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NPR

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GUESTS: Jim Sleeper

BYLINE: Robert Siegel, Washington, DC; Linda Wertheimer

HIGHLIGHT:

Robert talks with Jim Sleeper, the author of "Liberal Racism. They discuss why Sleeper believes that liberals are reinforcing racist policies and attitudes and preventing the development of a truly "colorblind" society.

BODY:

ROBERT SIEGEL, HOST: As a newspaper columnist in New York City, Jim Sleeper wrote a lot of stories about race and racial conflict.

Sleeper, who describes himself as a liberal, ran up against attitudes and ideas from other liberals that disturbed him -- the idea that political districts must be crafted to form majorities of minorities; that black babies should not be adopted by white couples; that a Hispanic man will experience things more like other Hispanic men than like non-Hispanics who might resemble him in other ways.

Sleeper has written a collection of essays that rebut such ideas from a liberal perspective, but recognize them as feature of American liberal thought. His title for the book is his name for that feature "Liberal Racism."

JIM SLEEPER, AUTHOR, LIBERAL RACISM: It's a condescension. It's an insistence that racial difference are more primordial, that they tell a lot more about us than they really do; and sometimes it's an old-fashioned garden-variety discomfort on the part of white people toward non-white people.

The obvious thing that a phrase liberal racism plays off against is the fact of conservative racism, and I say explicitly in the book that I think the

conservative record on race can't be defended and in my view is not likely to be redeemed.

That makes the liberal defaults all the more consequential to me and that's why I wrote the book.

SIEGEL: But some of the aspects of liberal racism that you would cite, would be say, political redistricting in order to create so-called majority, minority districts on the assumption that if people are Hispanic or black, they have something in common that they don't have with anybody else.

SLEEPER: That's right and I think that assumption goes too far. Obviously, if one can posit an unrelenting and implacable racism, white racism, then what non-white people have in common is opposition to that. And of course that's true.

But to leap from that to the assumption that all Hispanics share a common culture, or that even that all African-Americans share common political views, and perspectives, is reductionist. It's unfair. And we are hearing more and more black voices especially coming forward and telling us so.

I think a lot of the liberal racial remedies from the racial districting to affirmative action, some aspects of it -- the color

coding--is premised on a simplistic view of people of color. My suggestion is that that's not only not the way to fight racism, it winds up deepening race lines and in some ways recapitulating racism.

SIEGEL: Some critics of your book might say that it really is essentially a question for African-Americans to determine how great their identity is determined by African-American or being black and that a white writer like yourself, is essentially a spectator to that decision, not a participant in it.

SLEEPER: Well, as blacks are quick to remind us, and I would certainly agree, we've been locked in a 300-year-old psychic and physical embrace, sometimes intimate, sometimes miserable. And that's the template for our life. Whites have to speak about race just as much as blacks do.

And they have to speak more candidly than they have. I must say that when a portion of this book ran in Harpers about black identity, people started to clear their throats to say, why is white writer talking about why we should give up race consciousness?

And then, low and behold, simultaneously in the Atlantic, the cover story by Randall Kennedy, a black Harvard law professor, went even farther than I would, to say race loyalty and race kinship should be a thing of the past. And I think that's our destiny. I think that's where we're headed.

SIEGEL: What to you have been recent examples of a liberal racism at work?

SLEEPER: Well, one of the most glaring, ironically, was a remark that was made by the president of Rutgers University, Francis Lawrence (ph), which I cite in the book, a couple of years ago, you know, rambling defense of what by any standard was a very excessive affirmative action program, a program that was