

Joseph G. Conti and Brad Stetson

The New Black Vanguard

At a time when political correctness and ideological pretension have overrun clear thinking on matters of race, it is refreshing to hear the sensible voice of conservative black intellectuals—the New Black Vanguard. Though they have long been present, they are “new” in the sense that today they stand in especially stark opposition to—and have the potential to depose—the longstanding political hegemony of the civil rights establishment. These black dissidents, the most recognizable being Thomas Sowell, Shelby Steele, Glenn Loury, Walter Williams, and Robert Woodson, are a unique witness to the value of rationality and clear thinking in public affairs, and their common-sense approach to political philosophy bears a special relevance in today’s liberal political climate.

The conceptual centerpiece of their witness has been an unapologetic rejection of the authority and cogency of the “official story”—represented in the views of civil rights luminaries—regarding the path to black advancement. The New Black Vanguard presents an alternative message; it is a message of self-reliance, in the context of a dignified community, trusting its own ability to exercise freedom with responsibility, and thereby providing for itself the moral and social resources that breed and sustain independence.

Although the host of conservative black intellectuals that comprise this “new vanguard” do not present a homogeneous, systematic organization of a singular political philosophy, many of their ideas do intersect at definite points. The following pages are devoted to summarizing the points on which this provocative group of thinkers agree.

Members of the New Black Vanguard reject the deterministic notion that race unavoidably conditions individual thinking. Advocating a political humanism over the group politics so regularly practiced today, they see each person’s individuality as more significant than his race or gender. Their belief that an intellectual common ground exists among Americans of all colors is sharply at odds with the popular model of race relations. Recent remarks by film director Spike Lee are illustrative of the “correct” view. Lee, angered over the reluctance of a bond company to further fund some of the production costs of his movie *Malcolm X*, charged that Hollywood is more willing to risk money on projects being

Joseph G. Conti and Brad Stetson are Ph. D. candidates in Social Ethics at the University of Southern California. This article is based on their book *Challenging the Civil Rights Establishment*, published by Praeger Publishers, spring 1993.

supervised by white filmmakers. He lashed out at a black female executive of the bond company, saying that she "is a black woman but Clarence Thomas is supposed to be black too. Skin color doesn't mean anything."¹ Considering what he intended it to mean, that last sentence is ironic. While Lee meant it to express his furious disapproval of those heretical African-Americans who allow their minds to breach the borders of correct and truly authentic "black thinking," the true import of his statement and the intellectually stifling and censorious attitude it reflects is that race means everything! It and it alone is deterministic of what one should think, and what one is justified in thinking.

In contrast with the presumption toward determinism present in mainstream black advocacy, the New Black Vanguard believes that the individuality of each person enables him to cognitively transcend the prescriptions of color-coordinated thinking. This transcendence makes possible the common moral project of a pluralist democracy. A denial of this transcendence is an invitation to racial "balkanization."

In addition to rejecting deterministic notions of race, the New Black Vanguard argues that a chilling silence has been spread around a ghetto-specific culture by black advocates who fear that discussions about problems facing that culture will play into the hands of enemies of the black community. But such taboos on discussion, the dissidents argue, at best conduce to ineffective social policy—at worst, social engineering fiascos.

A benchmark moment in the history of American racial discourse occurred in 1965 with the publication of (now Senator) Daniel P. Moynihan's commotion-causing *The Black Family: The Case for National Action*. Noting a sudden, sharp rise in the number of single-parent black families, Moynihan

suggested that this trend posed a threat to black progress in the coming years, and would effectively close opportunities newly opened by civil rights victories. For this analysis and prognosis, Moynihan drew heavy criticism, even vilification. Many academics, including psychologist William Ryan, accused him of "blaming the victim."² Others accused him of "crypto-racism."

In a retrospective piece on the Moynihan controversy titled, "The Family, The Nation, and Senator Moynihan," Glenn Loury, professor of political economy at Boston University, argued that the chilling effects of this caustic censuring were felt in the social sciences for decades, effectively dissuading bold critical discourse on black family issues.³ In the rhetorical calculus of the late '60s and early '70s, for instance, a sociologist's call for attention to widespread unwed pregnancy would not infrequently be descrambled as "genocide." Rather than risk costly charges of crypto-racism, however unfounded, many academics simply played it safe, and shied away from controversial analyses. In this way, a multitude of topics related to black welfare were simply cordoned off from free inquiry, and non-conformist viewpoints suppressed. Of course, a good many scholars were genuinely persuaded by William Ryan's rebuttal to Moynihan's thesis. But as a matter of record, says Loury, many dissenters were simply cowed into silence.

The sad irony, according to Loury, is that two decades after Moynihan's censure, the prescience of his thesis is beyond dispute.⁴ William Julius Wilson, at odds with Loury on many issues, agrees with him here. "Aside from some problems in historical accounting," writes Wilson in *The Truly Disadvantaged*, "Moynihan's analysis . . . proved to be prophetic."⁵ Wilson and Loury's agreement is representative of the broad consensus that has developed on the

matter. The scoffing at Moynihan's thesis was not without consequence. James Q. Wilson notes: "Two decades that could have been devoted to thought and experimentation had been frittered away."⁶

The plausibility of Moynihan's hypothesis is emphatically confirmed by current demographic data. In 1959 about 2 percent of all black babies were born out-of-wedlock; today, the percentage has risen to over 60 percent, and in some inner city neighborhoods it is as high as

85 and 90 percent. Robert Woodson, founder of the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, believes this reflects an alarming deterioration in community ethos, and that it offers a damning commentary on the quality of black advocacy during the last two decades. A radical "course correction" is needed, he argues, one that particularly seeks the vitality and stability of the black family, and boldly cautions black youth

that poor personal choices may block opportunity as much as, or more than, the machinations of racists. Reflecting on the present strategy of black leadership, which he sees largely discredited by its track record, Shelby Steele, author of the best-selling book *The Content of Our Character* and professor of English at San Jose State University, argues that "[t]heir impulse is to be 'political,' to keep the larger society on edge, to keep them feeling as though they have not done enough for blacks."⁷

The media, especially, is kept "on edge," argues Thomas Sowell, Senior Fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution. Reporters,

eager to avoid embarrassing and costly charges of masked racism, are inclined to handle issues in ways consonant with the civil rights establishment's vision of race relations in America—viz., "structural racism" is the biggest obstacle to black progress. On race related issues, the objections of dissidents, black or white, rarely make the 6 o'clock news—instead they are treated, Sowell says, as benighted "yokels or fascists."⁸

What does make the news is the rhetoric of victimization, which goes conspicuously unchallenged by reporters desperate to avoid charges of racial insensitivity, even at the expense of objectivity. Such distortion was obvious in media coverage of the recent Los Angeles riots. One of the capital ironies of the coverage was the absence of the phrases "racially motivated violence"

and "hate-crime" on local LA news broadcasts during the 72 hours of bedlam—though they had long been nightly on the tongues of grave and furrow-browed news anchors, reporting yet another minority victimization. The straight-jacketing control of political correctness would not allow the suggestion that racism can be practiced by blacks and other minorities.

But beyond this, says Sowell, the media purposely supports the civil rights establishment. So much so that there "is a positive hostility to analyses of black success, when these cut across the grain of the civil rights vision."⁹ Sowell's thesis finds confir-



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mation in *Media and Business Elites* (1981) and *The Media Elite: America's New Power Brokers* (1986). Social scientists S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Linda Lichter—investigating how journalists' ideological values influenced their reporting—interviewed 240 journalists for several major outlets comprising the "media elite," including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the three television networks. Eighty percent of "media elite" journalists, they discovered, favored affirmative action for blacks.¹⁰ In another survey, the three social scientists asked journalists "where they would turn for reliable information" if they were doing a story on welfare reform. The reporters' choices "weighted heavily toward the liberal end. Three out of four journalists mention at least one liberal source [as a reliable guide to welfare reform]. In sharp contrast, fewer than one in four cites a conservative source."¹¹

The New Black Vanguard also maintains that racism is not a sufficient cause for ghetto poverty and other social problems experienced by the black poor, though the belief that it is effectively demotivates the poor. Many black leaders continue to assert that racism in America is the primary cause and the sustaining force of black poverty. Argues Jesse Jackson, "Ronald Reagan took the shame out of racism." And again, "Racism is now so powerful again in our domestic and foreign policy that it threatens the soul of our nation and our status in the Free World."¹² Alphonso Pinkney agrees: "Reports of the ongoing oppression of Afro-Americans are commonplace. . . ."¹³ Exactly how this expansive, national racism manipulates and controls the fortunes and destinies of American blacks is commonly left underdeveloped and unsystematized.

It is undeniable that definite statistical disparities exist between black and whites in

many areas, including income, education, and occupations. But, Sowell asks, do these disparities necessarily represent "moral inequities" caused by "society"? That is the view of what he calls the "civil rights vision." According to this perspective, statistical dissonance is automatically indicative of "moral inequities" caused by "society."¹⁴ On this view it seems there is a seamless garment of oppression covering the "black experience," rendering it a uniformly victimized condition.

There are, however, problems with this view. Beyond its implausibly absolutistic and highly general nature, it cannot account for the emergence and continued rise of the black middle-class. It also ignores correlative differences in "human capital" and performance as they relate to social mobility. Over the last thirty years, these factors have been exerting an economically polarizing effect on black America, highlighting the distinction between the middle and lower classes.

While 30.7 percent of America's 30 million blacks have incomes below the poverty line, the population of middle-class and affluent blacks has been dramatically expanding.¹⁵ "You've got one segment moving up, and the other stuck at the bottom," says William O'Hare, a social demographer at the University of Louisville.¹⁶ Of those moving up, nearly one in seven black families had an annual income of \$50,000 or more in 1989, according to O'Hare's study of black income, compared with only one in seventeen in 1967.¹⁷ In addition, since the 1960s, the percentage of affluent African-Americans has more than doubled.¹⁸ Initial dubiousity at this trend as proof of cynical "tokenism" has grown less and less credible through the years. Sowell accounts for this economic polarization among blacks in terms of differences in "human capital" and occupational choice. He notes in *The Economics and Politics of Race* that by the late

1960s statistics were showing that black males from families with access to libraries and those who had magazines and other literature in their homes reached high-level occupations as often as white males of similar backgrounds.¹⁹ For married couples outside the South, black family income was 78 percent of white in 1959, 91 percent in 1969, and 96 percent in 1970. Black families headed by women have had declining real incomes during a period when black husband-wife families have had rising real incomes, both absolutely and relative to white families. (Few have put the logic of this dynamic more succinctly than Charles Murray: "A poor woman who wishes to get out of poverty ought not have a baby out of wedlock. This is not a moral statement but an empirical one.")²⁰ The failure to note these class distinctions skews aggregate income figures for blacks downward, giving a misleading picture of overall black progress.

Rejecting racism as omni-explanatory, the New Black Vanguard is convinced that there are other and more credible causes of black poverty—not least among them the pervasive belief that "The System" is egregiously racist and discriminatory. This tends to discourage full-scale economic effort and instead encourages embitterment and resentment, emotions that are de-motivational and lead to economic withdrawal.

On moral and pragmatic grounds, the New Black Vanguard rejects the civil rights leadership's reliance on the political capital of white guilt. Black dissidents resist the temptation to harness white guilt for political purposes. They have a pragmatic reason for not drawing on the guilt many whites feel for racism: such an emphasis, as the record of the civil rights establishment shows, tends toward ineffective juridical and governmental solutions to the distressing problems of black Americans as a racial class. Rather than motivating individual

poor blacks to self-improvement and a critical evaluation of their lives, the emphasis on white guilt works to evoke an "It's their fault!" mentality on the part of many blacks. Black journalist Bob Teague makes this point in *The Flip Side of Soul* (1989):

To achieve our ultimate goals, will we advance faster or slower if we consistently point a finger at Mr. Charlie as the root of all our troubles, never at ourselves? It is my guess that true progress now depends on abandoning our current posture of total innocence.²¹

Forming an interesting corollary to Sowell's notion of the political use of white guilt is Glenn Loury's notion that such "political capital" is most readily garnered by politicians who supercharge their rhetoric with images of the ghetto, the archetypal symbol of white oppression—all the while stumping for policies (i.e., affirmative action) which will primarily benefit middle-class blacks, not the poor. Loury argues that "the suffering of the poorest blacks creates a fund of political capital upon which all members of the group can draw in the pressing of racially based claims."²² Whites agree to these claims, says Steele, to achieve a quick (but spurious) innocence.²³

De-emphasizing racism as the generator of black poverty, the New Black Vanguard explains the proliferation of the black underclass in other ways, including structural changes in urban economies, the effects of welfare work-disincentives, and elements of a ghetto-specific culture that have "taken on a life of their own." In *The State Against Blacks*, Walter Williams—an economist at George Mason University and opponent of the civil rights establishment—examines statist curbing of opportunity in the area of private entrepreneurial activity. As a case in point, he cites government enforcement of restrictive occupational licensures in urban areas. Many of these restrictions were unknown to turn-of-the-

century immigrants who used these occupations to get a foot-hold on America's economic ladder. It was in 1937 that New York City first required a licensure-medallion for each taxi in the city, with a single medallion costing \$10. Today, the price of a New York City medallion has risen to about \$60,000. This typifies, says Williams, the many "politically erected" barriers to employment that depress the life-chances of today's black underclass.²⁴ These barriers prevent what Clint Bolick calls "economic liberty" and the upward mobility that such liberty facilitates.²⁵

Inverting the nomenclature of oppression frequently deployed by the left, Williams terms these barriers and their effects "structural poverty."²⁶ Nevertheless, neither Williams nor Sowell believe such "structural poverty" limitations adequately account for pervasive nonwork in ghetto areas. Though black youth record the highest of all unemployment rates (typically over 40 percent), Sowell and Williams have argued that lack of jobs does not account for the high incidence of black youth unemployment—nor the unemployment of adult blacks. Sowell and Williams have also argued that steady employment, even at low-wage work, is a practical route out of poverty—this contrary to the regular rhetorical deprecation of "dead-end" jobs by civil rights leaders.

As noted above, the dissidents do not hold a deterministic view of human accomplishment. That is, they do not see the life-chances of inner-city youth as *unavoidably* shaped by ghetto conditions. They stress that inner city blacks do not have the luxury of postponing their achievement until the civil rights establishment relaxes its grip on urban politics and conditions improve. Such passivity is morally indefensible, and indeed perversely mirrors the wait-on-the-government rhetoric that thinkers like Sowell and

others find so repugnant.

The New Black Vanguard contests both the practical relevance to the poor, as well as the morality, of preferential treatment policies based on race. Generally speaking, the dissidents' criticism of preferential treatment embraces at least four main ideas. First, its economic effectiveness. While many acknowledge that preferential treatment has furthered the careers of some blacks—as any policy of favoritism would—the dissidents find evidence that preferential policies have been irrelevant to, or have even damaged, the vocational hopes of the black underclass. Business owners are reluctant to locate in predominantly black neighborhoods because of preferential treatment standards. Incompetence comes in all colors—but firing a minority employee, according to these employers, is especially risky, as charges of racism may require significant financial resources to refute. "The huge legal liabilities," writes Sowell, "created by policies that make statistical 'underrepresentation' equivalent to discrimination create incentives for employers to protect themselves by putting distance between their companies and those communities from which they can expect large numbers of minority applicants."²⁷

Second, the New Black Vanguard objects to the moral perversity they see embodied in preferential treatment. "Live people," observes Sowell, "are being sacrificed because of what dead people did." It is morally problematic to punish someone who unwillfully benefits from a residual advantage secured by the willful misdeeds of an earlier generation of people, possibly to whom they bore absolutely no relationship. In fact, the descendants of "free persons of color" or of a Harvard scholar may have more inherited capital than children of white manual laborers, making the arbitrary discrimination against the white laborer all the

more problematic. Economic histories are not racially uniform, yet a policy of preferential treatment must act as if they are. If discrimination is intrinsically wrong, then it seems a perverse public policy that intentionally codifies an immoral practice. The New Black Vanguard asks: In what other areas of public policy are we willing to enact into law a practice we find morally repugnant? But even beyond that, there is an irony in the civil rights establishment's pursuit of preferential treatment policies based on race: the removal of such policies was the very *raison d'être* of the original civil rights movement. As one trenchant critic of the civil rights groups said: "The head-spinning swiftness with which the former champions of color-blindness embraced color-consciousness once someone else's ox was being gored would have been comic were it not so tragic."²⁸

Third, they point to the indeterminate character of affirmative action: its success point remains unarticulated, and its "finish line" unavoidably, and frustratingly, unmarked. When is racial equality and parity achieved—when there are no poor minorities? But what exactly are the standards by which progress will be measured, and wherein lies the vindication, or warrant for those standards? Unless such guideposts and "finish lines" are cognitively erected, it would seem as though the condition of absolute parity will be hard to recognize, acknowledge, and celebrate.

Fourth, the dissidents contend that affirmative action stigmatizes its putative beneficiaries with self-doubt: in Steele's phrase, it sears with the "stigma of questionable competence." A black student confided: "I feel like I have AFFIRMATIVE ACTION stamped on my forehead."²⁹ Undermining the idea of personal merit, preferential treatment tends to make non-blacks suspicious of black achievement, and blacks themselves suspicious of others' suspicions.

Clearly inequity resides in any policy that perverts so radically the ideas of merit and personal desert.

Finally, in terms of our overview of commonly held beliefs, the New Black Vanguard emphasizes the importance of non-racial strategies—especially the development of human capital, mediating structures, and neighborhood enterprise—to enhance the status of minorities. It cannot be denied that the New Black Vanguard speaks primarily in a critical voice. They solidly oppose a political/juridical approach to black advocacy; educational bureaucracy; the current welfare system; a sociologism on the part of intellectuals that denies the centrality of personal responsibility in human development; the language of victimization, doom, and discouragement spoken by popular media and rap culture; a weak juvenile justice system; a deterministic view of human consciousness based on race; and preferential treatment policies based solely on skin color.

Nonetheless, it is a mistake to conclude that their work is exclusively "negative." Some of their positive proposals include welfare reform initiatives (i.e., mandatory workfare), service-delivery through mediating structures, increasing the savings-cap for those on public aid, school voucher plans, and a call for judicial interpretation that protects the "economic liberty" of small businesses, free enterprise zones, tenant management in public housing, and a youth subminimum wage.

But beyond this reality, understanding the dissidents as completely "negative" presumes that the character of their solutions ought to coincide with that of their critics—that they must reflect common assumptions about race, autonomy, family, government, and oppression. But Sowell, Loury, Steele, Williams, Woodson, *et al.*, don't share these assumptions. Consequently, they press

for dismantling many of the "positive" projects of the civil rights establishment and their ideological partners, arguing that these have proved ruinous to the axis of the black community—the black family. At this point in the historical development of unorthodox black advocacy, they find it necessary to engage in a concentrated social *via negativa* in order to shake the foundations of the longstanding hegemony of the "revised agenda."

Heading this social *via negativa* is the undoing of welfare laws that foster male desertion and unwed pregnancy. Contrastively, the civil rights establishment has consistently joined "welfare rights" groups (i.e., the National Welfare Rights Organization) in fighting for an "entitlement *sans* obligation" philosophy of welfare and for increased benefit packages. While civil rights leaders term their stance in favor of entitlement as "positive," the dissidents argue the opposite: entitlement cleaved from obligation has transmogrified the inner city by subsidizing the dissolution of the black family.

Predictably, these promising conservative intellectuals encounter hostility in academia. Andrew Hacker, in his best-selling tome on the immorality of America, *Two Nations*, can muster no more than one small paragraph in explanation of black conservatism. Alleging they are nothing but the dupes of heartless white conservatives, Hacker explains:

Since [white conservatives] see themselves as bearing no onus for whatever problems blacks face, they do not really care if blacks feel aggrieved or unfairly treated. To support their position, they cite black conservatives... who assure them that blacks have played the victim too long and must be judged by the same standards as other Americans.³⁰

Unfortunately, Hacker's unreflective dismissal of conservative black scholars is all

too typical. His wholesale substitution of presumption for analysis is what passes as political analysis today, particularly with respect to the creative and unconventional thought of the New Black Vanguard. It is, it seems, easier to simply dismiss the carefully reasoned critiques of conservative black intellectuals than to actually grapple with the empirical arguments they relentlessly advance.

Such ostracism is not unexpected, as liberal politics are seen by many as automatically and exclusively identical with black interest; so much so that to oppose it is often seen to be, if not racist, then racially insensitive. This goes for both white and black opponents—except, in the latter's case, the offense is particularly sinister, since it is viewed as a grievous disservice to one's racial heritage, a Judas-like betrayal of the nearly sacred bonds of ethnicity. Pressure to conform has for nearly three decades effectively quashed the kind of intra-group criticism that Dr. Martin Luther King knew to be a *sine qua non* to vital public discourse: "It is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of high maturity, to rise to a level of self-criticism."

Significantly though, self-criticism among African-Americans is most impeded by those who arrogantly understand themselves to be African-Americans' great benefactors: white liberals. The New Black Vanguard is insistent in its claim that white liberals have done blacks a disservice by regularly exculpating anti-social and irresponsible behavior among the black poor—behavior they would not hesitate to condemn in white communities. The result is a certain moral passivity among many African-Americans, as Shelby Steele remarked: "Watch out that your closest friend may be your greatest enemy, is my feeling about liberals, because they encourage us to identify with our victimization. It is one thing to be victimized; it is another to make an identity out of it." The victim identity para-

lyzes community initiative, causing neighborhoods to turn to bureaucratic solutions and "programs," rather than address their own problems through active self-government.

Overall, then, while it is true that the critique of the New Black Vanguard is, in part, "negative," and their program disestablishmentarian, considering the proliferation of so many hare-brained government policies, this is decidedly to their credit. They would dismantle those policies that tamper with the organic unity of the family, those statutes that wedge parent from child, that rhetoric which parts youth from practical aspirations. Yet they do not do so out of mischievous cynicism or selfish ambition; they do so because of their desire to see African-Americans flourish, and because of their confidence that the American social and economic polity provides a context well-suited for that end.

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3. Glenn Loury, "The Family, the Nation, and Senator Moynihan," *Commentary*, June 1986, pp. 21-26.
4. Glenn Loury, "The Need for Moral Leadership in the Black Community," *New Perspectives*, Summer 1984, vol. 16 #1.
5. William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 173.
6. James Q. Wilson, "The Rediscovery of Character: Private Virtue and Public Policy," in *Private Virtue and Public Policy: Catholic Thought and National Life*, James Finn, ed., (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990), p. 112.
7. Shelby Steele, *The Content of Our Character*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p. 174.
8. Thomas Sowell, *Compassion, Versus Guilt*, (New

York: William Morrow Co., 1987), p. 133.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

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12. Quoted by David Horowitz in "The Radical Left and the New Racism," *New Dimensions*, December 1990, p. 23.

13. Alphonso Pinkney, *The Myth of Black Progress*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. ix.

14. Thomas Sowell, *Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984), p. 15.

15. "Gap Grows Between Black Middle Class and Those Mired in Poverty, Study Finds," *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 1991, p. A27.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. Thomas Sowell, *The Economics and Politics of Race*, (New York: Quill, 1983), p. 194.

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21. Bob Teague, *The Flip Side of Soul*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1989), p. 103.

22. Glenn Loury, "The Need for Moral Leadership in the Black Community," *New Perspectives*, Summer 1984, vol. 16, no. 1, p. 19.

23. Steele, *The Content of Our Character*, p. 88.

24. Walter Williams, *The State Against Blacks*, (New York: MacGraw-Hill Books, 1982), p. 75.

25. Clint Bolick, *Changing Course*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988), p. 100.

26. Williams, *The State Against Blacks*, p. 107-8.

27. Thomas Sowell, "Election Year Spawns Reckless Rhetoric," *Los Angeles Daily News*, June 5, 1992.

28. Clint Bolick, *Changing Course*, p. 57.

29. "Does Affirmative Action Help or Hurt?" *Time*, May 27, p. 119.

30. Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), pp. 51-2.

