

Now What?

Donald R. Kinder

University of Michigan

I am grateful to David Berg and the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* for providing the space for me to spell out the message of *Divided by Color*, and to Clayton Alderfer, Jimmy Jones, and Thomas Pettigrew for their thoughtful reactions. I feel strongly tempted to reply to what they wrote—the temptation is strong even though what they wrote was, on the whole, generous. You all are, I suspect, familiar with this particular human failing. It is hilariously and darkly on display in a recent story by John Updike (1998). The protagonist of the piece is Bech, an aging New York writer, and it begins with his sour reflections on his mean-spirited and misguided critics:

It was as if these insults, these hurled mud balls, these stains upon the robe of his vocation were, now that he was nearing the end, bleeding wounds. That a negative review might be a fallible verdict, delivered in haste, against a deadline, for a few dollars, by a writer with problems and limitations of his or her own, was a reasonable and weaseling supposition he could no longer, in the dignity of his years, entertain. Any adverse review, even a single timid phrase of qualification or reservation within a favorable and even adoring review, stood revealed as the piece of pure enmity it was—an assault, a virtual murder, a purely malicious attempt to unman and destroy him. The army of critics stood revealed as not fellow word-smiths plying a dingy and dying trade but satanic legions, deserving only annihilation. (p. 72)

So possessed, Bech proceeds to plot and then to carry out the execution of his critics, shoving one under a subway train, poisoning another, and, through a series of ever more twisted subliminal e-mail messages, inducing a third to hurl himself off the balcony of his high-rise Upper East Side apartment.

Donald R. Kinder is Converse Collegiate Professor at the Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

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Not that I feel anything like that toward *my* critics, least of all Alderfer, Jones, and Pettigrew, who indeed hardly qualify as critics. In any case, I shall not surrender to this impulse. Instead, I will offer a brief sketch of the project I am completing now, in the hope that it will serve to enrich the conversation we have been having on race and politics.

My intention with *Divided by Color* was to write down what I thought was true about race relations and politics in the United States without describing how my views collided with others. There is a bit of this in the text, and a bit more buried away in the footnotes and appendices, but for the most part, *Divided by Color* remained above the fray. The book I am completing now follows a different path. It takes the low road. It is argumentative, quarrelsome, unpleasant. Instead of making arguments, it attempts to destroy them. I am calling it *Whitewashing Racism*.

Although the book is preoccupied with the present, with trying to locate where American society is now, it begins with a consideration of Gunnar Myrdal's masterful and justly famous examination of American race relations, published in 1944, under the title *An American Dilemma*. Myrdal situated the problem of race within the hearts and minds of white Americans, thereby turning conventional wisdom on its head. Glaring racial inequalities were a reflection not of Negro deficiency and defect, but of widespread and systematic discrimination and prejudice on the part of whites. The "Negro problem" was really a "white man's problem."

This problem, moreover, had a solution. Myrdal portrayed white Americans as caught in a dilemma, torn between noble democratic principles—what he called the American Creed—and shameful racial prejudice. And in this struggle of conscience, Myrdal was certain that principles were stronger, that the Creed would prevail. Supported by "mere" tradition or interest, racism and discrimination would be leveled, swept away. Myrdal's prediction, delivered at mid-century, was that the American Creed's advance was inexorable and that racism's days were numbered.

When the Carnegie Corporation first invited Myrdal to direct the study that became *An American Dilemma*, he knew next to nothing about American race relations. His naïveté was actually an advantage as far as Carnegie was concerned. The corporation wanted an exceptional person to lead the study, and an outsider, someone who could look clearly at race without the distortions of emotion and the encumbrances of history. Myrdal was exceptional—only 38, he was already a distinguished economist, a prominent public figure, an elected member of the Swedish House of Parliament, and a principal architect of the Swedish welfare state—and he certainly was fresh, in that at the time, he was completely unacquainted with race relations in America. Evidently, Carnegie's invitation both puzzled and amused Myrdal. He

wondered why the Americans would choose a man who knew nothing about the race issue, a foreigner who had never visited the southern states and whose contacts with Negroes were limited to elevator operators, lowly hotel workers, and Red Caps in train stations. (Southern, 1987, p. 5)

However little he knew at the outset, Myrdal threw himself into the work. He held discussions with scores of experts. He read voraciously. He assembled a team of accomplished American social scientists. And he began his preparation for writing *An*

American Dilemma not in the library with books and papers, but on the road in a Buick, in a 2-month tour of the American South. Myrdal went, often unchaperoned, to tobacco factories and textile mills, black churches, plantations and farms, and to bars and nightclubs, talking to blacks and whites from all walks of life. He returned to New York "horrified" at the scale and depth of the problem he had just agreed to analyze and convinced that racism ran "tragically deep" in the South.

Yet Myrdal ended up certain that the Creed would sweep prejudice and discrimination aside. His optimism is curious. *An American Dilemma* makes an awfully persuasive indictment, one thousand pages and more of racism and discrimination. In this context, Myrdal's faith in the Creed is extraordinary. He believed it to be an essential part of the American political inheritance; that all Americans, regardless of class or region or national origin, embraced the same democratic ideals: the "essential dignity of the individual human being," "the fundamental equality of all men," and "certain inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and a fair opportunity" (Myrdal, 1944, p. 4). Taught in school, preached in church, written into the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, the American Creed constituted, in Myrdal's estimation, the "national conscience."

Myrdal's optimism derived also in part from his reading of racism's decline. Myrdal was struck by the transformations in white thinking on race that had taken place since Emancipation, and it is hard not to be. In the early decades of the 19th century, distinguished Southerners, under attack from abolitionists, began to argue that slaveholding was a just and virtuous institution, and that Negroes were "destined by providence" for slavery. By the middle of the 19th century, racial superiority was no longer just an assumption; it had become a self-conscious and elaborated theory. Racism was both popular and respectable, endorsed by leading statesmen and distinguished scientists alike.

By the middle of the 20th century, however, racism had fallen into disrepute, according to Myrdal. The theory that blacks were inferior to whites in intelligence and character, and that such inferiorities were inherent and permanent, was now rejected by many educated whites. Such ideas were harder to find in books and journals and public speeches. This destruction of racism Myrdal (1944) took to be "the most important of all social trends in the field of interracial relations" (p. 1003). Conceding that individual cases of prejudice remained, Myrdal insisted that prejudice and racism were being driven underground and to the margins of society, consigned to "a surreptitious life" (p. 1003).

Fifty years have passed since Myrdal wrote those words, and perhaps he was right. Much has changed in American race relations since Myrdal's time, and much of it is good. Since the appearance of *An American Dilemma*, we have witnessed, among other things, the rising of the civil rights movement, landmark federal legislation outlawing discrimination on account of race, the emergence of a black middle class, the dismantling of the legal foundations of segregation, striking gains in political participation and representation among black Americans, and sharp increases in the extent to which white Americans endorse racial integration and equality as matters of principle. Real progress there has been—so perhaps Myrdal was on to something. Perhaps even, as

Myrdal predicted, democratic principles of equality and tolerance have succeeded in sweeping race prejudice to one side.

Nevertheless, I think that Myrdal was wrong, his optimism misplaced. And if Myrdal was wrong, then he has a lot of company among contemporary analysts, who share his optimism. A gathering tide of scholarship on the politics of race is, I believe, too impressed with postwar improvements in American race relations and too skeptical about the present-day political power of racism. Here I have in mind such important works as Carmines and Stimson's (1989) *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics*, Sniderman and Piazza's (1993) *The Scar of Race*, and a recent and notable addition to this literature, Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom's (1997) *America in Black and White*, which begins by applauding Myrdal's prescience and embracing his optimism.

Of course, such works do not present a single view of the current condition of race and politics in the United States. Nor do I want to leave the impression that I think these writings are completely wrong-headed. On the contrary, there is much to learn from them.¹ What I claim is more modest. Despite considerable differences in analysis and purpose, these various works all, in one way or another, lend support to the same conclusion: that prejudice is obsolete. Just as Myrdal had predicted, political conflicts involving race—over affirmative action or fair representation or poverty and economic inequality—are about principles now, not prejudice.

Let me be more specific. By contemporary versions of Myrdal's optimism I mean such arguments as these:

- Conservatism on racial issues is really just conservatism. It is the distinctively American apprehension over the intrusions of central government that accounts for white opposition to policies promising greater racial equality. Racial conservatism is simply the application of long-standing conservative principles of limited government to issues that just happen to be about race. Senator Goldwater's opposition to the Civil Rights Act and his 1964 campaign for the presidency is the exemplary case.
- It is the American commitment to individualism that accounts for white opposition to policies that promise a reduction of racial inequality. Americans prize self-reliance, they regard work and idleness as morally charged categories, and it is these commitments that stand in the way of white support for policies like affirmative action, school desegregation, or government programs that benefit blacks disproportionately. Whites resist such policies, according to this argument, because they see them as violations of individualism.
- In our enlightened times, white opposition to policies promising greater racial equality has little to do with racial prejudice. The politics of race today is about interests and principles and politics—but it is not, for the most part, about race.
- Even if some racial prejudice remains, it is fading fast, clearly and inexorably. In Myrdal's time, white opposition to policy proposals that challenged the racial status quo derived in a simple and immediate way from prejudice. In our time, much as Myrdal predicted, racial prejudice is disappearing, relegated, as he put it, to a "surreptitious" life.

Contrary to much scholarship today, I believe all of this is wrong. The burden of *Whitewashing Racism* will be to demonstrate why I think so and especially why anyone else should. In this endeavor, complications abound, not least the question of what we mean, exactly, by prejudice. To determine whether we have reached the end of racism,

we must be clear about what we mean by racism in the first place. Rather than insist on one way of defining prejudice, my approach is ecumenical, testing Myrdal's prediction against *varieties* of prejudice. Another complication, familiar enough to empirically oriented social scientists but a great annoyance all the same, is that the relevant evidence is not as comprehensive or decisive as one would like. Acknowledging all this, it is nevertheless impressive to me how confidently assertions of progress are made and how unconnected to systematic evidence they often turn out to be. Examined carefully, the evidence, I believe, runs preponderantly in the opposite direction.

As a parting comment, I would like to return to a point we tried to emphasize in *Divided by Color*. Reviewers have described the book as discouraged or pessimistic, and although I think realistic is a better way of putting it, I understand their point. Certainly when compared to the central tendency of current scholarship, the book *is* discouraged. In this context, it may be worthwhile to reiterate what I take to be *Divided by Color's* most hopeful result: that the political role of racism is contingent. Racism may long be with us, but the part it plays in our politics is variable. A bit more precisely, how large racism looms in white Americans' political thinking depends a lot on the nature of elite discourse, on how elites choose to formulate and frame the issues of our times.

This line of argument draws us away from matters of conscience and the psychological foundations of opinion and into the world of politics. And what do we find when we look there? Well, it is enormously complicated, of course. Americans are bombarded continuously with suggestions about how to think about political issues, and all this talk among elites is difficult to summarize. But it seems to me that, on balance and in the current period, progressive and principled arguments are conspicuous primarily by their absence. Consider the debate in Congress over what was universally referred to as welfare "reform." Consider the campaign to do away with affirmative action in California, culminating in passage of Proposition 209. Consider, as a final and telling example, President Clinton's Initiative on Race. Officially, we have just completed a year's worth of a national conversation about race, one led by the president. In reality, the first anniversary slipped by almost unnoticed.²

My purpose here is not to pick on the initiative itself, on how quickly it faltered, and on how poorly staffed and planned it turned out to be. The real point is broader: It is how easily race is displaced. Always, it seems, there is more pressing business, more urgent problems. In Myrdal's time, Franklin Roosevelt was preoccupied with economic recovery. He needed the Southern wing of his party to pass his programs. Racial justice would have to wait. And so it goes. Or so it seems to me. Maybe that's pessimistic, and then again maybe that's just the way things are.

NOTES

1. Nor do I mean to suggest that I am the only one standing against this particular scholarly stream. For points of view congenial to my own, see, among others, Sears (1988), Bobo (1997), Pettigrew and Meertens (1995), and Hochschild (1995).

2. John Hope Franklin (1998), the distinguished historian, is chair of the advisory board of the president's Initiative on Race. His unpersuasive defense of the Initiative's activities upon its first anniversary is set out in a *New York Times* op-ed piece.

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