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ANOTHER VIEW OF REVERSE DISCRIMINATION

by

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The arguments Mr. Golightly advances to support reverse discrimination against the majority in higher education and employment opportunity evoke a variety of responses—all dependent upon the background or mind set of the respondent. In my own case, while I am aware of strong counter arguments focusing on the role of the individual caught up in any group or “tribal” movement, I find his thesis most persuasive. I do so because of my personal encounters, as a white, with various facets of the Black experience in America.

As a young man during the 1930's, I lived for eight years in Mr. Golightly's native state, Alabama, and for three of those years was responsible for a work force of forty blacks. While my perception of the relationship between the two races at that time was conditioned by being part of the establishment, it was clear to me that the whites regarded Blacks as human but different—a segregated group existing in a semi-feudal society in which their basic needs were usually met as an afterthought by those in power. Among the poor whites Blacks were seen as competing for the scarce commodities of life and, consequently, a group to be treated with distrust and harshness.

A little later as a teacher in a technical high school in the North, I was to learn that Italian-Americans or Polish-Americans were treated with a different type of indifference as second class citizens in an urban community. In this particular situation, the white minority ethnic groups could exercise considerable political punch and, also, the State Education Department limited the degree of local benign indifference. Shortly after my arrival as a teacher, the students, by state edict, were granted equal opportunity for an adequate education. But the consciousness of generations of students had undoubtedly been shaped by a community that regarded them as second-rate citizens.

As an officer in the Coast Guard during World War II, I was again made aware of the menial roles permitted Blacks and other non-whites at a time when one might hope for a change in the establishment's values and attitudes. With the end of hostilities, I also served for a time as education officer whose principal duty was to provide educational counseling for enlisted men about to be discharged from the service. Again I was struck by the precarious future faced by Blacks and other non-white minority groups who had neither the credentials nor any clear understanding of how to take advantage of the educational benefits available under the G.I. bill.

More recently I served as interim director of an Educational Opportunity Program funded by the State of New York. My reaction to this experience was that the whites didn't possess the knowledge or ability to deal with the complex problems of the Blacks, and the Blacks themselves were unable to identify talent to organize these programs effectively. As a group, the Blacks needed time,

ANOTHER VIEW OF REVERSE DISCRIMINATION

tolerance, and patience, but the reality was that none of these seemed to exist. In their newly-discovered sense of "nation" they were impatient with even the most sympathetic whites. And perhaps with some reason, for all of us—whites and Blacks—seemed to be victims of our own special rhetoric. Whether, in this situation, the Blacks made more progress acting as a power group using force than might have been achieved through a more conciliatory stance is debatable.

Not long after the establishment of special educational programs for the economically and educationally disadvantaged, considerable controversy developed about the individual's responsibility as part of this particular student group. Kenneth Clark, for example, sharply criticized the "rip-off" tendencies of Black students and advocated acceptable individual academic performance as essential for the welfare of the group. Many of the group "power" movements came to be viewed as self-destructive by Blacks. Whatever the right or wrong of the argument, such tactics frightened the white establishment and usually led to more permissiveness or greater opportunities for Blacks, especially when they resorted to violence or threats of violence. By the late 1960's we had become an up-tight, frightened society. Much of the legislation in the past ten years may be as much the consequence of fear as a growth of moral consciousness. Certainly, the legislative branch of government has not kept pace with the judiciary's efforts to interpret the implications of the law, as in *DeFunis vs. Odegaard*, the celebrated case at the University of Washington.

Reversing Gunnar Myrdal's thesis, one might argue that the Black problem in America has now become the problem of the Blacks. While moral commitment to removing discrimination and insuring affirmative action exists among certain segments of our society, for the most part these people of good will are bewildered or rendered impotent by the immensity and complexity of the issues inherent in discrimination. Indeed, we seem to compound our difficulties by creating grandiose schemes for alleviating the myriad wrongs of mankind by assembling them in incompatible packages which actually reinforce the status quo. Such an approach was followed in the nineteenth century when the rights of Blacks and those of women were fought for as one human concern, thus setting up legalistic and attitudinal traps that could be manipulated by the power structure to delay any resolution of the problems of either group. It may well be that *Executive Order 12466* will lead to a continuation of the clever devices utilized during the nineteenth century. Admittedly, this is a cynical view of legislation aimed at alleviating discrimination, and one which supports Mr. Golightly's thesis to a certain extent.

Yet American history supports the thesis that only through group action can the rights of the individual be assured. We may be inspired by the clarion call to individualism by a Henry David Thoreau, but rely on group pressure when the chips are down. When groups that are regarded as threats to the status quo move toward sharing power and removing discriminatory barriers, those asked to share understandably become insecure or feel threatened. Talented persons in the group seeking to join the mainstream may also resent sharing with obviously less talented or "worthy" people of their own race and color. The issues which

DuBois and others have examined and lived are joined again in the lives of contemporary Blacks. And since the Blacks represent a large minority with a long, unique history of legalistic flim-flam and chicanery denying their rights to equality as citizens, it is only logical that they will eventually pursue a pragmatic approach to removing discriminatory practices in American society. In the process we shall probably continue to feel the stresses and strains resolution of the issues inevitably create.

Whether we will be a more moral country as a result of our confronting the problems of discrimination remains to be seen. However, there does seem to be a growing consciousness among Blacks so that the words "brother" and "sister" take on meaning transcending the struggle for power and a place in society. About five years ago a gifted black actress remarked that at one time a Black would see a fellow Black lying in the gutter and pass by without offering assistance, since presumably to do so would lower one in the estimate of white society. Today, the Black lying in the gutter would not be neglected, for a new state of consciousness has developed in the minds of Blacks. No longer is white esteem courted; Blacks have instead become increasingly aware of a new self-assurance in their brotherhood as Blacks. It is this emerging sense of nation that Mr. Golightly seems to be suggesting as the catalyst for reverse discrimination against the majority in America.