

Unit III. Combating Racism: Antidotes to Rage

Reading 10: A Crisis of Shattered Dreams

Blacks constitute about 12 percent of the American population. Overwhelmingly, America remains a white nation whose ethnic roots lie in Europe. Any effort by America to address the cause of black rage must involve the white majority. Here, *NEWSWEEK* profiles the gulf in black and white attitudes toward race, the black underclass and efforts needed to reduce the root cause of black rage.

A Crisis of Shattered Dreams

Decades of racial progress have given way to growing resentment on both sides of the color line. A look at what divides blacks and whites—and what might be done to bridge the gap

On a Wednesday evening in early April, more than 100 blacks and Jews gathered at the Union United Methodist Church in Boston for an unusual Passover celebration. With a moving mixture of Hebrew readings and black spirituals, they retold the story of the Jewish Exodus out of slavery in Egypt. It was a heartening example of racial togetherness—unless you listened closely to the words of the two featured speakers. The Rev. Charles Smith, a prominent black minister, called for a return to the civil-rights pressure tactics of the 1950s and '60s. But Lenny Zakim, a Jewish leader, clearly rejected that strategy, calling instead for a "new coalition cognizant of new realities." Privately, he was even more blunt. Whites have grown weary of black demands for "race-conscious remedies," Zakim said, and of endless accusations of racism. "White America," he said, "got tired of being called guilty."

That bittersweet scene in Boston reflects the kind of differences that divide even the most well-meaning of whites and blacks these days. All too often, the press distorts the race issue by focusing on ugly incidents of violence: the beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles, the rape of the Central Park jogger, the Charles Stuart murder case in Boston. For the most part, today's race crisis is not the stuff of bloody headlines and cities in flames—at least not yet. The riots of the '60s were a revolution of rising expectations; blacks had tasted power and wanted more, fast. The problem today is shattered dreams. After all the high hopes and genuine progress of the past 30 years, people on both sides of the color line feel they've reached an impasse, and that things are getting worse. In a *NEWSWEEK* Poll [in 1988], 49 percent of whites and 33 percent of blacks thought blacks were better off than they had been five years before. In a new sounding last week, the optimists had dwindled to 38 percent of whites and only 21 percent of blacks.

Is there any way to keep from losing more ground? The question is so bewildering in part because the grievances on both sides have become so complex. There's no such thing as a "white view" and a "black view" on racial problems anymore. Among whites, attitudes range from the raw fear of a Miami private-car driver who locks all his windows when he goes through the black section of Coconut Grove to the gnawing resentment of Chicago cop Jim Cosgrove, who says affirmative action made him wait seven years for a promotion to sergeant. Sources of black anger range from the utter hopelessness felt by blacks in the projects of Detroit to the subtle prejudice that rankles Denise Martin Welch, a Duke-educated attorney in Atlanta who complains about the way her legal briefs were scrutinized when she was a clerk for a superior-court judge. At stake are interests and emotions that differ

from income scale to income scale and region to region; yet at some level, the sore points all come down to skin color.

The deteriorating language of racial discourse hasn't helped matters. At the height of the civil-rights movement, blacks and whites spoke to each other in the lofty words of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and Lyndon Johnson's promise of a Great Society. Today those appeals to constitutional principles and Biblical ideals have largely given way to the cheap and spiteful rhetoric of demagogues: the Louis Farrakhans and Al Sharptons, the David Dukes and Jesse Helmses. The ungainly word "quota" has become a sly way for politicians to play on white prejudices that run far deeper than opposition to the idea of setting aside jobs for blacks. Even the word underclass, the catchall term for the largely black populations of the inner cities, doesn't do justice to the depressing universe of crime, drugs and broken families it attempts to describe. It sounds more like an academic abstraction than America's gravest social problem—one that while it persists may make reconciliation between the races impossible.

Does that mean there's no hope for more progress? Far from it. Growing frustration has given rise to some stimulating, controversial new ideas about how to improve race relations, ranging from black writer Shelby Steele's appeals to African-Americans to move beyond the politics of victimization, to white journalist Nicholas Lemann's re-examination of the poverty programs of the 1960s (and conclusion that they weren't the utter failures of popular myth). In places as different as the impoverished Dorchester section of Boston, where a group of Harvard-educated blacks have formed a religious community for street kids, and upscale black Atlanta, where a group of professionals called the Atlanta Exchange does fund raising and counseling for needy youngsters, blacks have begun to experiment with ways to help themselves without government assistance. The gulf war has held up the military as a model of an institution that can elicit loyalty and disciplined work from blacks in exchange for genuine opportunity. The problem isn't a lack of ideas; it's the absence of political will and public good will.

The first step has to be better communication. In private and among their own kind, blacks and whites open up about racial issues in a way they almost never do when they're brought together. If the races are going to deal with the many problems that divide them, they first must learn to understand—or at least listen to—each other's views of today's realities:

WHAT WHITES RESENT: Many whites who think of themselves as liberal, or at least socially tolerant, are baffled about why blacks are still so angry about their condition. Many

whites acknowledge that there is still room for improvement, but they think things have come a long way from the days of black restrooms, Jim Crow voting laws and police dogs in the doorways of all-white universities. In fact, the National Opinion Research Center in Chicago, which since the early 1970s has been tracking racial attitudes with its General Social Survey, shows that white support for integration and racial equality (in principle, at least) is at a record high. The wounded feelings are particularly strong among many liberals who have worked actively for black causes. Tom Donegan is an alderman and legal-services lawyer who lives in an integrated neighborhood in Milwaukee. Among his constituents, he laments finding "so many whites who were willing to make a personal commitment to integration [but] are now saying 'I did my part. I can't resolve this. I'm not going to keep bleeding.' They've had their bicycles stolen once too often, their cars broken into, they've been called names too many times."

For millions of more conservative, working-class whites, the issue isn't ingratitude; it's money and jobs. They resent quotas as unfair; but more to the point, they view them as coming at their own expense. Countless blue-collar whites, men in particular, share the frustration of Jim Cosgrove, the Chicago policeman. Cosgrove, 41, a 19-year veteran of the force, was made a sergeant last year. Based on his departmental-performance scores, he thinks he should have been promoted in 1983 or '84. During that time, he says, he was passed over for as many as 150 minority and women patrol officers with lower scores. Cosgrove says at first he supported affirmative action and greater diversity on the force, but that "now it's gone overboard. Historic discrimination wasn't imposed by the people being passed over for promotion today. What did I have to do with slavery? Why is the little guy paying the cost?"

Among working-class whites, that sense of being the little guy who can't afford "the cost" has grown steadily with the economic shocks of the past 20 years. At the height of the civil-rights movement the U.S. economy was still on its post-war roll. Then came the oil crises and inflation of the '70s, and the decline in the rust belt, which eliminated hundreds of thousands of jobs for blacks and whites alike. The recession of the past year has only deepened the worries about a shrinking pie. Many whites believe that they can't afford to be passed over or to pay more taxes for programs that mostly benefit blacks; besides, they suspect government will only squander that money. Keith Rush, a retired radio broadcaster from suburban New Orleans, says he's not a supporter of the Ku Klux Klan but that he planted a David Duke sign in his front yard when the former KKK leader ran for Congress in Louisiana. "I'm going to vote for David Duke," he said, "because it's the only way to let Washington know I'm pissed."

The past decade, many whites believe, has only given them more reason to be wary of blacks and their demands. The crime and drug epidemics in the inner cities have made people more afraid, even though those problems endanger far more blacks than whites. The seeming indifference of the Reagan administration sent a signal that whites didn't need to feel guilty about black concerns anymore. There are still whites who root for any form of black progress, but they are getting scarcer. Meanwhile, the number who believe the worst stereotypes of blacks is almost unwavering, even among peo-

ple who have day-to-day contact with black co-workers and neighbors they like and trust. Despite the steady increase in overall white support for integration, Chicago's National Opinion Research Center has found that many whites continue to view blacks as violence-prone and lazy.

WHY BLACKS ARE STILL ANGRY: For the 31 percent of African-Americans who live in poverty, the roots of rage aren't hard to fathom. They are the sources of the grim and by now familiar litany of "black statistics": that one quarter of all African-American men are in jail or on probation or parole; that more than 60 percent of all black children are born to mothers without husbands; that almost 40 percent of black males who drop out of high school can't find jobs. Much of this underclass lives all but penned up in projects and deteriorating ghettos—what the Reverend Stith of Boston calls "our brand of apartheid"—without any realistic prospect of escaping. All these blacks can look forward to is a life of inferior schools and menial jobs (if they can get them at all), where the only real prospect for enrichment lies in crime and dealing drugs. It's not hard to see how their plight feeds the alarmingly widespread view that whites are plotting "genocide" against blacks, or creates support for the demonizing anti-white messages of Farrakhan and Sharpton. When the Rev. Bruce Wall, a black minister in Boston, takes inner-city boys out for a meal, they don't talk about girls or sports; they discuss whether they'd prefer to get shot or stabbed.

Working-class and professional blacks view the ghetto poor with mixed emotions: anger that the government won't do more to help them; but also eagerness to steer clear of that dangerous and depressing world. Yet few blacks can completely escape white fears and prejudices fed by images of the underclass. When any black man watches the tape of the Rodney King beating in L.A., he has to wonder if that could happen to him. Chicago political-scientist Gary Orfield says numerous studies show that "whites don't differentiate among blacks very well . . . If an upper-middle-class black man puts on old clothes and heads for the hardware store in a mostly white neighborhood, he's likely to be seen as a threat." Recently Johnnie Roberts, a Wall Street Journal reporter, was accused of shoplifting after he bought a \$600 Hugo Boss suit at the elegant Barney's men's clothing store in New York City. After Roberts produced a receipt, store officials apologized—but insisted their suspicions were "understandable."

To white charges that affirmative action is unfair, middle-class blacks respond that it was unfair for them to be starved of opportunities by 300 years of slavery and discrimination. But at a deeper level they, like whites, see jobs and money at stake. Affirmative action, enforced with quotas or not, has helped give hundreds of thousands of blacks access to colleges, graduate schools, jobs and promotions they might not have achieved otherwise. Jobs and welfare programs have created a new class of black government employees. Some blacks may have squandered those opportunities, but most believe they have done their best to take advantage of them. "I'm sure that the last two jobs I had, I got because I was a black female," says Joceyln Roy, 27, now a Howard University law student. "I do think that I was a quota, positively. [But] it's a misconception that everyone who gets in on a quota isn't qualified." Besides, most blacks believe, affirmative action rarely gets them farther than just inside the door. As Janell Byrd, a

lawyer for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, puts it: "Corporate America certainly hasn't exercised any quotas in management."

Even blacks who do make it to the management level have to live with what Christopher Edley Jr., a black law professor at Harvard, calls "the exceptions theory." They have to cope with the fact that they are often the only blacks in a meeting or at a party, and that they have to work far harder at getting along with whites than most whites ever do at getting along with blacks. They have to deal with the worry that if they fail, it will be seen as a reflection on their race. And they feel the ambivalence that comes with knowing there are thousands of talented blacks who will never get the chance to go as far. As Eula Adams, 41, the first black partner in the Atlanta office of the national accounting firm of Deloitte & Touche, puts it: "I can't accept the fact that I'm so special, and that there are so few people like me who can be successful in an organization like ours."

WHAT CAN BE DONE? Publicly, many civil-rights leaders have denounced Shelby Steele and a handful of other black "neo-conservatives" who argue that African-Americans should stop blaming whites for all their problems and do more to help themselves. But privately, an increasing number of blacks are embracing the self-help doctrine—and doing something about it. The efforts range from intensified efforts to elect black mayors and other public officials, to a return within the black middle class to the tradition of fraternities, business groups and Masonic lodges. In one intriguing experiment, Eugene Rivers, a 41-year-old ordained minister who studied at Harvard, has moved into the poor section of Dorchester, Mass., with his Radcliffe-educated wife and two children and established a full-time home for street kids called the Azura Christian Community. Conceding that it's an uphill battle, Rivers is trying to spread the notion of a "liberation theology" for the ghetto that would bring middle-class blacks into the inner cities on a full- or part-time basis to act as role models and surrogate parents for the children of the underclass.

Yet the legacy of discrimination is still far too heavy for self-help alone to bridge the gap between the races. Ultimately most blacks still need to make it in the white world, and for that they require whites' help. Affirmative action is still needed, but it doesn't have to mean rigid quotas, which are a cheap way out for both whites and blacks. What's needed is a return to the notion that John F. Kennedy had when he first used the phrase affirmative action: the most aggressive possible attempt to find minorities who are qualified, or could become qualified,

to do the job. To make that happen, companies and universities have to work harder not only at recruiting but at assisting blacks who may need help fitting in or catching up—what Atlanta accountant Eula Adams calls the "mentoring" process. In Denver, for example, the police and fire departments didn't just lower their standards when they found that blacks weren't scoring as well as whites on entry tests. They instituted a program to tutor blacks—and scores improved dramatically.

At all levels, education is a key to chiseling away at racial barriers. In the long run, it offers the best hope for getting blacks to the point where they don't need affirmative action and for tackling the problems of the inner city—provided whites are willing to meet blacks halfway. None of that will be easy—but it has to be tried. The military has put so much effort into training minorities and improving race relations as a matter not of altruism but necessity: blacks make up 22 percent of its recruits. In the next decade, more and more of corporate America will face the same reality as blacks, women and other minorities actually become the majority of new entrants into the workplace. NEWSWEEK's poll shows that the races now agree overwhelmingly on this one issue: 69 percent of whites and 68 percent of blacks say that African-Americans should focus most of their energy on improving education.

The other key is integration—a once "virtuous word" that has become "highly problematic," as Randall Kennedy, a black law professor at Harvard, puts it. At some level both races continue to resist it—whites with their rationales for not mixing more with blacks; blacks with the rhetoric of separatism and "community development." But ultimately prosperity in America has always resided in the mainstream, and the only way to dissolve racial differences is for more blacks to join it—and whites to welcome them in. The good news is that, despite all of their many grievances, Americans of both races still support that ideal. In NEWSWEEK's poll, 72 percent of blacks and 52 percent of whites said that they would prefer to live in a neighborhood that was racially "half and half"—more on both sides than felt that way three years ago. It's only by spending more time together that the races will learn that "workaday black people's aims and understandings aren't very different from white America's," says Kennedy. An African-American like Kennedy, who has spent his life moving between both worlds, understands that only too well; the challenge now is to get everyone else to see it.

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