

# DIVIDED STAND

## New York Newsday

**TWO NATIONS: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal**, by Andrew Hacker. Scribner's, 257 pp., \$24.95.

### BY JIM SLEEPER

**I**N A country as bedeviled by racism as ours, anyone who would frame arguments for racial justice starts with a handicap. A David Duke need only allude to disintegration in the bottom third of the black community; he can take it for granted that many whites will see such symptoms not as evidence of anything they've done wrong but as proof of black inferiority or intransigence. Any-

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one who wants to persuade whites generally to acknowledge racism's ubiquity, let alone to help redress its effects, has to work a lot harder.

It isn't that all whites are hardened racists. For one thing, a lot of anti-racist rhetoric has needlessly alienated even very decent whites by mocking their beliefs in fair play. For another, racism's damage has been compounded by non-racist developments such as economic dislocation that hurts whites too, making talk of "white privilege" sound thin. Another obstacle is the bitter experience of urban whites with rising black crime and social decay — and their anger at pundits and policymakers who dismiss the dangers.

With all this complicating the debate about race, it's no longer enough simply to "expose" white indifference and marshal statistics that track black pain. As Andrew Hacker, who has sifted the data

in authoritative essays for *The New York Review of Books*, acknowledges in the preface to "Two Nations," "While research can be useful, past a certain point, we must bring intuition and imagination to bear."

This book is his effort to do just that. Yet it fails, and its failure is instructive.

In its strange mix of exhaustive documentation, arch moralism and muddled thinking about blacks' and whites' actual experiences, "Two Nations" represents a mindset, profoundly offensive to most whites and insufferably patronizing to blacks, that is widely shared among liberal elites of a certain age, widely disseminated and terribly destructive. Call it white liberal guilt run wild; it begins by denouncing whites and ends by belittling blacks. Because it is so deeply entrenched, we can expect that "Two Nations" will be warmly received.

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### THE WRITING IRISH

The *Field Day* Anthology of Irish Writing runs the literary gamut from St. Patrick to the present day. Page 37.



### A DOUBLE LIFE

The vagaries of Laurence Olivier's personal life are the focus of Donald Spoto's biography of the legendary actor. Page 36.

# HACKER

For Hacker, "white America" is almost one-dimensional in its racial myopia, endlessly inventive in its rationalizations for discrimination and hopelessly sterile in its linear, soulless conformity. His disdain for working-class whites is palpable and unrelenting. He doesn't seem to think that the civil-rights movement accomplished much either; reading him, I felt my own generation's awakening to black pain and nobility being reduced to a rerun of the illicit liaisons between blacks and whites that have punctuated our country's racial nightmare.

Blacks, on the other hand, are never anything but victims, even when Hacker considers the killing of ghetto youths by other ghetto youths: "While in one sense these are 'free' acts . . . they must also be seen as expressing a despair that suffuses much of their race . . . It is white America that has made being black so disconsolate an estate."

There is truth here, but not the whole truth, and we are well past the time when anything will be gained by denying blacks a larger measure of credit and responsibility for their own liberation, even in the teeth of racism itself. It's a mystery how Hacker can posit such a monolithic white world and such a hapless, helpless black one — and at the same time hope to change either.

To his credit, Hacker is too much the researcher to suppress findings that contradict his beliefs. But after acknowledging them, as if to prove his own objectivity, he evades the problems they pose. Consider his discussion of policing. First, he documents that violent crime is heavily, disproportionately black. Next, he notes: "Black Americans have a three times greater chance than whites of dying from a policeman's bullet. As it happens, a disproportionately high number of these killings of blacks are by black policemen, which suggests that departments tend to give black officers assignments where they encounter suspects of their own race . . . There is a tendency to use blacks to control blacks."

Hold on there! Analysis has given way to ideologically driven evasion. If proportionately more blacks than whites are dying from policemen's bullets, isn't that largely because — as Hacker himself acknowledges — violent crime is so heavily black? Isn't this explanation all the more plausible given that, as Hacker also acknowledges, so many cops who kill blacks are themselves black? And what on earth is Hacker saying about departments' hiring policies? That they *shouldn't* hire more blacks? That they should assign them to *white* neighborhoods?

Black communities clamor for more black cops, and Hacker knows why: White cops more often misread cues in black youths' behavior. What he forgets is that while black cops are less likely to misread, they aren't therefore more merciful. Perhaps, Hacker muses in conclusion, "experience has jaundiced so many officers that they see even law-abiding blacks as belonging to the 'other side.' Compounding these stereotypes is the fact that the typical police officer is a high-school graduate, from a working-class background, who had never previously set foot in the areas he now patrols . . . And . . . at least a few police officers still move in circles where no censure attaches to using the word 'nigger.'"

How does this explain why so many blacks are killed by black cops? It doesn't, of course. Hacker seems simply to have forgotten that there are black cops at all, and he's back to talking about whites who say "nigger." A discussion so warped by denial of the harsh realities can't parse the very real problem of police racism in a way that serves blacks or whites well. Yet that failure is entirely typical of this book. Whether the subject is the impact of affirmative action on black college students' performance, the prospects of a black "business culture" or the growth of race-specific remedies to presumed discrimination in electoral politics, "Two Nations" muses about its statistics from an armchair; it seldom touches the ground in ways true to everyday experience.

The worst cost of Hacker's stereotyping of whites is that he broad-brushes blacks too. Because "their" culture is so earthy, he says, blacks are "more attuned to their bodies and physical needs." They are more "spiritual" too, less given to linear thinking. So unless they "are willing to deny large parts of their selves," they cannot be expected to succeed in "white" institutions such as university physics departments or airlines, where people "are expected to think and act in white ways."

How Hacker expects an airline or a physics department to accommodate the black culture he has portrayed he doesn't say — and a good thing too: I suspect his answer would embarrass both him and blacks. He doesn't ask whether any whites are earthy or spiritual enough to suffer self-denial in corporations, or whether physics departments and airlines are driven by imperatives that transcend "white power." He ought to check this with the Japanese.

Similarly, the fact that few blacks are earning PhDs prompts Hacker to suggest that the degree is an inappropriate requirement for a good college teacher. Maybe, but wouldn't any serious alternative requirement — say, John Searle's well-rounded education, sketched out memorably in December 1990 in *The New York Review of Books* — be even tougher? Hacker doesn't say.

The 1960s' civil-rights movement made calculated, morally grounded appeals to the decency and legitimate concerns of whites. That politics of persuasion worked because it credited its targets with some integrity, even as it exposed their shortcomings. Hacker wants to show whites how hypocritical and indifferent they remain about the intolerable burden of being black in America; but he mischaracterizes that burden and caricatures its sources by suggesting that police exams using words such as "relevant," "disposition" and "unsubstantiated" are racially unfair. What Hacker himself doesn't see is that such a description of the burden of blackness only increases the burden by insulting both races.

He also fails to appreciate that people of all colors object to racialization of standards not because

they're racists and not because they've been displaced by blacks but because they genuinely believe that their commitments to merit and fair play are being discounted in ways that hurt everyone, black as well as white.

Even after we've documented all the white laziness, incompetence and discriminatory networking that vitiates such claims, on balance the claims hold true. We should strive to remain a society in which they continue to hold true. The assumption that such people are hypocrites — that America is really only about power and greed — is, ultimately, an elitist one. By failing to keep faith with whites and independent-minded blacks willing to be held to higher standards, Hacker weakens his contribution to the vision and construction of a non-racist America. ■



**JIM SLEEPER**

# Prof did a real hack job on race issue

Three times during a half-hour TV show, Queens College Prof. Andrew Hacker told a lie about New Yorkers. He said that, in 1989, those who

voted for Rudolph Giuliani were voting for "someone they'd never heard of." Even today, "You stop a single Giuliani supporter and ask them, what do they know about him? Nothing." Later, he said it again.

In 1989, New Yorkers knew lots more about Giuliani than about David Dinkins. They knew he was a hard-driving, controversial prosecutor, the most famous since Tom Dewey. They knew the Pizza Connection, John Gotti, Ivan Boesky, Bess Myerson, Stanley Friedman. They had opinions about Giuliani.

What New Yorkers knew about Dinkins, if they lived outside Manhattan, as most do, was that he was black, a one-term borough president who hadn't filed some taxes, a clubhouse pol like those Giuliani had put away. There was more to Dinkins' record than that. Not all of it endearing.

Hacker wants us to grasp that some whites back Giuliani only because he's

white. Too true. Some Hispanics and Asians do so for the same reason. "It's a fear vote," Hacker said. "It used to be our city and 'they' are taking it away. . . . Crime, welfare, drugs, guns — all of those have a black coloration" in white minds.

But why not? "Maybe race and fear of crime are intertwined, but is it reflexively racist to believe one candidate can address the issue better than another?" asked Peter Medonia, a Bronx baker who was one of the "Faces of Hope" at Bill Clinton's inauguration and whose family feels under siege.

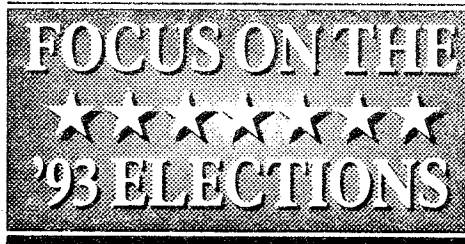
"You sound like a prize student of mine," Hacker replied. "Every so often the professor doesn't have the answer." He conceded he didn't know Medonia's mind, but he had no such compunction about Medonia's kind: "They want a certain kind of city, they want the troublemakers controlled . . ."

"Don't you?" asked Medonia.

This time, the professor really was stumped. He sputtered and spread his hands. Not a word came out of his mouth.

I have no interest in defending Giuliani. I have an interest in defending Medonia. Look up Gaspar Signorelli in my book, "The Closest of Strangers," at your library, and listen to another voice Hacker can't hear.

I also know that violent crime and out-of-wedlock births are disproportionately black. And that white racism and economic exploita-



tion are original sins. And that it's a mistake to cry "racism!" to explain all white exasperation with all that's wrong in black life.

Discrimination, you confront and fight. Attitudes, you dissolve more subtly. But Hacker just hacks away.

Prof. Larry Nachman of the College of Staten Island has Hacker's number. "If there are disparities in success between blacks and other Americans," he summarizes Hacker's reasoning, "it must be either because blacks are biologically inferior or because of the . . . racist environment."

Nachman rejects the notion of black inferiority and admits racism. But he asks why Hacker won't factor in a third possibility, one that presents blacks neither as inferior nor as hapless victims: "He cannot bring himself to think about elements in black culture which might work against success." From the Rev. Calvin Butts to the Rev. Al

Sharpton, black leaders now wrestle honestly with that. But, Nachman notes, "Hacker is so intent on viewing American blacks solely as victims that he seems incapable of making distinctions among them."

This keeps Hacker from making distinctions among white working people, too. He belittles them and mocks their alleged ignorance and bigotry with such unrelenting smugness that a black Washington Post reporter asked him if he thinks he's somehow exempt from his own whiteness.

"Oh, believe me," Hacker said, "I need my whiteness as much as Joe the truck driver does." Or Pete the baker?

Because of white racism, David Dinkins won in '89 by only 2.6%. But today's electorate is less white, and if Harold Washington, running for reelection in hyper-polarized Chicago, could win a few more white votes and many more Latino votes than he did the first time, why can't Dinkins?

If Dinkins had dealt decisively with the Korean boycott and Crown Heights, if he'd actually run his government, if he'd connected with people in their communities, is there anything special about this city that, unlike Chicago, would deny him more white, Hispanic and Asian votes than in '89?

To answer yes, you have to be some kind of bigot. Like Andy the professor.