

## AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: Should we stay the course or rethink it?

# The civic liberals' visceral understandings about race

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In the beginning was white racism, and it remains our country's original and enduring sin. I dare say that all of us "civic liberal" journalists, scholars and politicians, including Sen. John Kerry, agree about that. We want racial justice, passionately. But we no longer think the civil rights establishment is going to get us there. It's a hard, complex conclusion, borne more in sorrow than anger, but it's inextorable; there's no hiding from what we have to say.

No, we weren't born yesterday. We know that sometimes only the power of law, vigorously enforced, can block racial discrimination. We know that blacks, Puerto Ricans and Native Americans, who were incorporated wholesale into the American experiment, have special claims on public institutions — the very courts and schools that worked for years to degrade them.

But it is precisely because most of us civic liberals, black and white alike, have taken these propositions seriously enough to live at

some personal risk with their often unintended consequences that we've come to see other dimensions of the story. Unless what we've learned is acknowledged and explored, the gains of the past 30 years are sure to keep on eroding.

Our experiences as inner-city residents, street-level reporters, ethnographers and elected officials have given us a tissue of visceral understandings about race which we share not only with urban white ethnics in Charlestown and Bensonhurst, but also with urban blacks, Hispanics and Asians in Roxbury, Chinatown and Manhattan's Lower East Side.

First, we've learned that most people of color, however legitimately proud and inquisitive they are about their racial and ethnic heritages, want their skin colors to count for less, not more, in their daily economic and political lives. Since America has been such a relentlessly racist country, the civil rights establishment finds this almost impossible to believe. Yet, whether the issue is creating absurdly twisted congressional districts linking far-flung neighborhoods in the name of minority empowerment or the over-

solicitude of college admissions officers who set up unprepared blacks for disappointment by refusing to look past their color, most minorities just don't want well-meaning white liberals or racial nationalists corralling them by race.

As Rafael Olmeda, a star graduate of New York's elite Bronx High School of Science, told me, "I sent for Harvard's admissions materials and out came this leaflet saying, 'Here are some of the things minority students can expect at Harvard.' I said, 'What is this? I want to know, what can students expect at Harvard?'" Understanding Olmeda's sense of violation doesn't come easily to white liberals, but it's the beginning of wisdom.

Second, we've learned that there's such a thing as white-liberal racism. Some white elites, insulated from honest, daily give-and-take with blacks, seem to be so fearful of what their own gut reactions to such encounters might be that they've constructed an intricate latticework of impossibly noble stereotypes and unrealistic denials of their own legitimate concerns and fears. The more that latticework is threatened, the more desper-

ately they cling to it, for who knows what nightmarish fantasies about blacks might escape were experience to bring it down?

Not only is such racial rectitude insufferably patronizing to blacks; it's deeply insulting to whites who live and work near or with them — a third lesson. Many of the urban white ethnics whose epithets and exasperations earn our contemptuous charges of racism actually have more lively, nuanced and positive relationships with blacks than liberals do, even amid acrimony and contention over scarce urban resources. Yes, daily experience with urban black crime and social disintegration often drives urban whites to hostility. But even more maddening to many of them is the white liberals' ignorant contempt — ignorant because we seldom see, much less acknowledge or build on, the countless little gestures of decency and fair play that characterize many urban whites' routine interactions with people of color.

One of the developments that has ripped these hypocrisies wide open is that civic liberals' lessons have been embraced by countless recent immigrants of color. Like Rafael



Olmeda, young Chinese, Koreans, Cubans, Dominicans and West Indian blacks increasingly reject, in both precept and deed, the perverse illogic of a politics based mainly in racial grievances and race-specific remedies. **They want an American social and economic justice that transcends tortured calculations by race.**

Does Concord want that, too? Does Dover, or Wellesley, or Brattle Street or Greenwich Village or the Upper West Side? Or do white liberals there champion race-specific remedies as sops to conscience, precisely because they have no intention of challenging the deeper inequities and exploitations that divide not only whites from blacks but also whites from one another? If Dedham had any idea how to keep faith with white Dorchester as well as with Dudley station, Sen. Kerry wouldn't be taking half the heat he is.

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