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On Racism

Honors Thesis

May 2007
As rational creatures, fashioned in the image and likeness of God, human beings operate on the dual principles of reason and faith. Never in conflict with each other, these principles shape our human destiny and lead us in the pursuit of a deeper truth. When addressing a matter of grave consequence, humanity must seek guidance from these beacons of truth and choose according to their shared wisdom. Therefore, in addressing issues of racial discrimination and inequality, man must invoke those beliefs achieved through rational thought and believed by faith. When done wholeheartedly and honestly, one discovers the inherent incompatibility of racism in light of one’s faith and reason.

On one level, no person can earnestly believe that they were created superior to another, on the basis of race, when God created all men and women in his image. By sharing equally in the inheritance of God’s heavenly kingdom, all people are elevated to the same status as children of God. In the catechism, the Catholic Church eloquently defends this belief and offers a challenge that I will accept and explore throughout this paper. They argue,

Every form of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language, or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God’s design.\(^1\)

With perfect clarity, the tenets of our faith clearly reject racial prejudice and issue the call for all men and women to fight to end racial discrimination.

On the other hand, racism is also unreasonable and contrary to one’s rational nature. At a primitive level, racial hatred stems from an ignorance or fear that withers under the glare of education and truth. Yet, millions, knowingly and unknowingly, cling to this bigotry, wrapping it under the guise of myths, stereotypes and political correctness. In seeking a deeper truth about our common humanity, we must confront the demons of our past that persists in many forms today.
In order to overcome the racial prejudice and discrimination that persists today, we as a nation must first acknowledge that there is a problem and then must work together to discuss and implement feasible solutions to this injustice, at all levels of society. For over 400 years, our nation has endeavored to define our destiny as a people. We consider ourselves the beacon of democracy, where every citizen, regardless of race, creed, class, ethnicity, or gender, inherits the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Unfortunately, in reflecting upon this mission, we must confront our dark legacy of slavery, Jim Crow laws, Nativism, segregation, internment, and discrimination that blatantly exposes our failures to live up to these ideals. This constant battle between our commitment to racial equality and the reality of persistent inequality throughout society calls us, as citizens, to seek the root causes of this grave injustice.

Unlike the earlier periods of outright discrimination under Jim Crow laws or segregation, the racism that continues today is a subtler or hidden racism. Yet, this racism pervades so deeply into our national consciousness and institutional structures that many remain ignorant of its very presence. As Adrian Piper writes, “For part of this tragedy is that the racism I witness when their guard is down is often behavior they genuinely do not understand to be racist. So the revelation is not only of racism but of ignorance and insensitivity.” The litany of “color-blind” assessments that well meaning people utter masks the true racial undertones hidden beneath this dialogue. If we hope to achieve true equality and justice for all people, we must strip away the pretense and expose the cultural mindset that attempts to justify white superiority in terms of cultural values and blaming the victim, while ignoring definitive economic and social advantages present to whites.

This paper attempts to answer that call for an unbiased, yet critical analysis of current racial relations. More importantly, it also seeks to present practical solutions to the many
problems that the paper addresses. The issues and resolutions presented in the paper do not
come out of a solely disinterested academic pursuit, but rather encompass my journeys through
the trenches of race, faith, discrimination, and social justice, over the course of a lifetime. In the
personal recollections, the interviews and the observations, coupled with the research and the
statistics, I invite the reader to recognize my work as a summation of my efforts to define the
ture meaning of race in America. I believe that the words of James Waller on his writings so
eloquently capture my feelings on my own work,

In joining us on the trip, you also join us on a journey. A journey to confront issues of race in
America. A journey to face your stereotypical thoughts, prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory
behaviors. A journey that raises more tough questions than easy answers. . . Why go on such a
journey? The alternative – to stay home in the comfort of whom we appear to be – is certainly
easier. But does that alternative promise anything of substance? 3

In order to discuss fully the implications of race and the presence of prejudice,
discrimination and racism in society, one needs to define these terms properly. Of all these
words, “race” carries both the greatest significance and yet the most vague definitions. A
mixture of biological characteristics and societal perceptions, race attempts to link physical
differences with perceived mental, emotional or cultural differences in certain groups of people. 4
By its nature, the definition of race shifts throughout time, from race equaling nationality to race
referring primarily to one’s skin color, which complicates attempts to distinguish people solely
on race. In the end, race is purely a social category chosen by and for people to classify them,
usually for purposes of defining superiority.

Two other key terms that deserve definitions are prejudice and discrimination. Used
interchangeably in most common discussion, Christopher Doob explains the clear distinctions
between the two. Prejudice is “a highly negative judgement toward a minority group focusing on
one or more characteristics that are supposedly uniformly shared by all group members.” 5
Discrimination, however, is “the behavior through which one group prevents or restricts a
minority group’s access to scarce resources.” Distinctly different, prejudice and discrimination represent the two faces of the coin of hatred, the former affecting the mind and heart, the other affecting one’s actions.

Racism, then, is the use of prejudice and discrimination towards people based on their racial category. Underneath the broad category of racism, William Dudley divides racism into several different subcategories, depending on the nature of the racist action and who commits the act. Of primary importance to the American dialogue on racial relations are attitudinal racism and institutional racism. In attitudinal racism, a person expresses certain beliefs that prefer one racial group to another and can lead to individual acts of discrimination, while institutional racism refers to broader establishments, i.e. churches, governments, schools, companies, prisons, that commit acts of racial injustice or reinforce racist mindsets. All of these definitions play a critical role in contemporary society.

The true beginning of American racial interaction, as a nation, began, in 1619, with a fateful voyage from England to the American settlement of Jamestown, Virginia. J. Saunders Redding describes the event, “She was a strange ship . . . She came, she traded, and shortly afterwards was gone. Probably no ship in modern history has carried a more portentous freight. Her cargo? Twenty slaves.” The introduction of slavery into the American colonies, initially, fulfilled a desperate economic need for labor to support a rapidly expanding tobacco industry. Durable, possessing the ability to reproduce and ever increasing in number and decreasing in cost, the African slave became the preferred labor source well into the late eighteenth century. In expanding their “peculiar institution” of slavery, however, American society needed to justify the common practice of a predominantly white slave owner and a predominantly black slave population.
Out of attempts to defend these practices arose two separate dichotomies that continue to define the racial dialogue of the twenty-first century. The first came in whether to define Americans according to race or nationality. David Eltis weighs in on this question in his explanation of American slavery as distinguishing, ultimately, between races, rather than nationalities. He explains how, in its early days, slavery weakly defined this racial distinction, preferring to separate Europeans and Africans by their country of origin and cultural differences between them. Over time, however, a stark barrier developed that scientifically determined the boundaries of race and deemed one race as worthy of enslavement. This battle between nationality and race emerged repeatedly throughout the twentieth century, as individuals and groups attempted to overcome ethnic discrimination by defining themselves as part of the racial majority.

The second debate that came out of slavery focused on the conflict between the civic nationalist ideals of the founding fathers and the actual practices of a slave society. Until the Civil War, the majority of the public defined the patriotic strivings for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as applicable only to certain races and nationalities. Beneath the popular voice, however, resided a growing numbers of whispers that questioned the morality and legitimacy of slavery. Evidenced by the growing abolitionist movement, the racist ideology that permitted slavery to occur now faced its first significant challenge of several to occur throughout the decades to come. The fervor and dedication demonstrated by both sides in this conflict would ultimately drag the nation into a civil war.

With the ending of the war and the passage of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments, slavery became illegal and all people could now ideally share in the benefits of full citizenship, regardless of their race. In reality, however, the outpouring of support for racial
equality would quickly disappear as the desire for peace and economic security trumped moral
calls for justice.\textsuperscript{10} Within years, black codes and Jim Crow laws restricted the activities of the
recently freed to a new form of slavery. Even more discouraging, however, are the words of
Nancy MacLean in discussing the popular assumptions that fueled the hate groups that originated
to enforce these “laws”, “America had always been and should stay a middle class society . . .
From the time of the republic’s founding, American ideas of middle-class standing and
citizenship rights were coded in racially exclusive ways.”\textsuperscript{11} Though written in discussion of the
Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, the basic assumption of the superiority of white middle-class values
and beliefs continues to impact meaningful discussions on race today.

The early 1900s witnessed a continued abandonment of the principles fought for in the
civil war, not only for blacks, but for Asians, Eastern and Southern Europeans, Jews, Slavs, and
Hispanics as well. Fear of communism, crime, anarchy, and the loss of Anglo-Saxon superiority
pushed the nation to adopt fierce anti-immigration laws, restrict the civil rights of various people
of color, and forced the “Americanization” of all citizens, stripping them of their native
languages and cultures. In defense of this pervasive fear, anger and hatred, scientists began to
advocate eugenics that provided justification for Anglo-Saxon dominance. As an article in the
\textit{Boston Herald} argued,

\begin{quote}
Rome had [mistaken] faith in the melting pot, as we (Americans) have. It scorned the iron
certainties of heredity, as we do. It lost its instinct for race preservation, as we have lost ours. It
flooded itself with whatever people offered themselves from everywhere, as we have done. It
forgot that men must be selected and bred as sacredly as cows and pigs and sheep, as we have not
learned. Rome rapidly senilized and died.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

The legacy of Lincoln that once seemed obtainable now resembled nothing more than a distant
memory.

The onset of the Great Depression and World War II era triggered another conflict
between the civic ideals of the nation and the fierce racism that undermined them. Dr. Diana
Hayes talked about the vision of Franklin Roosevelt for an Economic Bill of Rights that aimed to guarantee peace and economic security for each American, through programs designed to provide jobs, living wages, education, medical care, homes and pensions for the elderly and sick. His programs of the New Deal, however, failed to overcome the racial boundaries so firmly established in society. Through the power of Southern representatives and senators, “Federal social welfare operated, in short, not just as an instrument of racial discrimination but as a perverse formula for affirmative action.” Although many blacks received more assistance than in previous decades, the significant gap between whites and blacks in obtaining welfare and employment opportunities, when compared to their respective needs, produced lasting ramifications. The failures of the New Deal to resist racial discrimination helped guarantee that race and poverty would remain intrinsically linked in American society, a link that remains to this day.

At the same time, however, the hostilities of World War II would contribute to the atmosphere that would pave the way for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The horrific nature of Hitler’s eugenics stunned the moral fiber of American society and led to severe questioning of America’s own theories of eugenics and its racist legislation and policies. Moreover, the valiant performance of blacks in the armed forces called into question the nature of segregation and the deeply held beliefs of white superiority. As the fires of war fused the various nationalities into one common white identity, military and government policies prevented blacks from sharing in that desired unity and equality. The blatant injustice of a nation that sent her citizens to war, but denied them the right to serve together, regardless of race, could no longer proceed without a challenge.
The Civil Rights Movement marked the most dramatic challenge since the Civil War to the system of white superiority and black segregation. As with the abolitionists over a century before, those who advocated for black equality came from all walks of life and represented a general moral and patriotic awakening to the failure of society to embrace fully the vision of Washington, Lincoln and Roosevelt. At the forefront of the movement was the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. whose eloquent preaching and steadfast leadership encouraged millions, both white and black, to abandon their comfort and personal security and endure sit-ins, boycotts, jails, beatings, threats and even death for the sake of justice and equality. As he wrote in one of his letters,

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. . . . We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with.  

In bringing these inequities to the attention of the public, the Civil Rights movement forced a nation to address the outright discrimination of segregation and guarantee with force of law and authority the equal rights of all men and women.

Arguably the crowning achievements of the civil rights era, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 revealed the impact of the protests on both popular opinion and government action. Although championed by the late John F. Kennedy, both these laws found their successful passage under the leadership of Lyndon Johnson. With his steadfast dedication to the memory of his assassinated predecessor’s agenda and his unquestionable skill in legislative politics, Johnson rallied a nation to the cause of equality, through appeals to America’s moral superiority and the need for domestic tranquillity and foreign prestige. Other senators and representatives joined in the clamor, as evidenced in this quote from Hubert Humphrey, “What kind of spectacle do we make in this world where we have prided ourselves
on being the good society, . . . – when duly constituted authority in parts of this nation not only
 tolerates but also incites brutality, violence and sadism?"17 Yet the battle-weary coalition that
pushed for these reforms soon found itself divided by the continued presence of prejudice and
hidden racism that persisted in the ghettos, courts and classrooms of the nation. The unity that
marked the efforts to achieve legal equality splintered when directed towards the deeper
economic inequalities that remained.

The story of the three decades following the height of the Civil Rights Movement brings
an explanation for the current state of racial relations in contemporary society. The non-violent
techniques and leaders that had achieved notable success in ending legalized segregation in the
south began to face utter failure in addressing the needs of the black ghettoes in the north.
Growing numbers of poor, young, angry black men began to subscribe to the messages of
Malcolm X that called for a rejection of all white institutions and culture, instead embracing a
new black heritage and separate identity as black people. Advocating the use of all means
necessary, this new “Black Power” movement began to fight back against white superiority,
through a complete and utter rejection of America and her democratic values and ideals.18 The
passion and message of this new Black Nationalism stunned the majority of the country and
awakened the nation to a hidden anger that threatened to engulf the United States in another civil
war.

Violence came to define the late 1960s and early 1970s as a wave of assassinations and
riots unveiled the depths of black anger. In the summer of 1966, the inescapable conditions of
slum tenements, overwhelming poverty and ignorant or hostile government leaders drove
frustrated blacks to spark riots in 36 communities. Even more lamentable than the extensive loss
of life and property, the legacy that these riots left made “violence first thinkable, then attractive,
then, perhaps, inevitable.” In addition to the use of violence, many of the Black Nationalist rejected the assistance of any white reformers, claiming that they belonged to the race of the oppressor and no longer belonged in the fight for equality. Following the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., many citizens, both black and white, questioned whether racial harmony was possible or even desirable.

The growing tide of radicalism within the Civil Rights Movement and the increasingly controversial nature of their reforms triggered a conservative backlash. Years of passionate debates over affirmative action, mandatory busing, and forced integration of schools, businesses, neighborhoods, churches, and community organizations began to divide the majority of white, middle and working class citizens. Beginning in the 1970s, George Wallace and other prominent conservatives sought to justify their opposition to federal intervention on behalf of blacks in terms of the Constitution, state rights and individual freedoms.

Wallace provided a desperately sought-after moral justification to those whites who saw themselves as most victimized and most displaced by the black struggle for civil rights. This struggle had in many ways become a contest for limited resources . . . Wallace portrayed the civil rights issue not as the struggle of blacks to achieve equality – a goal increasingly difficult to challenge on a moral basis – but as the imposition on working men and women of intrusive “social” policies.

The quest for total equality for blacks now faced the loss of significant support from the white majority.

In response to the shifting opinions of the public, the 1980s marked a serious decline in federal support for racial equality, in direct contrast to the efforts of the 1960s that were beginning to show substantial results. Under the efforts of federal agencies, the courts and private industry, blacks saw significant increases in economic and educational opportunities. Yet, new federal polices dismantled many of these civil rights agencies, shifted the tax burden onto the lower classes, lifted regulations for businesses, blocked judiciary movements on behalf
of racial equality and ended many need-based programs.\textsuperscript{21} Through a shift in dialogue, Ronald Reagan and the conservative right rewrote the debate on race relations by shifting the blame onto blacks and other minorities as possessing a lesser work ethic and a greater acceptance of loose moral behavior, dysfunctional families and criminal activity.\textsuperscript{22} Using a “color-blind” rhetoric, Reagan established the framework for contemporary dialogue on race relations in American society today.

The impact of the policies and language of the Reagan years continues to affect the financial and societal standings of both minorities and the poor in this country. The gap between rich and poor and black and white widened considerably in the years following the implementation of Reagan’s economic and administrative strategies termed “Reaganomics”. As Weisbrot reveals, “In a society where race and class intertwined, blacks as a group lost their tenuous footing in the climb toward economic parity.”\textsuperscript{23} In addition, the reduction in public aid disproportionately harmed blacks and other minorities below the poverty line. The supposedly “race neutral” decisions of the administration significantly altered the economic, social, and cultural standing of blacks.

The history of race relations in the United States highlights the progress and pitfalls that marked the journey to our current state of affairs. The paradoxes that filled the decisions of the past continue to cloud our choices in the present. Yet the dialogue of today differs profoundly from the discussions of the 1950s and 1960s. No longer do we fight to end legalized segregation, but we fight to overcome the mental and emotional barriers that reside in the national consciousness and hinder the quest for true racial harmony. This elusive and hidden racism and the quest to overcome it define the current state of race relations in the United States.
The greatest challenge that faces our society in truly achieving equality for all our fellow citizens lies in the mistaken assumption that the problem of race in America is no longer a “white problem”. Joe Feagin and Eileen O’ Brien explain how whites must acknowledge their substantial role in the persistence of racism today,

Racial prejudice and discrimination remain pervasive and imbedded in a system of racism that provides significant advantages for white Americans at the expense of African Americans and other Americans of color. This system includes not only racial stereotypes and prejudices, but also a racial ideology, powerful racialized emotions, a range of discriminatory practices, and the institutions in which the foregoing are imbedded.24

This paper, however, does not seek to place blame, but rather shine light on deeply held beliefs, rooted in ignorance, that significantly impact the ability of many whites to view their fellow citizens of color without bias. It also seeks to unveil the beliefs of different minority groups that also shape their interactions with whites and fellow people of color. By stripping away the prejudices, biases and assumptions that cloud the dialogue on race, all American citizens can work together to end the negative consequences of race in other areas of life, including poverty, crime, and education.

The largest myth that continues relatively unchallenged in current debate is the assumption that America is a color-blind society and that any efforts to acknowledge someone’s race, like affirmative action, are inherently unfair. In White-Washing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society, the authors explain, “Many opponents of affirmative action point out that were it not for these distorting and distracting policies whipping up racial consciousness, race would virtually disappear as a marker of social identity.”25 In their eyes, the only race problem resides in the policies that create it. As an example, a local university sponsored an affirmative action bake sale, where they charged white students more for the same goods, to reveal the unjust nature of race conscious policies. On its face, the students seem to present a valid argument, why should whites who did not directly discriminate suffer for the sins of the past? Yet, no one
questions the positive benefits of the past that whites still reap. We must acknowledge the legacy of superiority that allows many whites to go about their lives free from prejudice and discrimination and possessing multiple opportunities denied to others in housing, employment, education, and the criminal justice system. A nation cannot afford to be “color-blind” in policy, if race still plays a distinctively negative role in the daily lives of some of her citizens.

In defense of this misguided line of reasoning, whites typically offer several cliché justifications for their resistance to affirmative action and other race-based initiatives. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva debunks some of the most common, including “I didn’t own slaves”, “My Irish ancestors were persecuted, but they overcame their discrimination. If they can do it, so can blacks”, and “I didn’t get that job or acceptance letter because it was given to a minority.” Each of these statements fails to address the complexity of any particular issue, but rather seeks an impartial and even incorrect solution. Those who claim a lack of responsibility for the sins of slavery fail to accept the previously mentioned benefits of whiteness in American society, even to this day. Those who look to their own ancestors as examples fail to realize that the benefits of whiteness, although restricted, still placed their ancestors above blacks and other colored minorities. Finally, those who claim that they were denied employment or admission through affirmative action fail to acknowledge the reasonable alternative that they did not possess the proper qualifications for the position.  

Although clearly reinforcing the assumption of the first belief, many of these statements also provide insight into the second major belief of those who subscribe to a color-blind mindset. This belief states, “That persistent racial inequalities in income, employment, residence and political representation cannot be explained by white racism . . . Persistent and deep black poverty is attributable to the moral and cultural failures of African Americans, not to
discrimination.” Rather than looking in the mirror, many whites adopt a “blame the victim” approach that attributes the many problems facing blacks today to their “deficient cultural values”, including a perceived natural inclination towards a family structure without a father, the rejection of religion and a hard work ethic and the acceptance of promiscuity, laziness, handouts and violence as desirable. Yet, the “values” of most Black Americans do not significantly differ from those of their white peers, and statistics prove that the majority of black Americans live in traditional families, profess belief in a religion and a moral code, and admire those who work towards the fulfillment of the American Dream. Despite the documented research and the personal experiences of many to the contrary, the vision of a poor, lazy, urban dwelling, black criminal continues to remain the standard by which the majority of our nation views blacks.

Many well-meaning people also fall into a similar mindset that assumes blacks cannot rise out of their current situation, without the help of patronizing whites. In attempting to resolve critical disparities in economic status, education levels and criminal records for blacks, many liberals can mistakenly make their own assumptions that blacks are inherently lesser than those who assist them. Termed “liberal racism”, Jim Sleeper explains its legacy, “The result is precisely what liberals claim to find in others’ racism: that it is all the more damaging for being unconscious. . . . Liberals who, for political, moral, or ideological reasons, won’t pay them (blacks) the compliment of holding them to universal standards.” Despite their well-meaning intentions, the perception of all blacks as needing assistance to succeed reduces the accomplishments of all blacks to the gracious benevolence of whites. This damaging liberal mindset reduces the commendable accomplishments of black men and women, who through hard work, sacrifice, and determination succeeded in business, education, or law, to nothing more than a government handout.
The third and final misconception of a color-blind society is the belief that the root of current racial tensions comes from the current black leadership. Brown clarifies,

> The real problem today is not racists . . . who still prey on white fears. Instead, the genuine obstacles are misguided black militants like Al Sharpton who over dramatize white racism and white apologists who have a pathological need to feel guilty. Racial realists feel that since black civil rights leaders and militants benefit from government handouts and affirmative action, they have a vested interest in denying racial progress and fomenting racial divisions.  

Critics of the current black leadership believe that blacks should look internally and correct the actual problems of black achievement, including the erosion of the black family, the lack of morality, the dependency on welfare and the delinquent, criminal behavior of black males. Not only does this view absolve whites of any significant responsibility for the current state of race relations, but it also endorses a view of blacks, previously discussed, that is incomplete and biased. In reflecting on these three beliefs, one recognizes that the color-blind society is nothing more than a myth that masks racial prejudices and ignorance.

Within my own life experiences, I notice and recognize the assumptions and misguided beliefs that influence my actions and the actions of my family and friends. I will never forget an incident my senior year of high school, when I chose to accept the view of black males as deviant and possibly criminal, without any evidence to support this judgment. It happened on a routine drive home from school in Harrisburg, when I happened to notice two young, black men walking on the sidewalk adjacent to my vehicle. Without thinking, I reached across my seat and locked the doors, while keeping eye contact with the two men. In that split decision, I sent a message to both those guys that I was scared of them, without any justified reason. Unlike most similar situations, however, one of the young men had the courage to approach my car and inquire why I locked the door. In that moment, he challenged my hidden racism and forced me to acknowledge that decision as one based on prejudice and fear. Years later, that incident
continues to remind me that the path to overcoming our prejudices is long and difficult, but worth every step.

The current struggle to define blacks as equals in the hearts and minds of all Americans necessitates a commitment of whites and blacks to this dream. Through years of facing bitter resistance and general apathy, a significant number of blacks now harbor resentment and hatred towards a white America that continues to discriminate and towards the perceived failures of their own black communities. As Tucker explains, “The frustration that vented itself in words of hate and in burning city blocks . . . was the rage of essentially moderate black America that still wanted, as always, a way in.” Although understandable, this sweeping hatred or anger towards all whites or even their own black communities perpetuates the existence of “violent black” stereotypes that impede the ability of our nation to achieve lasting harmony. As one nation, blacks must work with whites towards a better future, or we will all languish in bitter resignation to the injustices that remain.

The first step to addressing these racial thoughts that cloud our reasoning and misguide our decisions, comes in educating the general populace about the reality of white privilege, the myth of meritocracy in a system that still suffers from racism, and the critical message that race is a national problem, not simply a black problem that blacks must solve. We need to heed the words of Dalton,

Thinking of race as “the Black man’s burden” is also debilitating to Whites. It leaves them powerless to effect change. It deprives them of the opportunity to be moral agents and to participate in the cleansing of this nation’s great stain. . . . As a practical matter, people of color cannot do it alone. This education must involve an incorporation of meaningful dialogue on race back into the national discourse that occurs everyday in the classroom, the courtroom, the campaign stop and the coffee shop. Until we can discuss reasonable solutions, without charges of racism or reverse
discrimination, from a “color-blind” society, the plight of minorities in this country will not improve.

As part of this education, Americans need to seek a broader understanding of those cultures and races that differ significantly from their own. The greatest solution to any racial stereotype is continued, meaningful interaction from someone within that racial group. It is increasingly difficult for someone to believe that all blacks are lazy, for example, when they have many close black friends who are hard working and dedicated. Close interracial relationships can also provide insight for the majority into the prejudice and discrimination that exists and its direct impact on those close to them. I remember with vivid detail a story related by my best friend, an African-American male from inner city Harrisburg. He recounted his direct encounter with racial profiling, as a security guard pulled him into a security office and proceeded to question him for shoplifting because he was walking too fast. The humiliation that my friend suffered because of the color of his skin was quite a revelation to me and prompted me to expand my understanding of prejudice and discrimination. Through efforts to gain a wider understanding, our nation can overcome the ignorance that breeds prejudice, bias, and, ultimately, racism.

The final solution to overcoming prejudice is encouraging people to speak out against racism, whether in the form of a racist joke, a biased observation or a flawed policy. Excessively often, we put our personal comfort or the avoidance of possible awkwardness ahead of the dignity of our fellow citizens of color. A quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer who resisted the hatred of Hitler powerfully explains the danger of staying silent,

They came first for the Communists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn’t speak up because I was Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.
Rather than allow this pervasive evil to continue, we must express our disgust and explain how this racist language damages the humanity of our fellow human beings. Unless we change the mindset of the nation, we cannot succeed in overcoming the other economic, political, judicial, and educational crises that remain.

Of all the remaining dilemmas that continue to face blacks and other minorities, the overwhelming conditions of economic poverty are the most critical. Relatively ignored by the mainstream media, blacks and Hispanics constitute a disproportionately large number of those in poverty, with 24% of all blacks and 22% of all Hispanics currently living below the poverty line. Despite the severity of this problem, the plight of millions of blacks, Hispanics and whites in poverty remains ignored until catastrophic events, like Hurricane Katrina, force the public to recognize the reality of life within the modern, American city. Just over seven months ago, people across the country and world questioned how the wealthiest nation on earth could permit third world conditions for millions of its residents. To answer this question, we must grapple with the legacy of race, class, and poverty in American society.

Far too often, most middle class Americans view these statistics and honestly believe that the problems of poverty are concentrated in the major metropolitan centers, like New York City or Los Angeles. However, less than fifteen minutes away, homeless men and women, numbering in the hundreds, line up to receive their daily meals. Regardless of where the poor are located, however, the face of poverty remains the same. From personal experiences in cities ranging from Allentown and Camden to Houston and New York, I realize that the face of poverty in urban American is black and Hispanic. Until we, as a nation, acknowledge that history has intrinsically linked race and poverty, we cannot devise workable solution to end both racism and poverty in the United States.
As previously mentioned, the history of racial relations in our country provides insight into the problems that remain today. Decades of “white affirmative action policies” during the New Deal and the GI Bill permitted the establishment of rigid residential segregation that persists today. Moreover, the last great attempt to end poverty under Lyndon Johnson failed, through a successful linking of race with poverty in the public mindset. Through a newfound rhetoric of individual responsibility and inherent weakness in black family structure and work ethic, many Americans link their own assumptions of blacks and other minorities with the visible reality of many minorities’ deficient quality of life, thereby disowning any responsibility for the fate of blacks and Hispanics in the urban city. By changing the language of both race and poverty, mainstream America avoids addressing its hidden racism or its growing underclass.

The current state of blacks, economically, exists within a multi-layered paradox. In one sense, overcoming centuries of racial segregation and hatred, in less than fifty years, is nothing short of exceptional. Today, blacks enjoy greater amounts of political participation, economic prosperity, educational success and visibility than any other time in our nation’s history. The past twenty years, however, also witnessed a steady reversal of integration in schools and neighborhoods, and stagnation in the decline of unemployment and poverty. Although we can be proud of our progress towards economic equality, our journey is far from over.

The complexity of racial poverty contains several overlapping issues, including housing, employment opportunities, politics, education and family structure. To look at any of these factors in their fullness, however, one needs to reject a pervasive myth that interferes in current discussions on solutions for the economic struggles of blacks and Hispanics. As Orlando Patterson states quite bluntly,
America is not, has never been, and will never be a meritocracy. As long as people are able to pass on to their children . . . most of their tangible wealth and power as well as their intangible assets – their social capital, or network of contacts, and their cultural capital, by which I mean those learned patterns of mutual trust, insider knowledge about how things really work, encounter rituals and social sensibilities that constitute the language of power and success – America will remain what it has been since the turn of the last century.\textsuperscript{37}

The legacy of white superiority, although ignored or denied in contemporary society, plays a decisive role in who homes are sold to, who jobs are offered to, and how someone who becomes poor is viewed by society. In all three of these situations, whites reap the benefits and blacks and Hispanics must struggle to overcome an inherited deficit.

A glaring example of the past’s impact on the present is the legacy of discrimination within housing markets. For decades, blacks faced hostility or outright rejection in attempts to purchase homes outside of the urban slums. Officially, real estate agents may no longer outwardly discriminate as company policy, but neighborhood pressure and personal biases present a strong deterrent in achieving residential integration. I remember selling our own house over five years ago to a black veteran and his family, in the suburbs outside of Harrisburg. At the time, I never thought that the color of their skin had any relevance in whether we should sell the house to them, but our neighbors thought otherwise. Within days after the sale became final, two of our neighbors never spoke to us again because we dared to bring a black family into their neighborhood. At the age of 14, I received a glimpse into the hatred that lurks beneath the surface and hinders our ability as a nation to move beyond race.

The impact of racial segregation in housing profoundly affects other conditions that prevent blacks and other minorities from escaping the conditions of destitution in the inner city.

“It [racial segregation] systematically undermines the social and economic well-being of blacks in America. Because of racial segregation, a significant share of black America is condemned to experience a social environment where poverty and joblessness are the norm.”\textsuperscript{38} By placing
blacks and Hispanics in neighborhoods suffering from high poverty rates, our nation condemns the residents of the inner city to a cycle of poverty that leads to the physical deterioration of their property, the loss of necessary investment, and the further flight of white residents from the neighborhood. In essence, we trap blacks and Hispanics in a pattern of discrimination, poverty and despair that requires extensive social programs and community support to overcome, resources that they currently do not possess.

Working in Camden, I witnessed some of the problems inherent in inner city neighborhoods. Although I helped feed hundreds of homeless each day, I drove past dozens of homes, boarded up and vacant. Hundreds of other homes were in desperate need of repairs, suffering from broken windows, rusting gutters, and flaking paint. Without the necessary financial resources, many city residents could not legally afford to purchase a home, pay rent, or maintain their current property. This problem of wages and employment marks the next major component in understanding the struggle for economic justice for minorities.

An epidemic problem within the ghettos of cities across the country is the high rate of unemployment. Historically attributed to laziness, the desire to remain on welfare, or broken families, many citizens neglect to look at the root problems of economics and discrimination that undermine current attempts to end joblessness among blacks. Economically, blacks suffer a host of disadvantages that lessen their ability to respond to changes in the market and seek jobs that offer a living wage. Most blacks lack adequate education or training, decreasing the scope of their options to unskilled positions that do not pay a livable wage and suffer the most during periods of depression and high unemployment. Blacks also suffer from the failure of companies located in the suburbs to recruit in these markets that are primarily black and Hispanic, reducing basic competition necessary in a capitalist society. By limiting the options of many residents of
the slums to jobs that cannot even lift them out of poverty, we foster an atmosphere of despair that drives people to escape, through a world of crime, alcohol and drugs.  

The previous economic factors, however, do not fully address the reality of racism and its impact on employment and wages in American society. Despite arguments to the contrary that excuse hidden racism as the will of the market, blatant discrimination on behalf of potential employers greatly reduces the opportunities of blacks to secure a reasonable paying job and provide an adequate level of financial support for their families. Fearful of economic consequences, employers may avoid hiring blacks or Hispanics for fear of upsetting customers or current employees, who in turn could cost companies thousands in lost revenue or decreased worker productivity. Moreover, companies may use statistics that technically prove the lesser capabilities of blacks or Hispanics, without acknowledging the obvious environmental factors that created this situation, to deny minorities employment or promotions. Combined with harsh market forces, the outright discrimination of many companies ensures that the cycle of unemployment, poverty and hopelessness will continue.

In an effort to remedy this situation over thirty years ago, President Johnson instituted a welfare system that attempted to create a social safety net. Today, welfare ranks as one of the most criticized and vilified social programs in the nation’s history. Rather than looking towards the deeper economic and racial problems, previously discussed, many conservative politicians, the media, and the majority of Americans turned on social welfare programs for discouraging work, promoting the decline of the family and costing taxpayers millions. Although not denying the possible abuse of the system, welfare supporters point to the absence of quality jobs as the root cause of black and Hispanic unemployment, not their innate desire to remain on government programs. As Jill Quadagno states, “The attack on the welfare state has had an insidious and
negative effect on the inner cities, but it has also hurt the poor outside of ghettos and the middle class. By blaming the victims and the current programs designed to assist them, current policymakers are condemning millions of our citizens to destitution, without looking towards any viable solutions.

The atmosphere of joblessness, impoverishment and despair also takes its toll on the family structure. During the 1960s and 1970s, the social taboo against extramarital sex, unwed mothers and divorce began a steady period of decline, exemplified by the current lifestyles of Hollywood actors and actresses and other elite men and women in positions of political and social power. With the decline of elite pressure for the two-parent household, however, came significant consequences for the rest of society that could not provide for two households or multiple child support payments. As Patterson explains,

Although single parenting is always emotionally or economically challenging for both parent and child, a capable adult living in a stable environment who has adequate resources and a dependable network of friends and relatives is usually able to surmount the inherent risks. It is when single parenting coexists with catalytic factors such as impoverishment, high-crime neighborhoods; low educational attainment and work skills; little or no earned income . . . and irresponsible fathering that single parenting becomes a devastating social choice.

The problem of unwed mothers, children born out of wedlock and the lack of father figures reflects a national view towards the family that disproportionately harms all those in poverty, especially those dwelling in the urban ghettos.

The reality of poverty for many black and Hispanic urban residents remains one of the greatest problems of the current age. In order to overcome these grave injustices, our nation must employ national, state and local politics to provide necessary reform and desperately needed aid to the poor of our nation. Saul Bernstein argues that the greatest opportunity for social advancement could occur in a complete overhaul of welfare programs to encourage working, without automatically subtracting benefits, unlike many current welfare systems that
stop benefits upon securing any job. Moreover, social agencies need to work to adequately train blacks and Hispanics for skilled labor, and then assist in finding these jobs for them. Finally, our nation should expand our means of social assistance to include jobs programs that could focus on rehabilitating and constructing hospitals, schools, roads, recreation areas, and housing projects and provide a living wage. Not only could these proposals make significant progress against unemployment, but they could also help improve the dilapidated nature of most ghetto neighborhoods.  

Before I proceed, I must distinguish these alternative proposals from current efforts at urban renewal that fail to address adequately the needs of the current residents of the inner city. Rather than working on the root causes of poverty, many urban planners desire to eliminate quickly unsightly buildings or abandoned condominiums, without concern for the livelihood of those who reside within them. Herbert Gans states the blatant reality that. “When households are displaced from inexpensive dwelling units, these units are usually lost forever to low-income tenets; and, as a result, the total supply of housing they can afford is reduced further.” I remember discussing urban renewal with the director of a homeless shelter in Camden, as we stared at the rows of new buildings buttressing against the slums in front of her church. Her insight remains with me, as she claimed that urban renewal does not solve the problem of urban poverty, but rather attempts to hide it by expelling the undesirables to another area of the city and removing the external blight and decay. She asked me a profound question that needs to be raised in local council meetings and on urban development task force agendas, if urban renewal restores Camden by pushing its poor into another city, what city do we condemn to be the next Camden? In discussions of viable solutions to racial poverty, we must look for solution that will resolve the issue of poverty, rather than sweep it under the rug.
Another critical focus of any substantial reforms of inner city poverty must look towards the growing residential and commercial segregation, occurring across America. Hearkening back to earlier calls for increased interaction between races, I argue that blacks, Hispanics, and whites will never truly understand one another if they fail to live, work, and recreate together. I believe that the proven way to achieve this success comes through affirmative action programs that ask companies and real estate agents to review their own histories of possible discrimination and then work to seek qualified minority applicants more aggressively from the inner city. To encourage the business and housing markets to comply, the judicial branch of our government needs to take a more active role in responding to charges of racism and dispensing justice in situations that warrant intervention. Although passionately vilified as “reverse discrimination” and promoting substandard workers, the actual results of affirmative action reveal exponential gains within black and Hispanic communities, along with significant improvements in racial relations within the workplace and community. Whenever programs are implemented that may take away the unnatural advantage of some for the improvement of others, those in power will resent the decision, but the hostility cannot deter us from the ultimate goal of racial equality.

Finally, as a nation, we must look at the current situation of the broken family, within urban environments. As previously mentioned, the shift of norms within society allowed the rise in single-parent households and extramarital sexual relations, but our social programs continue to focus on the traditional two parent, married households. Current efforts to remedy this situation must accept the reality of alternative families and design programs that provide more financial support to those families with only one significant source of income. In addition, new programs must work to educate single parents in proper parenting techniques and provide job training to assist these parents in securing jobs that will provide a living wage for them and their families.
Finally, our programs must emphasize the importance of education by providing programs to assist high school dropouts in achieving their GREs and working to improve communication and writing skills, thereby increasing their desirability among employers.

One cannot underestimate the importance of education in modern American society. As our society continues to shift from a manufacturing economy to a service economy, the necessity of a high school diploma becomes apparent, as being a high school dropout constitutes one of the surest determinants of poverty today. However, recent data indicates that one out of seven American children will drop out of school. Not surprisingly, the same trends that witness a disproportionate amount of blacks and Hispanics in poverty also witness a disproportionate amount of black and Hispanic high school dropouts. By permitting this failure in our education system, our society allows the cycle of poverty for many blacks and Hispanics to continue.

A year ago, I read Jonathan Kozol’s book on the deplorable state of inner city education. In his chapters, he visited the city of Camden and described the incredible poverty and inequity that defined urban education, in direct comparison to the affluence and achievement found in the public education system of the wealthy suburban district of Cherry Hill. I decided to do my own analysis of Camden, on a service trip fifteen years later. In visiting the classroom of St. Joe’s Pro-Cathedral, I observed the inherent inequality forced upon our youth, solely because of the color of their skin and the amount of money their parents make. The art teacher works with recycled scraps of paper and used coloring books and the gym teacher cannot develop sports teams because no one wants to coach in Camden. Yet, the school prepares its students for the rigors of high school that defy the odds stacked against them. Although laudable, the accomplishments of St. Joe’s only clarify our duty to support the efforts of these educators, as they struggle to overcome the inequity of public education.
Modern statistics reveal that fifty years after the landmark ruling against segregation in Brown vs. the Board of Education, schools remain highly segregated. According to Anyon, 76% of all students in urban public schools are African American or Latino. This resegregation of our school districts reflects the persistent reality of residential segregation.

Inner-city schools remain segregated because middle-class parents, white and increasingly black ones as well, have by and large withdrawn their children from those schools. The movement of the middle class to the suburbs out of the jurisdiction of urban public schools, coupled with increased use of private schools for those middle-class children who remain in major cities.

The critical union between class and race wreaks a unique havoc on education, as predominantly black and Latino school districts find themselves isolated from both white support and monetary resources.

The lack of financial support proves a significant barrier to providing equal education to all students. As Anyon points out, “Nationally, advantaged suburban schools spend as much as ten times that spent by urban poor schools.” Despite arguments to the contrary that money does not solve problems, Kozol argues that money corresponds with achievement in the majority of suburban school districts and could greatly benefit urban school districts. The stubborn resolve of many to refuse to acknowledge the inequities of public school funding ignores the blatant failure of property taxes to ensure an equal education for all. By relying primarily on real estate assessments for income, districts reward the wealthy and punish the poor.

In the 1970s California exposed the inherent injustice in basing educational opportunity on real estate.

The California Supreme Court found that the state finance system “invidiously discriminates against the poor” in violation of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment “because it makes the quality of a child’s education a function of the wealth of his parents and neighbors.” . . . The Court agreed that the system actually lessens the choice of the poor district, which “cannot freely choose to tax itself into an excellence which its tax roles cannot provide.”

The ruling reinforced the reality of blatant disadvantages within the education system and discredited critics that attempted to blame the failures of inner city schools solely on deficient
parenting. In reality, many cities carry the burden of excessively high taxes that outpace their suburban neighbors and reflect their unbending commitment to education. However, the generosity of the poor cannot catch up with the spending power of the rich, resulting in spending disparities that do have lasting consequences on the school and its ability to provide services, teachers and opportunities to the poor minorities of the ghetto.

Money and poverty, however, do not represent the only significant problems facing urban education. Prevalent attitudes that generalize about blacks and Hispanics damage relationships between teachers and students and separates peers based on race and class. In the book written by the Lindseys, the following interaction reveals the deep prejudice found in many teachers working in the inner city, “One of the dudes missed an English test because there was some trouble at home; and, in front of the class, the teacher, who is white, said that the kids on ADC always stay home, especially when there was a test. And that our friend was going to fail.” The unprofessional and judgmental comment embarrassed the student to the point that he did not return and did not graduate. Unchecked, the prejudices of teachers can profoundly influence their student’s self-concepts and create self-fulfilling prophesies of failure.

Teachers, however, also face extraordinary disadvantages in urban educational settings. Lacking proper resources, subjected to overcrowding and large numbers of students with learning disabilities and English as a second language, and dealing with the many complicated issues that afflict their students, teachers must balance many roles, often without proper training or experience. To complicate matters, many urban schools face critical teacher shortages and must resort to hiring incompetent, uncaring or prejudiced teachers. Engaged in a losing battle, without financial, political or parental support and lacking educational guidance, many teachers
lose their passion or desire to continue teaching. As their teachers lose hope, blacks and Hispanics begin to question their ability to succeed as students.

The importance of student struggles and self-images also contributes to the current reality of urban education. Across the board, many blacks and Hispanics view academic success as a marker of white identity, and therefore resist the urge to succeed in school. Moreover, the reality of crime, poverty, homelessness, abuse, hunger, divorce, pregnancy, AIDS, drugs and prostitution forces students to deal with many other pressing issues, which distract or completely inhibit a student’s focus on academic pursuits. Students cannot learn in an environment where their basics survival needs, like shelter, food, and security, are not met. Unless our nation makes significant efforts to improve the conditions of black and Hispanic youth in our cities, educational success will continue to remain an unattainable dream.

Currently, inner city education also faces a new challenge in the form of recent legislation that changed the nature of accountability for badly performing school districts. Known as the No Child Left Behind Act, school districts are now held to the same strict standards of every child must pass standardized tests in reading, math and science, or the school risks losing funding or even its ability to remain open. Although created with the greatest of intentions, the law attempts to judge all schools equally, when financially they are entirely unequal. More importantly, the culture of high stakes testing reduces the curriculum and purpose of education to passing a test, undermining many efforts to teach critical thinking or subjects that the state will not test, including the arts, history, or languages. In accepting this legislation, our nation has accepted a policy that has profound negative consequences for education, particularly of the black and Hispanic youth of the ghettos.
In order to achieve success for all our students, we must devise a range of solutions to address the multiple problems facing urban education. Personally, I believe that school districts need to redraw their boundaries to incorporate neighborhoods of different races and income levels into the same school. I came to this conclusion through reflecting on the school districts around my home and witnessing both the success of racial integration within my Catholic high school and the failure of our local public schools to prevent a return to de facto segregation. As a positive example, I look to my high school that draws students from the wealthiest suburb in the county and the poorest sections of Harrisburg and blends them to allow for meaningful interactions between races and for a greater exposure of our students to the realities of race, class and their impact on society today. Yet, I also witnessed the thinly veiled racism of my local public high school as new district lines firmly separated the suburbs from the city, rewarding the white, suburban majority with a new school building, while forcing their poorer black and white peers into the old, decaying high school. The message of both these personal experiences proves that students, teachers, and parents cannot overcome prejudice and racism, unless school districts work to overcome their own legacy of segregation and neglect.

On a similar level, states and local counties must devise new strategies to supplement those school districts that lack the necessary amount of property tax revenue to provide a fair and just education to their students. This additional revenue could come from sales tax revenue, lottery revenue, or through federal grants. In addition, the national government needs to reevaluate the current successes and/or failures of the No Child Left Behind Act and make adjustments to steer our education methods away from purely test preparation to deeper analytical thinking and a greater appreciation for all branches of knowledge, including aesthetics, history, government, literature, and advanced science and mathematics. Through a renewed
effort on all levels of government to communicate successes, failures, and alternatives to one another and to the public, our nation can learn from the mistakes of the past and adjust to assist all students, regardless of race or income. By leveling the field and returning to the purpose of education in advancing knowledge, schools can become havens of learning and progress, rather than prisons of standards and inequity.

Reform must also focus on the schools themselves and the teachers, students, parents and community that shape them. A top priority of urban school districts must be in locating, securing, and supporting high quality teachers, through higher pay and incentives, to educate their students. Schools should not accept “teachers” who lack pedagogical knowledge of how to teach or possess proven streaks of incompetence or racism, but instead work to support the excellent educators that struggle under the current inequities. Schools should also develop comprehensive programs to evaluate teachers, including student evaluations, standardized test scores, principal observations and teacher portfolios to determine the capabilities of each person as an educator. Administrators should then use the evaluations to reward excellent faculty with additional salary or benefits and to assist poorer performing teachers, through mentoring programs, providing them with opportunities to take additional classes and offering constructive criticism and reasonable suggestions for improvement. By recognizing and rewarding the crucial role of the teacher in the educational process, schools can maintain or restore their faculty’s sense of passion and commitment to education and pass that enthusiasm onto the students.

Schools also need to work with students to improve their self-image and assist in alleviating the other influences that hinder academic achievement. Schools should pioneer mentoring programs that match incoming students with a teacher and an upper classmen, providing them with valuable role models and readily available resources to succeed
academically and socially in an educational setting. In addition, guidance offices and individual
teachers should set the bar high, expecting students to attend class, arrive on time, complete
assignments and learn the material. Rather than lowering the standards of academic
achievement or expecting less of students solely because of their skin color or income levels,
schools need to invest additional time, resources and energy to level the playing field and
provide all students with an equal opportunity for success. Moreover, schools need to develop
specific programs to accommodate students’ needs, which include offering drug rehabilitation
programs, educating students in proper parenting techniques, assisting students in preparing for
future careers and/or entrance into college, securing food and clothing for those students who
struggle to possess these basic survival needs, and providing counseling services for students
struggling with dysfunctional families, abuse or fear. When schools reach out, take a stake in the
entire well-being of all their students and encourage them to pursue their dreams, blacks and
Hispanics will more likely believe in their own abilities, graduate and, hopefully, break out of the
cycle of poverty.

Finally, schools must recognize their function as part of a wider community and work
towards forming meaningful relations with parents and the community as a whole. Schools that
fail to acknowledge the greater social issues of poverty and crime that exist in the neighborhoods
of their students will fail to provide students with the proper tools necessary to succeed.
Administrators and teachers, therefore, need to develop programs that reach out to the
community, through implementing community service programs, joining neighborhood task
forces that discuss solutions to the issues of poverty, unemployment, urban decay and crime, and
interacting with community members in parades or cultural festivals that are important to those
citizens. Moreover, schools should provide education classes for parents, as previously
discussed, to provide the primary educators of a child with basic literacy, proper parenting techniques, job training, and a new focus on the importance of education in their child’s success. In recognizing the importance of a unified school community and working towards the success of each member, we can all ensure that the inequities that currently define education for the majority of poor blacks and Hispanics will end.

As previously mentioned throughout the paper, the issues of crime, violence, and justice within black and Hispanic communities permeate discussions on poverty, education and overall attitudes towards different races today. Crimes committed by and against blacks and Hispanics occupy our media, our politicians and our neighborhoods, as we attempt to understand why African Americans constitute 28% of those arrested, when they represent only 12% of the total population. Yet charges of police brutality and racial profiling inflame the relationship between blacks and police forces and complicate discussions on race and its potential impact on the criminal justice system. Not surprisingly, the disproportionate representation of blacks among the criminal population leads to national assumptions of the inherent criminality of blacks and drives legislation to remove these dangerous criminals from society. Rather than simply placing our problems behind bars, we need to investigate the social and economic conditions that drive people to crime and consider the reality of institutional discrimination in the branches of our nation’s criminal justice system.

Current arrest rates and incarcerations that place a significantly disproportionate percentage of blacks in prison reflect not only questionable trends in police enforcement, but also reveal the reality of a society that fails to solve poverty, poor school systems or unemployment. As Keith and Herring state, “The effects of skin color are not only historical curiosities from a legacy of slavery and racism, but present-day mechanisms that influence who gets what in
The conditions of destitution and neglect breed hopelessness and despair among black and Hispanic communities in urban areas, conditions that make drugs and alcohol desirable means of escape. In talking to a homeless gentleman in Camden, I listened to the reality of omnipresent drug use in many inner cities that creates a cycle of dependency and ruin that destroys entire families and neighborhoods. Until our nation recognizes the social problems that make crime look attractive, we cannot hope to end crime in urban ghettos.

Beyond the reality of pervasive crime in inner cities, however, researchers question the tactics of police forces that place significantly higher police surveillance in urban areas, thereby ensuring that the majority of arrests occur in these areas. Reacting in response to a public outcry for security and protection, many police forces concentrate on the areas with the highest statistical crime rates, but in doing so they ensure that arrest rates will remain high and that people will continue to perceive cities and their minority inhabitants as dangerous. For example, the current war on drugs that concentrates on urban drug trafficking, relatively ignores the reality of extensive drug use in suburban and rural America, where people possess the financial resources to acquire these substances. As Scott Johnson reveals, “Although African Americans constitute only 12 percent of the population of the United States and only 13 percent of its monthly drug users, they constitute 35 percent of drug arrests, 55 percent of drug convictions, and 74 percent of state incarcerations for drug offenses.”

Statistics of this nature call into question the practices of a criminal justice system that feeds upon and fuels the fears of a nation towards people of a different skin color.

In looking at the relationship between police forces and minority populations, one must acknowledge police brutality. The question of police brutality hinges on the tenuous relationship between those in power and those under their control. Personal assumptions and prejudices do
not leave a police officer when they are on duty, but rather influence his or her decisions, many times on a subconscious level. These personal attitudes can impact a police officer’s duties by shifting his views on the guilt of a suspect, the danger a suspect poses, or the degree of force needed to rectify a situation. In a similar fashion, centuries of abuse at the hands of authorities and continuing incidents of prejudice and discrimination make many blacks and Hispanics wary of law enforcement and more likely to resist arrest or appear to pose a significant threat. The collision of these various factors perpetuates the tension between police and minorities and will likely continue unless our nation makes a concerted effort to facilitate positive interaction between the two.

At the core of our nation’s struggle with race and its impact on justice in America is the reality of deeply help national assumptions of the criminality and dangerous nature of blacks. A constant feed of media images focusing on black criminals heightens our nation’s irrational fear of blacks. Yet Armour questions the basic beliefs of those who fear blacks because of statistics that attribute higher levels of crime to blacks, including the assumption that this crime is violent crime. The author reveals that the majority of black arrests deal with drug-related offenses, and that, actually, white felons commit the majority of violent crimes. To fear a random black male walking down the street is not only irrational, but also inherently prejudiced.

To address properly the interaction of race and the criminal justice system, our nation needs to implement the previous plans that will help eliminate the conditions that breed crime and despair in urban environments. In providing workable solutions to the social problems of poverty, unemployment, and the lack of adequate education, our nation will witness the automatic decline of crime and a reduction in prison populations. Our courts and prisons must also shift from solely mediators of punishments to tools of rehabilitation that can focus on
overcoming drug addictions, providing alternative job training that will offer comparable benefits to their current criminal activity, and forcing criminals to work in efforts that will benefit their local community and give them a sense of pride and investment in their neighborhoods and, ultimately, in society. To accomplish the infinitely more difficult goal of rehabilitation, our states must review their three strike laws that remove thousands of blacks and Hispanics from our citizenry because of addictions and deprive us of their talents and skills that could benefit society. I believe that society needs protection from both external enemies and internal crime, but in ignoring our duty to rehabilitate, we surrender millions of our citizens to a life of crime and prison, without challenging them and seeing if they can become something more.

In revamping our criminal justice system, we also need to focus on police forces and the wider network of judges, attorneys and juries that allow race to influence decisions and shape the color of criminality here in the United States. Part of the reform must come through intensive training and education in the reality of race and its direct impact on the dispensing of justice today. As Young argues,

We must raise police standards. The bulk of America’s policemen are underpaid and undertrained. Higher salaries, regional police training academies, better testing procedures, and extended periods of internship are needed to make police work more professional. A basic goal of this training, especially for policemen in the cities, must be to educate the racism out of recruits.62

In that same vein, police departments need to work to outreach into their local communities in a positive and beneficial manner for all. By attending local carnivals, volunteering in the community and working with schools to educate students about drugs, police forces can provide a different, more human side to the community they serve and, thereby, increase trust and goodwill between blacks and police.
Finally, our nation must continue to work towards overturning the prejudiced beliefs that condemn all blacks as criminals and deserving of suspicion and fear. Media outlets must review their current productions and consider striking a balance between honest reporting of crimes and stories about positive black, white and Hispanic role models working to improve their local communities. Rather than consistently focusing on the failures and problems that still remain for a large minority of blacks and Hispanics, we must recognize the reality that the majority of blacks and Hispanics are successful and do not fit the stereotypes imposed by a fearful white society. As Payne succinctly states, “The aberration has become the norm, in the view of many Americans.” As stated in the beginning of the paper, unless we change the mindsets of Americans, we cannot hope to overcome the economic, educational, and judicial physical symptoms of racial prejudice and discrimination.

In his book *Race Rules*, Michael Dyson succinctly states the foremost reality of the twenty-first century. “Race continues to make a difference. Race continues to dominate. Race rules.” Throughout the paper, I have attempted to explain briefly the multiple problems that overlap in any meaningful discussions on race and its impact on society. I have also looked at possible solutions to these inequalities, solutions that should not be mistaken for class charity. We must all realize that any solutions necessarily depend on the financial support and personal dedication of all members of society, especially those from the middle and upper classes who can afford to invest their time, money and talents into the fight for racial equality. Yet without the support of the entire society, our national mindset cannot be fully altered and our hidden racism cannot be fully exposed.

I also recognize that my proposals are not dramatically radical or new. Therefore, I realize that in order to make these plans come true, we must look towards the immediate steps
each person can take to move the plans for racial equality into action. First, each citizen must participate in his or her democratic duty to vote and use the ballot to further the cause of racial fairness. In the same vein, we all need to attend our local town council and school board meetings and express our opinions on decisions that could influence our efforts to end racial inequities. By participating in the political process, we are holding our elected representatives responsible to the civic ideals they swore to uphold. Third, we must use our commercial spending power to reward those businesses that work towards integration and the overall bettering of our communities. Finally, we must volunteer to help provide the necessary manpower to implement tutoring programs, job-training programs, and beautification projects and continue charitable services, like food pantries, homeless shelters, and medical clinics. Although each suggestion seems absurdly simple, all of these minor choices can become a significant catalyst for deeper social changes towards national racial harmony. In light of this entire work, I wish to leave you with the profound words of Thurgood Marshall in the hope that you will continue to research, reflect upon and work for the eventual end of racial prejudice and discrimination. “The law can open doors and knock down walls, but it cannot build bridges.” . . . “We will only attain freedom if we learn to appreciate what is different and muster the courage to discover what is fundamentally the same.”65 This is our call as Americans, Christians, and, ultimately, human beings. Will we have the courage to answer this call?


13 Diana Hayes, 24 March 2006, *Romero Lecture*, Rutgers University, Camden, NJ.


21 Ibid, 169.


37 Ibid, 9-10.
39 Ibid, 132.
41 Ibid, 42-43.
44 Patterson, *The Ordeal of Integration*, 33-34.
48 Alter, “The Other America”, 46.
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