

Race in the U.S.A.: We've come a long way, baby?

**AMERICA IN BLACK AND WHITE:
ONE NATION, INDIVISIBLE;
RACE IN MODERN AMERICA**

By Stephan Thernstrom and
Abigail Thernstrom

Simon & Schuster, \$32.50,
704 pages

REVIEWED BY LINDA GOTTFREDSON

Blacks and whites are inherently different, destined to live in separate worlds." The sentiment of the die-hard Southern segregationists of mid-century, right? No. It is the fashionable rhetoric today among radical multiculturalists, "critical race theorists" and a growing number of black intellectuals. For them, different racial and ethnic groups live in separate and competing cultures. Race is destiny, and individuals' psyches and material successes are the inescapable byproducts of birth groups.

It is against this divisive view of race relations that Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom aim their important new book, "America in Black and White." Theirs is an encyclopedic brief for returning to the principles of individualism and color-blindness.

Like other recent books urging the same return, this volume warns of the risks of the new racialism to national stability and civility. The Thernstroms, however — both are eminent scholars of race, ethnicity and public policy — focus on unmasking the popularly accepted falsehoods undergirding the new racial rhetoric. Anyone who is concerned about the future of American race relations should consider this book required reading.

In almost 700 pages of text and notes, and drawing extensively on demographic data as well as news accounts, historical documents and compelling anecdotes, the authors methodically dismantle the

see RACE, page B6

RACE

From page B8

racialists' claim that there has been and can be no meaningful black progress in the United States without aggressive race-conscious social intervention. They also take readers behind the scenes to watch the evolution of tactics among civil rights activists and the political maneuvering in different administrations, including President John F. Kennedy's political timidity on the issue and his administration's co-optation and control of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous 1963 March on Washington.

Part I of the book examines the frequent claim by civil rights leaders that black progress began only with strong federal intervention beginning in the mid-1960s. The authors document how the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 were actually the result, not the cause, of vastly changed white (and black) attitudes toward segregation. Moreover, between 1940 and 1960 there was a dramatic narrowing of the black-white gaps in the poverty rate, earnings, middle-class employment, home ownership, education level and life expectancy.

The authors also analyze the social forces producing this early progress, including the great migrations of blacks to the North, World War II and a booming post-war economy. Their descriptions of life under Jim Crow leave no doubt that blacks were escaping from truly horrific conditions in the South.

Blacks continued to advance economically, but at a slower pace after 1965. Rates of black crime and out-of-wedlock births both began to skyrocket and black-white gaps in cognitive skill remained distressingly large at all educational levels.

The brief, bright moment of national unity on civil rights collapsed and the movement was left rudderless, its major goals achieved with the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. The civility and dignity of the nonviolent Southern civil rights activists were soon superseded by the angry rhetoric of black power, race riots nationwide and, later, by degrading theories that portray blacks as helpless victims of white society who can be emancipated from their "new slav-

ery" only with special preferences.

In Part II, the authors marshal a wide variety of evidence to correct a series of common myths about racial progress since 1965. Indeed, they take particular civil rights leaders, academics and journalists to task for their hyperbole and gross distortions of fact in justifying affirmative action. Even the simplest facts are misrepresented. For example, most blacks are not impoverished inner-city residents. Fewer than 20 percent of blacks fit that false stereotype, and they are outnumbered two to one by the over 40 percent of blacks who consider themselves middle class.

The authors also unmask more complex myths with rather simple data. For instance, neither white racism nor black poverty can be the "root causes" of the high rates of black male crime and unemployment, as is commonly asserted, because the latter have risen as the former have fallen. The truth, the authors conclude, is that black crime, pathological family structure and cognitive skills deficits, not poverty and racism, are now the major impediments to further black progress.

Part III details how the civil rights movement has devolved into a federally-enforced race-consciousness in government contracting, congressional redistricting, education and employment. Having been granted extraordinary new powers in 1964 and 1965 in regulating voting, employment and education, the federal government immediately began to redefine racial fairness as the achievement of equal results rather than color-blind opportunity.

Some of this transformation was understandably motivated by flagrant Southern resistance to desegregation, but much was the result of a newly powerful but unaccountable federal bureaucracy working quietly with a civil rights community that by 1965 had already begun to favor color-consciousness. The recent flouting of court decisions and popular referenda by the Clinton administration's Departments of Education and Justice, the authors make clear, is clearly but a more recent and blatant action in a 30-year war by unelected federal bureaucrats to make race-consciousness the de facto law of the land.

The popular myths that the

Thernstroms seek to explode have greatly facilitated the triumph of color-consciousness over color-blindness in recent years. So too has the new demagoguery which exaggerates white sin and power as well as black innocence and helplessness.

How, the authors ask, have obvious falsehoods and wild absurdities trumped truth and reason in public debate? Answer: They enhance the political power of various elites, black and white, and they assuage both black self-doubt and white guilt. In ever more critical but still measured prose, the authors depict the black anger and fawning white surrender among the educated and elite. It is a pathological symbiosis that fuels racial pessimism and separation today.

In contrast, the authors counsel optimism, individualism and faith in the ideal of color-blindness.

Blacks have advanced remarkably during this century — with most of the progress being made when that ideal reigned.

The Thernstroms argue convincingly that color-consciousness is an empty promise with destructive results. The authors make a less persuasive case that color-blindness will produce the racial equality that color-consciousness will prevent, for they leave to others the task of finding solutions to the skills deficits, high crime and broken families that currently hobble so many blacks. Nonetheless, the Thernstroms do a monumental service by showing that our nation has no reason to forsake the goal of "one nation indivisible" in favor of the new racial separatism.

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