



American Dilemma: Problems of Race Still Cry to Be Solved

By James Q. Wilson

Conservatives and others need to take a hard look at what the civil rights revolution has produced. Many blacks have made striking gains. But the extraordinary efforts of government, private enterprise, and educators have not stemmed the rise of single-parent black families and the problems associated with those families. Data from New Orleans provides some evidence of the problems that remain.

National Review, at its founding in 1955, had as its mission stating and defending a conservative view in a nation that many believed had known only a liberal tradition. It was a difficult task, not only because of liberalism's apparent supremacy, but because it was not easy to define a conservative alternative. Conservatism could mean free-market economics, the reassertion of a traditional morality, or the endorsement of a religious or classical basis for moral thought. In the spirited discussions that took place in this magazine and elsewhere, each of these views had its proponents, and—as they made quite clear—their views were often in conflict. Individualism and free-market economics could leave morality to personal and even aberrant judgments, but a revival of moral thought and a reassertion of its religious basis could easily suppress individual choice and impose regulatory restraints on the market.

The debate on the meaning of conservatism consumed many pages in *National Review* but apparently ended, by exhaustion if not agreement, in the fusionism of Frank Meyer, who said that conservatism was “reason operating within tradition”—a phrase he said implied that there was an objective moral order, the individual

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was superior to the state, state power should be limited, and communism and the Soviet Union were deep threats that must be overcome.

Conservatism Today

Today the struggle against the Soviet Union is over, and conservatism, variously defined, has helped govern this nation during the administrations of Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and now George W. Bush. A torrent of conservative books has been published, several magazines with a conservative focus have done reasonably well (albeit with subsidies), and various think tanks (such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Hoover Institution) and public-interest law firms (such as the Center for Individual Rights and the Landmark Legal Foundation) have become important. There is still much to argue about, including government spending, the role of the state in combating illicit drugs, and the future of various entitlement programs. Many of these issues, since they involve how money is spent, will be settled by compromises, and none of them—though each is important—has the galvanizing effect of the old anti-communist crusade.

I am not convinced that any political movement needs a galvanizing cause; what liberalism, conservatism, and libertarianism need are

convincing arguments. But the intellectual leaders of these movements do need such causes as a way of reaching audiences, mobilizing support, and clarifying central principles. The most important foreign-policy question is how best to use American diplomatic, economic, and military power abroad. That issue is being heavily debated in magazines and books, and for now I have little to add to arguments that supporters of the Bush Doctrine have already advanced. To me the largest domestic question for such leaders, whether liberal or conservative, is how to make sense of the civil-rights revolution.

The Civil-Rights Revolution

It was, indeed, a revolution, one of the two or three most important ones in this country's history. In the space of just a few decades, the legalized suppression of a racial minority was ended, the public with trivial exceptions embraced an anti-racism ideology, and a large black middle class emerged. About one-third of all blacks now hold middle-class jobs, an even higher percentage think of themselves as middle class, the percentage of blacks living below the poverty line has declined, and the median income of black women is now about 90 percent that of white women.

But at the same time the percentage of single-parent black families has grown hugely, the advances that black women have made are not equaled by those of black men, and the rate of serious crime among blacks is much higher than it is for non-Hispanic whites and vastly greater than it is for Asian Americans. Everyone knows these facts, but hardly anyone discusses them publicly. Instead, the veil of political correctness has descended on this topic, a veil much in evidence during the media's coverage of the effect of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans. We have been repeatedly told that most New Orleans residents are "poor" and that it is the fault of the rest of us that they are poor. Clearly, something ought to be done.

What this argument lacks is any recognition of the extraordinary efforts that the government and private enterprise have made to help the poor: welfare payments,

Medicaid, food stamps, public housing, affirmative action, and a compulsive search by firms and universities for any competent black who can be hired or educated. Moreover, the "need to help end poverty" usually lacks any attention to the extraordinary gains that many blacks have made, largely on their own.

Problems in Black Families

What New Orleans should have told us is that many blacks living there have not made it on their own, or with the assistance of a long succession of black mayors and black police chiefs. In that city, 45 percent of black families with children under age eighteen are headed by an unmarried mother, and 96 percent of births to teenagers are to unmarried girls. Roughly 58 percent of the high-school students drop out before they graduate. The city has the highest homicide rate in the country, and—until recently—the city's police department had many incompetent officers. In 1994 a decorated black police officer ordered the murder of a black woman who had complained of police brutality. Between 1992 and 1995 about sixty New Orleans police officers were charged with crimes. One gang of cops guarded a warehouse that stored cocaine. Under a black reform chief, things began to improve; the recent incident of police brutality captured on videotape and broadcast nationwide is an exception to the rule.

New Orleans is not simply a city of poor people—it is a city that has left its black population untaught, unguarded, and unmarried. There is much talk about rebuilding the physical structure of New Orleans, but not much about creating a civil society there. President Bush in one speech said that poverty in that city was the result of racial discrimination and lack of opportunity, but that surely is an incomplete argument. The 2000 Census showed that 35 percent of blacks in New Orleans were poor, even though only 25 percent of blacks nationally are poor.

Discrimination did not produce what we see in New Orleans, where almost half the black families with children under eighteen are headed by single women. They outnumber married black families with children by over

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18,000. We do not know who the looters were, but among black thieves, I imagine that most came from single-parent families. As the nation's observance of civil rights has grown, the proportion of children living with unmarried mothers has also grown. There are many families with competent single moms, but they are outnumbered by the families that are harmed by the absence of a husband. From the ranks of the latter come high rates of crime and imprisonment, heavy rates of drug use, poor school performance, and a willingness to loot unguarded stores.

In this increasingly prosperous nation, these scarred youngsters are the source of our gravest social problems. To assume that these problems can be fixed by simply spending more money or creating more jobs reflects a mindless rejection of the evidence of the last half-century: we spent more and created more jobs, and the problems got worse.

The main domestic concern of policy-engaged intellectuals, liberal and conservative, ought to be to think hard about how to change these social weaknesses. Lower-class blacks are numerous and fill our prisons, and among all blacks the level of financial assets is lower than it is for whites. Many blacks have made rapid progress, but we are not certain how.

In my opinion, the condition of the black family is the key to the persistence of a large and criminal lower class. We have learned some things about how to improve what disadvantaged children learn and how to increase the earnings of public-housing residents. (The excellent studies by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation are a fine source of information on these issues.) But we have learned next to nothing about how to develop two-parent families. We will not learn much until we talk about the matter candidly.

There are programs all over the country, many run by churches, designed to restore two-parent families and encourage education. With only a few exceptions, we do not know which of them really work. Developing and testing these programs will be much easier if black leaders endorse the effort. Many do, but these efforts are drowned out by the attention the media pay to Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton. I doubt that liberal public-policy magazines are likely to pay much attention to this problem; they seem determined to talk about giving everybody more money so that they can minimize work and indulge their fantasies. A conservative magazine such as *National Review* can do better, but only if it makes the study of black culture—both its strengths and its weaknesses—a matter of deep concern.