

THE REAGAN LEGACY AND THE RACIAL DIVIDE IN THE GEORGE W. BUSH ERA

Michael C. Dawson

Department of Government and Department of African and African American Studies, Harvard University

Lawrence D. Bobo

Department of Sociology and Department of African and African American Studies, Harvard University

Honest and earnest criticism from those whose interests are most nearly touched—criticism of writers by readers, of government by those governed, of leaders by those led—this is the soul of democracy and the safeguard of modern society.

W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903

Although this essay appears very close to the most consequential presidential election since 1980, it was written months before during the week that former President Ronald Reagan died. The great majority of the U.S. media praised Reagan without any critical reflection—calling him the greatest president of the twentieth century, the man who brought hope and optimism back to America, the president who united the people. As one commentator mentioned, it was as if the nation itself had a case of collective Alzheimer's. Reagan deeply divided the nation and particularly on matters of race this division is very much still with us.

Reagan himself was a racial polarizer throughout his political career. His drive for the governorship of California in the middle 1960s was significantly fueled by his opposition to the state referendum that called for open housing. He opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act as well as the 1965 Voting Rights act. He opened his campaign after receiving the Republican nomination in 1980 in Philadelphia, Mississippi, which was the site in 1964 of the brutal murder of civil rights activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. While remaining silent during the speech about the murder of the civil rights workers, Reagan announced his support for “states rights”—the racist code words that had been used to justify in turn slavery, secession from the Union, Southern segregation, and the often violent opposition of Southern racists to the civil rights movement, civil rights legislation, and court

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decisions such as the then relatively new *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. While in office, he vetoed the 1988 extension of the Civil Rights Act while trying to win tax exemptions for Bob Jones University, which had openly racist policies. Nobel Peace Prize winner Bishop Desmond Tutu had nothing but contempt for the Reagan administration's policies on South Africa stating, "In my view, the Reagan administration's support and collaboration with it is equally immoral, evil and totally un-Christian" (quoted in Jackson 2004). On another occasion, after Reagan had spoken in favor of the apartheid government in 1986, Tutu exclaimed in disgust, "Your president is the pits as far as blacks are concerned. He sits there like the great, big white chief of old" (quoted in Jackson 2004).

Public opinion studies repeatedly demonstrated that a large majority of White Americans agreed with the current assessment of Reagan in the media as the great optimistic communicator who brought hope back to the nation. There were of course some critically important exceptions such as the gay and lesbian communities who were particularly bitter about the administration's gravely dilatory AIDS policies as well as its many anti-union stances, but by and large White America embraced the "Gipper." African Americans overwhelmingly had come to the same conclusion as that of Bishop Tutu. Deep Black opposition to Reagan fueled Harold Washington's successful 1983 campaign to become the first Black mayor of Chicago as well as the highly visible and, particularly in 1988, surprisingly strongly supported bids of Jesse Jackson for the Democrats' nomination for president. Indeed, scholars have shown that Jackson and Reagan defined the racial polarization in the electorate. It would not be overstating the case that a large majority of the White electorate loathed Jackson just as a great majority of the Black electorate constituted Reagan's bitterest foe.

The legacy of Reagan's racial polarization can be found in many arenas today and the first volume of the *Du Bois Review* (henceforth *DBR*) has focused by coincidence on many aspects of that legacy. In the first issue we published several articles which documented the continued deep divide of racial polarization in public opinion as well as a lead article that documented the depth of continued racial segregation in the nation and the physiological, behavioral, and health-related toll it takes on African Americans. In this issue we highlight other aspects of the legacy of racial polarization and politics. Under Reagan, the life chances of Americans became more unequal at an accelerated rate. This was particularly noticeable in income and employment statistics, but was by no means limited to the economic arena. During the 1980s, whatever progress Blacks had made on a number of fronts came to a halt. Articles in this issue of *DBR* highlight how some of these racial differences in life chances play out today. In a major assessment, Linda Darling-Hammond documents and analyzes the continuing disparities in educational opportunities across the color line, showing how recent testing and "accountability" policies are working to widen rather than narrow those disparities. Likewise, the article by Arline Geronimus and J. Philip Thompson highlight the continued racial inequities in health outcomes and how these, too, are profoundly shaped by public policies long insensitive to the particularities of Black communities.

Another of the central legacies of Reagan-era Republican electoral tactics was the use of racial code words (e.g., the "welfare queen" anecdote from the 1980 campaign) that evoked anti-Black sentiment as a means of forging a winning national electoral coalition. Building on the lessons of both segregationist former governor of Alabama, George Wallace, as well as Richard Nixon's "Southern Strategy," these racial tactics were perfected in the Reagan era and utilized by both Bushes' presidential campaigns notably infamously in the elder Bush's Willie Horton campaign ads in 1988. The article by Luis R. Fraga and David L. Leal highlights how

racial tactics are used by both political parties particularly with reference to Latinos in this era's more complicated racial terrain. Katherine Tate provides us with a provocative article that argues that the conservative legacy of the last quarter century has had more of a conservative influence on some sectors of African American opinion than some authors (such as one of us) have argued. Be that as it may, just as in the Reagan era, Black dismay with the sitting conservative president is deep, bitter, and ferocious. Black approval of George W. Bush in the spring of this year was measured by some reputable pollsters at 8%. And, further elucidating these themes in this issue of *DBR*, Hanes Walton reviews recent books on race in public opinion and American political behavior.

Another key legacy of the Reagan era involved the crafting of social policy not premised on ideas about the basic structures of opportunity and constraints facing individuals and communities, but rather on ideas about the choices and cultural affinities of individuals. During the Reagan era this thrust was most prominently exemplified by Charles Murray's hotly contested anti-welfare tract, *Losing Ground* (1984). In this issue of *DBR* we launch the first of an occasional series of special "State of the Discourse Symposia" that focuses very much on this paradigm for social analysis. We have two very distinguished scholars, historian Alice O'Connor and political scientist Rogers Smith, reviewing the impact of two of the leading conservative interventions in the scholarship of race. This is particularly fitting because the work of both Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom and of Dinesh D'Souza is representative of the conservative theorizing on race that provides the intellectual and even more so, the rhetorical, foundation for the racial policies of conservative politicians since the infamous Fairmount Conference at which what became the Reagan governing team announced their radical shift in policies of race.

The spread and influence of "cultural" analyses of race and inequality now cut across many domains of inquiry. Thus, Prudence Carter reviews how race and culture shape contemporary debates about educational outcomes for African Americans and Latinos. Alford Young examines three recent ethnographies that move beyond simple portraits of cultural pathology when analyzing the fabric of life in low-income Black communities. And Mia Tuan's "State of the Discourse" essay examines how processes of assimilation may break down distinct ethnic group cultures and identities in many instances and yet, in some cases, steadily mark the members of particular groups as not quite full citizens.

As usual, we have cutting-edge articles advancing racial theory. Distinguished historian and ethnic-studies scholar Ramón Gutiérrez provides a long overdue treatment of what the powerful Chicano and Black Power movements did both to advance internal colonialism theory and teach us about the contours of race in the United States. Michael Hanchard and Erin Chung continue our practice of international, broadly comparative, and critical analyses of how social scientists engage in theorizing and in empirical research on matters of race.

Corresponding author: Professor Michael C. Dawson, Director of Graduate Studies, Department of African and African American Studies, Barker Center 249, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138. E-mail: mdawson@latte.harvard.edu

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