

Straight Talk on Race

President Clinton's ongoing national dialogue on race relations may be laudable, but it will do little good unless Americans can break free from the simplistic formulas that define the current debate. The following two reviews are an important step in that direction. Richard Kahlenberg makes an original argument that in order for affirmative action to be both effective and popular it must be refocused to cor-

rect the disparities between the classes instead of those between the races. And Kahlenberg finds intriguing evidence to support his proposal in a new book by Paul Sniderman and Edward G. Carmines. Next, Scott Shuger explains how Lou Cannon's fresh new reporting on the Rodney King beating will force readers to rethink their assumptions about the true meaning of that infamous event.

Affirmative action should not be a black-and-white issue

by Richard D. Kahlenberg

SINCE 1994 AMERICA'S 30-year experiment with affirmative action has clearly been in jeopardy, but the struggle over its final outcome is anything but predictable. Opponents of race and gender preferences declared victory when a California initiative banning preferences was approved in 1996, only to suffer defeat on a similar referendum in Houston in 1997. In the U.S. Senate, opponents successfully blocked Bill Lann Lee's confirmation as assistant attorney general for civil rights, but in the House of Representatives, an attempt to curtail affirmative action went down to defeat in committee. Opponents of preferences appeared to be headed for a big win when the Supreme Court agreed to hear a case involving the use of race in layoffs, but a coalition of big business and civil rights groups prevented the case, *Piscataway v. Taxman*, from being heard by financing an out-of-court settlement.

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REACHING BEYOND RACE

Paul M. Sniderman

and

Edward G. Carmines

Harvard University Press, \$22.95

The great national debate over affirmative action is turning out to be more complex than we thought. Publication of a fascinating new book, *Reaching Beyond Race*, should help us understand the increasingly complicated affirmative action discussion. The authors, political science professors Paul M. Sniderman of Stanford and Edward G. Carmines of Indiana University, employ a number of tricks to help us determine what Americans really think about race and affirmative action. Along the way, the book explodes various myths held by both sides of the affirmative action controversy. Of the book's four central findings, the first three are likely to disturb proponents of affirmative action, while the fourth will unsettle opponents.

Finding #1: Deep down, white liberal Democrats are as opposed to racial preferences as white Republican conservatives. Pollsters find that when asked directly, white liberals are much more likely to support preferential affirmative action than white conservatives, but, the authors wondered, is this true because white liberals say what is politically correct rather than what they really think?

In order to understand the true feelings of liberals, Sniderman and Carmines devised what they call the "List Experiment." One-half of a random sample of whites was read a list of three items, and asked to name how many items make them angry (but not which ones). The list consisted of the following: "the federal government increasing the tax on gasoline; professional athletes getting million-dollar-plus salaries; large corporations polluting the environment." The other randomly sampled half, demographically identical to the first half, was read the same list with a fourth item added: "black leaders asking the government for affirmative action." By subtracting the number of items identified by the second group as contrasted with the first, the experiment reveals substantial covert white liberal anger about affirmative action: 57 percent of white liberals are angry about affirmative action compared to 50 percent of conservative; 65 percent of Democrats and 64 percent of Republicans. While the finding is surprising on one level, the authors say, it is consistent with the view that there is a liberal reason to oppose affirmative action—a moral opposition to unequal treatment based on race.

Finding #2: Racism plays a very small role in white opposition to affirmative action. Some proponents of affirmative action explain white opposition as simply another manifestation of white racism. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, for example, likens opposition to racial preference in the late 1990s to opposition to *Brown v. Board of Education* in the 1950s. But Sniderman and Carmines find: "Race prejudice, far from dominating and orchestrating the opposition to affirmative action, makes only a slight contribution to it."

Using data from the 1992 National Election Studies survey on white attitudes toward blacks, the authors separate whites by tolerance level. They do find, as one would expect, that there is strong opposition to affirmative action among the most bigoted whites. But they also find that the most tolerant whites are opposed to affirmative action preferences. "Looking only at the 25 percent of the [white] public whose attitudes toward blacks is most favorable, we discovered that opposition to affirmative action in this group is overwhelming, with between 7 and 8 out of every 10 objecting to it." Even among those 1 percent of American whites most tolerant, 80 percent oppose race preferences in hiring.

Finding #3: Instead of healing the racial divide, affirmative action appears to contribute to racial prejudice among whites. While affirmative action surely promotes some degree of racial harmony by integrating workplaces and universities, the prefer-

ential nature of the program also appears to have an unintended consequence, the authors find: White resentment over affirmative action seems to spill over into white attitudes toward blacks generally. In the "Mere Mention Experiment," originally presented by Sniderman in a 1993 book, *The Scar of Race* (coauthored with Thomas Piazza), the researchers ask one half of a group of respondents what they think of blacks, and subsequently ask a question about affirmative action. For the other half of respondents, the order of the questions is reversed, and individuals are asked first about affirmative action, and then what they think of blacks. The two groups were divided equally by education, levels of prejudice, social background, and political outlook. When the affirmative action question appears first in the survey, the mere mention makes the percentage of whites agreeing with negative stereotypes about blacks increase: that "most blacks are lazy" rises from 20 percent to 31 percent and that "most blacks are irresponsible" rises from 26 percent to 43 percent. The experiment involves varying the order of only one question in a survey of more than 100 questions, yet triggers a statistically significant jump in white hostility.

Finding #4: Opposition to race-based affirmative action preferences is countered by strong support for helping disadvantaged people generally. The authors find that opposition to racial preferences is decidedly not part of a larger conservative opposition to all programs aimed at racial and economic inequality: In fact, there is strong support, they find, for "policies to assist the badly off, both black and white, provided that political leaders base their appeal on moral principles that reach beyond race." The authors argue that a need-based approach is more powerful, "not because it evades the reach of prejudice but because it calls into play the principle of a fairness—that all who need help should be helped, regardless of their race."

Polls show, the authors note, that when policies are framed in nonracial terms, the level of support increases. Where 56 percent of whites support tax breaks to businesses "locating in largely black areas," 79 percent support such breaks "for locating in poor and high-unemployment areas." When policies are framed in terms of race-neutral need as opposed to race-specific criteria, support among whites increases for college scholarships for good students (94 percent vs. 77 percent), school and preschool spending (91 percent vs. 76 percent), and increasing taxes for education (65 percent vs. 46 percent).

Surprisingly, the authors do not follow their argument to its logical conclusion, and oppose, rather than support, class-based preferences in such areas as college admissions. They argue: "Class-based affirmative action is just as vulnerable as race-based to the root objection of selecting less qualified applicants in favor of more qualified ones. The unfairness is no less, and the resentment will be no less" Sniderman and Carmines present no data to support this contention. And elsewhere in the book, they make clear why class-based preferences would in fact be more morally appealing than race-based preferences: Middle-class African-Americans, they point out, "are now decisively better off than poor blacks and poor whites; it follows, in our view, that those who are badly off should be given priority over members of the middle class, regardless of race."

Public opinion supports need-based policies more readily than race- or gender-based policies, but the most powerful interest groups are organized around racial and gender identities.

Perhaps the authors believe that any deviation from "merit" is unpopular, but their own data show that, when it comes to preferences, "it obviously *can* make a difference who is to be helped." They note that in a study conducted in Great Britain, white respondents provided weak support for employment quotas for blacks and Asians (15 percent) and for women (23 percent), but very substantial support for employment quotas for the disabled (85 percent). The argument on behalf of class-based preferences in college admissions is even stronger, for an SAT score of 1250 surely means something more if achieved by a poor white or black student who lives in poverty and attends inferior schools than if achieved by a wealthy student with highly educated parents and private tutors.

While Sniderman and Carmines provide compelling polling data on an array of affirmative action questions, the book does not and cannot fully explain the tug of war over preferential policies, for the complete story requires a discussion of interest group politics. Where public opinion supports need-based

policies more readily than race- or gender-based policies, today the most powerful interest groups are organized around racial and gender identities rather than around economic status, so the transition to need-based programs will be heavily resisted.

Moreover, in Houston and in the Piscataway case, we have seen evidence of strong business support for the status quo on affirmative action. Under the current legal regime, businesses can be sued by people of color and women for discrimination, but are unlikely to lose reverse-discrimination suits filed by white males. If the current rules tilt away from affirmative action—and employers are left equally vulnerable to discrimination and reverse-discrimination suits—the risk of legal liability increases dramatically.

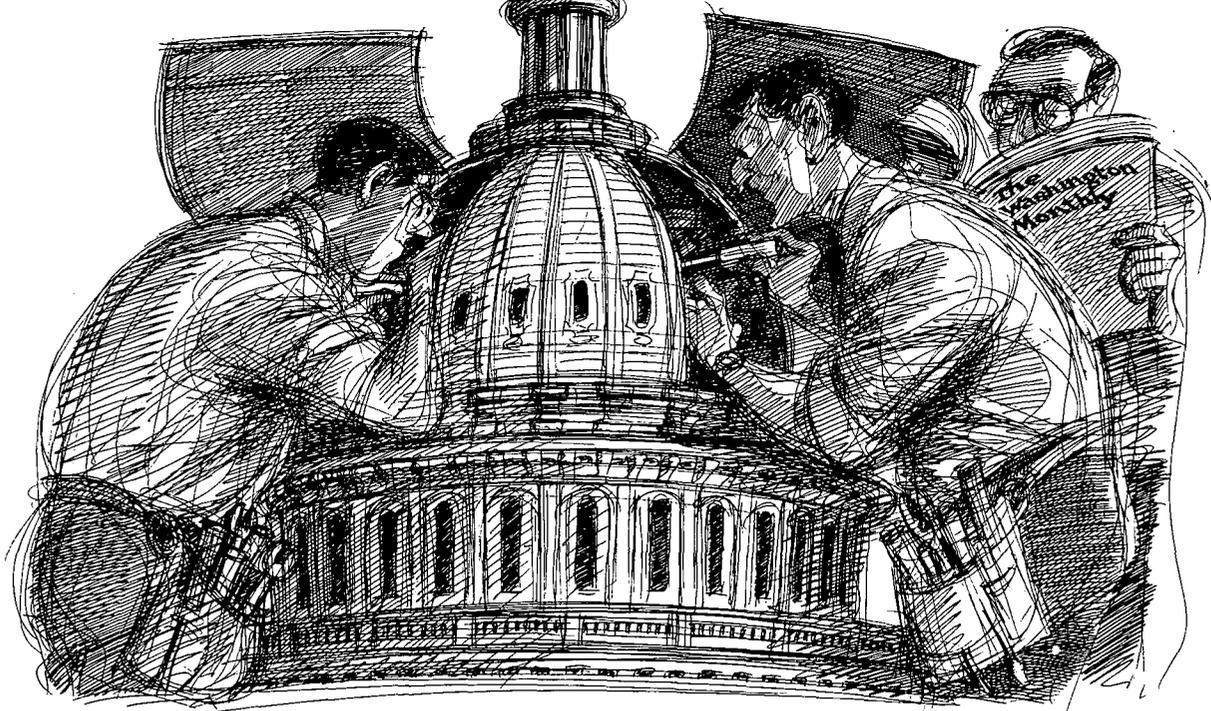
On the whole, however, the findings outlined in *Reaching Beyond Race* provide some powerful evi-

dence that over time we are likely to see a shifting away from race- and gender-based preferences to programs more broadly addressed to those in need—regardless of their color or gender. The fact that racism is not at the root of opposition to affirmative action means further education is unlikely to shift public

opinion; the fact that white liberals are often covertly angry about racial preferences means continuing support for preferences is even more fragile than we thought. And the bottom line is, the fact that race preferences can actually exacerbate racism should give pause to those who support affirmative action as a tool for fostering better race relations.

The finding that Americans also have a reservoir of good will—a strong desire to do something to help those left behind—suggests that voters would like to replace racial preferences with a positive need-based program. The most intriguing moment of President Clinton's recent town hall meeting on race in Akron, Ohio, came when the president raised the question of whether class-based affirmative action could replace race-based preferences. This, the president said, was "the nub of the affirmative action debate." He noted, "Politically and substantively you'll help more people and build more unity by having an economic basis for social policy now." Did someone slip *Reaching Beyond Race* to the president before the event? ●

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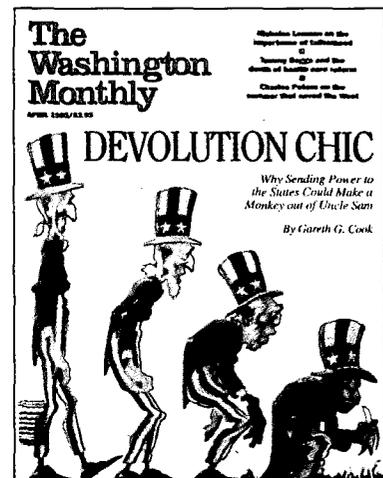
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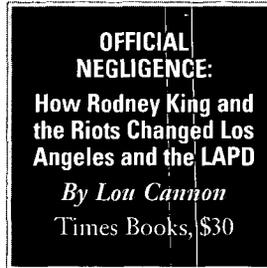
The part of the Rodney King tape America didn't see

by Scott Shuger

WANT TO BRING A PLEASANT evening with friends to a screeching halt? Say the following sentence: "I think the cops on the Rodney King tape got a raw deal." One way or another, that party is *over*. But this is one of the principal theses of Lou Cannon's book. (His upbringing in the newspaper cult of objectivity keeps him from saying it in so many words, though.) Cannon's development of this politically incorrect thought is exceptionally well-reported and fair-minded.

Reporting and fairness and Rodney King—three concepts that throughout the whole literally bloody saga in L.A. rarely made a joint appearance. While the topic was hot, we had no shortage of "coverage," but little in the way of explanation. Now that it's stone cold, we are finally in a position to get past the shortcomings of journalism to the strengths of history. For the most part, Cannon, best known as a *Washington Post* political reporter and biographer of Reagan but who also once headed up the *Post's* L.A. bureau, has, with this book, done precisely that.

And history, as Edward Gibbon observed, is mostly crime, folly, and misfortune. In the case of L.A. in the early 1990s, the crime was soaring, the folly was that the LAPD higher-ups, personified by Chief Daryl Gates, believed they could still fight it the same way they had in the good old "Dragnet" days, and the misfortune (before, and particularly during the riots) fell on the well-intentioned cops in the field and especially on the law-abiding citizens they were sworn to "protect and serve." The police problem in L.A., expertly limned by Cannon, boiled down to this: The LAPD was a primarily white-male force that had long prided itself on no-questions-asked aggressive ("proactive" became the modern euphemism) tactics in a place that had become, almost without the cops noticing it, the most multi-cultural, socially complicated city in the country. The department was still



trying to master the city, which now more than ever needed a public servant. There were plenty of warning signs long before the King tape: the numerous dubious shootings of black and Latino suspects, a long-simmering dispute about the LAPD's use of a submission choke-hold that was implicated in the deaths of at least a dozen

black men, and the millions spent by the city to settle excessive force lawsuits brought by citizens against the cops.

As Cannon's narrative makes clear, there was no silver bullet solution to all this, but there were some identifiable problems that could and should have been addressed. Typically, they were all of the "boring" bureaucratic variety. First, there was the problem of the near-total independence of the LAPD chief, who could only be fired for cause—that is, lying, stealing, etc.—not for incompetence or policy disagreements. (During the riot's first hours, Gates was speaking out against political control of his department at a fundraiser in Brentwood when he should have been downtown or on the scene.) Second, there was the department's near-total hostility to what is now called "community policing," getting police out of their cars and into the neighborhoods. Third, LAPD officers confronting resistant suspects did not have (especially after the department banned the choke-hold), either in their equipment or in their training, enough alternatives to the gun and the baton. Cannon relates how, after the King beating but before the Simi Valley verdicts, officers in charge of responding to possible disturbances pleaded with their superiors for such intermediate tools as leg grabbers, nets, and bean-bag guns. They were turned down. At least now the LAPD uses bean bags and pepper spray and has undertaken martial arts-based training for controlling suspects on the ground without seriously injuring them.

It's Cannon's contention that these unaddressed away-from-the-ball issues were the smoldering fuses that eventually lit off the L.A. riots. He's right. Cops who feel physically threatened will use the weapons they've got, whether they're appropriate to the level

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