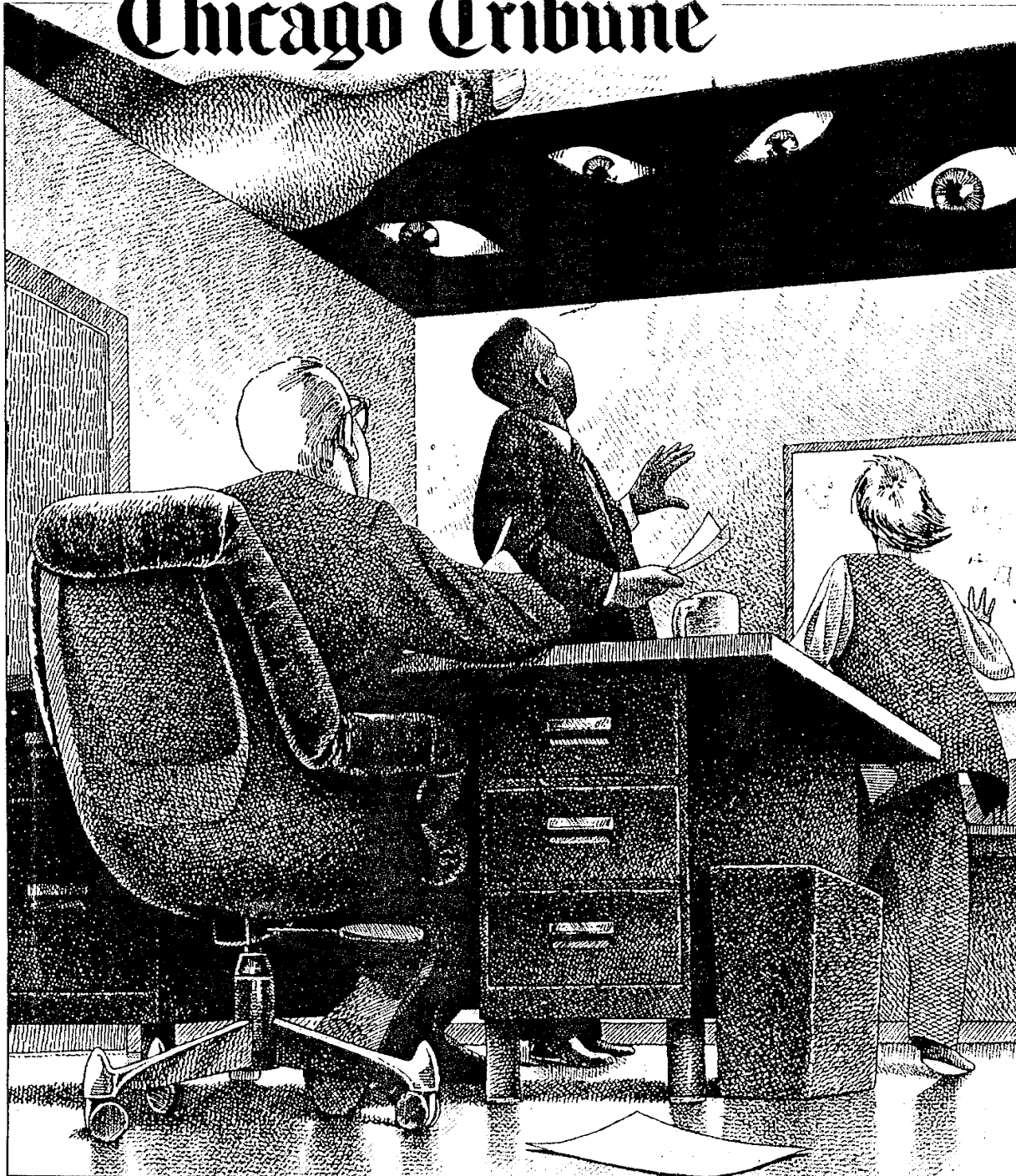


Chicago Tribune



Not all of the anger by white males is racist

By Jim Sleeper

I don't know what should replace affirmative action, but I do have some flashes of insight about what's missing from the debate: faith in American civil society and—heaven help us—in white men. Anyone who knows civil-rights movement history knows that if we can't renew that faith, we'll never approach what most Americans recognize as fairness or equal opportunity. Ultimately, this is a country, not a courtroom.

Last month a liberal journalist visiting New York left me this phone message: "I'm writing on affirmative action, and I know you can find me a bar where I can hear white guys grouching about how it's screwing them. I need that in my story."

Since I write for the newspaper of New York City's parish and union halls, I could have found my caller his bar. I didn't—and not because I resented his suggestion that, as a white male critic of affirmative action, I have an "in" with people who've been hurt by it or who are bigots. I've never known reverse discrimination; the Baltimore-based National Prejudice Institute find that nine out of 10 white men say they haven't, either. There are better

reasons to question affirmative action—and to stop disdaining a mythical tribe of “angry white men.”

Many of affirmative action’s defenders observe it less at work than in the rarefied realm of debate among the chattering classes. In our breezy uplands of talk, we highlight and then deconstruct claims of reverse discrimination and claims that affirmative action’s beneficiaries get ahead by color, not talent or grit. We seldom ask whether white racism really would keep affirmative action’s qualified beneficiaries from being hired if there weren’t ever-more-rigorous monitoring and enforcement.

The truth about that varies from sector to sector of our society and economy. Yet just as we often stereotype blacks as “deficit-ridden,” we often brand white men, especially those who aren’t like us, as bigots. Yes, racists are all too real and too many. But there are even more white men whose basic decency can be tapped by better leadership—and by journalism that’s too smart to hawk “angry white male” stereotypes.

Liberals have moved too quickly from insuring that government wouldn’t classify people by color, surname or sex to insuring that it would. We now classify people much as the old “white-male” system did; we just say that we’re more “respectful” of the boxes we’ve put them in. Actually, we’re becoming less respectful of individuals than liberals were when they first challenged the old, racist civil society in the name of true color blindness.

Despite enormous gains since then, we’re more patronizing of blacks and more disdainful of white men today. Like the reporter who called me, we assume that this nation’s awful past is its prologue. We squander its special promise by assuming that civil society—where people practice basic decency and fair play—is so hobbled by racism that it has no more positive pulling power.

We forget—dare I remind us?—that precisely because white men have been privileged, a few had the luxury of believing in America’s promises of equal dignity. And that just enough white men were offended when those promises were broken that those men did more to redeem them than any other “privileged” caste in world history.

We forget, too, that during the rise of the civil rights movement, many whites made it a point of pride to say, “I take each person as he comes.” Not all of them meant it. But once they’d said it, they could be called to account by it—especially when activists such as Rosa Parks on a Montgomery, Ala., bus and the young men at the Greensboro, N.C., Woolworth’s lunch counter demonstrated that they yearned to embrace civil society, not trash it as inherently, eternally oppressive.

Today, many white workers sustain more lively, nuanced relations with blacks than we chatters and moralizers do. Is there contention of scarce resources? Then let’s address that scarcity, which divides whites from whites and blacks from blacks, as well as whites from blacks. Let’s not accept racial remedies that serve mainly as sops to the consciences of elites who have no intention of fixing economic scarcity itself.

Of course, if you dismiss Americanism as mere Eurocentrism, you’ll equate white American men →

with their “cousins” in Serbia, Poland or the Ukraine. Democrats, such as Robert Kennedy, viewed them more hopefully, because they viewed America more hopefully. When Democrats stopped doing that, they began losing elections.

The real threat isn’t white men’s racism, abiding though it is in some quarters; it’s a loss of faith, by whites as well as blacks, in civil society—which includes black and white men, not to mention all people of all colors. So strong was our extra-legal faith in civil society in the 1960s that some brave Southern editors used it to shame white peers into isolating the ranters at schoolhouse doors.

It is our loss of that faith that drives us into courts and away from one another. It is sapping our confidence that civil society can grow; that progress can be reconciled with freedom; that collective action depends on collective faith in personal responsibility.

My point isn’t that there’s no need for laws or judicial remedies. It’s that we must treat civil society as something to work with, not to be rescued from. Archie Bunker understood that. So do most whites at the bars my reporter-friend sought. They do need to be reminded that the rest of us are counting on them to live up to it.

And it’s not as if any of us has an alternative.

Jim Sleeper is a political columnist for the New York Daily News. This essay will appear in the May/June issue of The New Democrat, a magazine published by the Democratic Leadership Council