a whole. Half the new jobs pay over \$20,000 per year, and managerial positions have grown by 21%.

The real income—not inflationary income—of the median American family rose by 9% over the last six years, but the median incomes of blacks, per capita, rose 15.5 %.

This is the meaning of hope: freedom, a job, independence, the chance to build a home and family.

When ever else, in the history of the world, has it happened that the outcast has gained the opportunity to enter into the community of freedom and family, and then made such good use

of that opportunity, without resentment or desire for revenge? It seems to me that journalists reporting on minorities have never really forgotten what a marvelous achievement this all has been, over the last generation. Journalists in America have never let us take for granted the fact that the blessings of citizenship in America are now the common inheritance of blacks, yellows, whites, browns, together. Indeed, obvious though it is, we should never take it for granted.

This brings me to an important subject to which we have given insufficient attention; namely, what will it take for us to cash in this hopeful state of affairs? That important question turns on an usually unacknowledged fact: blacks are not just a minority! Blacks are the American minority.

Central to the social and political development of the United States is the question of the status of American blacks. No other minority occupies that place. Further, the key to fulfillment of the promise of American freedom for all Americans is American blacks. From the founding era forward, intelligent and sensitive people have acknowledged that America, would never be whole unless and until a satisfactory answer could be found to the question, “what to do with the blacks?” That great moral fact is true of no other minority. The stage of history at which we are now arrived is that in which no one apart from black people can answer that question. It is up to American blacks to make America whole.

I will be said to have adopted ethnic chauvinism in this assertion. Words less true were never spoken. Dealing with the reality of American political history means facing up to hard truths as well as easy promises. The hard truth is that the intrinsic centrality of American blacks to America’s prospects imposes an enormous burden of blacks. This would be seen more clearly even today if commentators could pay attention, not to the froth, but to the full current flowing beneath the Jesse Jackson campaign. But divert attention from the candidate to the people voting for him, and the significance of my observation will become clear. It is not Jackson but that overwhelming, coherent body of opinion in an identifiable if not organized segment of the body politic which counts.

The situation does not differ, in this fundamental respect, from the body of slaveholders in ante-bellum America. Because of their coherence and articulated identify, they held in their hands—that is, in their opinions and sentiments—the power to save their country. They failed to do so, and the country paid the price of fratricidal war. That power has been inherited, not by unreconstructed white southerners but, by American blacks, whose views of freedom and American citizenship are the key to eliminating social and political contradictions in American life.

If and when the opinions of American blacks coalesce around a notion of the universality of civil rights and civil rights enforcement, then and not until then will the promise of America be secure for all. Blacks alone have the power to end the era of the illusory promise of special treatment. More importantly, they have no greater interest, since that era has unfolded largely at the expense of expected black advances which were to flow from the civil rights movement. The proliferation of minorities in America has played a direct role in frustrating the hopes of American blacks. The cause of that proliferation has been the era of special treatment.

When the black citizen will demand that he and the white citizen be subject to identical laws and regulations, at that point the era of the minorities in American politics will have ended. Not women, not other ethnic groups, nor status groups, will prevail to keep the era alive, once this change comes. That is why we cannot shrink from the assertion, that for all fundamental purposes, there exists but one minority in America, American blacks. And the key to their future in this country will be the transition from the role of supplicant to that of benefactor. In that way America's blacks will make America whole.

Now, I said earlier that there were problems looming on the horizon; I think that it is important that we consider for a moment what those problems look like. I am not going to talk to you about drugs, gangs or teenage pregnancy. These are serious problems. But they are problems which face Americans as Americans. Instead, I want to talk to you about two problems, not of Americans as Americans, but of minorities as Americans. As usual, most human problems boil down to knowing, first, who one's friends are, and second, who one's enemies are.

Briefly, the first sort of problem: knowing who our friends are: A generation ago, blacks in America may have thought that they had nothing to lose, in shaking up the existing constitutional and legal structure of the United States. At that time, whenever anyone warned that the cause of civil rights was threatening the cause of freedom, we all knew that the only freedoms being protected were the freedoms of those who already profited by theirs. We wanted ours, and we didn't care whose freedoms got trampled in our getting it.

Well, today, for the most part, we are getting ours, at least when we are not victimized by the false allure of programs which only sustain our subjection. We have our chance, and we are using it. And today, we have something to lose, namely, the America which makes those freedoms worthwhile. Of course, there are poor and homeless and people who need; but, today, they aren't black poor or brown poor; they are American poor, and we must deal with the poor as a problem of Americans. But, as for blacks—and browns and yellows—well, today, the freedoms being threatened are our freedoms and all of our freedoms. This is why I said, we have to know who our friends are. Today, we face a great deal of civil rights legislation and litigation, some from good intentions, ostensibly designed to improve the conditions of minorities in America: much of it often serves to diminish the freedom of minorities in America. This is why I said that we have to know who our friends are: Minorities as minorities don't need "help;" we need to be "left alone," so we can get on with the job of building our lives as free, independent Americans. The lesson of the last six years is that Americans, all Americans, need only their freedom to build a good life. The lesson of the last six years is that those truly our friends are those who worry most about and work hardest for the freedom of individuals and the independence of our families, churches, societies, schools, an independence from tyrannical authority for all of our lives together.

Briefly, the second sort of problem: knowing whom our enemies are: plain and simple, the enemies of the Constitution of the United States of America are our enemies. Those enemies are internal as well as external to the United States. But in the matter of color, or civil rights, it is above all the internal resisters who pose our greatest difficulties. I can not touch upon the many ways in which this opposition is manifest. But the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights may stand

as an example of the difficulty, an icon of our larger problem. For the Commission, too, has attracted intransigent opposition, an opposition no less damaging to the cause of civil rights than outright hostility to the Constitution. Let us consider how its opponents have obstructed the work of the Commission on Civil Rights.

The Commission symbolizes controversy today, but why? Is the Reagan Administration to blame? That will hardly seem a credible response, when one knows who it is that has hobbled the Commission. For, apart from certain congressmen and interests outside the Commission, the Commission has been hobbled, not by its Chairman, but by obstruction and incompetence in other commissioners. Commissioner Berry's constant barrage of charges the last five years about the stupidity of the Commission is mistakenly applied to the Chairman. She and Chairman Pendleton disagree, about means and ends. But she is too intelligent to dismiss that as stupid. Besides, she is well aware that the Chairman's chief failing is his tendency to run a meeting as openly as possible, with little attention to order and decorum. His willingness to afford all the chance to speak and be heard occasionally undermines the system required to get work done. But this particular weakness speaks well of the Chairman's good will and deference to his colleagues, rather than sustains Commissioner Berry's charges. If I understand her charges, as I believe I do, she has taken aim rather at commissioners who seek to say or promise everything to everyone all at once and, hence, never say anything at all.

It is, then, the core of two or three commissioners, Destro, Friedman, Guess, who seem to have formulated the ambition to create a "shadow commission," designed as an endrun around the Chairman, who are most immediately the victims of Commissioner Berry's charges. Her charge, so far as I can see and assuming I understand her correctly, is true.

A second source of the Commission's hobbling is Commissioner Berry herself, who aims to assure the realization of her prophecies of commission impotence by means of systematically undermining Commission initiatives. For example, when she predicts that so-called "respectable" civil rights leaders will not cooperate with the Commission, she seems only to be evaluating their view of the Commission when in fact she is revealing her intention to order them not to cooperate.

I will not try to put words in Commissioner Berry's mouth to explain the reason for her sabotage. It is clear without that, however, that there is a debate over the meaning of civil rights. I interpret her position in that debate to be the claim that civil rights today is just another name for a socialist platform, which she articulates with intelligence if not with complete disclosure. What the hobbling of the Commission accomplishes is to deny us access to the full debate, and particularly to the counter argument which insists that civil rights is just another name for the privileges and immunities of American citizenship in general.

Both of these factors came into play in the most recent commission meeting, held on March 18th. There, invited guests, press, and observers witnessed a seri-comic drama staged by Commissioners Destro and Guess and supported by Commissioner Berry. They moved to disapprove the agenda for the meeting, which consisted mainly of guests invited to address the question, "Should Congress re-authorize the commission in 1989?"

The successful rejection of the agenda meant that panelists who had made time to appear on appointment were in principle summarily turned away. For what reason? Ostensibly because these commissioners disapproved of the panels, which the full Commission unanimously sanctioned in its January meeting, and even though at least one Commissioner, Destro, participated in the process of inviting guests and had at least one present exclusively by his suggestion. The real reason for the move was to flex muscle and to demonstrate to the Chairman that his scope of action was limited by their after the fact veto, even where they had previously concurred. Commissioner Berry supported them, apparently, not out of a desire to further the ambitions of the “shadow commission” but to preserve the stalemate on the Commission, through the end of this Administration if possible.

The Commission’s enemies, then, are its purported friends, working for diverse, sometimes self-interested ends, and sometimes by dishonest means. After a year’s observation (I received appointment only in April of last year), I am confident in the assertion that the smoke screen of the Chairman’s opinions has been just that—a camouflage to obscure the failings and venality of others. Led by Congressman Don Edwards from the House of Representatives, these enemies of the Commission shrink from debate, work behind closed doors, and lie about their objectives.

These are troubled times, and I have followed the injunction to repeat the obvious. It may be imagined that it is obvious only to me, that the promise of America is accessible to all, that blacks constitute the only significant minority in America, that the, wisdom and decency of blacks is today the only means to realize that promise for all Americans, and that those who resist this truth in truth labor, not for the efficacy of our institutions nor the redemption of our way of life, of our freedom, but rather for an entirely new order. But it is not the fact that my one-year of service has produced this view. I believe, rather, that these facts will be clear to any American who gazes with eyes unshielded upon the accumulated legacy of despair and programs of subjection which pass today under the title, civil rights.

ADDENDA: The Economic Progress of Minorities

Given the 20th anniversary of the Kerner Commission, there have been a lot of figures floating around which seem to show the increasing economic disadvantage of minorities—virtually all of these figures concentrate upon the era, 1970-1986, as distinct from the “non-compassionate,” last six years.

From the *New York Times* (Monday, February 29, 1988):

<u>Unemployment</u>	<u>Black</u>	<u>White</u>
1970:	7%	4%
1981:	20%	9%
1987:	13%	6%

Of course, the figures show that there is still a legacy of the past, a legacy of inequality to be overcome. But they also show that, in the days of governmental paternalism, blacks did worse rather than better, and, further, when general economic opportunity opened the horizons for all, blacks did relatively better than whites at taking advantage of those opportunities, despite that legacy of inequality.

In fact, blacks have always done better when they were not the beneficiaries of “compassion.”

Of course we face serious problems:

	<u>1968</u>	<u>1985</u>
Black Children Born out of Wedlock:	31.9%	60.1%
White Children Born out of Wedlock:	5.3%	14.5%
Black Single Mothers:	27.7%	41.5%
White Single Mothers:	8.9%	12.9%

Are we to conclude that black men love their women and children less than white men? And notice the comparative rates of change? Do they not suggest something society-wide, which should trouble us more than race? May we not conclude that certain trends and programs in our nation have made it in fact burdensome for men to remain with their families? The Kerner Commission Report made white racism the universal explanation for every difficulty experienced by American blacks. Did it not also blind us to the broader responsibility we all share to sustain the moral and social conditions favorable to the development of independent and decent citizens?

¹ Reported in the *Economist*, Feb 27, 1988