

The Quiet Before the Storm

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Elections matter. This is perhaps especially true in times of deepening inequality and cultural polarization. Commentators on both sides of the political aisle were in unison on two points: the 2004 presidential election was the most important such contest in a century, and the U.S. electorate has never seemed so sharply divided. The intensity of feeling around the Bush-Kerry contest has solidified in the national consciousness a well understood distinction between “blue states” and “red states.” It has also resulted in the most complete consolidation of conservative Republican control of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government in history.

The enormity of the moment has numbed voices on the left, as if the events to come are too frightening to imagine much less voice. And at least as of this writing, just after the inauguration, the right in general, and the new Bush administration in particular, have only revealed a few of their respective new domestic agenda items. Even these involve little more than the broadest of strokes, such as “tax reform” and partial “privatizing of Social Security.” It is as if no one is fully comfortable navigating the new political terrain. Both sides would seem to be taking a deep breath before the plunge.

The implications of the election and of this uneasy moment for research and discourse on race and for the politics of racialized social existence remain opaque as well. Seldom discussed as such in the mainstream press is the fact that a majority of Jews, Asians, Latinos, and African Americans voted for the Democratic ticket. To be sure, a super-majority did so among African Americans, but according to *New York Times* exit poll data, clear majorities of voters in each of these minority groups did so. Is race, thus, not one of the major subtexts of the election of 2004? What does it mean for legitimacy in a “representative” democracy that all of the prominent minority groups within a polity voted in opposition to the sitting government? Does it not, especially in the light of a still significant “gender gap” in voting, call to mind images of a quasi-“Herrenvolk democracy”?

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What will happen in the foreground is now only dimly suggested by current events. On the one hand, the composition of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission has already greatly changed. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) now worries about its tax exempt status and, with the departures of Kweisi Mfume and of Raul Yzaguirre, the NAACP and La Raza are, respectively, conducting searches for new leadership (La Raza completed its search with the appointment of Janet Murguia.). A powerful voice for expanded minority homeownership and wealth accumulation, Franklin Delano Raines of Fannie Mae, has been forced to resign under a cloud. And yet, men and women of color continue to rise to high positions in the Bush administration. At this writing, Condoleezza Rice has replaced Colin Powell as secretary of state, becoming the second African American and first black woman ever to hold such a high cabinet post. In addition to Elaine Chao, the first Asian American woman to hold a cabinet level post, Mexican American, Alberto R. Gonzales, is now the first of his ancestry to become attorney general of the United States and a Cuban American, Carlos M. Gutierrez, has been appointed the new secretary of commerce. While there have been prominent appointments of people of color at the top, the number of non-white appointees overall lags behind other administrations. More important, all the evidence suggests that appointees such as Gonzales and Rice have political preferences so far outside that of their racial "constituencies" as to render moot any benefit to be derived from purely symbolic representation. Indeed, the appointments may be read as a cynical sort of symbolic politics, where the surface appearance of inclusion masks a continued substance of marginalization for the groups these individuals putatively represent. From the vantage point of the right, a re-examination and push for new directions for calcified civil rights organizations is long overdue. From the vantage point of the left, figures like Rice and Gonzales have been little more than well-schooled mouthpieces for a monstrous set of policies.

We do not draw attention to these matters in the *Du Bois Review (DBR)* in order to editorialize in a simple partisan fashion. Indeed, we trust it is clear that we are not committed fans of either the Democratic or Republican parties as currently constituted. We are instead profoundly concerned about the large historical parallels, and now even more deep-rooted social trends, that we see at work. In their 1999 award-winning work *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America*, political scientists Philip Klinkner and Rogers Smith identified eleven trends that strongly parallel the nineteenth-century development of the Jim Crow regime of racial oppression in the United States. We recount those eleven trends below:

- (1) Resurgence of arguments for state and local governance instead of national governance;
- (2) Increased prominence of calls for governmental actions to be "color-blind";
- (3) Resurgence of laissez-faire ideologies;
- (4) Resurgence of "scientific" racism;
- (5) Arguments about the "criminality" of racial and ethnic minorities;
- (6) Calls for immigration restriction;
- (7) Declining support and reduced federal efforts at effective civil rights enforcement;
- (8) Disempowerment of Black voting;
- (9) Abandonment of efforts to achieve high-quality, integrated public education;
- (10) Rise of doctrines of Black nationalism and separatism among African Americans;
- (11) Abandonment of racial equality by the party of reform (pp. 328–347).

In the five years since the publication of Klinkner and Smith's work, these trends all have arguably continued apace. Viewed in this light, the election of 2004 is but the symbolic and political capstone of a long struggle to curtail substantially if not so much reverse a great wave of progressive social changes ushered in by the protest movements, political and legal reforms, and cultural transformations growing out of the 1960s. If the Civil War and Reconstruction gave way to "redemption and reunion," then the Civil Rights era and the ethos of multiculturalism are arguably starting to give way to color-blind individualism and a strong Anglo-conformity model of "e pluribus Unum."

It is fitting then that the articles in this issue of *DBR* effectively push us to examine the meaning and the potential of the current moment from several key vantage points. In a trenchantly argued personal reflection, education sociologist Nathan Glazer takes stock of the debate on affirmative action. He reviews not only his own prominent and early challenge to affirmative action policies in the book *Affirmative Discrimination* (1975) and the debate it sparked (see Takaki 1982) but ends with a powerful statement on the necessity of affirmative action at least with regard to African Americans in the present. In an historical essay focusing on the career of Walter White, early NAACP executive secretary, Kenneth Janken examines the phenomenon of "passing." In so doing, Janken brings to light how a committed "race man" subverted and challenge racist oppression and ideology.

Cultural sociologists Michèle Lamont and Crystal Fleming examine some strategies African Americans employ to counter racist ideology and experiences in day-to-day life. Political scientists Lester Spence, Todd Shaw, and Robert Brown attempt a careful conceptual specification and empirical test of support for Pan-Africanism in the black mass public. Sociologists Douglass Massey and Mary Fischer provide an innovative test and confirmation of Claude Steele's "stereotype threat hypothesis" in the context of elite universities with data spanning large Black, Asian, and Latino samples. Ryan Smith and James Elliot examine how race and family structure interact to shape access to positions of power in the work place.

The modern era has brought to public attention a number of so-called conservative Black public intellectuals, such as Thomas Sowell, Glenn Loury, and Shelby Steele. This prominence and influence continue despite scant evidence that these figures represent any significant segment of the larger African American public. It is in this context that distinguished linguist John Baugh examines the recent lionization of John McWhorter by the political "right" and a number of those presumed to be in "the mainstream." Baugh offers a pointed assessment of McWhorter's recent published work, broader career, and high profile.

Americans exhibit extraordinary faith in the capacity of education and the schools to solve societal problems. No where has the hope for the redemptive power of education been greater than with regard to healing the racial divide in the U.S. Noted historian and education policy scholar James Anderson tackles the large question of whether the public schools can save America. In this essay he focuses a light on four major works on matters of race, democracy, the fate of public education, and social inequality in America.

Black feminist historian Barbara Ransby addresses the contemporary challenges in the struggle for social justice. Her essay pivots off two highly provocative books by leading scholars of the black experience, Manning Marable and Robin D. G. Kelley. Those in search of inspiration "before the storm" will find grounds for hope here. Political scientist Paula McClain takes on the issue of how political context matters in the arenas of congressional constituent service, local mayoral voting, and minority representation in Congress.

As historian David Blight (2001) has so eloquently reminded us, the stories a nation tells about itself and its past are important. And the *Du Bois Review* is very much about influencing such narratives. If there is a grand narrative that links all of these pieces and makes them relevant to the current moment, it is to expose once again the denial of the relevance and contemporary potency of racial divisions for the perverse canard that it is. If one time opponents of affirmative action can now make the case for its necessity, if the Black middle-class struggles still to negotiate a cultural climate suffused with notions of White supremacy, if Blacks and Latinos must overcome stereotypes about their capacity to perform in elite institutions of higher learning, and if access to positions of power and authority in the workplace remain sharply segregated by race, then the struggle surely must continue. And it is incumbent upon all those committed to intellectual honesty and the great goals of human progress to resist pressure toward silencing and ideological delusion that would otherwise push out of view still obdurate problems of race.

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