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POLITICS, RACE, RELIGION AND EDUCATION
IN THE U.S.A. (1960-1992)*

Thomas and Mary Edsall began their insightful essay «Race» with the following statement, «Race is no longer a straightforward, morally unambiguous force in American politics; instead, considerations of race are now deeply imbedded in the strategy and tactics of politics, in competing concepts of the function and responsibility of government, and in each voter's conceptual structure of moral and partisan identity»¹.

We are all familiar with the «Rodney King» episode wherein four Los Angeles police officers arrested Mr. King, a young black male, and beat him with their police batons, delivering almost seventy blows to his head and body which were captured by an amateur photographer on video tape. This tape was subsequently shown thousands of times on national and local television. After a long trial, the jury in Simi, Ventura County, California found the police defendants not guilty on all but one count of police misconduct, and on that one charge against one policeman they were unable to reach a decision. This verdict shocked most of America and the world. And it ignited riots in L.A. and other American cities. In Los Angeles alone the toll was over 50 died, 300 injuries requiring hospital treatment, 1,400 arrested and charged with crimes, and over \$1 billion in property damage.

This episode provides appropriate background for my discussion. I wish to argue today that the climate of racism, hate and violence which made the episode predictable is the direct outcome of

* This article was presented at a seminar on «History of Education» in the Section of Education (May 1992).

1. *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1991, p. 53.

a series of deliberate political strategies by a group of Right Wing politicians, including Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Jesse Helms, and Patrick Buchanan, in their successful attempt to forge an unlikely coalition between the rich, corporate interests, fundamental religious communities and white working-class ethnic voters. This climate of racism and the hatred and violence it breeds is causing untold damage in American education at every level. The first important aspect of this strategy was to use African Americans as scapegoats and targets of enmity for frustrated and frightened white working-class ethnic voters. The immediate or short-term result has been white working-class support for the Republican Party during the last two decades. It must be remembered that the Republican Party has been the party of corporate America and the rich during the whole of the 20th century. The long-term result is and will be a legacy of racial conflict.

To understand how this could have been accomplished it may be helpful to remember the long history of racism in America beginning with 17th, 18th & 19th century slavery, and the post-Civil War «Segregation» laws of the Southern States. One must also remember that these laws and institutions were supported by theories of racial inferiority which had «pseudo-scientific» and religious sanctions. These events and theories explicitly held that African Americans were less human, and more animal, than whites. While these theories have been thoroughly discredited in the scientific and theological arena, they, nevertheless remain part of American white folklore and a source of intense frustration and anger for African Americans.

A crucial event in the 20th century America was the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s and the 1960s. This movement for equal rights and equal access to institutions and economic opportunities was born in the famous *Brown V Topeka* Supreme Court Case [1954] which held that segregation unconstitutionally denied equal protection under the law. Led by Martin Luther King and culminating in the Civil Rights laws under presidents Kennedy and Johnson, the Civil Rights Movement represented a high water mark for American Liberalism. Unfortunately, it coincided with Liberal adventurism in foreign policy which supported dictators all over world, including Greece, Viet Nam, Spain, the Philippines, etc. This adventurism to «protect the world from communism» rightly, in my view, led to serious conflict among liberals culminating in the Viet Nam protests.

Many conservative Americans and white working-class ethnics saw these protests as «Un-american» and as a threat to their understanding of patriotism. They were especially troubled over the violence of some of the protests and the «lack of support for our boys» whom the conservatives believed were defending America in the rice paddies and jungles of Viet Nam. The «defeat» of American military forces and strategic policy in Viet Nam was a particularly bitter pill for these conservatives and white working-class ethnics to swallow — in fact many continue to deny the defeat to this day. They continue to use the term «betrayal» rather than defeat. This «betrayal», according to the conservative view, was caused by the Liberal protesters who forced America to «fight with one hand tied».

As the Viet Nam protests escalated so did the Civil Rights agitation. In 1965 the Watts section of Los Angeles was the scene of a violent riot which was followed in the next three years by riots in over 250 American cities. The fact that many supporters of the Viet Nam protest were also supporters of Civil Rights apparently caused some in America to equate the riots with war protest. This confusion was heartily encouraged by right wing Republicans. It was these riots which provided the springboard to national prominence of Governor George Wallace of Alabama and the 1968 presidential victory of Richard Nixon. Both were acutely aware of the «southern victory» of Senator Barry Goldwater in his ill-fated presidential campaign of 1964. Campaigning for a broad conservative program which included opposition to the 1964 Civil Rights Bill and «victory» in Viet Nam, Goldwater carried several of the southern states for the Republican Party for the first time in history. Moreover, in the south and among some northern working-class whites Wallace had been able to «demonize» the ruling Democratic party as the party of Civil Rights, high taxes, welfarism, and the enemy of traditional values.

In the 1968 election the Democrats were deeply divided over the Viet Nam war, but nominated an anti-war candidate George McGovern. The principle beneficiary of the disarray among the democrats was Republican nominee, Richard Nixon, who won a landslide victory. By the 1972 election, Nixon and his campaign strategists had fully worked out the «Race» card in presidential politics. During his first administration, Nixon had proposed enforcement of Civil Rights laws and alternatively he proposed «Enterprise Zones», to develop black capitalism within the urban ghettos. It is ironic

that one of these, known as «the Philadelphia Plan» also included «quotas» for awarding contracts to black companies and hiring of black workers. Once Nixon's strategists understood the racial enmity caused by these quotas, rather than attempt to calm racial tension he fanned the flames for partisan political advantage. An important part of his 1972 re-election strategy was to campaign specifically against «quotas» while more generally against economic redress and civil rights. In one of his 1972 speeches he told white workers, «There is no reason to feel guilty about wanting to enjoy what you get and get what you earn, about wanting your children to be in good schools close to home, or about wanting to be judged fairly on your ability»¹.

This single sentence carried the code words which embodied much of the Republican racial strategy for the next two decades:

No reason to feel guilty for selfish consumerism — get all you can and to hell with others!

No reason to feel guilty about segregated schools if your children are in well-financed, safe, neighborhood schools—even if inner city schools are underfinanced and fail to educate.

No reason to feel guilty about opposition to Quotas — the code word for opening economic opportunity to the economic disenfranchised.

«It was Nixon's re-election campaign (1972) that developed a relatively comprehensive Republican racial strategy stressing whenever possible the costs of remedies for discrimination, especially in cases of bussing and affirmative action»². It was made clear to Americans that the cost of remedies for discrimination would be subtracted from their disposable income, i.e., the more tax dollars spent on social programs the fewer dollars taxpayers would have to purchase new automobiles, VCRs, and other consumer goods. The National Opinion Research Center reported in 1991, «For millions of conservative, middle-class whites ... [the issue] is jobs and money. They resent quotas as unfair; but more to the point, they view them coming at their own expense»³.

The economic cost of redressing past racial discrimination became apparent in the early 1970s. The 1971 U. S. Supreme Court,

1. Ibid. p. 66.

2. Ibid. p. 66.

3. *Newsweek*, 6 May 1991, p. 30.

Griggs V Duke Power Company, sharply restricted racial hiring and promotion practices that adversely affected African Americans. Conversely when these practices were curtailed their chief beneficiaries, working-class whites, were denied privileges they had previously held (i.e., the «privilege» of not being forced to compete with blacks or work along side them). And it was precisely at this time that America began to decline economically.

«The end of vigorous post-Second World War economic growth came in 1973. Hourly wages...fell by 0.1% in 1972, by 2.8% in '74, and by 0.7% in '75. Weekly earnings fell more sharply, by 4.1% in '74 and by 3.1% in '75. ...In a whipsaw action the middle-class tax burden rose with inflation while the economy and real income growth slowed»¹. This downturn was fueled in part by recession, and in part by de-industrialization of America by transporting manufacturing jobs offshore —to Asia, and Mexico.

As it turned out the most aggressive efforts to provide jobs for African Americans were directed at working-class white workers who were at the time the most vulnerable to the economic decline. Moreover, these working-class white workers— policemen, building trades workers, firemen, —were the very constituency of the Democratic party which the Republicans needed for success in presidential politics. In many states a «swing» of only five to ten per cent of the voters could mean the difference between victory and defeat for a presidential candidate.

The «Great Society» programs of the President Johnson made considerable progress in the effort to redress past racial discrimination. Many African Americans were admitted to higher education under special «affirmative action» programs and others were admitted to previously restricted areas of the work place. By the mid 1980s there developed three separate classes among African Americans: an affluent middle class, a working class, and an «underclass». The middle class consisted of college educated professionals — in 1986- 21% of the African Americans earned over \$ 35,000 per year and almost 9% earned over \$ 50,000². But from 1976 to 1988 the number of African Americans attending college had fallen by 15,000. The working-class African Americans were those who were admitted to previously segregated jobs in competition with white workers. At the

1. Edsall, p. 69.

2. Richard Bernstein, «20 Years After the Kerner Report: Three Societies, All Separate» *The New York Times*, 29 Feb. 1988.

bottom of the American economic structure is an «underclass» which includes almost four million African Americans — or approximately one third of the total number of African Americans¹. According to a 1986 US News & World Report article, this underclass constitutes «a separate culture of have-nots ... who are trapped in an unending cycle of joblessness, broken homes, drugs and violence». One half of African American children grow up in poverty and in homes without fathers, and 1 out of every 21 winds up murdered (compares to 1 in 131 whites)². Overall African American median income has slipped by 4% since the 1970s and in 1988 was only 57% of white median income³. White racists often point to the African American middle class as evidence of what they call «unfair advantages» given to African Americans and at the same time point to the African American underclass as evidence that the Great Society programs were a failure. The common connotation given to the latter assertion is that the «failure» is related to a supposed inferiority of blacks — i.e. a lack of intelligence, moral laxness, and / or laziness.

The 1980 presidential campaign of Ronald Reagan displayed the Racial Politics most dramatically and was apparently well understood by the American electorate:

In 1980 Carter received 93% of votes from those «who most strongly supported government efforts 'to improve the social and economic position of blacks', while Reagan got 71% of those who felt most adamantly that 'the government should not make any special effort to help because they should help themselves'. «The political strategy of using racial politics to capture the votes of white working-class voters who traditionally had seen the Republicans, big business and the rich as the enemy was well understood by Republican strategists: «...Lee Atwater, who ran Reagan's Southern campaign in '80 and the Bush campaign in '88, said «In the 1980 campaign we were able to make the establishment insofar as it is bad, the government. In other words, big government was the enemy, not big business»⁴.

The second aspect of Reagan's 1980 campaign was built upon capturing the fundamentalists religious constituency — especially

1. It should be noted that this «underclass» includes whites and minorities other than African Americans.

2. 17 March 1986.

3. *The New York Times*, 29 Feb. 1988.

4. Edsall, p. 73.

working-class white catholics and protestants. This was accomplished with an appeal to «traditional» values — in part a code word for rejection of feminism, support for state sponsored prayer in public schools, and the reversal of *Roe V Wade* which had legalized abortion.

Reagan also appealed to conservative «patriotism» and the indignity of defeat at the hands of a small Asian country while «our boys were not allowed to fight» with his demand for a vastly increased military budget. Defense spending was more than doubled during his presidency. Increased defense spending and huge tax cuts for the richest Americans were largely responsible for the incredible Reagan increases in the national debt. During his eight years as president the Federal government incurred more debt than during all presidencies from 1791 to 1980. Nevertheless, Reagan's subsequent valiant «victories» over Granada and Libya «restored» American dignity in the minds of his supporters.

His economic message in 1980 was simple and direct: cut taxes, increase military spending, cut domestic (i.e., Great Society programs) spending, and reduce the national debt.

During his eight year presidency, Ronald Reagan made good on most of his promises — except debt reduction. The national debt actually increased from 1 trillion to over 4 trillion dollars. As a result of the increased national debt the U.S. went from the largest creditor nation to the largest debtor nation in the world.

Other results of the Reagan years were: 1) a serious decline in the power of unions in the U.S.— partly because of Reagan's example of union busting in the Federal Flight Controller's strike; 2) massive loss of manufacturing jobs to off-shore relocations; 3) Large and systematic withdrawal of federal funds from social service sector — i.e. public housing (80% reduction of federal funds), education, child care, and welfare; 4) a decline in the «middle class» especially the lower middle class — i.e., working-class white ethnics; 5) a massive redistribution of wealth — a) Top 1% income bracket after taxes income increased by almost 90%, b) middle 20% income bracket increased by 3% (i.e., lost ground after inflation) and c) bottom 20% lost 9%¹.

George Bush's 1988 presidential campaign combined all the racial, religious, economic, and militaristic themes of the previous Re-

1. Edsall, p. 77.

agan campaigns. This might seem surprising because in the 1980 Republican primary contests, Bush had attacked the Reagan economic proposals as «voodoo economics» and had been a supporter of *Roe V Wade*. With Lee Atwater as his campaign manager, however, the blatant use of racial politics was a prominent feature of his campaign. The infamous «Willie Horton» ad and the attack on 'quotas' and «welfare cheats», produced the kind of working-class white ethite response desired by the Bush campaign. This kind of racial divisiveness has continued as central to his first administration. Mike Murphy a Republican consultant argued in Newsweek magazine that the Congressional Democrats attempt to pass a new Civil Rights Act would be politically dangerous for them; he asserted, «Quotas cut; I've seen the polls. This issue moves numbers»¹.

And if George Bush learned racial politics while Vice President in two Reagan administrations, he also learned the religious and militaristic aspects to the election equation. By 1992 the Bush administration had engaged in two foreign military adventures, Panama and «Dessert Storm», designed to hype American patriotism. He also had actively courted the religious fundamentalists with his «pro-life» Supreme Court appointments and his opposition to feminists issues and domestic social spending as «destructive» to traditional values. As President, George Bush continued the Reagan economic «program» of incentives for the rich while cutting programs aimed at providing relief for the poor and urban areas. The later has left American cities economically bankrupt and unable to meet the problems of education, child-care, health, transportation, sanitation and a myriad of other essential services. All of this, however, was not to be a political liability as the cities became increasingly African-American, Hispanic and Asian. The cities became «the other».

Even this, however, has not been enough to completely satisfy the Radical Right of the Republican party. For most of the Fall [1991], Patrick Buchanan ran a close second to President Bush in the Republican primaries by claiming that Bush was not a real conservative because he had «compromised» for a slight tax increase on the rich and was seen as softening «on quotas». Anthony Lewis, the respected and usually restrained writer for the New York Times, has written that Buchanan «has spoken in contemptuous terms of blacks, Jews, women, gay people, and immigrants. He has called

1. 6 May 1991, p. 22.

Adolf Hitler a man of 'great courage' and 'extraordinary gifts'»¹. In the aftermath of the trial of the King assailants and the Los Angeles Riots, Buchanan has argued that the riots are not the result of any legitimate anger over the verdict and not associated in any way with economic deprivation or hopelessness, rather Buchanan asserted during a CNN-TV interview shortly after the riots, «the riots in L.A. are caused by criminals, hulligans, gangs, and thugs. The only appropriate response to the thugs is the use of force». This is the candidate who has stolen some of George Bush's thunder primarily because of the current economic recession. It probably indicates again the close connection between economic constriction and racial politics.

It was not only presidential politics where the Republicans found race a trump card. Jesse Helms won his re-election bid to the U.S. Senate from South Carolina in 1990 with a racially divisive ad asserting that his African American opponent would support affirmative action legislation which would set up quotas to take jobs from qualified whites and give them to unqualified blacks.

Presently, in the same state, Republican political consultant Rod Shealy is standing trial for secretly and illegally hiring a black to run for office in the Republican primary in order to attract a large anti-black, white voter turnout in that primary that Mr. Shealy believed would aid his sister's candidacy for another office. Shealy is a protege of Lee Atwater formerly of the Reagan and later Bush campaigns. Atwater was the protege of Henry Dent who according to the New York Times, «is considered one of the chief architects of Richard Nixon's 1968 Southern strategy of capitalizing on the anger of whites over the civil rights advances by blacks»².

This kind of boldfaced pandering to the most vicious racial prejudice by national and state leaders of the Republican party has had deleterious effects in American society. The resurgence of the American Nazi party, the Klu Klux Klan, The Arian Nation and other such previously considered lunatic fringe groups somehow in 1992 do not seem quite as ridiculous. For some, they seem a serious threat; for others, they seem quite «normal».

What is clear is that America is now beclouded by an atmosphere where racism is considered normal — where it is no longer con-

1. *The New York Times* 9 March, 1992, p. e-15.

2. Smothers, Ronald, «Racial Politics: In South Carolina, a Tale of Campaign Trickery», *The New York Times National Sunday*, 19 April 1992, p. 10.

sidered shameful to express in public racists prejudices which one may previously only held in the secrete depths of ones private heart of hearts. And this racists prejudice is being acted out daily on the streets of America's cities and towns, and in our schools and unniversities.

Let's look at a four randomly selected racially motivated events which have occurred in America since 1988:

First: In Detroit, Michael Chang (a Chinese American) was brutally beaten to death with baseball bats by a gang of white youths whose only excuse was that they had, as they said, «mistaken him for a Jap [sic]».

Second: In Brooklyn, New York a black teenager who was in a white neighborhood to inquire about a used car advertised for sale was murdered on a city street by a mob of white youths simply because he was in a «white neighborhood».

Third: The Arian Nation sent an organizer to Seattle, Washington to teach «skin-heads» how to inflict physical injury on blacks, Asians, Hispanics, and homosexuals.

Fourth: In Miami, a young black man was killed when shot in the back of his head by a city policeman. Witnesses asserted that the officer shot without warning.

It must be emphasized that the above is far from an exhanstive list. It is merely an illustrative sample.

In American colleges and universities there is presently an atmosphere of anger and tension resulting from racial slurs, affirmative action, racial signs, slogans, and banners. Some examples:

In the past five years there have been racial incidents reported at over 300 colleges and universities, including: Yale, Georgetown, Penn State, Michigan and other leading institutions.

At Yale and University of Illinois Law Schools African American law students have received racial hate mail in their campus mail boxes.

African American professors have been harassed on some campuses by «conservative» right wing students and organizations. (e. g. Dartmouth - black musicology professor harassed by the Dartmouth Review, a student newspaper with ties to Wm. Buckley and Patrick Buchanan; University of Illinois fraternity members «visited» University of Wisconsin and as a «prank» disrupted class of a African American professor by shouting racial epitaphs).

Newsweek noted in a May 6, 1991 article that, «Racial outbursts are no longer limited to extremist groups, to rednecks in white robes.

With disturbing frequency, upper-middle-class college students shout racial slurs. At home their parents too often silently concur¹.

Let us briefly discuss the «reasoning» of the jurors in the Rodney King - Police officers' trial which led to acquittal verdict. The defense lawyers successfully convinced the jury that:

1) King «controlled» the action during his beating — his refusal to lie still as he was beaten was the evidence;

2) King presented a dangerous threat to the four officers who were beating him (and the 16 officers who watched the beating) because of the «animal-like» sounds they said he uttered during the beating;

3) King's presumed strength was such that he could have overpowered the four officers (and presumably the other 16 also). These officers had 'only' their batons and police revolvers for protection (King was not armed);

4) Whatever these officers did could be justified as necessary to protect «law-abiding» citizens from the criminal element which threatens them at all times. The police represent a «thin-blue-line» separating «us» from the «jungle» of crime.

One must remember the racist stereotype of the African American male — just out of the jungle, animal in strength and passions violent and criminal.

There are equally vicious stereotypes regarding African American women which center on moral laxity, sexual permissiveness, laziness, drug use, criminality and lack of discipline. (time constraints prohibit fuller development)

These are the stereotypes which inform many white Americans and guides their racial and political behavior. The political behavior has significant educational ramifications. First, it has resulted in greatly reduced funding for inner city schools. For example: in Texas 1985-86 — 3000,000 students in wealthiest districts had 800 per cent more property wealth of the 300,000 students in poorest districts. Expenditure per student ranged from \$ 19,00 in wealthiest to \$ 2,000 in poorest². In most cases «poorest districts» means minority districts. Moreover, contrary to the explicit and constant denial

1. «The New Politics of Race», p. 23.

2. Paul E. Barton, Richard J. Coley, & Margaret E. Goerts, «The State of Inequality», *Policy Information Report*, Educational Testing Service, (Princeton, N. J.) 1991, p. 20.

of both the Reagan and Bush administrations, this same study showed that differential resources, indeed, do make a difference in educational achievement.

Equally important, the atmosphere of hate and racial prejudice which provides these stereotypes is present in our schools and universities. The stereotypes, prejudices, fear, anger and other associated unhealthy emotions do great harm to minority students—children, adolescents, and adults. It is literally impossible to underestimate the damage done to minority students who are constantly informed in subtle and all too often not too subtle ways—by teachers, other students, the news and entertainment media and the nation's political leaders—that they are not expected to learn because of the color of their skin or their surname¹.

Let me close with a quote from *Newsweek* magazine 6 May, 1991: «As distrust and resentment grow between blacks and whites, Washington strategists manipulate the tensions with clever slogans and divisive labels... This is the new politics of race, where notions of fairness and equity are lost in a scramble 'to get yours'»².

1. See: e. g., Lynn Olson, «Bigotry: A Teacher's Voyage into the 'Eye of the Storm'», *Education Week*, VII, 6 April 1988, pp. 4-5.

2. p. 22-3.