

Moving To An America Beyond Race

By Everett C. Ladd

The question before us in this issue of Perspective isn't, of course whether the US has serious problems in race relations and the status of African Americans; everyone knows that it does. No more is it whether blacks and whites view American society differently; for again, it's obvious they do. In the lead essay of this issue, Norman Hill, president of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, reminds us of an inescapable fact of America's history—that African Americans are the only ethnic group in this diverse nation that was brought here against its will "as chattel," and then faced another century of institutionalized racism known as Jim Crow. In marked contrast, as Hill points out, "most white immigrants effectively assimilated into the power structure in a few generations...."

Instead, the pressing issue—pressing for the analyst and the nation alike—is whether, given its racial history the US is one nation, or one country with two "nations" within it defined by different views and values. In one form or another, the "two societies" argument keeps cropping up historically—often advanced by persons who regret what they see. The Kerner Commission lamented in 1968 that the country was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white." And last year after the Simpson verdict, a bevy of news magazines and commentary argued that the Commission's tragic prophecy had been realized.

The data, which we have reviewed as fully as possible for this special edition of "People, Opinions & Polls," say otherwise. Both African Americans and fellow citizens who are called whites in fact see America's current race relations in terms far more complex and ambiguous than "two societies" envisions them. Those who are called blacks are much more inclined than others—given their experience—to understand that racism, past and present, is a huge problem. But they now see comity along with conflict, opportunity as well as discrimination, progress together with persisting problems (pp. 20-22). Like others they find that the problems which confront their community in the Nineties have sources transcending present discrimination and requiring a host of different solutions (pp. 23-24). For all the legacy of anger and pain, separation and name-calling, stereotyping and oversimplification—Americans see race relations today in hues vastly more subtle than black and white. Even when it comes to judging the criminal justice system as to bias, views are much more ambiguous than headlines suggest (see next page).

Because they have felt the thrust of racism as others have not, African Americans are much more inclined to insist that the nation, through national government programs, must now

assume greater responsibilities for finding remedies (pp. 26-27). But no more than others do they want government to do more than make the playing field level. And, on the broad range of important issues not governed by different racial experiences—from balancing the budget and reforming Medicare, to social issues including abortion across to getting tougher on crime—blacks and whites differ not at all (pp. 28-30).

Norman Hill finds it remarkable "that blacks, who bear the legacy of slavery, segregation, oppression, exclusion, and the daily indignities of racism are, in many ways, the most resilient archetypal Americans, still holding on to the notion that perseverance and hard work will give them a real shot at opportunity and equality" (p. 3). As a vast array of survey data makes undeniably clear, on most core social and political values, and personal ones too, one can't find black and white, only national consensus (pp. 34-35, 38-41). I think this is indeed remarkable—but not at all surprising.

G. K. Chesterton was right in calling America "the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed." This value system has proved enormously attractive to most Americans of all backgrounds in every era. Its terms are not made less so by the fact that many of us have failed to do what we should to realize its promise. America displays "an army of actualities," Chesterton wrote, that contradict its creedal ideal, "but ... no ideal opposed to that ideal" (*What I Saw in America*).

So let's get on with it. America is one nation, defined by shared values. It denied those values tragically in slavery and Jim Crow. Most of us, of all backgrounds, now acknowledge this. None of us can repeal it; all of us can work to reduce its present thrust. "Race" is an horrendous, scientifically unsound, entirely unAmerican idea. It has done us great harm; it's long past time to bury it. Without forgetting the evil its applications have wrought, each of us must stop being "black" or "white." Opinion research, reviewed here, shows the country within reach of achieving such an understanding. Racism now lies equally in two opposing conditions: Refusing to acknowledge the historical reality and continuing legacy of racist thought and action; and continuing to think or act as though the American family is in any legitimate way understood in racial terms.