

The Resurgence of Racism

Racism in America: A Continuing Dilemma

Despite legal protections for minorities, racism continues to pose a serious problem for society—and for schools.

—Spike Lee¹

One of the biggest lies out here is that no matter what race or religion you are, it doesn't matter. Now that's a lie, and we all know it. If we don't talk about these problems and take them on, they're going to get much, much worse.

—Spike Lee¹

The United States is fond of interpreting its history as a triumphal march of progress, so perhaps it is only natural that many white Americans assume that racism is something we "took care of" in the '60s. After all, the most popular show on television today features a black family, housing discrimination is illegal, lynchings are unheard of, the doctrine of "separate but equal" has been relegated to the same jurisprudential dustbin as the Dred Scott decision, and a black person can be a serious candidate for president.

But has the U.S. overcome its racist past? Of course not. Even the most casual reader of newspapers will notice that racism persists in many forms, some overt, some subtle. Physical at-

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tacks on minorities, racial clashes in schools, redlining, and widespread stereotypes with racial overtones such as "welfare queen" are very much part of the U.S. in 1989. Consider the following recent items drawn from newspaper accounts:

- U.S. colleges enrolled fewer black undergraduates in 1985 than in 1960.²

- A former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and founder of the National Association for the Advancement of White People was elected to the Louisiana State House and received campaign contributions from across the country.³

- One hundred and fifty-two years ago the Chippewa Indian tribes ceded what is now the northern third of Wisconsin to the U.S. in return for,

among other things, the right to hunt and fish on the lands that had formerly belonged to them. In 1983 the federal courts reaffirmed the Chippewa treaty rights, but Indians exercising their right to spearfish walleye are now faced with racial slurs and physical intimidation. In the spring of 1989, in the face of virulent anti-treaty rights protests, the governor of Wisconsin attempted—unsuccessfully—to have the Indians enjoined from exercising their rights.⁴

• In 1989 Americans in 12 states can tune in "Race and Reason" on their public access cable station. The program is hosted by Tom Metzger, who heads the White Aryan Resistance (WAR). Metzger aims to topple what he refers to as the Zionist Occupational Government of the U.S. He asks: "What is wrong with the system that white kids across the country are joining up with people like me?"⁵

• A double standard exists in media treatment of, and social response to, the plight of black crime victims and white crime victims, especially when the perpetrators are black.⁶ Although 81,000 blacks were victims of violent crimes committed by whites in 1986 (the last year for which data are available),⁷ it was a black criminal, Willie Horton, who became a presidential campaign issue in 1988.

Clearly, racism is still a serious problem today, but a different kind of problem than it was before the 1960s. The great advances of the civil rights movement were legal protections: it became illegal to discriminate on the basis of race in employment, housing, and public accommodations. However, legal protections for minorities did not mean the end of racism in this country. Racism persists in the minds, hearts, and actions of too many Amer-

icans—and, sadly, continues to be transmitted to our children.

The legal reforms of the 1960s and '70s give us the opportunity to struggle—to struggle to establish policies and practices that will dispel racial fear and ignorance and to change cultural and institutional norms that impede cooperation among the races. Schools have an important role to play in this struggle against racism. Schools are



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not sanctuaries, and educators cannot shut the classroom door on their responsibility to promote social justice in the face of the powerful manifestations of racism in our culture. Schools can address the interpersonal aspects of racism as well as offer school and classroom activities that teach about the devastating effects oppression has had on minority group members and their cultures while at the same time acknowledging the strengths and contributions of minority group members and their cultures.

In school, children can learn to understand the wounds that racism has inflicted on them and on our society and learn to understand that being different does not mean being inferior. If schools can teach that lesson, then they will be helping to nurture the hope that someday, indeed, we shall overcome. □

¹ Quoted by S. Muwakkie, (July 5–18, 1989), "Doing the Spike Thing," *In These Times* 13, 29.

² P. Ahlgren, (May 7, 1989), "Report Urges State College Fund for Minorities," *The Milwaukee Journal*.

³ "Ex-Klansman Had Donors from Across U.S.," (April 9, 1989), *The Milwaukee Journal*.

⁴ W. Janz, (May 5, 1989), "When Night Falls, Hate Is Turned On," *Milwaukee Sentinel*.

⁵ J. Coplon, (May/June 1989), "The Skinhead Reich," *Utne Reader*, pp. 80–89.

⁶ ABC World News Tonight, (May 10, 1989), "The American Agenda."

⁷ L. Greenhouse, (December 31, 1988), "Broader Curbs Sought on Challenging Jurors," *The New York Times*.

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