

Did the Civil Rights Movement Improve Race Relations in the United States?

On a steamy August day in 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., mounted a podium constructed in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., and, in the studied cadence of a preacher, delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. For many Americans, black and white, King's speech represented the symbolic climax of the civil rights movement. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were merely denouements.

There were other symbolic events at the March on Washington in addition to King's electrifying oration. The call for the march had been issued by A. Philip Randolph, a long-time civil rights activist, who had threatened in 1941 to stage a similar protest march to bring attention to the economic inequality suffered by African Americans. Randolph's presence at the head of the march reflected a realization of his dream. Moreover, several of the speakers that day paid homage to W. E. B. Du Bois, the godfather of the twentieth-century black protest movement in the United States, who had died the previous day (at the age of 95) in Ghana, West Africa, an embittered exile from the land of his birth. For decades, African Americans had endured an enforced second-class citizenship. But in the 1940s and 1950s, following constitutional victories spearheaded by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the areas of housing, voting, and education, black Americans awakened to the possibilities for change in their status. These victories coincided with the rise of independent nations in Africa, led by black leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, and this fostered pride in the African homeland among many black Americans. Finally, the nonviolent direct action movement, pioneered by interracial organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and individuals like Randolph, King, Ella Baker, James Farmer, and Fannie Lou Hamer, issued a clarion call to African Americans and their white supporters that full equality was around the corner.

Despite these idealistic predictions of the future, King's vision of a colorblind society, liberated from the harsh realities of prejudice and discrimination, faced serious barriers after the mid-1960s. King's desegregation campaigns had little impact on the economic plight of many African Americans, a point made consistently by Malcolm X prior to his assassination in 1965. The rise of black nationalism produced fissures within the leading civil rights organizations and alienated many whites who had committed their time and money to fostering interracial harmony. Following King's death in 1968, the federal government made efforts to enforce school integration and to legislate affirmative action programs. This fueled controversy that manifested itself in a conservative white backlash against much of the racial progress that had occurred during the previous generation. By the 1990s, in the midst of debates over hiring quotas and the Rodney King affair, to say nothing of the racial implications of the sensationalist media attention devoted to the criminal and civil prosecutions of O.J. Simpson, serious questions could be raised concerning the long-term success of the civil rights movement.

TRAGIC FAILURE: RACIAL INTEGRATION IN AMERICA Tom Wicker

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INTRODUCTION

Sharply conflicting white and black reactions to the O.J. Simpson verdict [not guilty of murder] dramatized the tragic fact that neither civil war in the nineteenth century nor the civil rights movement in the twentieth has brought racial equality, much less racial amity, to America.

I believe they can be reached only in the hearts of the people; wars will never achieve either, nor narrow legalities. Perhaps nothing can. Derrick Bell has written that African-Americans, despite surface changes in society, continue to be "the faces at the bottom of the well," the faces upon which whites, no matter how deprived themselves, can look down in the sure and comforting knowledge that at least they aren't black.

Having spent the first thirty-four years of my life in what was then the segregated South and the last thirty-five in what's only legally an integrated nation [and not always that] I believe the problem is not least that those black faces in the well are reassuring to most whites and vital to the self-esteem of the many disadvantaged among us, few of whom really want those faces to disappear.

The continuing separation of whites and blacks into hostile and unequal classes, however, is a fundamental cause of the political deadlock, economic inequity, and social rancor that mark American life. And if "a house divided against itself" could not stand in the era of chattel slavery, can it long endure in today's destructive atmosphere of black disadvantage, white anger, and racial animosity?

Long before O.J. Simpson went on trial, it was obvious that genuine racial equality despite laws and legal decisions had not been achieved in America. The high proportion of African-American males in U.S. prisons and the low economic status of more than half the black population were evidence enough for anyone willing to see it, but few were. Even as the Simpson trial unfolded, white resentment erupted over affirmative action, an effort to overcome black disadvantages that's now widely seen, despite little evidence, as reverse racism.

When a Los Angeles jury brought in the Simpson verdict, the hard truth finally was too visible to be ignored. Whites denounced what they saw as black racial prejudice by a predominantly black jury in favor of a black hero despite the evidence. African-Americans, on the other hand, hailed black jurors for a courageous stand against white racial prejudice and constitutionally impermissible evidence provided by the racist Los Angeles police.

Throughout the long trial, "the white position [that Simpson was guilty] was treated as the rational, normal, acceptable one, David Shaw of the Los Angeles Times said on October 25, 1995, in a panel discussion of media coverage of the Freedom Forum. "The black perception [that Simpson was not guilty] was treated as irrational."

It's almost irrelevant the black or white judgment might be more nearly correct. In my view, what mattered was the demonstration that whites and blacks, though living in the same America, see themselves in different worlds. Similarly conflicting views were evident in the responses of African-American journalists and their mostly white supervisors to a survey question of whether

U.S. press organizations are "committed to retaining and promoting black journalists." Of the white supervisors, 94 percent believed newspapers and broadcasters were so committed; 67 percent of the black (mostly middle-class) journalists thought not. Both worked in the same newsrooms; neither saw the same world of work.

The Simpson trial and verdict were followed immediately by the so-called "Million-Man March," in which at least hundreds of thousands of orderly African-American males demonstrated peacefully on the Mall in Washington in October 1995. Despite a demagogic speech by Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, the marchers espoused what white Americans, watching on television, could readily recognize as middle-class values, thus confounding the recent white view of black men as lawless and shiftless, as well as conveying the message that African-Americans still are far from equal citizenship in a supposedly integrated nation.

The march emphasized the strong growth of the black middle class in the last three decades, to perhaps 40 percent of the African-American population. Even that growth has not banished the faces from the bottom of the well, any more than it has produced real racial equality. Middle-class African-Americans testify copiously to the indignities and embarrassments they still suffer from the white assumption of black inferiority, black income and wealth still are far below white levels, housing remains largely segregated by race, and all African-Americans tend to be judged by the unacceptable behavior of the worst off among them.

I consider it the saddest racial development of the last quarter century that as the black middle class expanded, the urban underclass grew even faster. The scary and undisciplined behavior of that largely black underclass, those African-Americans who for lack of jobs and hope and discipline turned in the seventies and eighties to crime and welfare and drugs and were sent to prison in droves, was seen (often graphically, on television) by frightened whites as the behavior of African-Americans generally.

In one panicked and self-destructive result, whites turned against social welfare programs designed to benefit the white as well as the black poor, hence society generally. Worse, African-Americans once seen as bravely facing the police dogs and cattle prods of Bull Connor in the name of freedom came to be regarded, instead, as irresponsible muggers, drug dealers, addicts, rapists, and welfare queens.

The same period exposed the failure of the African-American political empowerment that white and black civil rights leaders of the sixties had hoped would be the remedy for black disadvantages. One of them, Dr. Kenneth Clark, sadly conceded in 1993 that greater numbers of black elected officials had been "unable to increase justice and humanity for those who have been forgotten in the inner cities."

Thirty-five years of failing integration have convinced me that economic as well as political empowerment is needed if African-American disadvantages, particularly those of the underclass, are to be overcome. Only when the faces at the bottom of the well achieve generally higher economic status might they, as well as those talented and energetic blacks in the middle class, reach genuine equality in the hearts of whites, and only through economic gains for all might the threatening underclass become a more constructive element in a more amicable American life.

Such an economic transformation will not be easily or soon accomplished, and it probably never will be if the task is left to today's major political parties. Neither any longer even talks of such ambitious goals; both are less concerned with the truly disadvantaged than with the numerically dominant white middle class, with its complaints about an unfair tax burden and unfair preferences for blacks. The Republicans offer a new home to white defectors from a Democratic party the defectors regard as too partial to blacks, and the supposedly "liberal" Democrats, alarmed

by the loss of white votes, pay scant attention to the interests of African-Americans, whose allegiance causes the white defections.

In their own interest, therefore, but also in that of a racially torn nation, blacks should turn away from the Democrats to form a new party dedicated to economic equality through economic growth for whites and blacks alike. Such a new party could build upon predicted demographic change that in the next century will bring today's minority groups into rough numerical equality with non-Hispanic whites. It might even win the support of those millions of despairing Americans who now take no part in the politics of a prosperous nation they believe ruled by the affluent and for the affluent.

The new party might never win the presidency, but in the historical tradition of third parties, it could have profound effect upon the other two and upon society generally. That's why I've suggested in this book that such a radically conceived party might also have the potential to do what our old, familiar politics-as-usual never can: "To achieve real democracy-to change American life by attacking its inequities, perhaps to save us from ourselves."

THE END OF INTEGRATION

"Integration is like Prohibition. If the people don't want it, a whole army can't enforce it."
Paul Johnson, governor of Mississippi

The sweeping conservative victory in the elections of 1994 returned control of Congress to Republicans, repudiated what was left of liberal government, and dramatized the tragic failure of racial integration in America.

Race, as it always is in a modern American election, was the underlying issue. In the autumn of 1994 that issue was a prime determinant of the outcome, as white voters everywhere expressed unmistakable yearning for a lost time, before "they" forced themselves into the nation's consciousness.

White animosity toward and fear of African-Americans, seen largely as criminals and welfare cheats, gave emotional edge and added energy to the election's ostensible issues, and the campaign was fought out in code words and symbolism that disclosed rather than disguised its racial character:

- * Fierce denunciations of crime and welfare, in white eyes the most prominent products of the black underclass
- * Withering blasts at liberals and liberalism as the "social engineers" behind the "big government" that tried to force racial integration and brought higher taxes
- * Diatribes against "spending" and "the redistribution of wealth" to the poor, a euphemism for social programs believed primarily to aid African- Americans
- * Loud promises to extend the death penalty, from which African-Americans suffer proportionally far more than whites
- * Overwrought demands for a return to "family values" (a term of many meanings, one of which is the sexual restraint that blacks are supposed by whites to disdain)

Anyone who might have misunderstood what had happened in the 1994 elections should have been set straight on January 23, 1995. That day, in the ornate hearing room of the House Rules Committee, the victorious Republicans removed a portrait of former Representative Claude Pepper of Florida, a renowned white liberal Democrat. That was understandable, but the new

Republican committee chairman, Gerald Solomon of New York, had ordered the Pepper portrait replaced by that of another Democrat, the late Howard Smith of Virginia, a last-ditch segregationist and in his many years as Rules Committee chairman one of the most powerful opponents of the civil rights legislation of the sixties.

Blacks clearly believed race was the principal issue in the campaign; the reason, said Robert Smith, a professor of political science at San Francisco State University, was "absolute disgust" with the campaign among blacks of all walks.

"It took us black people so long to get the vote," T. I. Smith of Philadelphia told Richard Berke of The New York Times in 1994. "Now they're making us not want to vote" by neglecting black interests. Chris Williams, a Philadelphia ironworker, agreed: "Why do they talk about just building jails? Why don't they talk about building schools?"

The returns, if anything, left African-Americans feeling even more frustrated. Black turnout, perhaps fueled by fear, more than doubled nationally, over the 1990 midterm elections, with black voters going heavily Democratic; yet the Republicans won in a landslide and not a single Republican incumbent was defeated. Clearly, white voters had turned to the Republicans.

Fifty-one percent of the whites, moreover, who had responded to an election year survey by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press said openly that they believed "equal rights" had been pushed too far—an increase of nine percentage points since 1992.

California, the nation's most populous state, voted by an overwhelming margin for Proposition 187, a ballot initiative designed to deprive illegal immigrants, mostly Latinos in California, of education, health, and welfare benefits. Governor Pete Wilson, whose reelection made him seem at the time a strong contender for the Republican presidential nomination, derived substantial political profit from his support for this initiative.

California's approval of Prop 187, which Democratic candidates for governor and senator opposed, may well have been symbolic of the 1994 elections as a whole. It was not an "anti-black" measure, nor was it an anti-black election by definition. The vote favoring Prop 187, however, clearly reflected the angry and vengeful or at least resentful racial attitudes many white Americans had developed since the high-water mark of the civil rights movement in the sixties. The entire election reflected such white attitudes.

If those attitudes reached a political peak in 1994, they had been a long time in the making. Racial integration in America had been falling for years, even though legal segregation in the southern states was ended in the sixties. The elections of 1994 only dramatized a fact that had long existed.

By that year integration had failed nationally because too few white Americans wanted it or were willing to sacrifice for it. Integration had failed too because whites' stereotypical view of blacks had been reshaped by the violence, idleness, and drug reliance of the urban black underclass. And the kind of political empowerment integration brought to blacks had proved unable to provide most African-Americans the economic and social gains needed for acceptance in white America.

The angry and fearful white reaction to undisciplined ghetto behavior also blinded whites to the concurrent growth of a substantial black middle class. Perhaps worse, that reaction had undermined white support for economic and social programs beneficial not only to the black poor but to millions of impoverished whites as well.

In actual practice, as a result of all this, integration had not been the policy of either Republican or Democratic administrations since the accession of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1981. In the decade before that, integration had been pursued only halfheartedly; zeal for

enforcement of equal rights in education, housing, and employment had declined as antagonism to African-Americans rose.

Crime, though its victims as well as its perpetrators often were black, and welfare, widely considered a dole and an aid to shiftless blacks' supposed instinct to spawn, had long been favored targets of public and political anger.

Now the primary national approach to the ills of the urban underclass, endorsed in the polling booths of 1994, is to imprison poor blacks—an expensive, ineffective, misdirected, and self-destructive course sustained by white fear, politicians' posturing, and the sensationalism of the white press. More executions, mostly of blacks, an equally punitive and ill-considered response to crimes that already have been committed, are promised in response to the conservative landslide of 1994. Early in 1995 New York's new Republican governor, George Pataki, signed a death penalty law after nearly a quarter century of vetoes by the Democratic governors Hugh Carey and Mario Cuomo.

The inner city does teem with crime idleness, and anger, spilling dangerously outward. Black family disintegration and welfare dependence are serious concerns. But for better or for worse the American community necessarily includes the black community—African. Americans, some Latinos, many from the Caribbean. The Census Bureau predicts that the black community will grow far larger. Its exclusion in anything like a democratic or humane manner would be impossible and would not solve the nation's most pressing problems; rather it would worsen some old problems and create many new ones.

Glaring economic inequities and class distinctions abound, among both black and whites. Technological or administrative competence, a prerequisite in today's economy is seldom within the reach of poor and ill educated Americans, of whom there are more and more of both races. Millions of whites and blacks are out of any kind of work, in the city and on the farm, and more will be in a newly competitive and technological era, with even profitable corporations laying off workers by the thousands. Manufacturing wages have declined for all. The real gap between rich and poor is widening unemployment, which strikes blacks first and worst, also hits whites hard, yet is fostered by a government too fearful of inflation to push economic growth strenuously and by a "lean and mean" business sector in which cost cutting has become the new panacea for all problems.

A seventh of the nation lives in poverty: more than forty million people, by no means all of them black, and including more than a fifth of all American children. Families of all races are disintegrating. The economy, measured against population growth and expected living standards, is not adequately expanding. Demographic changes predicted by the Census Bureau for the next fifty years will be of incalculable effect. What the brash conservatives who triumphed in 1994 may be able to do about any of these troublesome truths remains, at this writing, largely to be seen. But the end of integration more or less subtly marked by their victory will not remove or diminish those ills, each of which, in large part or small, is linked to or affected by race, the continuing, the cancerous, the unfronted American dilemma.

In the fifties and the first half of the sixties, following mostly to effective black demonstrations and demands, the shameful institutions of legally established racial segregation in the South at last were abolished. But this shining hour for the civil rights movement proved to be brief and limited.

In the late sixties and the seventies, efforts to broaden integration into a national, not just a southern, reality caused anxiety and anger in the nonsouthern white majority. Outside the old

Confederacy, integration came to be seen as moving too fast and going too far faster and farther than most whites in the rest of the nation had expected or wanted.

A "backlash" of white resistance to civil rights quickly gathered momentum, importantly furthered by the presidential campaigns of Governor George Wallace of Alabama. The long national retreat from integration was under way within a year or two after its greatest triumphs.

Such a turnabout had hardly seemed possible in the period when anti segregation laws were being passed slowly but, as it seemed, inevitably-by Congress under pressure from the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations and over die hard southern opposition. Even, however, in the Goldwater debacle of 1964 the most smashing Democratic and liberal presidential victory since Franklin Roosevelt's in 1930s the Republicans had carried four southern states.

The old Solid South had been shattered, a development that did not surprise the victorious President Lyndon Johnson, a southerner himself. The night Congress passed the massive Civil Rights Act of 1964, proposed by President Kennedy and pushed through by Johnson, a young White House aide named Bill Moyers called the president to congratulate him on the success of the legislation. "Bill," Johnson replied, "I think we Democrats just lost the South for the rest of my life."

Inasmuch as LBJ died in 1972, it turned out to be for considerably longer than that. In 1994, thirty years later, the Democratic share of the vote in House races in the South dropped to 13.4 percent of eligible voters. To most observers in 1964, including Tom Wicker, a New York Times political reporter, the southern defections had seemed relatively unimportant. After all, LBJ had defeated Goldwater by 486 to 52 in the electoral college. The Republicans had carried only one state (Goldwater's Arizona) outside the South, had lost 38 seats in the House and retained only 140, their lowest total since 1936. They also had lost 2 Senate seats and held only 32, no more than they had had in 1940. Republican defeats in state and local elections had been so severe as to cause frequent laments that the GOP was no longer an effective national party.

Only two years later, in a vigorous 1966 campaign led by Richard M. Nixon (out of office since 1961 but obviously on the road back), Republicans picked up forty-seven House seats, three in the Senate, and eight governorships, most significantly in California, where the political newcomer and old movie star Ronald Reagan first won political office. The Republican comeback was marked by a superb organizing and fund raising effort in the wake of Goldwater's defeat and by Nixon's leadership. But it benefited above all from the Democratic party's and Johnson's racial liberalism.

The president and his party had pushed through the Civil Rights Act of 1964, guaranteeing equal access to public facilities and banning racial discrimination in the workplace. They had achieved the Voting Rights Act of 1965, putting the federal government behind blacks' right to vote. Johnson himself had proclaimed to Congress the battle cry of Martin Luther King and his followers: "We shall overcome!" LBJ and John F. Kennedy rather reluctantly before him had identified their party more closely with African-Americans than any president since Lincoln.

Three decades later, in his 1995 inaugural speech as the new Republican Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, magnanimously praising the opposition, or so it appeared, noted that Democrats had been "the greatest leaders in fighting for an integrated America." He added pointedly: "It was the liberal wing of the Democratic party that ended segregation."

These honeyed words, intentionally or not, were political poison. Voters had shown in 1994 and earlier that they were well aware, and not favorably, of the Democrats' racial record. It had been apparent for years that this record was a political liability not just in the South but with the nation's white majority.

In early 1964, the year of Goldwater's defeat, a Gallup poll had found that 72 percent of nonsouthern whites believed the Johnson administration's pace toward civil rights was "about right" or even too slow. But as civil rights legislation began to touch life outside the South, although it had been expected generally that only the old Confederacy would be much affected, nonsouthern whites began to fear for property values, job security, local government, neighborhood cohesion, for the old, inherited, comfortable (for them) order of things.

By 1966 opinion surveys were showing a startling reversal: Three quarters of white voters thought blacks were moving ahead too fast, demanding and "being given" too much, at the expense of whites. As white backlash mounted, polls the next year suggested that "the number one concern" of most respondents was fear that black gains would damage the well-being of whites. And as the decade continued, blacks rioting in the cities, fearfully or angrily watched by a nation becoming addicted to television, and blacks raising clenched fists in the black power salute seemed not only threatening but ungrateful for white "concessions" (as whites tended to see changes in the old racial order).

The black separatist and "black is beautiful" movements, the anti-integrationist rhetoric of Malcolm X, the militant stance and demands of organizations like the Black Panthers and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) all stirred white animosity and anxiety. So did aggressive African-Americans like H. Rap Brown, Stokely Carmichael, Huey Newton, and Bobby Seale. The student and anti-Vietnam demonstrations were assumed by many whites to be a predictable consequence of black protests. Crime was increasing, much of it perpetrated by poor blacks, with television dramatizing it in the living room.

In 1967, as a result of the urban riots, President Johnson appointed a bipartisan commission, chaired by Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois, to look into the riots' causes. After extensive inquiry the Kerner Commission dismissed the notion that integration was proceeding too swiftly. Its report contended instead that despite the apparent success of the civil rights movement, black disadvantages still were so overwhelming that "our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white separate but unequal."

Many prominent Americans, white and black, shared and approved this view, but many others resented it. Hadn't enough already been done for blacks? Even Lyndon Johnson, with a presidential election impending and the nation alarmed at what many believed to be insurrection in the cities, disliked the commission's conclusion and might have disavowed it if he could have. The backlash was not reversed; the riots undoubtedly heightened it.

Thus in 1968 fear and resentment of African-Americans underlay the "law and order" issue loudly demagogued by George Wallace and more subtly exploited by Richard Nixon in the "southern strategy" by which he narrowly won the presidency. The national loss of confidence in "Johnson's war" in Vietnam and destructive divisions within the party hurt the Democrats. But primarily, I believe, it was white racial anxieties that brought disaster to the party of Kennedy and Johnson only four years after its greatest victory. And the black community's impressive gains were becoming the cause of alarming losses of white support for Democrats.

Wallace campaigned widely and effectively, using code words and flamboyant oratory to stimulate white fears and to castigate the federal government. He finished a relatively distant third in the 1968 election, receiving votes from Democrats deserting the old civil rights advocate Hubert Humphrey and from Republicans who preferred Wallace's tough talk to Nixon's subtler appeal to white sentiment. In retrospect, however, Wallace's campaign was one of the most consequential of the postwar years. It effectively moved the country to the right, making racial fears seem more legitimate and paving the way for Ronald Reagan to win the presidency twelve years later.

Nixon's election and Wallace's campaign in 1968 sped along the national retreat from integration (though the courts forced President Nixon to push southern school desegregation in 1970). During the seventies affirmative action and "busing" were widely resented, even in Boston, once the seat of abolitionism. Low-income whites who could not afford private schools for their children and who felt their job security threatened by new competition from minority groups and women were especially alienated.

The Democrats and the integration they had pushed and supported were blamed for these perceived threats to the established order. Twenty-four years of Republican and conservative ascendancy, broken only briefly and feebly by Jimmy Carter's single presidential term (1977-81),² followed the election of 1968 with near inevitability.

During the seventies escalating fears of busing, affirmative action, and neighborhood breakdown caused many whites to see integration not as laudable national policy but as "racism in reverse." The deterioration of cities and the increase in crime and violence were largely blamed on blacks. This development of the newly visible underclass, moreover, sharpened white fear and anger.

Whites continued to look down at the black "faces at the bottom of society's well," those "magical faces" of which Derrick Bell has written that "even the poorest whites, those who must live their lives only a few levels above, gain their self-esteem by gazing down at us." Those black faces had always been there, viewed merely with contempt and complacency by some, with bitter relief by the poor, the disadvantaged, the despised, who had little of value but their white skins. Despite civil rights laws, surely those "faces at the bottom of the well" always would be there.

Their absence would announce to whites not just the end of segregation in the South but the arrival of an all but unimaginable new world, making life less comfortable for some whites, nearly unbearable for others. And those black faces imposed a double imperative on whites: Not only must they be kept at the bottom of the well but those who would bring them to the top, or nearer to it, must be feared, castigated, opposed.

And then came Reagan.

On August 3, 1980, looking virile and businesslike, he spoke in shirtsleeves to a cheering crowd of about ten thousand people, nearly all white, at the Neshoba County Fairgrounds near Philadelphia, Mississippi.

"I believe in states' rights," Reagan declared that day in the well-modulated voice that was to become so familiar to Americans. The Republican presidential nominee then promised a restoration to the states and to local government of "the power that properly belongs to them."

Fresh from his Republican National Convention victory at Detroit, Ronald Reagan was making the first formal appearance of his presidential campaign, and his choice of a site for that opening appearance was powerfully symbolic: Philadelphia, Mississippi, was the place where three volunteer civil rights workers in the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964, two Jews and a black, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney, had been murdered. The sheriff and deputy sheriff of Neshoba County had been charged with these crimes. Most of the county's white population, by its silence, had been either complicit or oblivious.

No presidential candidate before Reagan had visited remote Neshoba County, in a state that had been the last stronghold of resistance to blacks' civil rights. Reagan was there because a Mississippi member of Congress, Trent Lott [now the Senate majority leader], had assured him that a personal visit to the state would carry it for him against President Carter.

The candidate might not fully have grasped the significance of Philadelphia, as later he would not understand the opposition to his visit to the Bitburg Cemetery in Germany, where members of the Nazi SS were buried. But if Reagan didn't know about Philadelphia, Mississippi, he should have. It could not conceivably have been a routine campaign stop. One week after the bodies of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney had been discovered buried in a nearby earthen dam in 1964, Governor Paul Johnson, without a word of sympathy for the dead youths or their families, had told a crowd of six thousand at the Neshoba County fair that no Mississippian, including state officials, had any obligation to obey the Civil Rights Act of 1964. "Integration," Johnson declaimed, "is like Prohibition. If the people don't want it, a whole army can't enforce it." In 1964 that was the voice of last-ditch resistance, soon to be overwhelmed by events. But by 1980, as Ronald Reagan stood where the governor had stood, looking out upon much the same sea of white faces, it was possible to see Paul Johnson as a national prophet, no longer as a southern relic. Reagan's mere appearance at Philadelphia, unthinkable for a major-party presidential candidate even a few years earlier, was evidence that times had changed, radically. And when the candidate chose to open his campaign where Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman had made the last sacrifice to rabid segregationist resistance, he sent the nation a message many Americans wanted to hear. That message was far more powerful and far more convincing than the deceptive plausibility with which Reagan was later to call for a "color-blind society" and insist that he was "heart and soul in favor of the things that have been done in the name of civil rights and desegregation...."

Reagan's actual policies exposed those words as lip service, and anyway, much of the nation was watching what he did, visiting Philadelphia, Mississippi, for instance rather than listening to what he said. Even before his speech at Philadelphia, Reagan had openly opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Open Housing Act of 1968 and in numerous other ways had demonstrated his fundamental opposition to the fact, if not the concept, of integration. And by the time he sought the presidency, nearly winning the Republican nomination in 1976, taking it easily in 1980, neither his clear anti-integration record nor even his appearance in Mississippi was a political liability. It was, in fact, largely because of these that Ronald Reagan was elected to the White House.

Reagan did not single-handedly and from his own convictions turn the nation against integration. Rather a national reversal had began not long after the civil rights triumphs of the sixties and his own entry into public life in California. In those years, as outlined above, national reluctance neither confined to the South nor always most pronounced they moved steadily toward opposition to integration. That movement owed more to crime, the underclass, busing, affirmative action, and fear (as much of the unknown as of any observable phenomena) than to the words or deeds of any one politician, even George Wallace. Reagan benefited politically from a greatly changed public mood even as he contributed to that mood.

Once he was in the Oval Office, moreover, the anti-civil rights record Reagan accumulated was so lengthy and substantial that he could not have compiled it without the acquiescence and support of white Americans. "From Philadelphia to the Bitburg cemetery to the veto on sanctions against South Africa," Jesse Jackson observed toward the end of the Reagan years, "it's one unbroken ideological line."

That was true enough, but it was also true that Reagan had read accurately a public mood of disenchantment with racial integration. If even a beloved president thought blacks were being "given too much," as his actions (if not always his words) suggested, then surely ordinary Americans could think so too.



With tacit support from a popular president, it became respectable for whites to express loudly their misgivings about integration and to act on their fearful or hostile instincts about black neighbors or employees or schoolmates or job competitors. Those misgivings were many and fierce, those instincts had been frequently offended; so all too many white Americans were grateful that Reagan seemed to share their views. They took full advantage of what seemed to be approval from the top.

NOTES

1. The author is aware that not all black Americans approve of the designation "African-American," or consider it accurate. The term is used interchangeably with "black" throughout this selection and no disrespect is intended in either case.
2. Carter's narrow victory over Gerald Ford derived mostly from reaction against the Watergate scandal of the Nixon years and Ford's pardon of Nixon himself. Without those counterbalancing factors, the Democrats might well have lost the close election of 1976 too, owing to the party's racial record and Carter's relatively liberal stance.