

surely decent impulse, to say: let's solve our problems at home first, let's get people back to work, let's take care of our cities, our minorities, our elderly; let's take care of pollution and population. Let us welcome, in the nicest and best sense of the phrase, a real greening of America.

I don't underestimate the decency of that impulse. I question only the equation. It is not a question of either-or. We must have *both*—we can have a decent, humane America, *and* we can pay the premium for human freedom. In fact, we can't have *either* unless we have *both*.

What happens if Americans stop paying the premium?

Maybe nothing. Maybe nothing happens when a totalitarian power becomes the strongest military force on earth. *Maybe.*

And maybe something. Maybe we will witness the slow, almost invisible, erosion of rights, freedoms, and liberties that we have struggled to gain over cen-

turies. Maybe all of Europe, dispirited and afraid, will come to resemble Finland, technically free, but actually a pet in a cage. Maybe, if the Class of 1975 does not respond, does not resolve to pay the premium, does not make the difficult decisions, maybe twenty years from now a commencement speaker at Hobart will be talking to another graduating class that has learned about a new phase in the story of Western Civilization—a *phase of history that notes a greening of America, notes an America that has failed to pay the premium, and features America's role as the last, big, green, fallen domino.*

In the course of making these decisions I hope your class will remember that this last generation brought forth not only Vietnam and Watergate, but also: the greatest worldwide economic boom in all history, across all continents for all races; a medical technology that has cured and prevented some of the world's crippling and fatal diseases; and an agricultural

technology that has fed billions of people—not well enough, but better than ever before.

It was a generation that put people on the moon, a feat that will be remembered when Watergate, Vietnam, and recession are distant memories. It was a generation that saw the first Catholic in the White House and the first black mayors of white cities. It was a generation that heard one President say, "We will pay any price, bear any burden..."—and then heard another President, a Texan, deliver a speech that ended with the words "we shall overcome."

Above all, for all the problems, for all the mistakes, for all the miscalculations, it was a generation that has preserved, for the time being, the fragile tradition of human liberty in the Western world.

That tradition deserves to be, first, understood, and second, protected.

I hope, and I expect, that your class will do it better than mine did. □

The
Public
Policy



by
Adam
Meyerson

The Case for "Benign Neglect"

The time may have come when the issue of race could benefit from a period of "benign neglect."

—Daniel Patrick Moynihan,
"Memorandum for the President,"
January 1970

Do you remember the uproar Mr. Moynihan inspired when these words of his were leaked to the press? It was an ironic uproar, for "benign neglect" is precisely what the noblest moralists of the day would have had us practice: we were to look upon all men as brothers, regardless of their accents or skin colors. It was an uncalled-for uproar, for Moynihan had urged benign rather than malignant neglect, and even if one disagreed with his suggestions it was unfair to excoriate his sentiments. And it was a sad uproar, for it pointed out the unfortunate state of our polity: the *New York Times*, perhaps the greatest newspaper in the English language, so distrusted our elected government that it felt obliged to "expose" a private memorandum meant only for President Nixon's eyes.

The worst part about the uproar, however, was that Moynihan had been entirely right. In 1970 the median income for black households was only 64% that of white households; no wonder many com-

mentators felt that this was no time for neglect. But Moynihan and a few other social scientists had probed behind the statistics and isolated the proper variables—age, geography, family characteristics—and it had become clear to them that in most parts of the United States the problem of race was no longer a problem. Thus, in 1971, the income of black families outside the South, with the head of the household under 35, and with both a husband and wife present, was 93% that of their white counterparts, suggesting that the importance of race had been greatly exaggerated. This is not to say that there were no problems in black or other minority communities. Quite the contrary: at the same time that most blacks were making extraordinary economic advances (between 1959 and 1972 the proportion of black families living in poverty dropped from 48% to 29%), there was an alarming growth of welfare dependency, crime, illegitimacy, and unemployment in particular black subcultures. What Moynihan correctly pointed out was that these were problems of welfare, community, family structure, and economic institutions, not problems of race, and our obsession with race was not improving matters.

Now I submit that if in 1970 the time

"may have come" for some "benign neglect," in 1975 that time has certainly come. I say this because in the intervening years the issue has been neither neglected nor treated benignly, and this has been to the detriment of both race relations and the commonweal. What, for example, is the purpose of busing for school desegregation, now that most evidence casts doubts on its usefulness in promoting educational opportunity and racial concord? The major effects of busing seem to be the destruction of neighborhoods, widespread popular resentment, and the ugly expression of latent racial hostilities, and yet the courts are imposing it with a vengeance. Better, I say, we focused our attentions on the frightening decline of *quality* in our schools, for that decline hurts all races. Better, when it comes to purely racial questions, we had some benign neglect.

I am fortified in these views by my reading of a remarkable book published this year, Thomas Sowell's *Race and Economics* (David McKay, \$9.95). Sowell is a historian of economic thought at UCLA, and an earlier book of his, *Black Education: Myths and Tragedies* (David McKay, 1972), contains a chapter on Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C. which should be required reading

for all federal district court judges, because Dunbar was one of the country's finest urban high schools and Dunbar was all-black. *Race and Economics* should be required reading for anyone who is fascinated by race and ethnicity, who delights in the cultural richness which ethnic and racial diversity has contributed to American culture, and who is inspired by a vision of multiracial and multinational harmony. Sowell shares that fascination, that delight, and that vision, and by combining them with the moral and analytical perspective of economics, he brings to his subject some sorely needed wisdom.

Sowell is an economist in the true sense of the word, that of Adam Smith. He has studied the history of men and thinks it wisest not to place much trust in their benevolence, yet he appreciates how in the marketplace the public good can often emerge as an unintended consequence of self-interested pursuits. Therefore he understands that denunciations of racism and "appeals to the principles of brotherhood" may be less effective in reducing racial injustices than "the unplanned effects of mutual economic advantage." He has studied economic institutions and the extent to which they both reflect and shape cultural values. Therefore he understands how racial and ethnic differences are often the product of different economic environments. And he has studied the progress—slow, tortuous, and not without its problems, but progress nevertheless—that men have made in improving their condition, all over the world but especially in America. Therefore he understands how important it is to make comparisons over time, and how, when you do so, it turns out that almost every racial and ethnic group in America is making substantial progress. In all these ways, Sowell's analysis and his understanding suggest that racial and ethnic groups would be better served if the public discourse were less obsessed by race and ethnicity.

Consider our obsession with broadcasting and making restitution for our racial and ethnic injustices. American history has been a history of racism and prejudice, and Sowell in no way glosses this history over. Negro slavery, he points out, was accompanied by a more virulent racism in the United States than elsewhere in our hemisphere. Nearly every immigrant group in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries encountered discrimination in housing and employment; eighty years after the great wave of Irish immigration it was still common to find "Irish Need Not Apply" signs on business doors. Jews, Orientals, and blacks were often singled out for brutal racial attacks, sometimes by policemen. And in one of the great disgraces of our history, American citizens were rounded up in concentration camps, their property often confiscated without compensation, merely because they were of Japanese origin.

But, Sowell asks, what good does it do a racial or ethnic group to dwell on prior

injustices? It makes much better sense, he suggests, to set about acquiring skills and education which will make it in the self-interest of others not to discriminate against you. This, he points out, is what the Japanese have been doing. Rather than expending their energies in protesting a shameful recent injustice, they have quietly worked to advance themselves, to make the most of whatever economic and intellectual opportunities are available. In the process, they have quickly earned one of the highest per capita incomes of any ethnic group, as well as the general respect of the population. By contrast, the Irish of the nineteenth century sought to counteract the harsh prejudice against them by political efforts, by violent protest, and by a vocal concern with their public image. It was not until the twentieth century, however, when the Irish ceased their own violence and slowly but surely pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps, that the enormous prejudice against them finally subsided. Toleration, Sowell notes, usually follows rather than precedes economic advancement.

Or consider the invidious comparisons between racial and ethnic groups that are sometimes made in the public discourse. Economic advancement in a competitive market economy depends chiefly on the ability to prepare for and adapt to economic opportunities, in other words, on work habits and skills. Therefore those cultures which have stressed the virtues of self-reliance, of diligence, of education, of planning for the future, have fared better in America than those cultures which have not; and some observers are tempted by such cultural differences to infer the superiority (or inferiority) of particular racial and ethnic groups. There are countless examples, for instance, of first-generation Jews who have risen from poverty to positions of great wealth and prominence; if the Jews could make it in America, some people ask, why can't the Poles, the Negroes, or the Puerto Ricans?

Sowell's response is that these groups are making it, though more slowly, and they are making it more slowly because the emphasis on education, the self-reliance, and the work habits which lead to advancement do not spring up automatically, but take generations to develop. It simply is not fair, Sowell asserts, to measure the progress of individuals whose grandparents were peasants in Poland, southern Italy, or the American South—where there was virtually no opportunity to develop self-reliance, and where people were often kept purposefully illiterate—by the progress, say, of Jews whose grandparents, even if they arrived in America penniless, came from a culture which had stressed the importance of learning and self-reliance for centuries. Sowell points out that West Indian immigrants have made much greater progress in America than American Negroes, even though both suffered debilitating slavery and both come from the same African heritage and genetic

base. As an explanation, he suggests that the demography of the West Indies (90% black, 10% white) gave blacks there the opportunity to fill many positions unavailable to American Negroes, and thereby gave them greater opportunity and more time to develop responsible work habits and a sense of self-reliance.

Ironically, it is Sowell's appreciation of how slowly those habits develop that makes him rather optimistic about the future. At the turn of the century, the Irish were plagued by crime, alcoholism, and broken homes, not to mention a low standard of living, and nary a soul expected them to amount to anything. Yet today, the Irish are comfortably ensconced in the middle class. Sowell suggests that the condition of American Negroes is in many ways comparable to that of the Irish seventy-five years ago. Although blacks have been free for over a century, they really did not emigrate to the urban market economy in large numbers until the 1920s. And Sowell asserts that for relatively recent immigrants, the Negroes are doing quite well—especially when you isolate the proper variables. Blacks have a higher level of prosperity than Mexicans or Puerto Ricans, largely because these latter groups arrived more recently. Clearly, Sowell expects all three groups to continue developing the skills which will ensure further advances.

Civil rights leaders and the liberal press have raised no ruckus over *Race and Economics* comparable to the ruckus they raised over Moynihan's memorandum. Instead they have ignored the book and will probably continue to do so. No doubt they would dismiss Sowell's emphasis on the virtues of self-reliance as hopelessly old-fashioned. Certainly they would regard his skepticism about political action as ridiculous: are the virtues of political pressure not obvious in the establishment of affirmative action programs and racial quotas? They would fail to understand when Sowell replied that quotas are precisely what minority groups do *not* need now, for quotas discourage the kind of work habits that in the long run will prove most helpful.

But civil rights leaders and the liberal press fail to understand something much more important, and that is the idea of progress which informs the thought of men like Moynihan and Sowell. Our age is obsessed with race in part because we are obsessed with the present: when you look at neither the past nor the future, you become much more concerned about who is getting what share of the present spoils. If, however, you reflect on how people of all races and nationalities have been slowly and patiently improving their lot, then you recognize the promise of the future. To realize that future will require continued patience and much more hard work, and that is why "benign neglect" would be so benign. The mass of men, in every race and ethnic group, have so much important work to do, they shouldn't be disturbed. □

Slavery and the Simplisms of Reform

Much of the recent writing on American Negro slavery has tended to describe it from the inside, to treat the slave system as an institution that exercised a profound influence on the lives of those who lived within its limits and hence deserves analysis as an important historical phenomenon. Moreover, historians lacking any impulse to approve the slave regime have found themselves describing it as a remarkably resilient and even successful social formation. As significant as these historiographical developments may be for revealing the nature of human slavery and elucidating the variety of human institutions, they fail to account for one salient characteristic of slavery in the Western experience. The slave system has always been in some sense a "problem." True enough, modern intellectuals have tended to see virtually all human institutions as problems, as obstacles to the achievement of true freedom. No other social arrangement could supply better evidence for this modern attitude than slavery. Yet the history of slavery as a problem has its origins in the beginnings of written discourse. At the same time that it formed the lives of great numbers of human beings, it was perceived as the profoundest of social conundrums.

David Brion Davis began his analysis of this question in 1966 with the publication of *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, which carried the story into the late eighteenth century. In this second offering, he examines the phenomenon in the period of the democratic revolution. The first volume swept across many centuries, yet one felt the immediacy of the problem. In treating the revolutionary age, Davis is more concrete. Although no issue brought forth a more compelling ideological commitment from those who took it up, Davis shows in considerable detail and with unerring skill that the problem of slavery provoked a variety of responses. It may not have been the central issue of the age, but it was surely of critical importance.

The book is about antislavery; supporters of the institution found little reason to view it as a problem. Davis finds the origins of antislavery in the familiar places: the religious perfectionism of such fringe sects as the Quakers, the rationalist libertarianism that descended from Locke, and the ethic of the benevolent man of feeling that later matured into romanticism. The tendency in all of these movements was reductionist, a distinct drift away from the concrete and tentative toward the abstract and absolute. None of them awakened in their followers a firm attachment to existing institutions. They were movements of opposition and slavery was only one of the evidences of social organization against which they set their full force. In time

slavery came to be the major object of their attentions because it was easiest to see in that institution the deprivation of freedom that was apparent in virtually all social arrangements. Freedom could be defined only in opposition to society and hence black slavery became symbolic for the thralldom that society imposed on all men.

Davis is on the side of freedom and antislavery, though he does manifest a certain discomfort in dealing with the simplism of reform. In fact his book is an effort to explain that life is more complicated than most of the characters he treats would have dared believe.

The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770-1823

by David Brion Davis
Cornell University Press \$17.50

"Truth," he writes, "is always framed in ambiguity;... good and evil are always colored by human ambivalence." He concedes that "history is filled with moral ironies." Yet he affirms that we are the beneficiaries of the reformers of the past who called upon the "collective conscience" and broke the "proprieties of the present." "Virtually all significant moral change springs from people who are in some sense deviant...." Davis may be no reductionist in his explanations of the origins of antislavery, but his sympathies rest with the terrible simplifications of modern reform. He invariably defines freedom as external to social order.

The major impulse toward antislavery arose from Christian messianism. Calvinism had long sought social correlations to man's sinfulness, and by the late eighteenth century Quakerism had become a vehicle for the more subversive ideas of Enlightenment reform. The Christian touched by the immediate infusion of grace or the Quaker transfixed by the inner light could assert his new liberty by championing the cause of the oppressed. And what better way could the new American nation find to effect its messianic motto, *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, than to emancipate the slaves? The Christian freed by God's grace from the burdens of the world and hence released from the obligations of subordination could scarcely support an institution whose very essence was the subjection of one man by another. The perfectionist sects saw the hierarchical arrangements of historical institutions as the antithesis of God's kingdom. As a consequence slavery assumed the burden borne by the corrupt world in sectarian thinking. It be-

came the primary evidence of worldly corruption.

Still the consequences of Christian perfectionism were ambiguous. The messianic drive led as often to quietism as it did to aggressive reform. In the United States there proved to be no necessary connection between evangelical revivalism and antislavery. Although the revivals of the early nineteenth century greatly stimulated the American attack on the institution, the consequences for the slaves were not the same as the effect on their benefactors. Conversion of the slaves often led to Christian resignation and better slaves, not emancipation. Among slaveholders it induced a spirit of trusteeship which may have alleviated the immediate plight of the blacks but scarcely contributed to their hope for freedom. Most poignant of all, freedom for the slaves did not lead to an increase in Christian fellowship between white and black. Freed slaves were driven from their homes in the South, and in the cities they kept to themselves. Few blacks became Quakers.

The doctrines of the inner light and the individual experience of conversion had a secular analogue in the principle of self-sovereignty derived from the humanist image of man. The major ideas of the age of revolution rested on the Lockean conceptions of possessive individualism and a contractual social and political order. These seminal concepts justified the emergence of the industrial society of the nineteenth century, and the Quakers pioneered in its development. The principles that led them to oppose slavery were closely related to the attitudes that placed them at the center of the most significant processes of modernization.

This troubles Davis. The Quakers had an ingenious way of combining high principle and utility. The humanitarian ethic required the condemnation of the slightest signs of overt cruelty and was unrelenting in exposing the ways in which society masked its imperfections. The Quakers "helped to create a moral climate in which a highly ethical purpose could disguise the effects of power. Although eighteenth-century Quakers were not responsible for the consequences of a nineteenth-century free labor market—or for the consequences of British efforts to stamp out the slave trade in the heart of Africa—they unwittingly drew distinctions and boundaries which opened the way, under guise of moral rectitude, for unprecedented forms of oppression." One might question Davis' assumptions about the nineteenth-century labor market or the brutality of British imperialism; but no matter, the irony is nicely put. Quaker industrialists took a major role in dismantling the old order,