

Read the Book

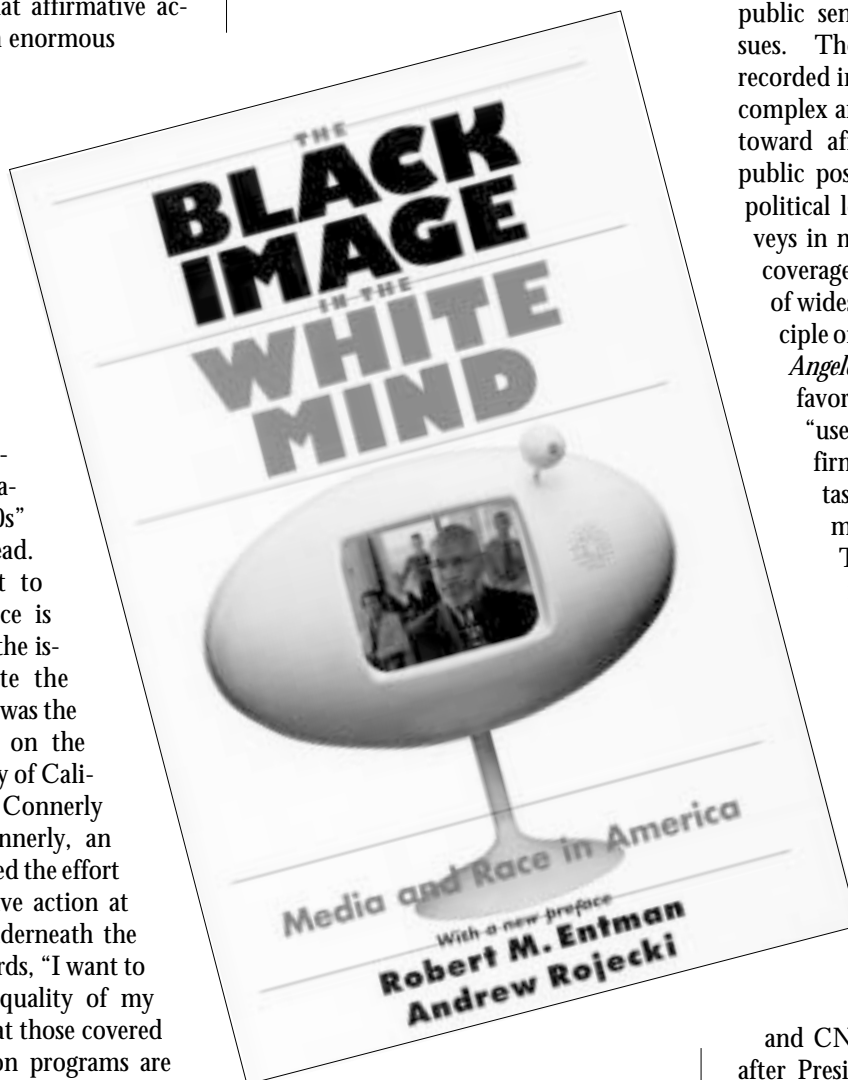
An excerpt from THE BLACK IMAGE IN THE WHITE MIND
By Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki

Framing Opinion on Affirmative Action

A *Newsweek* column by Joe Klein (13 February 1995) contained two of many media assertions that affirmative action had become an enormous political issue, a source of intense white emotion and opposition. *Newsweek* highlighted this issue in large print: “A NEWSWEEK columnist says we may be hurtling toward the most sensitive point in race relations since the 1960s” is the article’s subhead. “California’s effort to end racial preference is just the first step—the issue could dominate the 1996 election year” was the large-print caption on the picture of University of California Regent Ward Connerly and his wife. Connerly, an African American, led the effort to rescind affirmative action at the university. Underneath the picture were the words, “I want to be judged by the quality of my work,” implying that those covered by affirmative action programs are not. At the same time, Klein asserted (without evidence) that emotions ran high among blacks: “The reaction of the black community [to abolition of affirmative action] is likely to be cold fury, incendiary rhetoric—and a deep sense of despair.” An equal opportu-

nity pessimist, he then wrote that “[t]he response from white America is likely to be a disingenuous and slightly smarmy call for a ‘colorblind society.’”

Supporting the interpretation that Klein confused the opinions of ordinary citizens with those of elites, in the two
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tences about “reaction of the black community” and “response from white America” he actually referred to leadership elements, not the average individual (who does not speak in “rhetoric” or engage in “smarmy

calls”). Equating elites’ strategically chosen rhetorical positions with the general public’s opinions can lead journalists and their audiences, both mass and elite, to underestimate the zone of potential compromise.

Even if they are deeply flawed, sample surveys offer the only reliable data journalists or scholars have about aggregate public sentiments toward policy issues. The sentiments of whites as recorded in the surveys are both more complex and more favorably inclined toward affirmative action than the public positions staked out by most political leaders. Four separate surveys in mid-1995, around the time coverage peaked, revealed evidence of widespread support for the principle of affirmative action. In a *Los Angeles Times* poll (1995), 21% favored affirmative action that “uses quotas,” 50% favored affirmative action “without quotas” and 20% “oppose[d] affirmative action altogether.” This result implies that affirmative action with or without quotas was favored by 71%. On this question, even white men were 61% in favor of affirmative action (white women, 76%) when we combine the “without” and “with” quota categories. Surveys by ABC/*Washington Post* (March), NBC/*Wall Street Journal* (July-August), and CNN/*USA Today* (July, right after President Clinton’s speech) all found 70% of respondents favoring either affirmative action as then practiced or with reforms....

Similar questions asked about affirmative action without quotas (in “business,” “employment,” or “industry”)

in 1982, 1988, and 1990 found virtually identical percentages. The most comprehensive review of survey data concludes that *whites' attitudes on affirmative action remained virtually unchanged between 1965 and 1995*, despite journalists' and politicians' frequent claims of a massive shift in the mid-1990s.

The polls did show that a majority opposed "quotas" or "preferences." Thus the *Los Angeles Times* poll of March 1995 that found 71% support for the principle of affirmative action also asked if "qualified minorities should receive *preference* over equally qualified whites" (emphasis added). On this question it found 72% of all respondents opposed, 78% of whites—and also 50% of blacks. These results and others suggest not only widespread antagonism toward "preference" programs, but also that many African Americans share the antipathy. Blacks and whites seem to occupy more similar moral worlds than the news media implied.

We should not leap from polling data showing support of affirmative action programs without quotas or preferences to a presumption that every member of the majority would approve any one reformed affirmative action policy. We do not have a definitive sense of the public's opinions on what is actually a diverse range of policy solutions. In addition, whites may mask their true sentiments when responding to interviewers' probes on affirmative action....

At the same time, polling evidence reveals considerable contradiction, uncertainty, or ambivalence. For example, the respondents to one survey both endorsed a referendum *repealing* affirmative action (by a slim margin) and favored another referendum *maintaining* affirmative action (by a larger margin). Whites consider anti-

white discrimination a bigger problem than anti-black, but also seem to accept affirmative action as a remedy for the latter. The instabilities within and across representative samples suggest we cannot infer much about the details of public thinking from conventional surveys....

We can, however, combine poll data to reach a reasonable synthesis: a variety of surveys variously worded revealed general support for the principle. They also showed a widespread perception that current applications entail some undesirable costs or practices. Distinguishing among affirmative action programs, [Lawrence] Bobo and [James R.] Kluegel argue specifically that whites tend to support "opportunity-enhancing" affirmative action policies while opposing "preferential" ones. These strands are congruent with a majority of white Americans wanting to "mend" but not "end" affirmative action, to use the phrase President Clinton evoked in his 1995 speech.

The favorable majority might not have been as robust as the polling data suggest, but at the minimum, the best available empirical evidence lends little support to the pessimistic image painted in the news. Rather, polls consistently suggested a significant reservoir of sympathy and support among whites for redressive public policies, even if other, less friendly sentiments coexisted. We cannot determine which has been *the* true reading of the white public's opinion toward affirmative action. In all likelihood, depending on circumstances and stimuli, whites can genuinely feel both sympathy and antipathy.

In any case, the failure of the issue to catch on in the 1996 election campaign despite the expectations of many pundits and politicians suggests white Americans were much less exercised over the issue than the news media

depicted. That leads to another misleading element in media framing of public opinion—the portrayal of intense white arousal over the issue. Beyond the fizzling of the issue in 1996, survey data suggest that whites and blacks have long considered it a low priority issue. The best evidence suggests it was not bubbling at the surface of a seething white America's political consciousness in the 1990s. Nor were African Americans obsessing about affirmative action. Although it may have been the most vexing specific issue when interviewers raised the matter of race relations (as we did in Indianapolis), it apparently did not rise to the surface spontaneously as a major problem facing the country among either group....

By creating the notion that an angry white majority was fed up with affirmative action, the media might well have discouraged white politicians from publicly defending the policy. To justify it in this media-constructed environment could have made a politician seem unresponsive, even arrogant. Perhaps this is one reason that none of the twelve network stories on Clinton's affirmative action speech or the California regents' decision showed a white political leader other than the president endorsing affirmative action. That absence, along with the presence of so many white opponents, portrayed a deepening racial polarization, again despite surveys revealing considerable common ground.

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