



## Color Schemes

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### COLORING THE NEWS

*How Crusading for Diversity  
Has Corrupted American  
Journalism*

By William McGowan

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There it was: that look, on the face of a member of Harvard's prestigious Society of Fellows, as I told him over coffee in 1996 that the "epidemic" of racist arson against black churches headlined on the nation's front pages was a fantasy. Worse, I said, newspapers weren't admitting they'd been stampeded by activists' claims that a small uptick in church arsons nationwide was concentrated on black churches. They hadn't bothered to discover that many of the black-church fires were set not by racist nightriders but by blacks seeking insurance money or drunken white teens seeking thrills. My new acquaintance gave me the easing-toward-the-exit smile of one who's found himself at the wrong table. Like many busy people, he relies more than he realizes on editors' news judgments to take his bearings amid racial, sexual and other social changes. Keeping his political and moral equilibrium sometimes involves being notified when to be outraged. It unnerved him to be told he was being misled.

William McGowan, who'll get lots of looks like the one I got, explains the problem with the arson story and other such reportorial wrongs. How are journalists, who are professional skeptics, so easily gulled? His answer is flagged by his subtitle: Something has gone terribly wrong with the noble goal of diversifying American newsrooms, where more racial and sexual variety is supposed to enhance political and philosophical vitality. Too often, McGowan claims, it has done the opposite, as high-end media managers dress up quarterly bottom-lining with color- and

gender-coded crusading that asks reporters to become true believers, not skeptics. The result, he says, is a toxic brew of guilt-driven moral posturing by publishers and editors, bureaucratic diversity training and groupthink for reporters, racial and sexual sensationalism and cheerleading and stroking for targeted markets.

Promoting "diversity" for profit and moral purity reminds me of Woody Allen's quip that the socialist magazine *Dissent* was merging with the conservative magazine *Commentary* "to form *Dissentary*." But journalists who've made it their mission to slay the dragons of racism, sexism and homophobia may consider McGowan part of a conservative, white-male media-bashing campaign. There are indeed such campaigns. McGowan has gotten too close to them for a good skeptic's comfort, and some of his documentation looks sloppy or manipulative. But his targets' flaws transcend his own and must be reckoned with. He carries his argument through journalistic embarrassments touching feminism, gay rights and immigration as well as race, but the book's title reflects his preoccupation with the last, which began for him in Sri Lanka, where he wrote tellingly of racial and ethnic conflict for his book "Only Man Is Vile."

"Coloring the News" opens with an account of how, in 1995, as initiatives against affirmative action arose in California and other states, journalist Nicholas Lemann wrote a *New York Times Magazine* profile, widely reprinted and retold, that made a civic saint of Patrick Chavis. The black physician had been admitted to UC Davis' medical school under a racial-preference quota the U.S. Supreme Court later struck down after a challenge by white applicant Allan Bakke. Still angry about Bakke, Lemann contrasted Chavis' apparently noble work among the poor of Compton with Bakke's humdrum service in Minnesota.

Three years later (as the *Los Angeles Times* reported fully, though McGowan doesn't acknowledge it), California's medical board revoked the medical license of Chavis for "gross negligence" after six patients were injured and one died from botched operations in a liposuction business he was running.

Chavis was an embarrassment to affirmative action because Lemann's misplaced moralism had made him an icon; so, McGowan reports, the *New York Times* and many other papers that had touted him never reported his fall. Perhaps, having abused Chavis by inflating him, Lemann and the *New York Times* hadn't the heart to hit him again. But what about their obligation to readers, like my Harvard acquaintance, who still think Chavis a hero?

Journalists whom McGowan queried agreed that had Bakke been "caught in such flagrant malpractice, the press would have been all over the story." But they wouldn't admit this in print, where, McGowan claims, their credibility is dropping as readers tire of forced marches through stagy morality plays like the Chavis

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and church-arson stories; the "decimation" of the Congressional Black Caucus by Supreme Court rulings against racially drawn districts; the "re-segregation" of higher education via Proposition 209 (at the hands of former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, no less).

We need better reporting, especially, McGowan argues, to sort conflicting claims about racial preferences. He argues that—in sectors such as college admissions and journalism, where nonwhites are sought avidly—affirmative action, which was supposed to counter discrimination, has been superseded by a color-coded "diversity" to keep up the appearance of full racial integration even when pools of fully qualified applicants are thin. Instead of helping the disadvantaged, "diversity's" claim that serious deficiencies are really just cultural "differences" reflects a fudging of entrance and performance standards to deflect political or bureaucratic presumptions of racism and to enhance a company's niche marketing efforts. Thus contrived, diversity ends up misjudging and isolating its supposed beneficiaries, like Chavis.

How pervasive is this? McGo-

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wan says that news corporations' legal and marketing priorities are at odds with the public's need to find out. He notes that some "diversity" programs chill true diversity of opinion and freedom of expression: Religious and/or anti-abortion reporters are more closeted now in mainstream newsrooms than gays; so are blacks who think that O.J. was guilty or that racial preferences bring dubious returns. Those who leap forward to speak for their "groups" become apparatchiks of color, he claims, licensed to dispense bitterness and mistrust in measured doses to all who deviate from accepted patterns: Several times McGowan cites Washington Post columnist Dorothy Gilliam, former president of the National Assn. of Black Journalists, for rants about the "plantation" racism of whites who doubt, say, Marion Barry's statesmanship, and he cites Latino and gay counterparts in the piety police. Nervous white editors roll over at dubious charges of racism: McGowan tells how only after embarrassing legal depositions did Gannett's Burlington Free Press in Vermont settle out of court with an award-winning white reporter it had fired because he'd angered a black politician by telling the truth about a public meeting "for people of color" at which whites were barred from speaking.

**I**f white men weren't complaining, it would be an indication that we weren't succeeding," retorts New York Times publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. to such criticisms, in an in-house Times newsletter quoted by McGowan. Sulzberger, a crusader for what he calls "managed diversity" in the nation's newsrooms, adds that no longer can news be reported only from a "white, male and straight" perspective. McGowan pairs that with former Los Angeles Times publisher Mark Willes' call to make his "white male newspaper" more appealing to minorities and women with stories "more emotional, more personal and less analytic." You wonder whether these elite white men and their collaborators of color downstairs can tell "white" from wrong or "male" from stale. George Orwell or Lionel Trilling could have explained how such groupthink multiplies blun-

ders.

But McGowan's political groupthink produces blunders of its own. He doesn't acknowledge that while liberal guilt certainly drives moralizing, the corruption of diversity is more corporate than "liberal." He touts the conservative editorial pages of the Wall Street Journal and Fox TV News as trustworthy alternatives to liberal bias, as if they had no pieties, phony crusades and buried stories of their own. They and most other conservative team players have given his book great play. I've long damned such devil's bargains, and McGowan hasn't escaped this one by putting me in his acknowledgments. He's caught in the left-versus-right paralysis of public discourse, in which each ideological camp is right about how the other is wrong yet too partisan to follow its truths wherever they lead.

"The profession would be better off," McGowan acknowledges, if it hired not more conservatives but more "journalists who possessed skepticism, a regard for hard truth and an impatience with the 'smelly little orthodoxies,' as Orwell described them." So why doesn't he cheer when the "liberal" press catches wind of itself and cleans up a little? In 1998, the New York Times and its Sunday magazine began producing some work on racial districting, bilingual education, affirmative action, hate crimes and even the supposed statesmanship of the Rev. Al Sharpton that all but rebuked editorial page "diversity" mantras that had framed the paper's mindset. Stung by criticism like mine, the paper also cranked out a decent but dull "How Race Is Lived" series but then repackaged it for book publication in pious, editorial groupthink.

It's too soon to claim that McGowan is only fighting the last war. This country's vast race industry of activists, consultants, foundation officers, civil rights lawyers and government monitors enhances its funding, job lines and moral cachet by playing up bad racial news and discounting the good. Whatever his mistakes, McGowan is right to argue that journalists should be investigating the race industry, not working for it. □