

The U.S.A., from the 1970s to the Present

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The three decades after the Vietnam War marked a palpable shift from the rest of the twentieth century. The Civil Rights movement's calls for integration effectively ended, leaving the work of implementing visions heralded by Martin Luther King and countless other activists to rank-and-file Americans. To be sure, Americans faced sundry fate-defining questions by the 1970s: how to end the war in Vietnam, what to do with traumatized veterans, how to reunite with alienated young Americans, how to heal from a season of violence that peaked in 1968 with the My Lai Massacre and the murders of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy, how to peacefully and fully integrate corporate boardrooms after having integrated grade school classrooms during the 1960s. Despite unyielding pressure from Americans committed to moving their country away from its legacy of white supremacy, the last quarter of the twentieth century is best characterized as a tug-of-war between impressive advancements for African Americans (such as doubling the rate of black college graduates) and devastating reversals of fortune (such as skyrocketing rates of childhood ailments and poverty). Even as African Americans triumphed legally, economically, politically, and culturally, they also faced real tragedies, most markedly with respect to prospects for their children.

The Fight for Education

By 1970 African Americans and their allies began exposing the deep-seated commitment to white supremacy still thriving beyond the South by pulling back the veil on *de facto* Jim Crow in schooling, voting inequalities, access to housing and employment. As in Dixie, school integration became the testing ground for desegregation efforts spearheaded by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other black organizations. This time, nearly twenty years after the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, all eyes were on Boston, with its firmly defined racial and ethnic neighborhoods, the result of a century of redlining. While events in Philadelphia, Newark, New York, Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, and Los Angeles mirrored those in Boston, the city hailed as the "cradle of democracy" and boasting of New England gentility led some of the most violent protests against school integration.

The clamor by black parents concerned over the unequal distribution of resources in predominantly black urban schools reached a fever pitch. Pointing to the dearth of books, supplies, and qualified and committed teachers, they organized committees intent on making their grievances known to municipal and board of education officials. Though African Americans comprised 15 percent of the city's population, their children remained clustered in a handful of Boston schools, namely in Roxbury, while white children enjoyed a broader range of educational options and resources. In effect, Boston, like so many other American cities, operated two separate school boards—one reserved for poor black children, the other for white ones. Those opposed to such a blatant display of inequality resolved to dismantle that system by devising a plan whereby some children, black and white, would be bused into opposing neighborhoods. In

the case of Boston, the one-mile division between all-black Roxbury and all-white South Boston demarcated a steadfast line between two very different worlds. After weeks of frenzied demonstrations, in September 1971 black children swallowed their fears, boarded yellow school buses, and headed for school escorted by a police caravan and helicopters carrying snipers.

White and black parents wrestled over their children's right to a proper education. White parents saw that entitlement as one whereby their children would study in their own neighborhood schools. They even staged a boycott, a strategy adopted from black civil rights activists, keeping more than 50 percent of their children home rather than sending them to school with black kids. For their part, black parents argued that so long as the school board refused to invest its resources equitably and so long as better resources remained mostly pooled in white neighborhoods, black children would be herded out to those areas. It is important to note that whatever their misgivings, African-American parents saw busing as an imperfect solution to a resource allocation problem, opting for sending their children to suburban white schools not because they were inherently better environments but rather because access to resources informed their children's future success.

To be sure, many black parents adamantly opposed busing, believing that after nearly twenty-five years of integrating southern schools, black children had been exposed to angry, violent whites for long enough. After all, many of those same parents had witnessed the chaos at Little Rock and were veterans of other southern civil rights battles. Some had even abandoned the South since the 1960s for cities in the North and West, hoping to outpace Jim Crow, only to find it proscribing life in Boston and other large urban centers as well. If 1970 saw the last kicks of a dying horse in Boston, by the late 1970s, the battle over school integration moved back to university and professional schools, with *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) challenging the nature of preferential admission programs. At the core, these measures, designed to correct the endemic and systematic outcome of Jim Crow education and employment patterns, faced the greatest resistance from white Americans who saw the advancement of African Americans as robbing them of their entitlement to middle-class privileges. Accordingly, programs like Cleveland's promotion of black firefighters and Alabama's policy of hiring black state troopers were challenged in court as unconstitutional acts of "reverse discrimination." Throughout the 1970s, the courts sided with private and federal efforts at correcting corporate wrongs, but with a sharp turn toward conservatism by the 1980s, many of the strategies that finally cut a path toward management and other leadership positions for African Americans ran into new dead ends under President Ronald Reagan.

The 80s Paradox

African Americans who had spent the 1950s and '60s fighting for a foothold in education and voting booths could weigh their success in the ensuing years, thanks in large part to the Freedom Rides and the Voting Rights Acts of 1965 and 1975. As a result, during the 1970s, a dramatic transformation occurred in local and state politics, namely, the rise of black elected officials. Whereas in 1971 there had only been eight black mayors, within just four years that number ballooned to 135, with many mayors governing cities with populations of over one million. The number of black state senators more than tripled. In Congress, black members went from fourteen in 1972 to forty by 1997, pointing yet again to robust African-American involvement in politics, as evidenced by the careers of Maxine Waters, Jesse Jackson, Barbara Jordan, and Andrew Young, with the last two becoming the first southerners elected to Congress since Reconstruction. Most impressively, in 1972 Shirley Chisholm announced her run for the

presidency, becoming the first African American to do so. An indefatigable civil rights advocate, Chisholm served fourteen years in Congress and maintained that she was a "people's candidate," not a black candidate or a women's candidate. The 1980s began with obvious measures of success for the nation's 26.5 million African Americans. Astronauts Guy S. Bluford Jr. and Mae C. Jemison became the first African- American man and woman in space. Chicago elected its first black mayor, Harold Washington; before the end of the decade, David Dinkins would win the mayor's race in New York. Career officer Colin Powell took up the helm of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the highest military position in the Department of Defense.

African Americans made an impressive showing in entertainment, arts, sports, and literature during the 1980s. Michael Jackson's *Thriller* sold forty million copies and secured eight Grammys, quickly becoming the bestselling album of all time. Eddie Murphy debuted on NBC's wildly popular *Saturday Night Live*, launching a career that would eventually lead to an Oscar nomination. In 1989 Denzel Washington earned an Oscar as best supporting actor in *Glory*, a Civil War drama about a black regiment. The 1980s also witnessed great strides for black athletes like Carl Lewis and Michael Jordan, who dominated their sports. In 1983 Alice Walker's *Color Purple* won the Pulitzer Prize as well as the National Book Award; two years later, the book's film adaptation earned a record eleven Oscar nominations. A number of other women enjoyed publishing success, including Maya Angelou with *The Heart of a Woman* (1981) and Gloria Naylor with *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983). Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) secured the Pulitzer before going on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, making her the first African-descended laureate.

Without a doubt, the two African-American entertainers who enjoyed the greatest success during the 1980s were Oprah Winfrey, whose show entered syndication in 1985, turning her into one of the world's most powerful billionnaires, and Bill Cosby, creator and producer of NBC's television show *The Cosby Show*, an at times saccharine and overly sanitized depiction of a world most—black and white—never realized existed: the black upper middle class. *The Cosby Show* introduced American audiences to a happy and loving black family: a doctor, a corporate attorney, and their five children. Though living in New York, the Cosbys seemed immune to the range of urban conflicts complicating African-American lives during the 1980s—police violence, drugs, crime, underemployment, and poverty. The show, Cosby explained, was designed as a powerful countermodel to predominant depictions of African Americans as dysfunctional family units. Its real appeal may well have been its seductive image of what the Civil Rights movement had won for African Americans—fairer access to higher education, measured in financial success and security, also producing stable, two-parent, hetero-normative models of family life.

Just down the street from Cosby's haven, young African Americans were reporting a very different reality. Crack cocaine had hit the inner city and given way to a rampant wave of violence, crime, and escalating rates of HIV/AIDS. Likewise, a new musical form, rap, gave voice to a younger generation's frustrations with rising unemployment, police harassment, racism, gender relations, and poverty. In 1988 NWA captured the raw emotions of young men at war with police in Compton, California, home to one of the largest black communities on the West Coast. For its part, Public Enemy denounced the effects of racism in access to health care, declaring "9-1-1's a joke!" when reports surfaced that ambulances would not serve impoverished black communities, where either wanton violence made rescues hazardous or a lack of health coverage meant that EMS companies would not be paid for saving black lives. In the end, early rappers provided their audiences with a looking glass into urban life, unapologetically unearthing

its ugly side but also rejoicing in ghetto life, seeing beauty, warmth, and loving in a world that most politicians vilified and most suburbanites imagined as unsalvageable.

Foremost, the 1980s stand out as a decade of paradox. Many Americans enjoyed a greater level of prosperity in the 1980s, while others slid deeper into financial despair. The median income for an African-American family of four in 1980 was \$12,674, almost half of what white families of the same makeup lived on, \$21,904. The Census Bureau reported that 88 percent of African-American families earned less than \$50,000 in 1982. Whereas in 1984, 40 percent of black men aged twenty-five to fifty earned less than \$10,000, by 1986, the black middle class, those earning more than \$50,000, grew to 8.8 percent, doubling from the previous decade. Even so, the Washington-based Center on Budget and Policy Properties confirmed that during the Reagan years, one-third of African Americans—and 45.6 percent of black children—lived below the poverty line.

The Reagan Era

President Ronald Reagan, elected to office in 1980, did much to vilify the urban poor, especially women, confirming the suspicions of many African Americans that the man who first came to blows with the Black Panther Party as governor of California would, as president, do little to improve conditions for blacks. Reagan launched his bid for the presidency with a speech in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where civil rights activists Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner had been murdered by white supremacists in 1964. From that stage, Reagan resuscitated talk of states' rights (locally understood as code for anti-desegregation) and curbs on the federal government's powers (regional euphemism for rolling back affirmative action). For his audience—supporters and detractors alike—Reagan's choice of location as well as the content of his speech was seen as an attempt to soothe southern resentment over the last two decades, but especially over the Civil Rights Bill of 1964. Disturbingly, the FBI reported a resurgence in Ku Klux Klan activity, a pattern not seen since the 1960s. Adding fuel to the fire, Reagan refused to meet with the NAACP. Instead, he capitalized on his access to a southern audience and publicly waxed poetic about his hero, Jefferson Davis, the iconic Mississippi rogue Confederate leader revered by southern white supremacists.

From the outset, President Reagan was an outspoken opponent to busing and affirmative action; one of his first acts in office was to weaken the Civil Rights Commission by ousting black and white liberals appointed under former president Jimmy Carter, including Arthur S. Fleming, who had supported voting and education reform. He also pulled back federal support for civil rights cases, turning the matter over to the states, where he believed that the work should happen. President Ronald Reagan is also known for characterizing poor women, especially black ones, as "welfare queens driving around in pink Cadillacs." During his time in office, the culture of hostility toward the poor dramatically intensified, also taking on decidedly racialized undertones. Black women were singled out as emblems of all that was wrong with American society and urban life in particular.

President Reagan stirred up his opponents when he threw his support behind Bob Jones University in South Carolina, renowned for expressly forbidding interracial dating and marriage. He also sided with United Christian College in Goldsboro, North Carolina, which stood firmly behind its refusal to admit black students in the 1980s. Worst of all, President Reagan dug in his heels on anti-apartheid movements, championing South Africa's white supremacist regime when the rest of the world increasingly called for the dismantling of that blatantly dehumanizing

system. Prominent African Americans like Jesse Jackson, Arthur Ashe, and Steve Wonder joined the international anti-apartheid movement by persuasively pointing to the similarities between southern Jim Crow and the South African regime.

Reagan responded by pointing to his backing of the plan to make Martin Luther King Day a federal holiday, a bill adopted into law in November 1983, though its application would be delayed for an additional three years as a concession to states still vehemently opposed to celebrating a civil rights leader so reviled during his lifetime. Despite his lack of investment in African Americans, Ronald Reagan attracted several black conservatives to the Republican party: Colin Powell, Clarence Pendleton Jr., Clarence Thomas, and Larry Elder were perhaps the most notable conservatives making their way up Republican ranks during the 1980s.

The 1990s

Most African-Americans breathed a sigh of relief when Reagan's term ended, though George Bush's election did not signal a palpable shift from conservative Republican rule. To be sure, conditions for most African Americans, especially children, were legitimate cause for alarm, particularly in underfunded urban areas. In spite of nearly half a decade of civil rights campaigns and countless court orders, African-American children, especially those living in the North, remained highly concentrated in segregated school systems. For example, in Illinois, 83 percent of black children attended segregated schools in 1990, while 80 percent of African-American children in New York (the state with the largest black population), Mississippi, and Michigan (with Detroit, the city with the largest black population) were in predominantly black schools. By contrast, children in Kentucky overwhelmingly attended integrated classrooms, with only 7 percent of public schools there segregated. Put simply, by the 1990s, southern schools were more consistently desegregated than northern and western ones, with very real consequences for those communities still allocating their resources along Jim Crow lines.

The result of poorly funded schools is easily gauged: less economic stability, because of impeded access to quality higher education; as of the mid-1980s, in some of the worst-funded school districts, nearly 50 percent of African Americans did not complete high school. By 1989 African Americans accounted for only 3.5 percent of students earning a Ph.D. and 5 percent of those going on to medical and law schools. In 1991 the U.S. Census Bureau pointed to an alarming trend for blacks in higher education: only 12 percent of African Americans aged twenty-five or older earned a four-year college degree, half of the rate for their white counterparts, thereby aggravating the income gap between black and white Americans at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Completing college—and better still, earning graduate and professional degrees—translates into important human capital, urgently needed in impoverished urban communities. Yet throughout the 1990s, higher-paying, more secure jobs remained primarily closed to African Americans: only 0.9 percent of architects, 1.7 percent of dentists, 2.5 percent of chiropractors, 3 percent of accountants, and 4 percent of lawyers were black. By contrast, 48 percent of African-American men did blue-collar work during the 1990s, while 58 percent of black women toiled in white-collar jobs. In the end, Jim Crow hiring and promotion practices persistently locked African-American men and women out of higher-paying, secure employment, forcing legal action in landmark cases such as *Fullilove v. Klutznick* (1980), *U.S. v. Paradise* (1987), and *Metro Broadcasting v. FCC* (1990). Throughout the 1990s, the Supreme Court struck down federal and corporate programs that advanced women and African Americans in professional sectors, with the justices declaring "suspect" the use of racial classifications, as in the congressional statute

requiring 10 percent of federal highway projects to be set aside for African-American contractors.

Suburban white flight aggravated an already precarious situation for African Americans who during the 1990s remained overwhelmingly gathered in major urban centers; in 1989 the Census Bureau announced that 80 percent of African Americans lived in metropolitan areas. The income gap between black and white Americans expanded during the last quarter of the twentieth century, with the median income for black families growing much more slowly at the end of the century. Whether working as mechanics or secretaries, blacks earned consistently less—on average \$15,000 to \$20,000 less per family—than whites. In the Midwest, 38 percent of African American families lived below the poverty line, five times the rate of white ones. The U.S. Census Bureau confirmed that 56 percent of poor inner-city dwellers during the 1980s and 1990s were African Americans, though that number has been shifting to include Latinos and recent African migrants as well. In 1980 the National Urban League augured that by century's end, American cities would become increasingly "black, brown, and broke." The median income for black families in 1990 was \$18,000, while white ones earned \$30,000, race-based income gaps reminiscent of the 1930s.

Poverty urgently haunts black children. Black infant mortality rates in 1990 were more than double that for white babies. Diabetes, high blood pressure, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, heart disease, and other health risks aggravated by poverty and truncated access to education shaved years off impoverished African Americans' lives. If in the 1980s whites could expect to live to see their seventies, African Americans could not, with nearly a decade less of life expectancy at birth. What is more, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that during the 1980s, black male homicide rates skyrocketed by 68 percent, driven in large part by drug trafficking—related violence. Also attributed to drugs was the alarming spread of HIV/AIDS, with federal reports citing the rate of infection among black women as having grown by 74 percent. Quite simply, poverty and crime conspired against black women's lives more than any natural risk or disaster.

African-American children born or raised by single parents, namely women, faced an even higher level of danger. During the 1990s, five times more black children in Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, and Michigan were born to single mothers. Given that African-American women earn consistently less than their male counterparts, black and white, and that women, regardless of race, are underrepresented in the highest-paying employment sectors, black children raised on single incomes suffer higher rates of poverty. And by 1988, 60 percent of African-American families with one or more child were headed by a single parent, compared to 20 percent of white families. Moreover, 60 percent of black female-headed households were fixed in city centers, pointing to a real crisis in the making for the urban working class. In other words, almost four times as many black children were raised by single mothers, compared to 14 percent of white children, with 35 percent of black children born to parents who had never wed, a major shift in marriage trends from the 1960s, when only 2 percent of African American children had been born to unwed parents.

By 1990, the largest concentration of African Americans, 30 percent, lived in the South Atlantic states, with Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Maryland home to the largest number of black Americans. The nation's largest cities—New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Chicago, and Los Angeles—were home to the largest black populations. In many southern cities, African Americans made up the majority of the citizenry: 70 percent in

Washington, D.C., 67 percent in Atlanta, 55 percent in New Orleans, 40 percent in Memphis. Detroit, home to so many southern migrants in the latter part of the twentieth century, remains the city in the North with the highest concentration of blacks – 65 percent. Regrettably, these same urban centers suffered from some of the greatest social and political problems at the dawn of the twenty-first century: thin municipal coffers, the legacy of Reagan's trickle-down economic theory and cutbacks to federal funding for cities; high unemployment; crumbling infrastructures; poor schools; and violence, like the Rodney King riots that erupted in Los Angeles in 1992.

The New Century

Though President Bill Clinton (1992–2000) benefited from the support and affection of African Americans, conditions for blacks in America improved at a modest pace during both of his administrations. In particular, Clinton's Welfare to Work reforms and draconian drug laws forced thousands of African Americans into deeper misery. Deindustrialization, coupled with growing unemployment, became real cause for concern, especially given rising high school attrition rates and new service-sector jobs moving to the suburbs. If left unchecked, black male unemployment and crime promise to be an even greater problem in the twenty-first century as people seek alternative ways of making ends meet for themselves and their families. With an estimated one million African Americans of working age languishing in prison by 2005, up nearly 900 percent since the 1950s, the degree of black incarceration has already reached startling proportions.

The range of preventable health crises undermining African Americans at the dawn of the twenty-first century is an epidemic that promises to worsen before trends reverse. Quite simply, African Americans suffer and die from diseases aggravated by limited access to proper health care, poverty, and poor epidemiological education. Despite a wealth of information on the hazards of smoking and indulging in fatty and high-fructose foods, African Americans experience cancer and type 2 diabetes patterns leading to higher mortality rates. Environmental racism, toxic dumping, and limited access to affordable, healthy food options make worse the lives of blacks in America, especially African-American children.

African Americans embraced the new century with the hope and grit that carried them to success against the insurmountable challenges presented by the twentieth century's Jim Crow era. The twenty-first century will bring great triumphs for African Americans, as already seen in the growing ranks of black entrepreneurs. More African Americans have college degrees, hold positions of power, earn middle-class incomes, and own their homes than ever before and scores of black immigrants are changing the makeup of African America and transforming debates about black life.

The invigorating career of Barack Obama, elected the first African-American president on November 4, 2008, closes an era of exclusion in American life, just as it also sounds the salvo on what the twenty-first century will hold.

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