

The Future of an Illusion

Leonard Steinhorn and Barbara Diggs-Brown, *By the Color of our Skin: The Illusion of Integration and the Reality of Race*, Dutton, 1999, 299 pp., \$23.95.

Never give up trying to achieve the impossible.

reviewed by Thomas Jackson

This book has one of the most promising subtitles to appear in years: *The Illusion of Integration and the Reality of Race*. Has American publishing actually produced a realistic, hard-headed book about race? Not yet. The subtitle is only a tease.

Leonard Steinhorn is white and Barbara Diggs-Brown is black and both teach at American University in Washington, DC. They recognize that despite much hypocritical blather, blacks and whites have not integrated and are not likely to. And in the early part of the book, they write as if they are prepared to draw serious conclusions from this:

"We ask whether our national devotion to the integration ideal hinders or helps race relations . . ."

"[W]e . . . believe it is best for America to face the truth and cease pretending that the integration myth has anything to do with the racial reality."

"The sooner we acknowledge the permanence of the color line . . . the sooner we can begin an honest accounting of our racial divide and develop an alternative vision of our collective future."

"The races do not have to hate each other to be divided, and indeed we can be very cordial about it."

These are sound sentiments and could have been the basis for a genuinely thoughtful book, but the authors quickly veer into conventional liberalism. Much of the book is devoted to disapproving examples of the unwillingness of whites to mix with blacks. Whites move when blacks buy the house next door, they send their children to private schools, they socialize only with whites, etc. "Integration," as the authors put it "exists only in the time span between the first black family moving in and the last white family moving out." They quote a student about campus race relations: "I don't remember any overt racial hostilities. You need a certain amount of

contact to have hostilities." America, they argue is scarcely any more integrated than it was 30 or 40 years ago.

The authors note that this is especially remarkable given that whites almost invariably claim to support integration and even to practice it. According to polls, 60 to 90 percent of whites say they have at least one close friend who is black.

Given the difference in numbers between blacks and whites, this means that all blacks—including the most degenerate criminals and ghetto bums—must have five or six close white friends. Whites tell silly lies like this because they have so thoroughly absorbed the prevailing fear of "racism." To have no black friends might be a sign of "bigotry."

Profs. Steinhorn and Diggs-Brown give another example of the extent to which whites have absorbed the correct attitudes. After the O.J. Simpson murder trial, 62 percent of whites had an unfavorable opinion of the murderer, but 88 percent had an unfavorable opinion of Mark Furman, the white detective who lied about using the word "nigger." William Clinton says that integration and racial tolerance are the most important moral ideas he grew up with, and many others would probably agree—at least in public. The authors are right to call this hypocrisy: "most whites don't want to be integrated with blacks but also don't want to be seen as unwilling to integrate with blacks."

Many whites do not even know their real feelings about blacks, partly because they can't tell the difference between real integration and what the authors call "virtual integration." Profs. Steinhorn and Diggs-Brown suggest that whites who may have no meaningful contact with blacks nevertheless think they are intimate with them because they see them often on television. Whites become so familiar with the faces and mannerisms of black TV personalities that they may come to think of them as part of their lives. Whites who have never shaken a black hand talk about "Oprah," as if they knew her. Sports fans have passionate attachments to black athletes. It is hard to know just how much this

sort of thing tricks whites into thinking they spend time in the company of blacks, but it is a provocative idea. "Virtual integration" proves itself an illusion as soon as whites come face to face with the real thing.

Why don't whites want to mix with blacks? Today, the most common reason whites give is fear of crime. The authors point out that this may be an excuse for something deeper, because even in the 1940s and 1950s, before crime rates shot up, whites would not integrate. So what is it about blacks that repels whites even after decades of integration propaganda that has been so successful almost all whites claim to believe it? The authors suspect whites feel a kind of physical revulsion for blacks, and wonder if this has something to do with opposition to miscegenation. Naturally, they think miscegenation is fine. The only reason they can think of why whites might oppose marrying blacks is that they fear they might appear to lose social status. They at least pretend not to realize that it is natural and healthy for people to want their descendants to look like their ancestors, to be part of the same culture, and to hold the same ideals. For the authors to profess bafflement at opposition to miscegenation—something neither practices—is as suspect as the claims most whites make about having black friends.

Daily Indignities

A tiresome number of pages is devoted to accounts of the racial indignities blacks reportedly suffer at the hands of whites. The authors love to talk about black executives tailed by store detectives, basketball players arrested driving swanky cars, law partners mistaken for janitors, executives who can't catch a cab. They report that middle-class blacks have to spend a stupendous amount of emotional energy suppressing anti-white anger. They write of one successful executive who says it is all he can do to keep from bringing an AK-47 to work and going on a rampage.

Whites have heard so many stories like this they have no more patience for them. It is entirely rational to judge



strangers on the basis of race. Black cabbies, who don't care to be robbed any more than white cabbies do, don't like to pick up black passengers either. Black security guards are just as likely to be suspicious of black customers as white guards. Blacks are just as surprised as whites if a partner at a law firm turns out to be black. There are excellent reasons for these things. People don't expect Frenchmen to speak Chinese or fat people to be acrobats. Life follows certain patterns, and it is foolish to expect people not to notice them. It is all very well to decry stereotypes, but many racial stereotypes—as the authors grudgingly admit—are true. No doubt it is unpleasant for a black executive when white women refuse to get into elevators with him, but whose fault is that? If blacks did not commit so much crime whites would not be afraid of them. It is silly and ineffective for the authors to expect to shock their readers by recounting examples of rational expectations based on race.

Blacks, for their part, have discovered that most whites do not want integration no matter how much they claim to. Some blacks never wanted it, and many who at least thought they did, have stopped trying to push in where they are not wanted. And when blacks are in a position to staff an office they don't exactly fill it with whites. The authors recognize that black indifference and even hostility to integration also contribute to its failure. They also note that even though blacks complain about being treated like criminals, they enjoy the sense of power that comes from being able to scare whites—a power they would not have if so many were not criminals.

The authors are also correct to point out that blacks and whites have dramatically different conceptions of American race relations. Whites, the huge majority of whom are not in a position to "oppress" blacks even if they wanted to, are sick of constant black complaints about "racism." Blacks, on the other hand, believe "racism" is everywhere and ac-

counts for everything. As the authors point out, people of different races live in the same world but see it completely differently.

And, in fact, many try to make their worlds different. The book regretfully describes the different television programs blacks and whites watch, the different magazines they read, and the segregated churches they attend. Blacks identify with Africa, celebrate the racial holiday of Kwanza, have their own "national anthem" (Lift Every Voice and

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Sing), and have a different "culture" from that of whites. In effect they are a separate nation within the territory of the United States.

So what do the authors propose to do about this? What is the "alternative vision of our collective future" that they propose, given the persistence of racial separation in America? The only indication that they have actually considered an "alternative vision" is to suggest one and immediately reject it: "To those who say that the only alternative to the integration ideal is separate but equal, we vehemently disagree." They give no reasons; separation just won't do.

Instead, they say the country should:

(1) Mount a national effort to recognize the uniquely tragic experience of blacks. They say that just as Jews have made the Holocaust into a badge of unique suffering and special deserving, blacks should do the same with their own history.

(2) It would then be possible to promote racial preferences as "a positive good that all Americans should be proud to support."

(3) Finally, the centerpiece of their efforts would be a massive campaign of anti-racist television advertisements that

would "educate us on subtle discrimination or alert us to the racial hurt we cause each other." The ads would "challenge white middle-class homeowners to rethink why they consider selling when a black middle-class family moves in next door." The authors propose some specifics:

"Imagine an ad that shows two women, one black and slightly overweight, the other white and well-tailored, and then asks us to choose which one is the welfare mom and which one is the business executive—to be followed by another ad that shows two men, one black in sweats and one white in a polo shirt, which asks us to choose the ex-convict and the business executive."

Anti-racist television must "saturate the airwaves and keep reinforcing the ideas behind it," and "in the hands of the creative and resourceful advertising industry, there is no limit to the assumptions and stereotypes such a campaign can challenge."

In a book that has already pointed out that "the races do not have to hate each other to be divided, and indeed we can be very cordial about it," these proposals are so breath-takingly idiotic it is hard to imagine the authors are being serious. Blacks already try to dine out every night on slavery, whites are sick of racial preferences, and a saturation campaign to get whites to love blacks—which will never be funded anyway—would certainly backfire.

This book is a perfect example of the incoherence and dishonesty of American thinking about race. The authors have discovered the obvious: that integration hasn't happened. They have even managed to be slightly daring and suggest that it may never happen. Then, in a paroxysm of stupidity they propose even wilder, more unrealistic versions of the kind of propaganda they already admit has failed. The tragedy is that this is precisely the way the country has handled race relations for the past 40 years. **W**

O Tempora, O Mores!

Justice Grinds On

On the evening of Feb. 20, 1990, Robert Simon and Anthony Carr—both black—were burgling Carl Parker's house in Lambert, in Mississippi's Quitman

County. Mr. Parker, along with three other family members—all white—arrived home to find a pickup truck loaded with loot just about to drive off. The surprised thieves held the Parker family at gun point and tied up Mr. Parker's 12-year-

old half brother Greg and then shot him in the back. They raped and sodomized his nine-year-old half sister Charlotte Jo before they killed her. They shot his step-mother, Bobbie Jo in the chest, and they also killed Carl Parker himself. They cut