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Exploring the Future: Race Relations in the 21st Century†

THOMAS FRASER PETTIGREW*

Racial problems will still curse the United States in the year 2000. Tenuous as the art of predicting the future is, this speculation appears relatively assured.

Almost as assured is a further speculation. The nature of our racial problems, though necessarily evolving from the past, will nonetheless be radically different from what we have known during recent decades.

One need only recall the long and tortuous racial history of America to realize that our racist legacy is too deeply implanted to be eradicated by the end of the century. This legacy has shaped our institutions so thoroughly as to perpetuate the subjugation of racial minorities. But this is not to argue that racism, individual and institutional, is inevitable in the United States. Or that it cannot be effectively combatted and eroded. On the contrary, the partial success of explicit reforms over the past quarter century shows how much more could be accomplished over the next quarter century.

Yet the terms of the nation's racial issues will undoubtedly shift sharply. One crude guide, perhaps, is to project present trends forward at an ever accelerating pace. In particular, three trends impress me as critical for the future.

First, racial developments in recent years have split rapidly into two separate and contrasting processes. One process, governing largely the young middle class, is a positive reflection of racial gains since 1954. This is the trend emphasized by optimists and apologists. The other process, governing largely the old and poor, is a negative reflection of our past failures. This is the trend emphasized by pessimists and critics. The reality of racial minorities today includes both processes.

Thus, some urban Native Americans with skills prosper, while many on the reservations slip deeper into poverty. Young, educated Asian-Americans forge ahead, while older Asian-Americans and new arrivals face major obstacles. Likewise, many middle class Black Americans prosper, having directly benefited from the gains achieved by the middle-class-oriented Civil Rights Movement. But most poor Blacks have experienced few positive changes in their immediate lives. Indeed, poor minority peoples have lost ground in absolute as well as relative terms in the last three years under a Federal program that has acted against their interests.

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Second, the nature of racial discrimination has altered considerably. In the past, discrimination took such blatant forms as total exclusion or relegation to an inferior and separate status within institutions. Today's discriminatory forms are more subtle, though blatant methods still characterize such conspicuous sectors as railroad and construction unions and the real estate industry. More typical now are techniques ostensibly "nonracial" in character.

Restrictive zoning ordinances, such as suburban requirements of two-acre lots, are an example. Similarly, we see increasing reliance on irrelevant employment qualifications, such as a high school degree for semi-skilled factory jobs. The furor and confusion over so-called "quotas" for affirmative action are part of this trend. Even once-liberal organizations confuse lowered barriers for racial *entry* into employment and educational institutions with lower standards for job performance and graduation.

Third, racial attitudes have altered; there is less white resistance to, and rising minority insistence for, racial change. Older, less educated, conservative members of all races are being replaced by younger, *more* educated, liberal members. And, more importantly, the events and experiences of the past two decades shows that social attitudes generally change *after*—not before—behavior and experiences have changed.

Projecting these three trends forward, I can see increasing numbers of racial minority peoples joining middleclass whites in more comfortable lives of opportunity; while large numbers continue to suffer from the twin burdens of economic deprivation and racial discrimination. Thus, by the year 2000 "racial" problems will be viewed in more distinct class and economic terms than today, with welfare goals far outweighing status goals. The forms of racial discrimination will be more subtle and difficult to root out; and these newer forms will raise thornier political issues. "Busing" as an issue will be dead even in Pontiac, Michigan. It will be replaced by such critical issues as metropolitanism and greater income equality. Finally, racial minorities will continue to press for changes while whites haltingly reduce their racial fears and opposition to change.

But what of the present? The open hostility in government circles—the greatest since Woodrow Wilson—has attempted to destroy virtually every positive Federal initiative in race relations. Not surprisingly, this climate has engendered spokesmen claiming to speak as "scientists" who assert the genetic inferiority of Black Americans and the "failure" of public school desegregation.

Is this not evidence of a massive retrogression in race relations, a second Post-Reconstruction era to reassert the white supremacy doctrine? And if so, does not this period—which has intensified since Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination—suggest a bleak foreboding for the nation's racial future? Perhaps so. Yet on balance it appears that, though these recent years of retreat have meant a serious delay, they do not yet mean a fundamental reversal in the process of eliminating our racist legacy. Progress, at least for the already skilled continues out of sheer momentum from the Sixties. Recall, too, that opportunistic politicians and pseudoscientists have emerged repeatedly throughout our history to rationalize racial oppression in times of threat and uncertainty.

Race relations specialists would like to be wrong about most of their predictions of the future. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to witness the elimination of racism in the United States in my lifetime, so that my grandchildren would know it only as a subject in a history text. But the grim realities of our past and present suggest that we will be denied this satisfaction. Yet I still maintain my hope, even belief, that these present years are an American aberration in race relations.

Affirmative actions, taken in the next generation, can still effectively limit this historic denial of the American Dream in the twenty-first century.

