

## The Public and the President's Commission on Race

By Robert J. Blendon, John M. Benson, Mollyann Brodie, Drew E. Altman, and Mario Brossard

Last June, President Clinton announced that he would lead the country in a "national conversation on race." Recently the seven-member commission impaneled to advise him on this matter began its hearings. The race commission, chaired by historian John Hope Franklin, faces a daunting task. The state of race relations is a central concern for African-Americans, but not for most whites. Partisan differences complicate the picture: the commission was named by a Democratic president who faces a Republican Congress, and the party constituencies hold sharply different views on racial issues. For instance, according to a January 1997 Gallup poll, 70% of Republicans and 43% of Democrats think the government should not make any special

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effort to help minorities because they should help themselves. In addition, the commission was named at a time when the only race-related issue on the agenda was a particularly divisive one: affirmative action.

What can public opinion surveys tell us that would be helpful to the race commission in shaping its agenda?

We were asked, primarily on the basis of our having conducted a survey in 1995 as part of a series by the *Washington Post*/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University Survey Project, to make a list of recommendations to the commission. Our survey focused on the perspectives of different racial and ethnic groups on social policy and the role of government in America.<sup>1</sup> Between July 20 and August 9, 1995, telephone interviews were conducted by Chilton Research with 1,970 randomly selected adults, including 802 whites and 474 African-Americans.<sup>2</sup> We have supplemented our survey findings with specific results drawn from 12 other surveys conducted nationwide between 1994 and 1997.

Recognizing that public opinion is only one perspective from which to consider an issue involving many moral, ethical, and political aspects, we offer the following six recommendations based on our analysis of recent public opinion data.

- *To prevent the purported dialogue from becoming one-sided, try to convince white Americans that the state of race relations is an important problem to think about and discuss.*

Race relations are far more salient to African-Americans than they are to whites. A June 1996 CBS News survey found that seven in ten blacks (70%), compared with only three in ten whites (31%), thought improving race relations was one of the most important things we need to do for the future of the country.

Even when it comes to affirmative action, a race-related issue that potentially

affects whites, blacks show more interest than whites do. Asked by NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* in June 1996 how important dealing with affirmative action would be in deciding who they would vote for as president, half (52%) of blacks said it would be extremely important, compared with only 18% of whites.

One strategy to get whites more involved in the discussion of race relations would be to show its relevance to other national goals, such as the future performance of the nation's economy, that are important to whites.

- *To overcome misperceptions held by many whites, discuss the current state of black America in terms the average white American can understand.*

Despite decades of studies, reports, and commissions documenting disparities between blacks and whites, most whites still misperceive the real-life circumstances that African-Americans face today, as measured by government statistical data.

According to our findings and those of an April 1996 ABC News poll, a majority of whites incorrectly believe that African-Americans are as well off or better off than the average white in terms of access to health care, education, jobs, and risk of losing their jobs. Even in terms of income and housing, where the clearest discrepancies exist according to government statistics, more than four in ten whites believe that the average African-American is at least as well off as the average white.

Interestingly, whites hold these views even though a plurality (45%) of them believe (again incorrectly) that more poor people in this country are black than white. Only one in three whites (34%) knew that whites make up a higher proportion of the poor than blacks do. More than half (58%) of whites believe incorrectly that more recipients of public assistance or welfare are black than white.

- *Encourage a frank and open discussion of why blacks are not doing better than they are.*

While whites see the breakup of the African-American family as the predominant reason, blacks see discrimination and other barriers as playing at least as large a role.

The two races differ in the reasons they give for the economic and social problems faced by African-Americans today. We have found that, from a list of eight possible reasons for these problems, the breakup of the African-American family is the only one cited by a majority (58%) of whites. While an even larger proportion (62%) of African-Americans agrees that family breakup is a major reason, majorities of blacks also cite four other factors as major reasons: lack of jobs (74%); past and present discrimination (71%); lack of educational opportunities (67%); and whites not wanting African-Americans to get ahead (60%). African-Americans cite each of these factors at least 30 percentage points more often than whites do.

- *Devote considerable time to a discussion of the extent of racial discrimination.*

Most whites acknowledge the persistence of discrimination. Two-thirds believe that blacks are discriminated against in our society at least somewhat (69%), according to a June 1997 ABC/*Washington Post* poll, and that racial discrimination is at least a somewhat serious problem (68%), according to an August 1996 Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* poll.

However, blacks and whites disagree sharply about the extent of discrimination that exists. Only one in six whites (17%) responding to the ABC/*Washington Post* poll, compared with 44% of blacks, say there is "a lot" of discrimination in this society. Similarly, only 18% of whites in the Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* poll, compared with a majority (55%) of blacks, believe racial discrimination is a very serious problem.

A Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* poll from July 1995 tells us that while three-fourths (74%) of blacks believe racial minorities in the US are routinely discriminated against, only 34% of whites share this view. In addition, a majority of blacks but a minority of whites surveyed by ABC News in April 1996 believe there is discrimination in several broad areas: hiring (77% of blacks, compared to 43% of whites), the housing market (75% of blacks, 44% of whites), and the kind of education they get (60% of blacks, 26% of whites). In June 1997, nearly six in ten blacks (59%), compared with 19% of whites, told Princeton Survey Research Associates in a survey for Wisconsin Public Television that they believe blacks and other minorities being denied jobs or promotions because of discrimination happens "often."

The same pattern holds true for a number of specific aspects of employment, according to a March 1995 poll by

Time/CNN/Yankelovich Partners. Blacks and whites differed greatly on whether racial minorities are discriminated against in being hired for white-collar jobs (73% of blacks, 37% of whites), being promoted to middle-management positions (68% of blacks, 36% of whites), being paid equal wages (65% of blacks, 32% of whites), and being hired for blue-collar jobs (59% of blacks, 24% of whites).

- *Encourage a dialogue about whether the African-American experience is unique, different in nature from the experience of other racial and ethnic groups.*

Two entirely distinct answers can be given to the question of whether or not the African-American experience is unique. On one hand is the view that America is a grand "melting pot" made up of people of different races and ethnic backgrounds but with common experiences, including a history of discrimination and prejudice. In this view, African-Americans are part of the broader experience of ethnic and religious minorities in the United States.

The other view is that the African-American experience is very different, based on a history of slavery and racial segregation. A corollary to this view holds that whites today have actually benefitted and continue to benefit from this discriminatory history.<sup>3</sup>

Our survey found that most African-Americans see the latter view as being true, while most whites consider the African-American experience to be little different from that of other ethnic groups such as Irish and Italian Americans and feel no responsibility for past discrimination. Whites believe that

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the problems faced by African-Americans will ultimately work themselves out, because that has been the experience of other minority groups earlier in our history. To many people, Asian-Americans are just the latest example of this process. Blacks remain much less hopeful, because they do not think the historical experience of African-Americans parallels in significant ways the experience of other minority groups.

When asked whether they agree with the statement that "The Irish, Italians, and many other groups overcame prejudice and worked their way up, African-Americans and other

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minorities should do the same without any special help from the government," a large majority of whites (69%) agreed, compared with only 34% of African-Americans.

Similarly, nearly two-thirds (64%) of whites do *not* believe that whites have benefitted from past and present discrimination against African-Americans and do not believe that whites should be willing to make up for these wrongs. In contrast, nearly two-thirds of African-Americans (64%) do believe that whites have benefitted from discrimination and should be willing to make up for these wrongs.

The importance of this dialogue is highlighted by looking at an issue where white opinion is nearly equally divided: the enactment of tougher anti-discrimination laws to reduce racial discrimination in the workplace. Whites' misperceptions about the social and economic realities facing African-Americans are strongly related to their views on this issue.

Whites who are the least informed (believe that African-Americans are at least as well off as the average white on five or six of the six measures mentioned earlier) are more likely than the most informed whites (those who know African-Americans are worse off on average than whites on five or six of the measures) to oppose tougher anti-discrimination laws to reduce racial discrimination in the workplace (51% versus 29%).

Whites' policy views are also significantly related to their beliefs on the two central questions about African-Americans' uniqueness among the country's minorities. Whites who see the African-American experience as unique, by either measure, are significantly more likely to support tougher anti-discrimination laws. Of those who disagree that African-Americans, like the Irish and Italians, should overcome prejudice and work their way up without special government help, 62% favor tougher anti-discrimination laws; and of those who think whites have benefitted

from past and present discrimination and bear responsibility, 60% favor tougher anti-discrimination laws.

- *Focus on issues where there is some possibility of agreement between blacks and whites.*

Several studies have shown that blacks and whites differ on a number of policy issues. The commission could make a big contribution by focusing discussion on ways to solve problems where there is already majority support among blacks and where white opinion is split. As we have seen, African-

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Americans believe that discrimination is a significant problem in a wide range of areas. In some of those areas, white attitudes are nearly evenly divided. For instance, 44% of whites surveyed by ABC News in April 1996 think discrimination exists in the housing market, while 45% believe it does not.

According to a March 1995 *Time/CNN/Yankelovich Partners* poll, nearly half (45%) of whites believe blacks are discriminated against in being promoted to high level executive positions (42% disagree), while four in ten (41%) responding to the April 1996 ABC News poll believe blacks are discriminated against in hiring generally. A December 1997 poll by CBS/*New York Times* found that nearly two-thirds (65%) of whites believe that laws protecting minorities against discrimination in hiring and promotion are necessary, and half (50%) of whites we surveyed think the federal government should enact tougher anti-discrimination laws to reduce racial dis-

crimination in the workplace (48% of whites are opposed).

But the greatest chance of helping bring about progress in race relations during the next decade lies in areas where a majority of whites recognize a problem and see a role for government in trying to provide solutions. A majority of whites believe it is the responsibility of the federal government to make sure minorities have equality with whites in treatment by the courts and police (74%), in schools (66%), and in health care services (61%).

Oversight of police activities was a major issue at the time of the Rodney King incident, although surveys have not asked about specific policies. The general notion of oversight in cases of alleged mistreatment is an area where the races agree more can be done.

Research has shown that race-targeted programs are not a good way to gain support from white Americans.<sup>4</sup> An alternative approach that might prove more effective is proposing policies that would disproportionately help blacks, but which are not targeted solely on the basis of race.

Most Americans share a general commitment to equal educational opportunity, although it is clear that a majority of whites oppose many policies proposed to reach this goal. A majority of both blacks (82%) and whites (58%) favor more government spending on preschool programs like Head Start,<sup>5</sup> a program seen in our survey by a majority of both races (61% of blacks, 51% of whites) as benefitting more minority than white children. Both blacks (83%) and whites (73%) surveyed by Gallup for Phi Delta Kappa in May 1994 show strong support for a large increase in funds for early childhood education in those public schools with the highest percentage of children living in poverty.

Nearly six in ten whites (59%) told a December 1997 CBS News/*New York Times* poll they favor high schools and colleges providing special educational

programs to assist minorities in competing for college admissions, and almost two-thirds (64%) of whites favor government funding for job training programs for minorities to help them get ahead in industries where they are underrepresented.

Similarly, proposals to expand health insurance coverage for children have the potential to gain support from majorities of both races while being especially helpful to members of minority groups, who are disproportionately represented among the uninsured.<sup>6</sup> Majorities of both blacks (88%) and whites (64%) would like to see more government spending on health care for children whose families do not have health insurance. In addition, 82% of blacks and 58% of whites say they would personally be willing to pay more in taxes to provide this insurance.<sup>7</sup>

### Concluding Thoughts

Our analysis of the *Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard* survey and other recent public opinion polls points to four key areas the President's race commission should address.

First, the commission has an opportunity to develop an agenda for the next decade in race relations apart from affirmative action. Areas where it may prove possible to find agreement include tougher anti-discrimination laws, oversight of police, and increased efforts in education and health care.

Unfortunately, on the difficult question of what to do about affirmative action, our survey offers little guidance. Public opinion about the issue is complex,<sup>8</sup> and it is not clear from the avail-

able survey data just how much attention the commission should pay to an issue that so clearly divides the public.

Second, the commission should encourage a frank and open debate about the state of black America today and the causes of problems experienced by African-Americans. An important aspect of this debate is the issue of whether the African-American experience is essentially like that of other racial and ethnic minorities or is historically unique.

Third, the commission has a chance to involve more white Americans, many of whom are not especially interested in race relations, by organizing its work and events so that people can more easily see the linkage between race relations and other important issues, such as the nation's future economic well-being.

Finally, the commission should view its work not as an academic exercise, but rather as an attempt to mediate differing views of what should be done about the state of race relations today.

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Representatives from *The Washington Post*, The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University worked closely to design the survey and analyze the results. Four outside experts on race relations and public opinion helped shape the survey questionnaire: Lawrence Bobo, professor of sociology at UCLA; Michael Dawson, associate professor of political science at the University of Chicago; Jennifer Hochschild, professor of politics and public affairs at Princeton University; and Lynn Sanders, assistant professor of political science at the University of Chicago.

<sup>2</sup> Margin of sampling error (at the 95% confidence level) is plus or minus 4% for the white subsample and plus or minus 5% for the African-American subsample. The re-

mainder of the sample consisted of 353 Asian-Americans, 252 Latino-Americans, members of other races, or respondents who declined to identify their race.

<sup>3</sup> In *The Wealth of Races* several authors present the argument that there are large economic gaps between the races, principally in accumulated wealth, based on African-Americans' experience of slavery. These gaps in turn affect how each new generation of whites and blacks start out economically. Most whites are probably not aware of this argument or do not consider it relevant. See Richard F. America, (ed.), *The Wealth of Races: The Present Value of Benefits from Past Injustices*. Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, No. 132. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> David O. Sears, Colette Van Laar, Mary Carrillo, and Rick Kosterman, "Is It Really Racism? The Origins of White Americans' Opposition to Race-Targeted Policies," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1997, 61(1):16-53.

<sup>5</sup> University of Maryland Survey Research Center/Harvard University/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, August 11-November 2, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> US Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1996* (Washington: US Bureau of the Census, 1996), p. 120.

<sup>7</sup> University of Maryland/Harvard/RWJF, August 11-November 2, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> "Affirmative Action, Welfare, and the Individual: A Roper Center Report of Findings in Public Opinion Research," *The Public Perspective*, 1995, 6(4):23-42.



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