



# AN ANALYSIS OF AMERICAN RACISM

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## *History*

From the time the first native American "Indian" died at the hands of a European settler (if not before), the United States has held white supremacy as a dominant theme in its institutional and cultural life. The "New World" civilization ultimately destroyed nearly one half of the "Indian" population (genocide by any criteria), defined in its basic political document the black person as three-fifths of a man, and created a chattel slavery system more dehumanizing and destructive than any the world has ever known.

White supremacy has served as the defining characteristic of white America's relations with people of color both inside and outside what seem to be the endlessly expanding boundaries of the United States. Racism is integral to America's foreign as well as its domestic policy. The nation finds itself increasingly in global predicaments precisely because the white supremacy of the past has contributed to the arrogance of the present.

Men and women of color have died and been brutalized at the hands of whites who have, perhaps irrevocably, distorted and brutalized themselves at the same time. They have built a culture in which racism is pervasive; whites do not know who they are because they have constructed an identity which depends primarily not on who they are, but on who they are not.

## *Definition*

The first step in the solution of any problem is its correct definition. To this day, whites have not attempted to devise a realistic definition of the race problem. The task has been fundamentally evaded by the belief that the race problem is a Negro problem.

Even those such as the Kerner Commission who have recently begun to recognize racism in the white community direct their recommendations and solutions not at white America but at reforms for black America. Such reforms are obviously prevented by the very racism which created the need for reforms in the first place. What is required is an analysis of white supremacy -- however crude at this stage -- and a strategy and program for combatting it.

Racism is a complex phenomenon, particularly in the urban North. Like much of American society, racism is a matter of subtle and not-so-subtle euphemism. An elaborate rhetoric exists to disguise it. Schools are segregated not to keep blacks separate but to preserve the neighborhood school. Police are given excessive power in the ghetto not to deny basic constitutional rights to second-class citizen black people but to stop "crime in the streets." Blacks are not denied jobs because of the color of their skin but because they are not "qualified." Housing integration is not opposed because people do not wish to live next door to "niggers," but because black people lower property values. Black students, it is argued, fail to learn in ghetto schools not because the schools are inferior, but because the black students are inferior by virtue of "cultural disadvantages" and a poor home environment.

Such euphemisms are only one of many devices by which whites absolve themselves of the responsibility for racism.

Most whites sincerely believe that they do not discriminate against black people. And indeed, institutionalized, anonymous racism means that many whites



do not discriminate in any direct, overt way. They are rarely given the opportunity. White America employs a number of what sociologist Lee Rainwater has labeled the "dirty workers" to do the actual discriminating. The "dirty workers" include the ghetto policeman, schoolteacher, social and welfare worker and merchant. Also included are the real estate agents, the prosecutors, the slumlords, apartment managers, lower echelon personnel employees and selected politicians. (For reasons of survival or opportunism, even some black people are employed as dirty workers.) It is the responsibility of the dirty workers to control black people as quietly and unobtrusively as possible. The discriminators are supported financially, psychologically, ideologically and otherwise by whites. They are, nevertheless, a minority.

Similarly, relatively few whites benefit in a tangible economic or political sense from the continued oppression and exploitation of blacks. Nearly all whites, however, accept the psychological "benefits" of an arbitrarily defined caste of inferiors in the society. In exchange for the psychological benefit, they offer their tacit, and where necessary active, support to those whose benefits are more material in nature.

Because many whites do not directly participate in the discrimination against or exploitation of black people, they are sustained in the belief that these do not occur. According to the Gallup Poll of July 22, 1967, only one out of 100 whites believes, or admits to believing, that Negroes are treated "badly." Seventy-five percent believe that "Negroes are treated the same as whites."

This inability or unwillingness of whites to recognize racism is exacerbated by the lack of a tradition of systematic analysis or understanding of any social phenomena. Thus, the Horatio Alger Myth, combined with the Protestant Ethic, decrees that failure by whites as well as blacks is either the fault of the individual or the work of God as punishment for sin. In either case, the problem is an individual one. The more whites see of the conditions in which black people live, the more they tend to be convinced that this is what black people want or deserve.

Furthermore, racism and the projections of their own materialism onto blacks combine to prevent whites from seeing the non-material aspirations of people of color. Even those whites who can sympathize with the desire of blacks for decent housing, jobs or education, balk when it comes to self-determination, liberation or power. George Washington's revolutionary action based on the Declaration of Independence is somehow different when the same document is adopted virtually word for word by non-white peoples as the basis for nationalist struggles to free their countries from foreign domination.

Lastly, as part of the institutionalized evasion process, whites have become adept at making the criminal the victim and the victim the criminal -- particularly when the victim is black. Blacks are always "going too fast" or "hurting their own cause." Black militants become responsible for the election of the Lester Maddoxes and the Lurleen Wallaces.

The complexity of racist psychology makes the definition of racism in working with whites a key analytic problem. If racism is to be understood and attacked conceptually, it must be set in two distinguishable but related definitions. First, a distinction must be made between individual and institutional racism; second, the more difficult differentiation must be made between what might be termed attitudinal and behavioral racism.

As Stokely Carmichael has observed, individual racism is represented in the bombing of a Birmingham church which results in the death of four black children. The deaths of 500 black infants in the same city, compared to the much lower infant mortality rates among whites, is a consequence of institutional, systematic racism.

All American white institutions are racist, or more accurately, white supremacist, and all operate to perpetuate white privilege. Some do so more vigorously, some manifest it differently, some are more strategically located than



others. Only differences in degree and scope characterize their operation, internationally, nationally, regionally, or locally. The concepts of white superiority introduced into the culture as a raison d'etre for anti-nonwhite behavior subsequently come to be included in the formal and informal education and socialization process of young people who neither had nor found any basis on which to challenge them. As a result, racism became an integral part of the culture and thus of the institutions of the society. Because institutions by definition seek to perpetuate themselves, they automatically attempt to continue white supremacy just as they automatically attempt to continue their bureaucracy, economic security, power and the rest of what makes up an institution.

In the second set of definitions, attitudinal racism is defined as any action taken against people of color simply because they are not white and are, therefore, less than human or not civilized. De jure segregated schools, for example, result from attitudinal (and institutional) racism.

Behavioral racism, on the other hand, need not be consciously anti-black. It may be defined as any action, individual or institutional, which disadvantages non-whites to the advantage of whites, regardless of conscious motivation. Most urban renewal programs are thus racist, since they have the effect of rendering black people homeless.

The concept of Behavioral Racism is essential because it goes beyond racism as a stated intent. Again, white Americans are intellectually trapped by their culture. The Western, Christian, Liberal tradition insists that altruistic ideologies be constructed to justify "immoral" self-interest. The American system of slavery was as dehumanizing as it was partially because in order to enslave people, the Protestant Ethic and the liberal tradition made it necessary to declare the slaves as sub-human. Once that was accomplished, any possibility of immorality was eliminated since morality pertains only between humans.

The same thing happened in the "settling" of the West (including Texas, Oregon, Hawaii, the Phillipines, American Samoa, etc.). It was necessary for the missionaries to certify that the natives were uncivilized, heathen, savage barbarians so that generals, politicians, citizens and missionaries themselves could sleep at night secure in the knowledge that the only good "Indian" is a dead "Indian."

This kind of doublethinking is used today to justify and defend behavioral racism in Vietnam. The Administration argues, for example, that it would be racist to withdraw from Vietnam. In fact, of course, it is racism and its military, political and economic corollaries which got the U.S. involved in the war in the first place, and which control the unprecedented brutal tactics of the war. We maintain now, as we have in previous periods, that our non-white victims are slaughtered for their own good.

The operation of both attitudinal and behavioral racism may be either individual or institutional, and they are manifested both within the American culture and in the relations between this nation and foreign non-white people.

This limited definition of the concept of racism and the above discussion of the defense mechanisms which whites use to justify, evade or perpetuate it begin -- only begin -- to suggest at least a long-range strategy for combatting white supremacy.

## Strategy

As noted earlier, most white strategy up to now has not sought to deal with the white problems of white identity, culture, self-image and the like. Indeed, white strategy has not even seriously attempted to deal with the structural economic, political and social relationships between white America and black America.

Attempts to ignore the white problem fail to recognize that the roots of



racism are in the white community. Control of the institutions which deny people of color power, dignity and equality rests in the white community. White supremacist attitudes are formed and white supremacist behavior patterns are learned there.

To the extent which white liberals have seen white racism as a problem, they have tended to concentrate on individual as opposed to institutional racism. They have attempted to curtail or get rid of publicly identified racists such as Bull Conner. This approach fails to recognize, of course, that the system provides replacements who may be less obvious and overt but most likely share the same basic assumptions as their fellow whites.

This failure to recognize the institutional and behavioral nature of racism has led whites to the use of integration as a primary tactic. Except at the highest levels, of course, integration has failed. A higher percentage of black children attend segregated schools today than did before the Supreme Court decision of 1954. More black people live in segregated neighborhoods today than did in 1960. A recent ecological study of Detroit's Metropolitan Area showed that there is less "interaction" (contact of any sort -- school, job, neighborhood, etc.) between whites and blacks than there was in 1960.

Integration has failed, too, in a more profound sense, partly because the terms under which it has been posed are themselves white supremacist. Integration has suggested that the criteria for what is "good" is that which is white. Integration has generally meant that to gain physical access to white America, blacks must abandon their blackness. Even those whites who are well-intentioned have usually accepted blacks as human only to the extent they are not black. ("Why I don't even think of you as a Negro," they say of their friends.) To put it another way, those blacks who are accepted are admitted as exceptions.

This is not to say that integration never influences change in the anti-black attitudes of whites. Physical proximity has often been successful as a device, particularly when it takes place on black people's terms. Neither is this to argue that whites are not opposed to physical proximity in most instances. They are. It must be understood, however, that their opposition is not based only on intrinsic dislike of closeness, but that it is a function of the fear that closeness will somehow lead to diminishing the power which allows whites to control the destiny of non-whites.

Nor is this to say that integration which accepts a man's humanity without regard to his color -- instead of in spite of it -- and in which people live and work together is not a desirable objective. Utopian though it might seem, it is, of course, an objective. It is not necessarily strategic at this time, however, to pursue integration as an objective. And to argue that integration is a desirable objective does not make it a useful tactic.

Finally, it should be clear that physical separation is not the issue by the overwhelming lack of tangible or even rhetorical support given to black "separatists" (whether they be the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X or Stokeley Carmichael) by whites adamant in their desire not to have a black man live next door. Whites, it would seem, are in favor of separation only when blacks are against it. Opposition to blacks, first in the form of the "white backlash" and later in the form of increased legal and military repression, increased significantly at exactly the point black people began to talk about "going it alone."

The final complication with the integration strategy concerns the tactic of physical proximity. Integrationists assume that physical proximity itself causes whites to recognize the humanity of blacks, which then leads to whites accepting and liking black people. Unfortunately, this assumption flies in the face of both logic and history.

Whites have always been willing to accept physical proximity to blacks when it suited their purpose to do so. During slavery, for example, white males reg-



ularly achieved ultimate physical proximity to Negro females. The result was hardly respect between the races. The consequence, in fact, was quite the opposite, the further dehumanization of both races.

Additional examples of a more contemporary nature can be seen by noting that some of those having the most actual contact with black people are often the most racist. Brutal white supremacist policemen work eight hours a day in the ghetto; bigoted school teachers in ghetto schools have extensive contact with blacks; welfare workers spend much of their working day in black homes. Detroit area factories have integrated assembly lines in many cases, yet there is nothing inconsistent or implausible about whites who work next to blacks on the same job going home at night to meet with their neighborhood anti-Negro organization. Negro women have always been allowed into the wealthiest white homes to clean, cook and care for white children. Finally, the United States Army has proven its willingness to integrate itself if only to prevent excessive resentment among the black troops which it sends to die in disproportionate numbers.

Physical proximity is a smokescreen.

Liberals in particular abandoned support for black people when they began to declare their independence. Often this was for the simple structural reason that much liberal white power, especially in politics, was in fact black power. Black votes have elected many white politicians. More profoundly, the relationship between white liberals and black people has always been at least symbiotic. Black people as a downtrodden "cause" to be saved by good whites have traditionally given liberals the very definition of their existence -- at least their existence as liberals. It is understandable that liberals, who have been as dependent on black dependence and submission as any group, would feel "betrayed" by the declaration of independence of blacks.

The strategy of the past has failed. We must begin, on the basis of a fresh analysis, to build a new strategy, however difficult that may be.

The recognition of the institutional nature of the problem suggests that whites, no less than blacks, must struggle for the power to control the institutions which create and perpetuate a disastrously distorted system. Whites must begin to see that the present system is as destructive to them as it has been for blacks.

Anti-racist whites must first recognize their own powerlessness, particularly as individuals, to take on institutions. They must, therefore, organize themselves and others. They must build a base.

Those who would seriously address themselves to the task of confronting institutional, behavioral racism must also gain as quickly as possible the necessary experience and analysis which will allow them to make maximum use of their limited power. They must discover, for example, which are the most important institutions and by what methods racism is transmitted to the young.

Most likely, they must turn to youth as a major constituency; one which is most receptive to a new explanation of their present and potential identity as well as to systematic analysis on which they may begin to act.

Finally, they must prepare themselves for a long, difficult, unpopular and possibly dangerous task.

### *Crisis and Conclusion*

The task of combatting racism grows more urgent and more difficult each day. Current trends make it entirely possible that we may be faced with the more immediate task of combatting Fascism.

The period since the 1954 Supreme Court decision might be characterized as the nation's second attempt at reconstruction. If so, it shows signs of ending more disastrously for blacks and whites alike than did the first.

Under the accumulated stresses of many years, including racism, the "liberal" center of the coalition, especially in urban areas, shows signs of break-up and disintegration. A growing, mass-based, frightened and anxiety-ridden, well-financed right wing stands ready to fill any vacuum which is created.

If only to preserve itself, the center will most likely shift to the right as an accommodation. The fact, in part, that the significant and dynamic force on the left is black (or where white, young and largely powerless) and a minority will prevent much, if any, accommodation to the left.

As symbolized by the little noted and little mourned massacre of unarmed black students in Orangeburg, South Carolina, and the indictments and reclassifications of draft protestors and resisters, repression against blacks and deviant whites will continue to grow. (The above examples demonstrate, as always, that the tactics of repression directed at blacks will be different than those directed at whites.

Time is short. For both the short and long range tasks, the maximum number of financial, personnel, and organizational resources must be mobilized immediately.

