6

RACE IN AMERICA: THE ULTIMATE TEST OF LIBERALISM

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No issue has more severely challenged the liberal tradition in America than that of race. Whatever else liberalism has meant at different points in time—more or less equitable distribution of wealth, larger or smaller programs of social welfare, a stronger or weaker role for the federal government—there has always been at the heart of liberalism a belief in the goal of equal opportunity, a conviction that *individuals,* whatever their background or starting point in life, should be able to compete with each other and maximize their *individual* talents. Within such a framework, group identity ultimately does not count. The norm is one of assimilation, each man or woman developing his or her abilities within a social and economic system presumably capable of, and committed to, individual rights. Within such a paradigm, every person enjoys equal protection and similar chances to make it, or not make it, in the competition for success.

The critical question, of course, is whether a viable opportunity to achieve equal opportunity can ever exist in a society that from its inception has made race a dividing line separating people with black skin from those with white skin—with blacks having almost no rights, and whites having lesser or greater rights depending on their class, gender, and ethnicity. From Martin Delaney to Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington to W. E. B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey to Walter White, African Americans have differed profoundly on how to answer that question. Only in the years since the 1930s, however, have changes occurred that put the issue to a test.

During that period, two kinds of dialectic have taken place. The first has been between those who wield power in government and society, and others in established positions of civil rights leadership who have sought entry into the corridors of power on behalf of the previously disenfranchised. The second has been between people at the grass roots for whom experience is the best teacher, and whose vision has been less constrained by the customs or perquisites of power, and those who determine public policy. Occasionally, the two types of dialectic have overlapped and found some common ground. That happened in America during the late 1940s and the early 1960s. But more often, the two have diverged, calling into severe doubt whether the dream of liberalism can ever accommodate the reality of race.

THE DEPRESSION AND WAR YEARS

Only by contrast with what had gone before could anyone speak of the 1930s as a time of positive change for American blacks. The system of Jim Crow remained deeply entrenched. Lynchings continued to occur, gruesomely testifying to the degree that physical terrorism reinforced the customs of segregated jobs, schools, and social spaces. More than 75 percent of black Americans lived in the South. Fewer than 5 percent had the right to vote. White schools received more than five times the funding per student that black schools received. Richard Wright summarized the effect of growing up black in such an environment in his autobiographical novel *Black Boy*. Working as a domestic in a white person's home, he was asked by his employer why he was still going to school. "Well, I want to be a writer," he replied. "You'll never be a writer," she responded. "Who on earth put such ideas into your nigger head?" In spite of such experiences, blacks found myriad ways to sustain their communities and families, and even on occasion engaged in resistance—but always within a context of pervasive control.

Yet the New Deal also offered some reason to hope. Federal relief checks came to blacks as well as whites. Some jobs existed in the Works Progress Administration. African Americans were appointed to federal offices, and there was even a "black" cabinet of highly placed officials who advocated change in race relations. Although the president would not support an antilynching law, he acknowledged, with regret, the reality of white terrorism. And his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, became a champion of civil rights, supporting black women leaders such as Mary McCleod Bethune, resigning from the Daughters of the American Revolution when they denied the black opera singer

Marian Anderson the right to sing at Constitution Hall—even testifying by her physical actions to her convictions about equal rights. When told at a Birmingham meeting of the Southern Conference on Human Welfare that she would have to take her seat on the "white" side of the room, separated from black delegates, she carefully placed two of the four legs of her chair on each side of the dividing line, showing her contempt for the whole concept of Jim Crow. By 1941 even her husband was ready to sign an executive order creating a Fair Employment Practices Commission barring discrimination against blacks in defense industries—especially when threatened by A. Phillip Randolph, the black union leader, with a massive march on Washington were he not to do so. It was World War II, however, that set in motion more dynamic and long-lasting grassroots change. The war jolted all Americans into new roles and responsibilities. More than two million blacks left the South for the North and West. The number of African Americans employed in manufacturing more than doubled, from 500,000 to 1.2 million. Black ballots were counted and mattered in the North, and politicians inevitably became champions of those who voted for them. Blacks enlisted at a rate 60 percent higher than their proportion in the population, and experienced, especially in posts such as England, France, and Hawaii, a warmth of reception and level of respect that gave credibility to the notion that a better world of race relations might someday exist.

The very existence of some progress, on the other hand, made all the more infuriating the persistence of white racism, both inside and outside the military. Blood supplies were segregated, notwithstanding the fact that a black physician, Dr. Charles Drew, had perfected the means of preserving blood plasma. A black soldier was lynched in Georgia. When a black army nurse violated Jim Crow seating regulations on a Montgomery bus, she was brutally beaten. A black soldier in Durham was shot and killed by a bus driver when the soldier protested the discourteous way in which the driver treated him. Symptomatic of the grinding tenacity of racism was the experience of black soldiers in Salina, Kansas, who sought service at a lunchroom. "You boys know we don't serve colored here," they were told. Indeed they did, so they walked away while inside the restaurant German prisoners of war sat at a table eating their lunch. "It was no jive talk," they noted. "The people of Salina served these enemy soldiers and turned away black American GIs."Precisely because of this chemistry—small, but important breakthroughs existing side by side with pervasive reminders of second-class citizenship—black Americans intensified their protest. The government's sophisticated propaganda campaign against fascism and for democracy highlighted America's vulnera-

bility to the charge that it was the most racist country of all. "Our war is not against Hitler and Europe," one black columnist wrote, "but against the Hitlers in America." The black press united behind a "Double V" campaign—victory at home for democracy as well as victory abroad, increasing the militancy of its demands, even as circulation soared by 40 percent. Membership in the NAACP skyrocketed to 500,000 nationwide—a 900 percent increase, with local chapters increasing threefold. Racial tensions mounted, with race riots breaking out in Detroit, Harlem and elsewhere—only this time with black reprisals as well as white provocation and aggression. Black protest organizations, as well as average black citizens—and especially returning black soldiers—were determined that after this war, change would happen and happen quickly.

POSTWAR AMERICA, 1945–1960

Black hopes hinged on pricking the conscience of white America, generating new resilience and determination on the part of a biracial liberal coalition of northern urbanites, union members, and minorities, and sustaining black insurgency in the face of inevitable and overwhelming oppression. The last proved the easiest to achieve. More than a million black veterans came back from the war, many of them intent on remaking the world they had left. Medgar Evers and Amzie Moore returned to Mississippi and immediately went to register to vote. In Columbia, Tennessee, blacks insisted that there be a "new deal" in their community based on respect and dignity for blacks. Atlanta saw a registration effort that brought eighteen thousand new blacks to the polls in 1946, while in cities such as Greensboro and Winston-Salem a new black presence in politics resulted for the first time in aggressive candidacies for office. Overall, the number of blacks registered to vote in the South grew sixfold from 1945 to 1947, from 2 percent to 12 percent.

None of this came easily, and all of it occurred in the face of white terrorism. Medgar Evers and his associates were met by white men with pistols when they sought to register. The only black man to cast a ballot in one Georgia district was murdered immediately thereafter, his assailants never tried. When Isaac Woodward got off the bus in his hometown in South Carolina proudly wearing his uniform, policemen beat him with billyclubs and blinded him. A race riot greeted the efforts of blacks in Columbia, Tennessee, to forge a "new deal" there, and the response of white politicians to

black voter registration drives was epitomized by Mississippi's Theodore Bilbo, who told a cheering throng: "If there is a single man or woman serving [as a registrar] who cannot think up questions enough to disqualify undesirables, then write Bilbo [because] there are a hundred good questions which can be furnished . . . but you know and I know what is the best way to keep the nigger from voting. You do it the night before the election. I don't have to tell you any more than that. Red-blooded men know what I mean." Bilbo then winked and left.

The key was whether the black insurgency could evoke a positive response from politicians across the nation. There the message was equivocal. On issues such as vigorous support for the Fair Employment Practices Commission, the new Truman administration provided more verbal than substantial backing, particularly on cases where a strong stance could have made a difference, as in hiring black operators for the Washington, D.C., transit system. After forty religious and civil rights groups visited him in the White House to protest the rise of racial violence, on the other hand, Truman seemed surprised (perhaps inappropriately so, given his Missouri background) at the degree of violence that had occurred. "My God," he said, "I had no idea it was as terrible as that. We have to do something."

In a dramatic follow-through, Truman appointed a blue-ribbon Committee on Civil Rights, featuring such luminaries as Charles Wilson, the head of General Electric, and Frank Porter Graham, the president of the University of North Carolina. Its report, "To Secure These Rights," boldly acknowledged the severity of the crisis and recommended a series of changes, including a permanent FEPC, creation of a Civil Rights Commission, desegregation of the armed forces, abolition of the poll tax, and support for the legal assault on segregated housing. As a follow-up, Harry Truman became the first U.S. president to address a national meeting of the NAACP, pledging to close the gap between black and white. "Every man," he declared, "should have the right to a decent home, the right to an education . . . the right to a worthwhile job, the right to an equal share in making public decisions through the ballot. . . . We must assure that these rights—on equal terms—are enjoyed by every citizen." In support of his words, Truman sent a special message to Congress in February 1948 embracing virtually all the recommendations of the Civil Rights Committee he had appointed.

Political self-interest also weighed in. Facing an extraordinarily difficult reelection campaign, Truman knew his political success hinged on winning the support of labor and urban minorities. Clark Clifford, one of Truman's chief political advisors, created a campaign blue print premised on such a

strategy. Although Truman himself seemed reluctant to commit himself too overtly to a biracial liberal coalition, liberals in the Democratic Party forced him to become more assertive. Led by Minneapolis Mayor Hubert Humphrey, they generated a platform revolt at the convention that placed civil rights at the heart of the Democratic message. Although rabid segregationists such as South Carolina's Strom Thurmond walked out and formed their own party, Truman used the energy of his new coalition to lambaste the forces of reaction and bring to fruition, on election day, the successful political coalition that Clifford and Humphrey had made possible.

Other political developments, however, proved less promising, in terms of both implementing the party's new commitment to civil rights and narrowing the options for pursuing change. Progressive industrial unions in the auto, electrical, rubber, and textile industries were key to the success of a biracial coalition. Many of their most effective organizers, however, were either Communists or individuals significantly to the left of the mainstream Democratic Party. A number of their organizing successes had promoted the idea of using interracial solidarity as a vehicle for creating major economic changes, both in social welfare programs such as national health insurance, and in the sharing of decision-making power between unions and industry. In the face of the rapidly escalating Cold War, these radical union leaders were attacked as Communist sympathizers and purged from the labor movement. As a result, the focus on economic and systemic change as a solution to racial inequality faded into oblivion, and more and more of the energies of civil rights groups went into legal challenges, within the constitutional structure, to patterns of segregation.

At the same time, little was being done to enforce the new policies politicians had embraced. Though he won reelection, Truman seemed relatively powerless to secure enactment of progressive legislation. Although he ordered the desegregation of the armed forces in the summer of 1948, it was not really until after the Korean War ended in 1953 that integration took place. A permanent FEPC remained a dream; southern politicians seemed more racist than ever, with the "liberal" Frank Porter Graham defeated in a sordid campaign for the U.S. Senate in North Carolina where his opponent circulated (cropped) pictures of Graham supposedly dancing with a black woman and accused him of being a communist; and average black citizens continued to suffer terrorist repression. When Isaac Nixon, a black veteran, ignored white warnings and cast his ballot in 1948, he was murdered, with an all white jury acquitting his assailant. Blacks who stood up for justice consistently found themselves victims of economic reprisal. Much, therefore, rested

on the degree to which the legal assault against segregation would prove successful, both in theory and in substance

In principle, there seemed good reason for optimism about the legal fight. Led by the irrepressible Thurgood Marshall (the NAACP's Herbert Hill noted, "he was a very courageous figure. He would travel to the court houses of the South, and folks would come from miles, some of them on muleback . . . to see the 'nigger lawyer' who stood up in white men's courtrooms"), the NAACP's legal team had strung together a series of victories eroding the impact of the infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896 upholding segregation. In *Missouri ex.rel Gaines* (1939) the court mandated that equal treatment for a black law student required construction of a fully equipped and staffed black law school in Missouri. Two 1950 cases extended the court's dissatisfaction with how *Plessy* was implemented, one winning the Supreme Court's endorsement of the idea that equality could be measured by psychological as well as physical evidence so that a student made to feel "inferior," even in equal physical facilities, could still secure redress. Now, Marshall and his colleagues determined to take on the core of *Plessy,* arguing for its invalidation on the grounds that segregation, by definition, represented a denial of equality. The Court agreed in a 9–0 opinion masterfully orchestrated by new Chief Justice Earl Warren in order to signal the decisive reversal that had just occurred. Marshall and others predicted that within less than a decade all segregated schools would disappear, with other forms of mandated separation soon to follow. "We have won," black newspapers exulted.

Yet the ruling meant nothing, or almost nothing, without enforcement. "The law is a landing force [of change]," one legal scholar wrote at the time. "It makes the beachhead. But the breakthrough, if it is it to be significant, [must be] broadened by forces from behind which take advantage of the opening to go the rest of the way." Those forces were not there. In the dialectic between those in power who had the authority to create change, and those out of power seeking admission to the system, deafening silence greeted the petitioners. President Dwight Eisenhower disliked the *Brown* decision. He believed that changing racial customs by force "is just plain nuts," and that the federal government should "avoid any interference" in local racial situations. As a result, he did virtually nothing to make desegregation of the nation's schools a reality, sending troops into Little Rock on 1957 only because the governor there, Orval Faubus, had directly challenged Ike's authority as commander-in-chief. Although the White House had been known since Teddy Roosevelt's days as a "bully pulpit," it was, according to historian William E. Leuchtenburg, "an

empty pulpit" when Eisenhower was president. "It is not too much to say," he has written, "that a great deal of the violence, as well as the fearfully slow rate of compliance after 1954, may be laid at Eisenhower's door."

That left the battle back in the hands of the people, many of them average black citizens who had experienced the resurgent hopes borne of war and protest, now angered and frustrated by the failure of those in charge to open the corridors of power for equal participation or to follow through with actions consistent with their words. One of those people was Rosa Parks, a seamstress in Montgomery, Alabama. In December 1955 she did what countless black people had done before her—refused to abide by the Jim Crow regulations that required black customers to give up their bus seats to whites if the whites were left standing while blacks were seated. On most other occasions, those who protested were arrested, forced off the bus, or in some cases beaten or even murdered. But the time was different and Mrs. Parks was different. "She was decent," one leading Montgomery black noted. "And she was committed . . . nobody could point no dirt at her. . . . And when she did something, people just figured it was the right thing to do." So when Mrs. Parks was arrested, the community reacted as one. Within hours a mass church meeting was called, a committee was put in place, and the Montgomery bus boycott—which lasted for 381 days and involved well over 90 percent of Montgomery's black citizenry—began.

Significantly, the bus boycott brought together themes that spoke to the long history of black organization and resistance, even during the worst days of Jim Crow. Mrs. Parks was no newcomer to protest. A secretary of the Montgomery NAACP, she had long participated in black protest activities and had attended a workshop on race relations at the Highlander Folk Institute in Tennessee, a major incubator for social activism. Other actors in the drama carried similar credentials. Jo Ann Robinson, a leader of the local Women's Political Council (an organization in the black community similar to the segregated and all-white League of Women Voters) had developed a political network of women activists with a phone tree, ready to put into place a plan for community mobilization whenever necessary. She, in turn, had an additional ally in E. D. Nixon, head of the Montgomery chapter of the all-black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porter's Union (of which A. Phillip Randolph was president). Nixon was prepared to call out his troops on a moment's notice as well. Not even the idea of a bus boycott was new. Black leaders in Montgomery had been discussing the need to take action to end callous and discourteous treatment from white bus drivers for years and were just waiting for the right moment to express their grievances.

Thus when the protest began, it represented the crystallization of social forces already in place. Black institutions, headed by experienced activists who had thought through their agenda, were prepared to mobilize their resources. The genius—and difference—of the bus boycott was its ability to provide a vehicle for so many people to express their discontent; *and* the emergence of a vibrant young leader named Martin Luther King Jr., who discovered in his ruminations about how to justify breaking the law the philosophy of nonviolent resistance, rooted in the Christian Gospel, and informed by the impulse to speak truth to power through love. If the president of the United States was unwilling to expand the beachhead secured by the *Brown* decision, the average citizens of Montgomery would help transform that "landing force" of change into a real breakthrough.

A few short years later, a new generation of African Americans would carry that beachhead still further, once again using their experience and the training they received from the all black institutions in their community to forge a new language of protest and insistence on self-determination. The four first year students at Greensboro's North Carolina A&T University who began the sit-in movement had come of age at the time of the *Brown* decision. They grew up with the expectation that the world would change around them, but it did not. They also grew up with teachers, ministers, and parents who taught them the importance of standing up for their beliefs. Members of an NAACP Youth group, they met weekly to talk about events such as the Montgomery bus boycott. They also went to all-black schools where teachers like Nell Coley and Vance Chavis imparted a message of empowerment, Chavis by having his homeroom pupils address voter registration envelopes at the beginning of the day, Coley by using the texts in her English class to transmit the values of courage, honor, and sacrifice. The students went to a church pastored by a young minister who himself had led civil rights activities at all-black Shaw University in Raleigh, and who preached his own version of liberation theology—that the Gospel of Jesus was a Gospel of freedom and justice.

Using that framework of teaching and institutional strength as a departure point, the four freshmen started to debate their own responsibility to bring change where change had not yet happened. Lest they become complicit in perpetuating segregation, they concluded, they must do something to combat it. And so they struck on the simple but elegant tactic of highlighting the moral absurdity of segregation by being customers at the local five and dime, and demonstrating the immorality of being treated one way at one counter and a totally different way when they tried to buy food. They

purchased paper and toilet products alongside other customers in the main part of the Woolworth's, then, with their receipts in hand, sat down at the lunch counter and asked for a cup of coffee. "We don't serve Negroes here," they were told. "But you served us over there," they pointed out.

Refusing to leave, the sit-in demonstrators took out their books and began to study. Four hours later the store closed. The next day, they were back, this time with twenty others. The day after that there were sixty-six, then the next day a hundred. And on the fifth day there were a thousand. Within eight weeks, sit-ins had erupted in fifty-four cities in nine states. In April the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee was founded—at Shaw University. The student phase of the civil rights revolution had begun—all as a product of growing up with clear values, strong teachers, and a sense of community support.

Rosa Parks, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the Greensboro sit-in movement represented the entry of new actors onto the stage of racial protest. Significantly, they were actors who accepted the values and principles of the American Dream and the American political system. Like the NAACP attorneys before them, they wished to join, not destroy or subvert, the existing structures of society. Integration, not separatism, represented their goal. They believed that by making their case fairly, showing their good faith as citizens, they could prove the merits of being accorded equal opportunity. All they wanted was the right to be treated as individuals, regardless of their race. In the opening dialectic between those who held power and the organizational representatives of the disenfranchised, the failure of those with authority to respond to legal petitioning created circumstances where others had to find new ways of expressing themselves. With voices of average people, even if taking the form of a new language, the protestors initiated a new dialectic. But it was one born out of conservative instincts and innocent faith in the capacity of the larger society to respond in a just and progressive way. If the first round of dialectical interaction had failed to generate consensus about a common ground, perhaps the second round would lead to clearer, more direct communication and a new and better understanding of how equality of opportunity could come to exist within a liberal tradition.

THE 1960S

On three occasions during the first half of the 1960s, there seemed moments of possibility that such understanding could emerge.

The first came shortly after the Kennedy administration took office in January 1961. Although neither John nor Robert Kennedy had ever spent much time thinking or worrying about civil rights, the issue had in fact played a pivotal role in John F. Kennedy's defeat of Richard Nixon. A black aide to Kennedy had written him a memo early in the campaign urging a "bold, national gesture" that would speak emotionally to black Americans. When Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested and sentenced to two months of hard labor in an Alabama jail, the opportunity suddenly emerged for precisely such a gesture. John Kennedy called Mrs. King to express his personal concern, and a day later his brother Robert called the sitting judge in the case and successfully sought King's release. The tide of the black vote suddenly shifted, and Kennedy rode to his narrow victory largely on the basis of African American votes.

Although Kennedy never mentioned civil rights in his inaugural address or followed through on his campaign pledges to take immediate executive action on civil rights issues such as desegregated housing, the Freedom Rides in the spring of 1961 provided another opportunity for the convergence of black aspirations and government response. Robert Kennedy immediately became intimately involved in the Freedom Ride protests. Enraged that the governors of Alabama and Mississippi refused to provide protection for civil rights protestors who were simply exercising their right to ride integrated interstate buses, he worked the phones night and day. "After all," he said in one call, "these people have tickets and are entitled to transportation. . . . I am—the government is—going to be very much upset if this group does not get to continue their trip." Kennedy personally persuaded a bus driver to get behind the wheel so that the Freedom Rides could continue, and then, when further violence met the demonstrators when they arrived in Montgomery, he called out federal marshals to protect them. To be sure, Kennedy also berated the demonstrators for criticizing the government just when the president was ready to go abroad for the first time, but in this, the first domestic crisis of the Kennedy presidency, there seemed evidence of a growing passion and commitment on the part of at least some people in government for the cause of racial justice.

The second moment of possibility occurred in the spring and summer of 1963. Although the Kennedy administration had severely disappointed blacks with its failure in 1961 and 1962 to advance civil rights legislation or protect civil rights workers engaged in voter registration activities, the Justice Department had increased fivefold the number of voting rights suits, and had increased ten times its number of black attorneys. Still, until the spring

of 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. was accurate when he stated that "if tokenism were the goal, the [Kennedy administration] has moved us adroitly toward it." Now, the explosion of demonstrations in Birmingham ("Bombingham," as it was known in the black community) changed all that. As Bull Connor's police dogs attacked women and children and firehoses pinned peaceful demonstrators against storefronts and walls with the force of their water pressure, the world—and Washington—awakened to both the searing brutality of racism and the moral imperative of bringing racial change.

The Kennedys finally understood that they had no choice but to join the cause. Mobilizing the entire administration, they lobbied with business and political leaders to promote desegregation. Between May and July, the president met with more than 1,600 leaders from religious, labor and business organizations, while Robert Kennedy orchestrated the day-to-day response of federal law enforcement officials to the ongoing crisis of the demonstrations. Culminating the administration's new sensitivity to the issue of civil rights, President Kennedy went on television in June, and in an extemporaneous address (his text was not ready by air time), for the first time embraced civil rights as "a moral issue, as old as the Scriptures and . . . as clear as the American Constitution." Who among us, he asked, "would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in the [Negro's] place? Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay?" Finally delivering on what he had so long promised, Kennedy proposed a major civil rights bill that would mandate desegregation of public accommodations, promote school integration, and outlaw discrimination in hiring based on race or sex. It was a major step forward, reinforced when the Kennedys ended up supporting the civil rights movement's March on Washington in August 1963, with the president hosting the leaders of the march after its conclusion.

The third moment of possibility—and perhaps the most symbolic—came in the spring of 1965 when Lyndon B. Johnson, who inherited the presidency after John F. Kennedy's assassination, personally embraced the civil rights cause as his own when he advocated transformative voting rights legislation before the U.S. Congress. Once again, of course, the precipitating cause was massive civil rights demonstrations. Thousands of civil rights protestors had descended on Selma, Alabama—with Sheriff Jim Clark playing the role that Bull Connor had played in Birmingham—to petition peacefully for the right to vote. Vicious beatings, and a near stampede of dogs and state police horses as peaceful demonstrators tried to cross the Pettis Bridge in Selma, brought the same kind of national outrage against white state authorities that had occurred two years earlier in Birmingham. Although the federal government

had avoided full support of the demonstrators before and had in fact secured injunctions to prevent them from marching, Lyndon Johnson now changed his position. In language worthy of Lincoln, he told the Congress and the American people that for more than a hundred years blacks had been suppressed in their desire to become full citizens, and that the time had now come to right that wrong once and for all. Expressing his complete identification with the movement, Johnson closed his address by using the movement's slogan as his own, telling the nation, "We shall overcome."

Even as the apparent convergence of civil rights insurgents and administration officials reached a new high, however, the disconnect between grassroots experience and political power was already eroding the possibility of civil rights advocates finding satisfaction and fulfillment within the liberal tradition. The decade had begun with optimism and faith on the part of civil rights protestors. They believed that by simply pointing out the wrongs and dramatizing their absurdity and immorality, they would cause lasting and meaningful reform. Instead, all too often, government officials defaulted on promises, waffled on implementation of policies, and, on occasion, even actively opposed civil rights insurgents. Even those who epitomized white liberalism failed repeatedly to come through, acting as though they had the right and authority to dictate the pace of change and the terms under which it would occur. By mid-decade, a significant segment of the civil rights movement had determined that liberalism itself was the problem, and that only by taking charge—defining their own agenda—could they achieve true self-determination.

Part of that evolution reflected the daily frustration of the student portion of the civil rights movement with the failure of government officials to protect them. Some were already disillusioned with what they saw as the effort of adult leaders like Dr. King and Roy Wilkins to manipulate them, expressing, in Ella Baker's words, anger "when the prophetic leader turns out to have heavy feet of clay." But that frustration paled beside the rage they felt when local law enforcement officers oppressed them, and federal agents stood by and did nothing. After Hartman Turnbow tried to register to vote in Mileston, Mississippi, his home was attacked with a Molotov cocktail and his family fired upon. The next day, Turnbow was arrested, not the perpetrators. The charge: that he had burned his own home. When Fannie Lou Hamer went to fill out voter registration forms, she was evicted from her home, then later taken from a bus, jailed, and viciously beaten.

To all of this, the federal government seemed to turn a deaf ear. After whites in Ruleville, Mississippi, fired into the homes of local blacks who were

assisting the civil rights movement, FBI agents suggested that the civil rights workers were trying to extort money and that *they* had done the shooting. State troopers in Selma brutally jabbed voter registration applicants with cattle prods and billyclubs, and all the FBI did was stand and watch. Even after repeated phone calls for federal assistance, it took hours for FBI officials to come and investigate imminent threats of violence to civil rights advocates. In Albany, Georgia, the federal government even sought indictments against some civil rights advocates for conducting a boycott of businesses that discriminated against blacks.

Symptomatic of the underlying grievance many blacks felt was the way that white liberals, at both the March on Washington and the Democratic national convention in 1964, insisted on depriving blacks of their own, independent voice and making them conform to white terms and standards. After white labor and religious leaders saw SNCC leader John Lewis's speech attacking established politicians of both parties for failing to address black grievances, they censored his remarks and threatened to abandon the platform unless Lewis accepted their revised language. In Atlantic City, at the Democratic convention of 1964, black insurgents tested the resolve of white liberals by seeking, through the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, to replace the all-white, segregated Mississippi delegation. They had collected reams of affidavits; they proved, by using the rules of the party, that they had been unfairly excluded; and they won the support of enough members of the credentials committee to send the issue to the floor for debate and resolution—until Lyndon Johnson concluded that this would upend *his* convention and threaten *his* control. Using every political weapon at his disposal, including threats to take federal jobs away from delegates, and having union leader Walter Reuther call in favors owed him and Johnson—and Hubert Humphrey, who was told a solution was the only way he could become vice president—Johnson eventually forced a "compromise" that allocated only two out of forty-eight delegate seats to the MFDP, and then did not even allow the MFDP to choose the two. The MFDP said no. "We didn't come all this way for no two votes," Fannie Lou Hamer said.

Finally, a growing economic radicalism took root among young activists in the movement. The more students from colleges, southern and northern, saw firsthand the poverty facing black southerners and the ways that credit, loans, and insurance policies were used to whip blacks into conformity with white expectation, the more they saw the economic system, as well as the political system, as part of the explanation for racism. Some, at least, began to ask why anyone would want to be integrated into a social and economic sys-

tem that perpetuated such inequality. What was it worth to be able to eat at a Holiday Inn if one could not afford the meal? The desire for control over their own movement reinforced the evolving conviction that systemic, not incremental, change was the only answer. "In earlier days," Roger Wilkins, nephew of the NAACP leader Roy Wilkins, wrote, "the overwhelming majority of Negroes retained their profound faith in America [and] her institutions. . . . [Now] there is a growing view . . . that white people have embedded their flaws so deeply in the institutions that those institutions are beyond redemption."

Out of such experience emerged the political doctrine of the Black Power movement. More an expression of frustration than a coherent program of economic and social policies, Black Power spoke powerfully to the desire of many African Americans to be in charge of their own movement and aspirations. America, Stokely Carmichael declared, "does not function by morality, love and non-violence." So why should blacks wish to become assimilated into such a nation. Occurring, as it did, at the same time that race riots broke out in areas as different as Watts in Los Angeles and inner city ghettoes in Newark, Cleveland, and Detroit, Black Power—and companion developments such as the emergence of the Black Panther Party—signified the degree to which the hopeful optimism of the early 1960s had been displaced by voices of anger that saw little if any hope for finding common ground with the larger liberal tradition.

THE POST-1960S

Even if the development of Black Power reflected the sentiments of only a portion of the African American population, the experiences that shaped its emergence suggested a degree of fragmentation and division that made unlikely the convergence around a set of common policies that had once seemed possible in the late 1940s and early 1960s. Instead, it seemed, race remained a reality within American society that the liberal tradition could accommodate, at best, only partially. Notwithstanding remarkable gains, both politically and economically, for a segment of the black population, race conferred a group identity that did not easily give way to an ethos of individualism and equal opportunity. Controversy after controversy heightened sensitivity on the part of blacks as well as whites about the underlying resonance of race as a social dividing line. And the degree to which poverty, housing segregation, and educational experience still revolved

around racial variables suggested that the dream of a liberal coalition that would transcend race was a long time away from being a possibility.

No one used the political volatility of race better than Richard Nixon. Although in the 1950s Nixon was one of the chief supporters of civil rights in the Eisenhower White House, by 1968 he had become a specialist in using racial code words as a rallying cry for a conservative political resurgence. Issuing scathing denunciations of forced busing to desegregate schools, Nixon not too subtly suggested that he would cease heeding black America's call for change by focusing on the "restoration of law and order" as his chief priority. "As we look at America," he proclaimed, "we see cities enveloped in smoke and flame. We hear sirens in the night. We see Americans hating each other. And . . . millions of Americans cry out in anger: Did we come all this way for this?" Nixon pledged to speak on behalf of "the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators . . . those who do not break the law," the great silent majority. He did not have to use the words "black" or "Negro." It was all too clear who he was talking about, who his foil was. And blacks as well as whites got the message.

As another measure of the ongoing and divisive salience of race for both blacks and whites, affirmative action became—with abortion—the single most polarizing issue in American society. Started in the mid-1960s by JFK and LBJ as a policy of seeking the inclusion of blacks in employment pools, affirmative action by the 1970s had come to mean, for whites, quotas, preferential treatment, and mandated violations of equal employment procedures in order to give blacks something they did not deserve; for blacks, on the other hand, affirmative action was a critical and necessary intervention to reverse centuries of discrimination by making employers look carefully at qualified black candidates for positions that were open. The courts for the most part upheld affirmative action policies, especially where a history of proven discrimination existed, but the larger battle was in the symbolism of using race as a category of political decision-making. Even though for centuries laws had been made solely based on race—slavery and Jim Crow as prime examples—now it became un-American to use the same criterion for seeking to redress injustice. When in the 1970s network news anchors first started to use the phrase "reverse discrimination" as a synonym or descriptor of affirmative action, the cultural war was over. Blacks had lost, and they knew it, even if the policy of affirmative action itself had made a significant difference in the jobs many middle-class blacks, in particular, now occupied.

Perhaps the most enduring manifestation of race as a shaping issue in America was the dividing line that separated those African Americans who

enjoyed new opportunities to move to the suburbs, hold good jobs, and secure a decent education, and those who remained totally outside the mainstream, isolated by their race, class, and gender from even a chance to make it in America. On the one hand, the proportion of blacks earning a middle-class income increased 250 percent from 1960 to the mid-1970s. Black enrollments in colleges leaped fivefold. But on the other hand, the unemployment rate for blacks in inner city ghettoes was more than 30 percent, high school dropout rates approached 50 percent, and the number of children born out of wedlock in the black community went from 17 percent in 1950 to nearly 60 percent by 1990. Almost a third of black America lived in poverty in the 1970s and '80s, with a new category of black female-headed households providing the major reason.

None of these trend lines shifted during the '80s and '90s. The bifurcation of the black community by income and education accelerated rather than diminished over time, with nearly two-thirds of black births in 2000 taking place in single-parent households. Affirmative action—or "reverse discrimination," as most whites called it—continued to divide the population providing a lightning rod for both white conservatives such as Pat Buchanan on one hand and black protestors such as Al Sharpton on the other. George Bush's use of the Willie Horton ad in the 1988 election—a black convict, given weekend leave in Mike Dukakis's Massachusetts, who subsequently raped a white woman in Maryland—demonstrated the political capital that could be seized by, once again, making race a dividing point in political decision-making.

Although many social scientists now talked about the "declining significance of race"—William Julius Wilson's phrase—two events in the 1990s suggested that announcing the demise of race as a pivotal issue in America was premature. In the early 1990s, Rodney King, a black man with a record of minor criminal violations, was chased by Los Angeles police for a speeding violation. Subsequently, as recorded by an amateur photographer using a new video camera, police officers with billyclubs subdued King on the ground and struck him sixty-five times. When the officers were put on trial, an overwhelmingly white jury decided that no brutality had occurred, despite the videotape.

A few years later, O. J. Simpson, the famous black football player and commentator, was arrested and charged with brutally murdering his ex-wife and her companion. A record of previous domestic violence was established, with 911 calls from Nicole Simpson. Most important, DNA evidence directly linked Simpson with the murder. Yet an overwhelmingly black jury acquitted Simp-

son, convinced that white police had framed him. Two-thirds of black Americans thought Simpson was innocent. Two-thirds of white Americans thought he was guilty. Two cases, one with videotape, one with DNA—both the equivalent of eyewitness testimony—each decided on the basis of race. It was not necessarily a good omen for those who believed in the liberal tradition.

CONCLUSION

What would have been required for liberalism to have passed successfully the test posed by the issue of race? Clearly, the total elimination of race as a category conferring group identity represents a utopian idea. Given the plethora of ethnic traditions in the United states, the persistence of cultural differences and collective pride in one's origins should be a source of strength, not weakness. Nor is there an inherent inconsistency between embracing the values of individualism and equal opportunity on one hand and celebration of group identity on the other. The key, then, is not the elimination of race as a concept conferring difference and identity, but rather the elimination of race as an automatic signifier of inequality and invidious treatment.

For that to have happened, the chasm between white leaders and black activists would have to close, and the disconnect between the average black person's daily experience and the pronouncements of public policymakers come to an end. There appeared to be moments in the post-1930s world when that kind of bridging might have been possible. The rhetoric surrounding President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights, and the strength of biracial liberalism at the 1948 Democratic convention offered hope. But then action failed to follow words, and in an age permeated by anticommunism and the fear that any criticism of America might be punished as giving aid to the enemy, that moment passed, with reliance on the courts the only viable means of seeking change.

Then again in the early 1960s, particularly in 1961, 1963, and 1965, there were occasions when white and black political leaders came together, and when even the dialectic between average insurgents and public policymakers seemed on the path to open communication, trust and synthesis. The Kennedy administration's responsiveness to the Freedom Rides and the Birmingham demonstrations—although only partial—provided hope that there could be more follow-through in the future and that a new coalition might be born. The same sense of optimism seemed warranted when Lyndon Johnson made vot-

ing rights a cause that he personally embraced, even though the foundations of a liberal coalition were already crumbling.

But in the end, the follow-through proved inadequate, leaders faltered under the ongoing temptation to use race as a negative wedge that would bring temporary political advantage, and the disconnect between average people's daily experience and the words that supposedly guided government policy became deeper and wider. Persistence, consistency, and vision were all necessary if the promise of incorporating racial equality within a liberal tradition were to be realized. If there had been agreement to "keep your eye on the prize," and that prize were defined as making race a positive value within a commitment to equal opportunity, the test that race posed for liberalism might have been passed. Instead, the moments of brightness became shadowed by longer periods of darkness, and the gap between leaders and the experience of average citizens widened. Ultimately, race was the Achilles heel of the liberal tradition, challenging its capacity to grow and to evolve organically in service to democratic values. It remains so in a new century, still challenging leaders and average citizens to redeem the original sin of American democracy.