A Dream Deferred: The Politics of Race in America

At the end of World War II, the struggle for equal rights for African Americans took on a renewed emphasis in the United States. African-American soldiers had fought and died to make the world safe for democracy, only to return home to conditions of segregation, which were manifested through inferior neighborhoods, schools, and public accommodations. Many were determined to no longer endure second-class citizenship. The modern day civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s began with the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954)\(^1\) Supreme Court decision, which outlawed segregated public schools. This decision overturned the Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) doctrine of separate but equal.\(^2\)

The decision of Brown v. Board of Education, culminated with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 did the following: barred discrimination in public accommodations, such as hotels and restaurants, which have a substantial relation to interstate commerce; authorized the national government to bring suits to desegregate public facilities and schools; provided for the withholding of federal funds from programs administered in a discriminatory manner; established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; and outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, national origin, and in the case of employment, sex.\(^3\) The second landmark policy, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, sought to

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\(^2\) Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

eliminate restrictions on voting that had been used to discriminate against blacks. A major provision of the Voting Rights Act suspended the use of literacy tests. The discriminatory legal vestiges of Jim Crow had finally been dismantled. Blacks now had achieved the right to use all public accommodations, and they had gained the full realization of the right to vote. For African Americans had indeed gained the right to vote with passage of the 15th amendment in 1870, however, after Reconstruction many southern states had adopted Jim Crow laws and policies to effectively deny African Americans their basic civil rights.

The genius of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the modern-day civil rights movement is that it was inclusive in its struggle for freedom. The movement appealed to the consciousness of all of American society. As a social movement, it required the political mobilization of black and white America. King would remark with each triumph in the movement that it was not a victory for the black man, nor a victory for the white man, but a victory for all of mankind. Black Americans wanted to be included in American society and they wanted the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution to apply to all Americans. It was a majestic argument and, its leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., was a majestic messenger.

By the time King delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech to a black and white audience at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963, many whites had come to believe the system of racial apartheid in America was wrong and should be ended. King remarked in his speech, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” A year later, King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his utilization of nonviolent civil disobedience. King’s use of

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4 Ibid., 117.
5 Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream” (Speech presented at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963).
nonviolence to end racial discrimination and segregation in the American South was vindication for the movement. His methods had gained the support of the world community.

“We Shall Overcome” had become the slogan of the movement, “black and white together.” These aforementioned slogans were not just empty rhetoric. The next year, in response to “Bloody Sunday” in Selma, Alabama, President Lyndon Johnson called on Congress to pass a Voting Rights Act. In that speech, Johnson proclaimed, “Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.”


Johnson had a majority of Democrats in both houses of Congress and he knew that this was the best time to get a voting rights bill passed by Congress.

Literature Review

Since the urban riots across America’s cities and college campuses in the late 1960s, there have been vast arrays of books written that examine the politics of race. The scholarly examples put forth within this review are a sample of the literature and focus on race from a socio-economic perspective and in a post-civil rights era. In Blaming the Victim, William Ryan articulates that poverty-stricken individuals are blamed by conservatives in society for their circumstances. His views rejected the Moynihan Report and placed blame at the doorstep of systematic social and economic factors. (See page seven for a discussion of the Moynihan Report.) In The Declining Significance of Race, William Julius Wilson argues that class, not race, has become the primary indicator (metric) that drives “social mobility” in the post-World War II United States. “[T]he life chances of individual blacks have more to do with their economic class position than with their day-to-day encounters with whites,” writes

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Wilson. He ascribes credit to the industrial economy of the 1970s for the advancement of blacks into the middle class.

Lawrence Mead, in *Beyond Entitlement*, offers a neo-conservative viewpoint with respect to the issue of race. He faults the “narrow economic” policies of the Great Society Program instituted by President Johnson in the 1960s as the cause for modern-day welfare ills. Before the implementation of the Republican-backed *Contract with America* policies (1995), work requirements for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) or welfare beneficiaries were less stringent than they currently are for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which requires individuals to move off of welfare and into work programs.

Charles Murray inspired Mead and several other Reagan-era conservatives. His book attacks liberal social policies by tracking the welfare system from 1950-1980. According to Murray in *Losing Ground*, young blacks lost ground to young whites in the area of unemployment; federal help (money) was thrown at the situation, but the situation worsened nonetheless. In Murray’s view, welfare systems that began with Kennedy--in the 1960s--do not work and should be abandoned, thus allowing the market, family, and/or charity to aid the poor. Manhattan Institute Senior Fellows, Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, presented a scathing rebuttal of the Kerner Commission report in their coauthored 1997 book, *America in Black and White*. They concluded that the situation for blacks was improving, that greater racial equality, more racial integration, rising educational levels, and

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increased African American homeownership rates were “enormous changes” that benefited blacks in the postwar era.\textsuperscript{11}

On the opposite spectrum of the ever-continuing ideological debate on the politics of race, there exists a plethora of intellectuals who argue that because of the continuing legacy of racism in American society, government intervention and programs are needed in order for blacks to gain full access to equal opportunity in American society.

In \textit{The Truly Disadvantaged}, Wilson directed more attention to the plight of the underclass within the black community. It is his contention that concentrated poverty within the inner city will not improve. According to Wilson, blacks born into dire conditions will continue to stay within the same social class because forces such as gang activity, infidelity, or drug use will dictate the direction of their life.\textsuperscript{12} To improve mobility he advocates the implementation of government programs; however support from Americans as a whole, including middle class whites, is needed to combat the problem.

Another publication titled, \textit{When Work Disappears: The New World of the Urban Poor}, also authored by William J. Wilson, offers further insightful strategies to reverse the destructive state of affairs that are prevalent within the lower class socio-economic strata.\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Black Politics in Conservative America} by Marcus Pohlman asserts, blacks have had an absence of influence on the allocation of resources in the post-industrial economy.\textsuperscript{14} In the realm of the social class, wealth is in

\textsuperscript{11} Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail M. Thernstrom, \textit{America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible} (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 204.

\textsuperscript{12} William J. Wilson, \textit{The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).


the hands of the few. Moreover, blacks hold only a fraction of the wealth of whites and have little wealth to pass down from generation to generation.

Cornel West identifies “nihilism” and lack of black leadership as the central threats to the black community in his book *Race Matters*.\(^\text{15}\) West declares, life without meaning, hope, and love breeds a mean-spirited outlook that destroys the individual. In the publication *The Future of Race*, Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West cast themselves as indirect pupils of W.E.B. DuBois’ doctrine of “The Talented Tenth.”\(^\text{16}\) Their separate reflections provide an outlook on their lives and solutions for the improvement of African Americans.

In the book *Tragic Failure: Racial Integration in America*, Tom Wicker scolds the conservative movement due to their actions against progressive integration measures.\(^\text{17}\) He critiques those, including the Democratic Clinton Administration, who failed to step up to the plate and fully support minority interests. Wicker joined West’s general premise in support of economic parity and the practice of affirmative action.\(^\text{18}\)

*Come On, People*, a publication by Actor Bill Cosby and Psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint, offers the latest prescriptive measures for healing the scars that have plagued many in the black population.\(^\text{19}\) The authors criticize how Hip-Hop culture glamorizes ghetto life and unwed teenage mothers, and that being smart in school is not cool and equivalent to “acting white.” They also take aim at perceived poor personal choices in the areas of diet, parenting, sexual promiscuity, and substance abuse—things that seemingly can be controlled by the individual.


\(^\text{18}\) West, *Race Matters*.

\(^\text{19}\) Bill Cosby and Alvin F. Poussaint, *Come on, People: On the Path from Victims to Victors* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2007).
By the 1960s, blacks had begun making significant economic progress in this country. About half of all blacks moved to middle class status by the mid-sixties; however, this progress began to decline. The progress blacks made relative to whites in income began to decline dramatically. Fewer blacks were gainfully employed in 1964 than were in 1954. As economic conditions began to deteriorate, blacks began to riot in Harlem, New York and Paterson, New Jersey in 1964. The problems of the Northern ghettos seemed to be more intractable than the racism of the Jim Crow South. Months before the Watts riots in Los Angeles, California, in 1965, Daniel P. Moynihan, an official in the Department of Labor, issued a report titled: *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. According to Journalist Kay Hymowitz’s examination and analysis of the report, Moynihan explained a disturbing new trend in the black community:

Instead of rates of black male unemployment and welfare unemployment running parallel as they always had, in 1962, they started to diverge . . . In the past, policymakers had assumed that if the male heads of households had jobs, women and children would be provided for. This no longer seemed true.  

Moreover, asserted Hymowitz, “Even while more black men were getting jobs, more black women were going on welfare.” Moynihan saw this as a threat to the stability of the black family and the black revolution for equality. With this observation, he made several specific comments in his report: 1) single-parent families were on the rise in the ghetto; 2) the rise in single-mother families was not due to a lack of jobs but rather to a destructive vein in ghetto culture that could be traced back to slavery and Jim Crow discrimination. He identified through charts and graphs, the emergence of a

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21 Ibid.
“tangle of pathology,” (borrowing a phrase from psychologist Kenneth Clark), including delinquency, joblessness, school failure, crime, and fatherlessness that characterized ghetto behavior.  

Moynihan concluded that these behavioral traits created a threat to “the basic socializing unit” of the family. In June 1965, President Johnson delivered the commencement address at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Johnson stated in his speech that the freedom recently extended to blacks was not sufficient to equip them with tools needed to avail themselves of all that America had to offer. Johnson noted that it was:

\[\ldots\text{not enough just to open the gates of opportunity; it was necessary to make sure that all had the ability to walk through those gates. The goal was not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and a result.}\]

Additionally, Johnson exhorted:

\begin{quote}

You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say ‘you are free to compete with the others,’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.
\end{quote}

Johnson was laying the groundwork for the next stage of the civil rights movement. He went beyond condemning inequality and he touched on problems of the Negro family in his speech. Johnson stated that Negro poverty is not white poverty. Moreover, he described the breakdown of the Negro family structure, which he noted was “the consequence of ancient brutality, past injustice, and present prejudice.”  

Johnson concluded by saying, “When the family collapses . . . on a massive

\begin{footnotes}

\footnote{Ibid.}


\footnote{Ibid.}

\footnote{Hymowitz.}
\end{footnotes}
scale, the community itself is crippled”\textsuperscript{26}. These ideas laid the foundation for remedial efforts by the government to go beyond just allowing blacks the opportunity to compete but also for allowing equal outcomes.

Ironically, Johnson considered the speech as his greatest civil rights speech. Others felt differently. By the summer of 1965, the Moynihan Report was being attacked on all sides: civil servants, academics, and civil rights leaders found discrepancies in the report. In August 1965, Los Angeles’ Watts ghetto, located in the south central portion of the city, erupted in violence. Some surmised that the “tangle of pathology” was the administration’s explanation for urban riots, a view that differed from civil rights leaders who believed the violence was a response to black despair over white racism. Black civil rights leaders rejected the report’s conclusions. For instance, Floyd McKissick, the Director of Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), scoffed that rather than just the family, “it’s the whole damn system that needs changing.”\textsuperscript{27} Whitney Young, Executive Director of the National Urban League, proclaimed, “Family instability is a peripheral issue . . . the problem is discrimination.”\textsuperscript{28} The remarks receiving the most attention came from William Ryan, a noted psychologist and a member of CORE, who described the report as a “highly sophomoric treatment of illegitimacy” and insisted that ‘whites’ broader access to abortion, contraception, and adoption hid the fact that they were no less ‘promiscuous’ than blacks.”\textsuperscript{29} Moreover, Ryan accused Moynihan of ‘blaming the victim’ (a term he would use as the title of a book). Journalist Kay Hymowitz quipped that:

\begin{quote}
no one would grapple seriously for months, years, or even decades to come with the basic cultural insight contained in
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
the report: that ghetto families were at risk of raising generations of children unable to seize the opportunity that the civil rights movement had opened up for them.\textsuperscript{30}

President Johnson would abandon any White House initiatives on the topic. Moynihan would later remark:

“This was a moment when we had the resources, the leadership, and the will to make a total commitment to the cause of Negro equality. Instead the nation had disastrously decided to punt on Johnson’s next and more profound stage in the battle for civil rights.”\textsuperscript{31}

\textit{Kerner Commission Report}

Urban rioting by blacks in Newark and Detroit erupted in 1968. As a response, President Johnson created the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to determine the causes. The Commission, also referred to as the Kerner Commission, after its chairman Illinois Governor Otto Kerner, concluded that “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal.”\textsuperscript{32} The report largely blamed the urban riots on “. . . the devastating poverty and hopelessness endemic in the inner cities in the 1960s.”\textsuperscript{33} The report also saw the black/white racial divide as an economic divide in addition to being a social one. The findings issued by the Commission were eye-opening and painted a bleak picture of African American life:

One in five blacks lived in squalor and deprivation in ghetto neighborhoods. The unemployment rate was double for blacks, as compared to whites. Whole communities had been ignored by their government,

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.


wracked with crime, and traumatized by police brutality. Disproportionate rates of infant mortality – black children dying at triple the rate of white children.\textsuperscript{34}

The Commission laid the blame for many of these social ills on white racism. It stated, “what white Americans have never fully understood--but what the Negroes can never forget--is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.”\textsuperscript{35} The report also highlighted the institutional racism that exists in American society: white people live in all white neighborhoods, send their children to all white schools, work where their associates are white and think nothing of it. The report blamed white society for isolating and neglecting blacks and urged a specific set of economic solutions to address the problem.

The Commission noted that the federal government was the only institution with the moral authority and resources to create change at a scale equal to the dimensions of the problem. It proposed the creation of two million public and private sector jobs, subsidized on-the-job training for the chronically unemployed, federal assistance to all schools that worked to end \textit{de facto} segregation, compensatory education programs serving disadvantaged children, six million new and renovated units of affordable housing, and a uniform national welfare standard to bring everyone’s income up to the poverty line. Of note, it urged legislation to promote racial integration and to enrich slums through the creation of jobs, job training programs, and adequate housing.\textsuperscript{36} President Johnson, who had commissioned the study, rejected its recommendations. In April 1968, shortly after the release of the

\textsuperscript{34} Fred Harris interviewed by Bill Moyers. “Kerner Commission Report Forty Years After,” http://www.nathanielturner.com/kernercr….\

\textsuperscript{35} "Our Nation Is Moving toward Two Societies, One Black, One White—Separate and Unequal": Excerpts from the Kerner Report," \textit{History Matters}, http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6545 (accessed March 26, 2008).

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
Kerner Report, rioting broke out in more than 100 cities following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

**Efforts at School Desegregation and White Flight**

The rioting across America had a devastating impact on black white relations. It accelerated white flight: the fleeing of whites from the inner cities to the surrounding urban areas or suburbs. Around the same time, white opposition to school desegregation was mounting. School desegregation became a major issue in the presidential election of 1968 won by Richard Nixon. Nixon, a Republican, had been accused of running a campaign that implied that he would be opposed to busing. According to legal scholar Derrick Bell, the Nixon Administration adopted policies that halted the federal government’s aggressive school desegregation posture.

Sociologist James Coleman directed a highly controversial study in 1966 known as the “Equality of Educational Opportunity Study (EEOS),” or simply “the Coleman Report” after its director. The study, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, assessed the equality of educational opportunities for children of different races, color, religions, and national origins. It was undertaken in response to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The EEOS consisted of test scores and questionnaire responses obtained from students of various grade levels and questionnaire responses from teachers and principals obtained from a national sample of schools in the United States. 

Coleman noted that the most significant findings of the study were as follows:

First, it showed that variations in school quality (as indexed by the usual measures such as per pupil expenditure, size of school library,
and so on) showed little association with levels of educational attainment, when students of comparable social backgrounds were compared across schools. (Differences in students' family backgrounds, by comparison, showed a substantial association with achievement.) Second, a student's educational attainment was not only related to his or her own family background, but also (less strongly) to the backgrounds of the other students in the school.  

The study provided the impetus for desegregating public schools and using busing as a means of transporting black students to integrated schools. Coleman, who supported school integration, subsequently published a 1975 report that blamed white flight on court-ordered busing. He concluded that white parents moved their children out of these integrated schools in large numbers. Since black students would only benefit from integrated schools if there were a majority of white students in the classroom, busing as a result, had failed.

In a landmark case, Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Co. Board of Education (1971), the Supreme Court outlined several remedies federal courts could use to comply with the 1954 Brown decision. Those remedies included busing, racial quotas, and the pairing of noncontiguous school zones. The Swann decision represented the high water mark of judicial support for desegregation of the public schools. In the aftermath of Brown (1954), white children began exiting public schools and moving to the suburbs in alarming numbers. Bell noted that in the cities where white flight occurred; a tipping point was witnessed, which was achieved when roughly 25 to 50 percent of the student body

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43 Ibid.
was black. When the aforementioned percentages were reached, white families began to flee to the suburbs.

In *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), the Court signaled a major reversal in the trend to support all efforts at school desegregation. The Court ruled that a federal court could not order busing of school children across district boundary lines to achieve racial integration unless each school district affected had been found to practice racial discrimination or that the school district lines had been deliberately drawn to provide for racially segregated schools. The *Milliken* decision essentially put an end to the likelihood of extensive integration of schools in major metropolitan areas where black students are concentrated in inner city schools and whites are aggregated in surrounding suburbs. In his critique of this decision, Bell noted:

> Whites had every incentive to flee the inner city while racism and the perceived (and usually actual) inferiority of black schools keep white families from moving into predominantly black neighborhoods. Thus, courts’ tolerance of residential school segregation created an inescapable cycle of racial separation.

Opposition to school desegregation began to mount on all sides. By the 1980s, it was black parents who became disillusioned with efforts to integrate public schools. Black students were shuffled in and out of predominantly white schools to take the places vacated by whites fleeing to outlying suburbs. Bell states that black children often met racism and a curriculum blind to their needs. Moreover, young black children found themselves the subject of tracking wherein largely white students were placed in accelerated schools and programs while black students were put in the lower tracks. So, black students and white students, although attending the same desegregated

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45 Bell, 156.

46 Ibid.
schools, are often assigned to different classes and rarely come into contact or direct interaction with one another.

By the end of the 1980s, due to mounting political opposition, and socioeconomic trends, America’s grand experiment with school desegregation had stalled. By the mid-1990s, civil rights advocates were criticizing a new and disturbing phenomenon: the re-segregation of black students in the South; (see Table 1).\(^{47}\) Moreover, Gary Orfield, co-director of the Harvard Civil Rights Project, stated, “Despite decades of court-ordered school integration, more than one in six black children attends a school comprised of 99-100 percent minority students; by comparison, less than 1 percent of white public-school students attend such schools.”\(^{48}\)

*The Kerner Commission Update: Forty Years Later*

The Kerner Commission Report has been updated every few years since it was first published in 1968. An update was prepared in 2008 on the fortieth anniversary of the initial report by the Eisenhower Foundation, a think tank in Washington, D.C. The updated findings were compiled through hearings in Detroit, Newark, and Washington, D.C., cities that experienced rioting during the 1960s. The report lamented that little progress had been made for blacks in areas such as poverty, racial injustice, education, and crime, since the urban riots of 1968 and the initial report. The report noted that despite an emerging black middle class, increases in black entrepreneurs, and black elected public officials, few of the goals of the 1968 report had been accomplished.\(^{49}\) In reacting to the report, Arthur Johnson, former President of the Detroit branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) proclaimed, “There is nothing I can point to in our present


\(^{48}\) Ibid., 26.

day experience that tells us that we are significantly better off today than we were then.” However, not everyone agreed with the conclusions of the updated report. The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank in Washington, D.C., held a lecture series in June 1998. Historian Stephan Thernstrom, one of the panelists, remarked:

The commission was wildly mistaken in its claims that the socioeconomic condition of black America was deteriorating, and that the country was splitting into two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal. Even more mistaken have been the pessimists who continue to claim, despite superabundant evidence to the contrary, that almost every problem defined by the Kerner Commission has become worse. To deny the dramatic progress in the status of African Americans and in race relations that has been achieved in the last 30 years is perverse and dangerous.  

Paradigm Shift

Fred Harris, a member of the Kerner Commission and the Eisenhower Foundation Update, stated that the original report laid much of the blame for many of the conditions of black America on “white racism, something that he said that white America has never fully understood . . . white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto.” Poverty is a key reason, noted Harris, that blacks have not made more progress. It has led to the breakdown of the black family. Moreover, Harris pointed out that white flight to the suburbs in the wake of the riots in the 1960s was quickly followed by middle class black flight. Furthermore, the urban poor today are fewer in number but more isolated not only from the white mainstream but also from upwardly mobile blacks.

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51 Thernstrom et al.


53 Ibid.
Black Americans have suffered economically due to a disappearance of industrial jobs. Poor black residents of the nation’s central cities have also been disadvantaged by the migration of jobs to the suburbs. Harris said, “The new jobs are out in the suburbs, where it’s hard for central-city people to get to and the ones in the city are low-paying service jobs.” Furthermore, Harris notes:

Technological changes have left many black Americans particularly ill-prepared for today’s high wage jobs that require advanced education and a high level of skill. This has created a gap in America between people with high school or college educations and those without.

The social pathology that Moynihan warned of is a result of these factors. Urban poor blacks have become increasingly isolated from the rest of society. That isolation has meant fewer role models of stable two-parent families that raise a family and work on a regular basis. Moreover, as middle class blacks followed whites to the suburbs, property values decreased, and, as the tax base declined, so did the funding level for public education. The unemployment rate for young black men is over twice the rate for young white men (see Figure 2). Many inner city youth have joined gangs, which serve as a surrogate family. William Triplett notes that “Within the structure of the group the individual can develop such characteristics as loyalty, leadership and community responsibility . . . .”

William Julius Wilson, a sociologist, and Cornel West, a theologian, have both written about this segment of inner city black Americans who are unemployed and no longer looking for employment. Those that are members of this group are now referred to as the underclass. West refers to this condition of hopelessness as nihilism, for many of them have grown fatalistic. A government loses its legitimacy when people feel powerless and begin to believe that the institution no longer addresses the

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54 Wilson, 1996.


56 Ibid.

57 *Issues in Race and Ethnicity*, 257.
needs of its citizens. These individuals often cease to be law-abiding citizens, engaging in lawless behavior. The value of life is lessened for them – both their own and anyone else’s. West laments in *Race Matters*:

> The exodus of stable industrial jobs from urban centers to cheaper labor markets here and abroad, housing policies that have created ‘chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs’ . . . white fear of black crime all have helped erode the tax base of American cities just as the federal government has cut its support and programs.  

### Outlook for the Future

Race relations in American society have shown significant progress since the Kerner Commission delivered its report in 1968. However, racism and discrimination still exist. The two aforementioned factors aren’t the biggest challenges facing black Americans today. There continues to be a huge wealth gap between blacks and whites. The typical white family has a net worth that is more than seven times its black counterpart. However, within the black community there is a growing economic rift. Robert Woodson, head of the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise quipped:

> . . . the number of black families earning between $15,000 and $70,000 annually doubled between 1970 and 1990, even though the number of black families earning less than $15,000 more than doubled during the same time frame.

Serious gaps still exist between whites and blacks on income, wealth, wages, educational achievement, racial injustice, and crime. However, blacks have made substantial advancement throughout all walks of American society. The number of black entrepreneurs has increased

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58 West, 1994, 5.


tremendously. A significant number of blacks have moved into the middle class in the 40 years since the Kerner Commission Report was originally issued. There are a large number of black state and local elected officials. The country currently has a black Secretary of State, two black governors, and 44 black members of the United States Congress.

Moreover, America has recently elected Senator Barack Obama to be its 44th president. Obama is the first African American to run for president as a major party candidate, and he is the first ever elected to the highest office in this land. His election sends a strong message that America has finally overcome a significant racial barrier. In a decisive victory, Obama attracted support from Americans of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. He offers a unifying message of hope and reconciliation that we can bridge the racial divide and come together for the good of all Americans. So, as Americans reflect on the 40 years after the Kerner Commission Report was issued in response to race riots throughout the country, Americans can take satisfaction in knowing that remarkable strides have been made by African Americans in terms of equality of opportunity, but in spite of this progress, there is still an abundance of work that remains to be done.
Bibliography


Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).


### Tables and Figures

#### Table 1
Change in Black Segregation in South, 1954-2005

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<th>Year</th>
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