

IMPRIMIS

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"The New Segregation"

by *Shelby Steele, Author, The Content of Our Character*

Preview: At Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives February 1992 seminar "Thought Police on Campus: Is Academic Freedom in Danger?" author Shelby Steele made an eloquent plea for a return to the ideal of genuine equality and an end to "the politics of difference," which has produced not only a divided campus, but a divided society. £

The civil rights movement of the 1950s-1960s culminated in the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act—two monumental pieces of legislation that have dramatically altered the fabric of American life. During the struggle for their passage, a new source of power came into full force. Black Americans and their supporters tapped into the moral power inspired by a 300-year history of victimization and oppression and used it to help transform society, to humanize it, to make it more tolerant and open. They realized, moreover, that the victimization and oppression that blacks had endured came from one "marriage"—a marriage of race and power. They had to stop those who said, "merely because we are white, we have the power to dominate, enslave, segregate and discriminate."

Race should not be a source of power or advantage or disadvantage for anyone in a free society. This was one of the most important lessons of the original civil rights movement.



crimination were made illegal. Blacks began to enjoy a degree of freedom they had never experienced before.

Delayed Anger

This did not mean that things changed overnight for blacks. Nor did it ensure that their memory of past injustice was obliterated. I hesitate to borrow analogies from the psychological community, but I think this one does apply: Abused children do not usually feel anger until many years after the abuse has ended, that is, after they have experienced a degree of freedom and normalcy. Only after

myself. I had a tremendous sense of delayed anger at having been forced to attend segregated schools. (My grade school was the first school to be involved in a desegregation suit in the north.) My rage, like that of other blacks, threatened for a time to become all consuming.

Anger was both inevitable and necessary. When suppressed, it eats you alive; it has got to come out, and it certainly did during the 1960s. One form was the black power movement in all of its many manifestations, some of which were violent. There is no question that we should condemn violence, but we should also understand why it occurs. You cannot oppress people for over three centuries and then say it is all over and expect them to put on suits and ties and become decent attache-carrying citizens and go to work on Wall Street.

Once my own anger was released, my reaction was that I no longer had to apologize for being black. That was a tremendous benefit and it helped me come to terms with my own personal development. The problem is that many blacks never progressed beyond their anger.

The Politics of Difference

The black power movement encouraged a permanent state of rage and victimhood. An even greater failing was that it rejoined race and power—the very "marriage" that civil rights legislation had been designed to break up. The leaders of the original movement said, "Anytime you make race a source of power you are going to guarantee suffering, misery and inequity." Black power leaders declared: "We're going to have power because we're *black*."

Well, is there any conceivable difference between black power and white power? When

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The legislation it championed during the 1960s constituted a new "emancipation proclamation." For the first time segregation and dis-

civil rights legislation had been enacted did blacks at long last began to feel the rage they had suppressed. I can remember that period

you demand power based on the color of your skin, aren't you saying that equality and justice are impossible? Somebody's going to be in, somebody's going to be out. Somebody's going to win, somebody's going to lose, and race is once again a source of advantage for some and disadvantage for others. Ultimately, black power was not about equality or justice; it was, as its name suggests, about power.

And when blacks began to demand entitlements based on their race, feminists responded with enthusiasm, "We've been oppressed too!" Hispanics said, "We're not going to let this bus pass us by," and Asians said, "We're not going to let it pass us by either." Eskimos and American Indians quickly hopped on the bandwagon, as did gays, lesbians, the disabled and other self-defined minorities.

By the 1970s, the marriage of race and power was once again firmly established. Equality was out: the "politics of difference" was in. From then on, everyone would rally around the single quality that makes them different from the white male and pursue power based on that quality. It is a very simple formula. All you have to do is identify that quality, whatever it may be, with victimization. And victimization is itself, after all, a tremendous source of moral power.

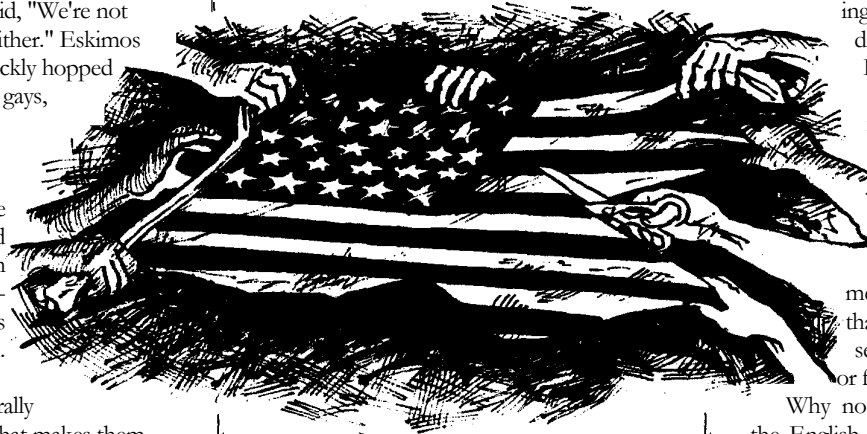
The politics of difference demanded shifting the entire basis of entitlement in America. Historically, entitlement was based on the rights of citizenship elaborated in the Declaration of Independence and the U. S. Constitution. This was the kind of entitlement that the original civil rights movement leaders claimed for blacks: recognition of their rights as American citizens to equal treatment under the law. They did not claim, "We deserve rights and entitlements because we are black," but, "We deserve them because we are citizens of the United States and like all other citizens are

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due these rights." The politics of difference changed all that. Blacks and other minorities began demanding entitlement solely based on their history of oppression, their race, their gender, their ethnicity, or whatever quality that allegedly made them victims.

Grievance Identities

By the 1980s, the politics of difference had, in turn, led to the establishment of "grievance identities." These identities are



not about such things as the great contributions of women throughout history or the rich culture of black Americans. To have a strong identity as a woman, for example, means that you are against the "oppressive male patriarchy"—period. To have a strong identity as a black means that you are against racist white America—period. You have no choice but to fulfill a carefully defined politically correct role: (1) you must document the grievance of your group; (2) you must testify to its abiding and ongoing alienation; and (3) you must support its sovereignty. As a black who fails any of these three requirements you are not only politically incorrect, you are a traitor, an "Uncle Tom." You are blaming the victim, you are letting whites off the hook, and you are betraying your people.

In establishing your grievance identity, you must turn your back on the enormous and varied fabric of life. There is no legacy of universal ideas or common human experience. There is only one dimension to your identity: anger against oppression. Grievance identities are thus "sovereignties" that compete with the sovereignties of the nation itself. Blacks, women, Hispanics and other minorities are not even American citizens anymore. They are citizens of sovereignties with their own right to autonomy.

The New Segregation on Campus

The marriage of race and power, the politics of difference, and grievance identities—these are nurtured by the American

educational establishment. They have also acted on that establishment and affected it in significant ways. After a talk I gave recently at a well-known university, a woman introduced herself as the chairperson of the women's studies department. She was very proud of the fact that the university had a separate degree-granting program in women's studies. I stressed that I had always been very much in favor of teaching students about the contributions of women. But I asked her what it was that students gained from segregated women's

studies that could not be gained from studying within the traditional liberal arts disciplines. Her background was in English, as was mine, so I added, "What is a female English professor in the English department doing that is different from what a female English professor in the women's studies department is doing? Is she going to bring a different methodology to bear? What is it that academically justifies a segregated program for women, or for blacks, or any other group?"

Why not incorporate such studies into the English department, the history department, the biology department or into any of the other regular departments?"

As soon as I began to ask such questions I noticed a shift in her eyes and a tension in her attitude. She began to see me as an enemy and **quickly** made an excuse to end the conversation. This wasn't about a rational academic discussion of women's studies. It was about the *sovereignty of the feminist identity*, and unless I tipped my hat to that identity by saying, "Yes, you have the right to a separate department," no further discussion or debate was possible.

Meanwhile, the politics of difference is overtaking education. Those with grievance identities demand separate buildings, classrooms, offices, clerical staff—even separate Xerox machines. They all want to be segregated universities within the universities. They want their own space—their sovereign territory. Metaphorically, and sometimes literally, they insist that not only the university but society at large must pay tribute to their sovereignty.

Today there are some 500 women's studies departments. There are black studies departments, Hispanic studies departments, Jewish studies departments, Asian studies departments. They all have to have space, staff, and budgets. What are they studying that can't be studied in other departments? They don't have to answer this question, of course, but when political entitlement shifted away from citizenship to race, class and gender, a shift in cultural entitlement was made inevitable.

Those with grievance identities also demand *extra* entitlements far beyond what should come to us as citizens. As a black, I am said to "deserve" this or that special entitlement. No longer is it enough just to have the right to attend a college or university on an equal basis with others or to be treated like anyone else. Schools must set aside special money and special academic departments just for me, based on my grievance. Some campuses now have segregated dorms for black students who demand to live together with people of their "own kind." Students have lobbied for separate black student unions, black yearbooks, black Homecoming dances, black graduation ceremonies—again, all so that they can be comfortable with their "own kind."

One representative study at the University of Michigan indicates that 70 percent of the school's black undergraduates have never had a white acquaintance. Yet, across the country, colleges and universities like Michigan readily and even eagerly continue to encourage more segregation by granting the demands of every vocal grievance identity.

White Guilt

A great contributing factor is, of course, white guilt—specifically a knowledge of ill-gotten advantage. Ignorance is innocence, knowledge is guilt. Whites in America generally know that there is at least a slight advantage in being white. If a white person walks into a department store, chances are he or she is not going to be followed by the security guard as I am. This kind of knowledge makes whites vulnerable. (Incidentally, I do not mean to deride all forms of guilt. Guilt

can be a wonderful thing, a truly civilized emotion. Prisons are full of people incapable of feeling guilt.)

A member of a grievance identity points a finger and says, "Hey whitey, you've oppressed my people! You have had generations to build up wealth and opportunity while I've had nothing." Almost automatically, the white person's first reaction is: "Am I guilty? Am I a racist?"

dorms and yearbooks. They need basic academic skills. But instead they are taught that extra entitlements are their due and that the greatest power of all is the power that comes to them as victims. If they want to get anywhere in American life, they had better wear their victimization on their sleeve, they had better tap into white guilt, making whites want to escape by offering money, status, racial preferences—

"...the real problem is not racism; it is that black students are failing in tragic numbers."

The second reaction is escapism: "All right, what do you want? What is it going to take to prove to you that I am not racist?" White college and university administrators say, "You want a black student lounge? You got it. We have a little extra money, so we can pay for a black yearbook. We can hold a separate graduation just for you. What else do you want?"

The third reaction is blindness. Obviously, when you are preoccupied with escaping your own feelings of guilt, you are utterly blind to the people causing it. So college and university administrators blindly grant black students extra entitlements, from dorms to yearbooks, and build an entire machinery of segregation on campus while ignoring the fact that 72 percent of black American college students are dropping out.

Black students have the lowest grade point average of any student group. If whites were not so preoccupied with escaping their own guilt, they would see that the real problem is not racism; it is that black students are failing in tragic numbers. They don't need separate

some-

thing, anything—in return. Is this the way for a race that has been oppressed to come into its own? Is this the way to achieve independence?

A Return to a Common Culture

Colleges and universities are not only segregating their campuses, they are segregating learning. If only for the sake of historical accuracy, we should teach all students—black, white, female, male—about many broad and diverse cultures. But those with grievance identities use the multicultural approach as an all-out assault on the liberal arts curriculum, on the American heritage, and on Western culture. They have made our differences, rather than our common bonds, sacred. Often they do so in the name of building the "self-esteem" of minorities. But they are not going to build anyone's self-esteem by condemning our culture as the product of "dead white males."

We *do* share a common history and a common culture, and that must be the central premise of education. If we are to end the new segregation on campus, and everywhere else it exists, we need to recall the spirit of the original civil rights movement, which was dedicated to the "self evident truth" that all men are created equal.

Even the most humble experiences unite us. We have all grown up on the same sitcoms, eaten the same fast food, and laughed at the same jokes. We have practiced the same religions, lived under the same political system, read the same books, and worked in the same marketplace. We have the same dreams and aspirations as well as fears and doubts for ourselves and for our children. How, then, can our differences be so overwhelming? 8

At the very moment in time when history has vindicated our most cherished principles, when people all over the world are struggling to win the economic benefits Americans have long enjoyed, we in the U.S. seem to be losing our understanding of the forces that have brought those benefits into being.

It was shocking when current Hillsdale parent Brian Bex, president of the Hagerstown, Indiana based American Communications Network, showed me the results of a recent Harvard survey that asked corporate CEOs to list the factors responsible for their success. Not one responded I listed freedom.

Something has gone terribly wrong when they value of living in a free nation—of being able to share in the benefits of free enterprise and to conduct one's affairs without subservience to the state—isn't even apparent to the "leading lights" of the American business commu-

nity. It reflects a glaring educational deficiency, a failure to teach the most basic truths.

With help from the American Communications Network, Hillsdale College is about to launch the "Freedom as Vocation" scholarship program. This program ties student financial assistance to an ambitious schedule of classwork, business exposure and—the key element—training in *communications*.

This is something really new, and here at the College we are excited about it. The initial funding we have received from ACN will allow us to make an ambitious start, and we are seeking \$1 million more to endow the program,

The Freedom as Voca" scholarships are a model of what colleges and universities *should* be doing to teach the next generation about the vital link between personal and economic liberty. We hope you'll support us in that effort.

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