

American liberalism's

Liberalism seems poised for a renewal, but its chances for creating a visionary program for the next century are jeopardized by racial contradictions and confusions that continue to appear in its social policy. Instead of the colorblind society once promised by the left, we inhabit a country seething with racial resentments. With uncompromising clarity, Jim Sleeper discusses what liberals need to do to return their political movement to the vital center.

Along the way, Sleeper punctures liberal pieties to reveal politicians and journalists still stymied by race, impotent in the face of conservative racism, and paralyzed by a guilt that neither advances social justice nor helps fashion a common American identity. Jim Sleeper challenges us to transcend race, to reject the foolish policies and attitudes that have only reinforced racial divisions, and to weave a social fabric sturdy enough to sustain the values upon which this country was founded.

"Sleeper elaborates a compelling alternative to current liberal thinking, one that combines stalwart integrationist principles with a deep concern about the wretched conditions of millions of black Americans."

— SEAN WILENTZ, IN SLATE

"Jim Sleeper courageously writes about what can only be whispered in the Academy and in the bowels of bureaucracy: an identity politics that refuses to identify itself."

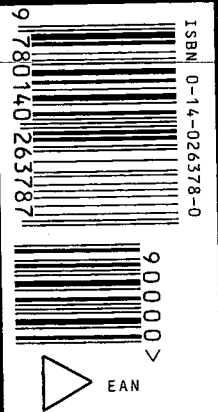
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Jim Sleeper liberal racism

how fixating on race subverts
the american dream

"Skillfully and persuasively argued... Sleeper takes pains to make his book a critique of the left, not an endorsement of the right."

— ERIC LEE, THE WASHINGTON POST

LIFE AFTER DIVERSITY

◆ The Liberal Default

Students now enter college with their group identities intact, and they expect the institution to respond accordingly. . . . People have come to identify themselves not only according to race, gender, or ethnic identity, but also by class, sexual orientation, disability, and age.

—Edgar Beckham,
vice president,
Ford Foundation

When I was a senior at the Bronx High School of Science, Harvard's admissions materials showed up in my mailbox, unsolicited. Out came this Minority Student Information Request Card and a leaflet saying, "Here are some of the things Hispanic students experience at Harvard." And I thought, "What is this? I want to know, what do students experience at Harvard? Like, what am I to them?" Well, I knew what I was. I was the fulfillment of a quota. And I have no intention of being that.

—Rafael Olmeda, reporter,
New York Daily News

Edgar Beckham's assumption that your skin color signals a "group identity" is now liberal doctrine. It drives the color-

coding of American public policy and civic culture, and it is a colossal blunder. Rafael Olmeda is proud of his Puerto Rican heritage, he has known the discrimination and bigotry to which the term "racist" usually applies, and he accepts limited affirmative action as a remedy for discrimination. A busy young reporter at an urban tabloid newspaper, Olmeda doesn't read conservative tracts or magazines. But he feels patronized and insulted by liberal racial solicitude far more often than he feels oppressed by the conservative racism that dominates the liberal imagination. "When I face people in a newsroom or the street, I don't want them assuming they know anything important about me because of my name or my color," Olmeda says. "They have no right to do that."

Many of today's liberals assume that right. They have been trying to color-code Olmeda's sense of himself and his country since long before he felt put off by Harvard's approach to him as a colored person. Claiming to oppose historic racism, the liberal "diversity" project defaults on America's promise, sometimes by reinforcing racial "awareness" on campus and on the job in ways even segregationists might applaud. Constraining us all to define our citizenship and even our personhood more and more by race and ethnicity in classrooms, workrooms, courtrooms, newsrooms, and boardrooms, today's liberalism no longer curbs discrimination; it invites it. It does not expose racism; it recapitulates and, sometimes, reinvents it. Its tortured racial etiquette begets racial epithets, as surely as hypocrisy begets hostility. And it dishonors liberals' own heroic past efforts to focus America's race lens in the 1950s and '60s, when conservative pieties about color blindness concealed monstrous injustices.

Liberals who still challenge such injustices are right to argue that sometimes only the power of law, vigorously enforced, can block racial discrimination. They are right to insist that blacks, Native Americans, and many Hispanics, incorporated involuntarily into the American experiment, have some special claims on public institutions—the very courts, legislatures, and schools that worked so long to degrade them. They are right to remind us that, given half a chance, the rich will

grind the faces of the poor and need occasionally to be restrained and taught decency by the rest of us. But these truths do not offset the bitter irony that many liberals who fought nobly to help this country rise above color have become so blinded by color that they have leapt ahead of conservatives to draw new race lines in the civic sand. Conservatives may have gotten race wrong, but that does not mean that liberals have gotten it right, and we are well past the time when liberals can point fingers at racist and capitalist bogymen across the ideological divide to justify their own abandonment of a transracial belonging and civic faith for which Americans of all colors so obviously yearn.

In this book I recount how liberals have lost that faith, letting down their fellow citizens of all colors even while claiming to assail racism. I describe the civic balance we need to reclaim in our public life if we are to undo the damage that liberal myopia has done. I think I speak for many other Americans who are uncomfortable around the ideologically or racially encamped, whether on the left or on the right, and whether in distinct groupings of blacks, Hispanics, Asians, or whites. If we could truly eliminate racism from our national life, neither conservatives nor liberals would emerge covered with glory. But I emphasize the liberal default in these pages because it has been so unexpected and—given liberalism's promises—so fateful.

♦

It was Congressman Major Owens, a black representative from New York City, who in 1981 first told me and other members of a small audience of liberal activists and journalists that "liberals are sometimes the worst racists." Mystified though I was by that remark, I knew it was no polemical flourish; Owens, a child of the South and a graduate of the proud, black Morehouse College, had forged strong ties to white liberals in the 1950s on his way to becoming a librarian and activist in Brooklyn. Still, it took me a few years to understand what he meant. Perhaps this book can save other liberals some time.

Only gradually did I realize that liberal racism has several dimensions. Sometimes, prompted by misdirected and self-congratulatory compassion, liberal racism patronizes nonwhites by expecting (and getting) less of them than they are fully capable of achieving. Intending to turn the tables on racist double standards that set the bar much higher for nonwhites, liberal racism ends up perpetuating double standards by setting the bar so much lower for its intended beneficiaries that it denies them the satisfactions of equal accomplishment and opportunity.

Liberal racism also assumes that racial differences are so profound that they are almost primordial. The term "racism" is sometimes used to denote this belief that racial differences are essential to our understandings of ourselves and society, and at times I will use it to refer to such thinking. But the fascination with racial differences that prevents many liberals from treating any person with a nonwhite racial physiology as someone much like themselves only begets policies and programs that reinforce nineteenth-century assumptions about race that are patently racist. It is time to call this mindset what it is: liberal racism.

Yet another dimension is the visceral discomfort some white liberals feel with nonwhites. Some white liberals, insulated from honest give-and-take with blacks and hobbled by guilt and fear of the unknown, seem so wary of such encounters that they construct intricate latticeworks of racial rectitude and noble stereotypes to mask their own fears. Their compensatory, fervent gestures of goodwill are sometimes amusing, often just sad. And some blacks—especially irresponsible leaders and public poseurs who appear in these pages—have learned to "play" liberal avoidance strategies for all they're worth.

Since liberals often argue that other people's racism is all the more dangerous for being unconscious, one might expect them to be the first to suspect and uncover their own. But instead of uncovering it, liberal institutions such as the Ford and other foundations fund it; activists and politicians pander to it; and the *New York Times* and other media disseminate its

view of the world. Liberals who assume that one's skin color is one's destiny tend to deceive themselves and others about that belief. They behave remarkably like "quality white folks" in the old South, who condescended sweetly to blacks while projecting contempt for inferiors onto poor whites and onto blacks who chose not to be charmed by elite gestures of affection. Today's liberal racists are more willing, even eager, to accept black criticism—as long as it is ritualized and therefore excupatory, and somewhat entertaining. Such liberals applaud society's thirty-year-long regression from trying in the 1960s to ensure that people were not categorized officially by color and surname to ensuring now that they are so categorized, at liberals' own behest.

One could call all this "friendly racism," but its apparent solicitude yields few friendships and little mutual respect. The "antiracist" protocols that liberal racists impose upon public-school teachers, bureaucrats, and corporate chief executive officers have become so emptied of meaning that those who follow them trade mainly on petty or fabricated resentments, which fester as proxies for real problems that remain undressed. As I will show in the next chapter, on perceptions of crime, liberals often think that they can treat any black skin as an automatic signifier of disadvantage and aggrievement; yet they are shocked when urban police officers and taxi-drivers—many of them black—treat blackness the same way, treating blacks as bearers of deficiency and anger who are not full citizens and legitimate customers. As I show in Chapter 3, on voting rights, liberals seem to think that they can integrate legislatures more fully by segregating voters racially. Chapter 4, on media, shows how liberal journalists sometimes compound such problems by reporting news in the language of racial groupthink, applying different standards to people of different colors—in the name, ironically, of "inclusion."

Not only are such liberal strategies racist; as Americans' understandings of race become more fluid and ecumenical, the strategies seem ridiculous. When an Irish-American family tried to adopt a black baby abandoned in a Brooklyn hospital, liberals saw a threat to black integrity. The family was told that

state regulations imposed at the behest of the National Association of Black Social Workers mandated a "culturally consistent" (i.e., same-race) environment for the child—even if that meant that the baby must languish for months in the hospital until a suitable black family could be found. At a hospital meeting for prospective parents, the father of the white would-be adoptive family protested. "All of the thirty other people at the meeting were black or Latino," he recalls. "These people, not an ideologue among them, agreed with me loudly: 'What kind of nonsense is this?' The social worker was sympathetic but said the regulations came from the state."

Like these parents of all colors who supported the would-be adoptive white family, millions of liberal racism's intended beneficiaries are disdained or distrusted when they reach "inappropriately" across color lines. Yet such open-minded people are our future, and if they now are voiceless, it is only because they are leaderless. Liberal racism has gotten their priorities and aspirations backward by insisting that more institutional "respect" for racial identity would enhance individual dignity. This is no longer simply a misconception; it is a lie. Beneath liberal racists' institutional radar, a new American identity is being forged, and with good leadership, it will spawn a rebellion that sends liberal "diversity" doctrine off into the past with Chairman Mao Zedong's "Little Red Book," whose prescriptions for Third World socialism some multiculturalist advocates, teachers, consultants, and journalists used to take as seriously as they do racialist nonsense now.

Since the story of liberal racism is not one of conspiracy but of folly, this book must track a mind-set that barely knows itself, in a country that knows itself little better. After describing liberal racism's colorization of perceptions of crime, of voting rights, and of the news media in the next three chapters, we leave such horror stories aside to explore in Chapter 5 some mysteries of black identity that have deepened amid growing confusion about American identity and the classical liberal principles upon which black progress so fatefully

depends. In Chapter 6, we share in the cogitations and soul-searching of two black thinkers who have wrestled with liberal assumptions about race, one moving from the left toward the center of our national experiment, the other moving toward it from the right. In Chapter 7, we consider what we might salvage from the best of American civic culture, which liberals abandoned on the assumption that it was inherently and inevitably racist. First, let me establish a few principles to guide us on our journey.

♦ Liberals' Lost Mission

This book's premise is that precisely because the United States is becoming racially, ethnically, and religiously more complex than institutional color-coding can comprehend, liberals should be working overtime to nurture some shared American principles and bonds that strengthen national belonging and nourish democratic habits. Alone among the nations, such as France and the Soviet Union, that have made globe-girdling, universal claims, the American nation abducted and plunged into its "white" midst millions of black people who, in consequence, had the highest possible stakes in the country's fulfillment of its oft-stated creed. This gives us opportunities and challenges unprecedented in human history. By the accidents of history and the irrepressible logic of the founders' intent, it is America's destiny to show the world how to eliminate racial differences—culturally, morally, and even physically—as factors in human striving.

Liberals should herald this truth, not shrink from it, as they so often do now. They should champion a common civic culture that is strong enough to balance parochialism with universalism, and deep enough to sustain individual freedom amid a robust sense of obligation to the common good. They should teach every American who enters a jury room, teaches a class, or reports a news story to make it a point of pride to mute and even abandon his or her racial affinities in order to stand, at least briefly, for the whole. That is possible only if

American civic culture and identity are "thick" enough to live in on race-transcendent terms. Liberals should be weaving that thick social fabric.

Since early in this century, liberals have been the great framers of race-transcending American public narratives that struck the right balances between parochialism and universalism and between individual autonomy and communal obligation. Liberals dared and helped people of all colors to rise above whatever was keeping them isolated and small. The socialist labor leader Eugene Victor Debs did that; the two presidents Roosevelt did it; even the Communists of the Popular Front in the 1930s did it, albeit for reasons that few now care to defend. Today's liberals have abandoned all national moral storytelling to conservatives because they are afraid to take the lead in wresting our racial discourse from ethnocentric activists as well as white supremacists, from the left as well as the right—and, yes, from blacks as well as whites.

Why are so many liberals toeing the color line instead of crossing it or even trampling it? The most obvious reason is that liberals remain sensitive to the fact that black and white Americans have been locked in a three-centuries-old physical and psychic embrace. That embrace was as intimate as it was miserable, and, even now, as it loosens, fears as well as hopes are stirring the hearts of the newly disentrangled. Many just aren't ready to let go, because they long ago let the terms of past racial encounters define what they are. "Few of us would choose to be rendered raceless—to be suddenly without a tribe," writes the black journalist Ellis Cose. But the stark truth is that neither whiteness nor blackness in America harbors any lasting cultural meanings, apart from the ones imposed and sometimes lovingly embellished under segregation. From the black Baptist and Methodist churches to the blues and jazz, black culture has been a treasure chest of survival tools—the finest ever created in America. But as the terms of survival change, so must the tools. Liberals, black as well as white, are shrinking from their obligation to acknowledge this. Apparently they cannot bear to learn that when blackness and

whiteness are no longer locked together, neither can define itself clearly enough to serve as a vessel of hope.

Liberals often try to justify their fixation on color by citing Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun's wise dictum in the *Bakke* affirmative-action case: "In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way. And in order to treat some persons equally, we must treat them differently." It was in that hopeful spirit that liberals first imposed racial remedies upon settled civic and communal arrangements, from election districting to neighborhood schooling. But that is not the spirit in which they have continued to color-code our public and private lives. The new spirit is one of fatalism. They give no sign of wanting truly to "get beyond racism."

Blackmun's claim that we must "first take account of race" (he might better have written that we must *sometimes* or *temporarily* take account of it) should make us ask whether and when it is still useful to racialize civic interactions. Sometimes it is; often it is not. Liberals' refusal or inability to draw that distinction has cost them political credibility and power. Edgar Beckham's claim that students enter college with racial and other group identities "intact" and that institutions should be configured to "respond accordingly" is as far from Blackmun's dictum as one can get. Yet Beckham's is a succinct statement of today's liberal folly.

So deeply are liberals in denial about this default that the moment the conservative "revolution" of 1994 began to falter on its own hypocrites and inherent contradictions, they predicted that, reincarnated as "progressives," they would win back enough power in the 1996 elections to curb economic injustice and racial division. Instead, as I will show in Chapter 3, some of the returns suggested that liberals, under whatever name, will never sustain a governing agenda that has broad public support until they reckon more deeply with how they have gotten race wrong. Liberals can always gain some electoral ground by capitalizing on conservatives' lies and blunders, as conservatives have capitalized on theirs—with facile repositionings toward the "center" and with tit-for-tat

scandal-mongering and scare tactics. But unless liberals come clean about their own racism, nothing will come of all their finger-pointing at others' bigotry.

Absent such a reckoning, many Americans have actually had to outfox liberals to advance racial justice. In the 1996 elections, for example, hundreds of thousands of moderate white voters in white-majority congressional districts in the South elected black incumbents who had come seeking their support. These voters were able to rebut the presumption that they were racists only because, prior to the election, a conservative Supreme Court majority, ignoring liberal prophecies of racial doom, invalidated the establishment of racially determined congressional districts drawn by liberals (with help from cynical conservative Republican operatives) who had insisted that fair-minded white majorities simply didn't exist.

Liberals have defaulted in such controversies partly because they have lost touch with, and faith in, civil society—the web of voluntary associations in families, churches, neighborhood groups, and civic, educational, and labor organizations where democratic dispositions are nourished and given practical scope. The early civil rights movement knew better. It won what most Americans recognized as justice by affirming that even a flawed civil society should be embraced and redeemed, not deconstructed and micromanaged as inherently, eternally racist. Practicing a politics of persuasion that distinguishes this country from Serbia, Rwanda, and even France, the movement made canny but resonant appeals to “angry white men’s” decency, even as it exposed their shortcomings. It understood that while this is a nation of laws, ultimately it is more than a courtroom. Today’s liberals have forgotten that law works best when it is introduced deftly, on the cusp of a civic consensus nourished by the politics of persuasion and not by assumptions that everyone is operating in bad faith.

So deep is the liberal default that Barry Goldwater has become a better friend of racial integration than Benjamin Chavis Muhammad, the former president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People who has joined the Nation of Islam, and Newt Gingrich is less prone

to exploiting racial fears and resentments than is Congresswoman Maxine Waters of South-Central Los Angeles. When it comes to race some conservatives *are* more “progressive” than liberals.

♦ Wrinkles on the Right

But only some. Many conservatives hypocritically praise civil society as an antidote to the bureaucratic state, even as they champion market forces that disrupt and erode traditional American networks of sharing and trust. For all their celebrations of color blindness and their testimony that in a free-market society the only important color is green, many conservatives’ notions about race seem to doom them to spin and subsidize geneticist propositions about black inadequacy and pathology. Time and again they find themselves beating embarrassed retreats from such obviously un-American stuff and from the cynical, “wedge-issue” politics that divides people by color.

But liberal racism also divides people that way, and there is no better proof than in the support or indulgence it gets from opportunistic conservatives. Liberal “voting rights” activists cannot explain why their race-based election redistricting proposals have been backed by conservative foundations and Republican operatives, or why their notions of racial “identity” and “diversity” are embraced and even inculcated by the nation’s meanest, leanest corporations. But it really isn’t a mystery. Since the law in a classical liberal capitalist society responds better to claims of racial discrimination than to claims of economic abuse, liberals have gone to court over race, not economic class. Imperative though it was to secure civil rights that way, the liberal strategy has become a permanent evasion of liberals’ true moral and intellectual responsibility—recognized by Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill—to set reasonable limits on free markets that erode civic virtue. Color-coding is cheaper than trust-busting or denouncing Time-Warner for promoting gangsta rap, but color-coding is

no better a solution to racism than is a conservatism that occasionally tries to put markets in their place. Liberal racism thwarts a transracial, class politics that could seriously challenge abuses of economic power, and there is no clear evidence that most liberals are up to making that challenge. And racism eclipses the American identity and national narratives that once gave such class politics some traction.

Conservative racial ideas and initiatives do sometimes serve as necessary correctives to ghastly liberal blunders that might otherwise have remained unacknowledged and unstopped. Conservatives also have important lessons to teach the left about markets, which sometimes stimulate civic virtue by throwing people together across old lines of racial enmity, confounding ancient superstitions and feuds. Fifteen years ago, the writer Susan Sohrtag told a shocked audience of fellow leftist-liberals that the relatively conservative *Reader's Digest* had long been a better guide to the Cold War than the leftist weekly *The Nation*. Certainly the *Digest* was more accurate and morally right about Communism, but Sohrtag didn't mean that just because it sounded alarms about Communism, it was therefore Americans' best guide to democratic foreign policy making. Nor are conservatives our best guides to rejuvenating civic culture now, even when they're right about the absurdities of liberal racism.

To its great glory and unending consternation, the United States will remain a capitalist country, and the question is whether liberals can temper its excesses more wisely than by subdividing it into imagined racial "cultures" (African American, European American, Hispanic American, Asian American, and Native American), a scheme that hobbles good pedagogy, politics, and public policy. The best of the civic culture which the early civil rights movement tried to embrace and redeem presumes not that our racial and ethnic story lines and affinities should disappear, but that they should not prevail as the central organizing principles of our public life. Yet some liberals support racial remedies as sops to their own consciences, perhaps because they are complicit in a flawed liberal capitalism which they do not actually oppose yet cannot quite

bring themselves to defend. They support such remedies because they have no serious intention of redressing deeper inequities that divide not only whites from blacks but also whites from whites (and, increasingly, blacks from blacks).

♦ Americanism and Universalism

Liberals have lost touch with the basic principles of classical liberalism itself. No movement for social justice can make headway in a pluralist society without keeping classical liberal commitments to rational analysis—to the primacy of often provisional and evolving public truths over the mythic, communal ones that are enshrouded in racial narratives. Nor is justice possible without a commitment to individual over group rights in a context of civil and moral obligation to other individuals across race lines—the right, for example, to dissent from or to leave one's own subculture without fear. Without a working faith in such principles, movements and societies sink into a tribalism whose brutality is all too well known.

Necessary as they are, the classical liberal commitments are still insufficient. People who stake everything on them find themselves soaring into universalisms so removed from human reality that they end up creating holy inquisitions or gulags. We need a better way. And there is one: It involves the American civic cultural genius for tempering the universal with the parochial, without succumbing to the tribal. Liberal constitutional democracy and the civil society that sustains it aren't perfect, but they embody historic human gains that more ambitious revolutionaries have repealed only at great cost. As a self-conscious social experiment, the United States is the only multiracial civilization to nourish the seeds of its own transcendence. People of all colors, believing this, have watered those seeds with their blood and tears. Yet liberal educators no longer show young Americans how to think of such people as their own forebears whatever their race, and how to keep faith with their legacy.

The costs of such pedagogy are evident not in the number

of people who actually believe it, but in the extent to which it distracts or prevents them from helping the American promise to come true. They are left confused and impotent before the more brutal turns which "identity politics" often takes on urban streets and in hard-pressed rural areas. Perhaps the only thing that inner-city gangs, white militias, and the Nation of Islam have in common is thousands of young men bereft of an American civic culture that is potent enough to draw them into rites of passage that would make them all they can be—and reward them credibly for becoming it. Hence the invasion of the public square by Louis Farrakhan and Snoop Doggy Dog, by Pat Robertson and Timothy McVeigh—all disowning one another but all "united" in being marketed by political and media producers who profit handsomely from sensationalizing their assaults. "Fundamentalists rush in where liberals fear to tread," warns the political philosopher Michael Sandel. Liberal racism is no answer to these fundamentalisms; it is a capitulation to them.

But just as liberals will get nowhere by obsessing about white malevolence, malingering, and myopia, they will fail in their mission, as conservatives have, if they profess color blindness too sweepingly and too soon. The challenge we all must face is the mystery at the center of American black identity, especially, that has been exposed by the vacuum at the center of classical liberalism itself.

♦ An American Mystery

Early in 1997 I happened upon a C-Span telecast of the awarding of seven Congressional Medals of Honor to black World War II veterans, each of whose "gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life" had been ignored for more than fifty years. President Clinton strode across the East Room of the White House to present the medals to Vernon Joseph Baker, at seventy-seven the only recipient still living, and to the families of the others. "History has been made whole today," the president told the assembly, adding that the hon-

orees had "helped us find a way to become a more just, more free nation . . . more worthy of them and true to its ideals."

History has not been made whole for American blacks, of course, and yet something almost archaic in the recipients' bearing and in the ceremony itself reminded me that none of us in the younger generations can say with certainty what an American wholeness might be, or, within it, what blackness or whiteness might mean. If we have trouble thinking about race, it's because we no longer know how to think about America itself.

At least Second Lieutenant Baker seemed to have less trouble half a century ago than we do now. In April 1945, he single-handedly wiped out two German machine-gun nests in Viareggio, Italy; drew fire on himself to permit the evacuation of wounded comrades; and led his segregated battalion's advance through enemy minefields. Asked by reporters after the East Room ceremony whether he had ever given up hope of winning the medal, he "sounded surprised . . . as if the question presumed arrogance," the *New York Times* reported. "I never thought about getting it," Baker said. Asked why he had joined the army in the first place, he responded, "Well, I was a young black man without a job."

Ah, yes, *that*. Prodded to comment on having risked his life for his country while in a segregated unit, he answered, "I was an angry young man; we were all angry, but we had a job to do, and we did it. . . . My personal thoughts were that I knew things would get better, and I'm happy I'm here to see it." Anyone might be happy if, after fighting in a segregated black unit, he lived to see a black chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But, of course, that isn't all Baker has seen, for "intrepidity" like his is often eclipsed now by that of young black Americans killing one another. When he said, "I knew things would get better," perhaps he was measuring his words for the occasion.

Asked what the ceremony meant to her, Arlene Fox, widow of First Lieutenant John Fox, who died in Italy in 1944, said, "I think it's more than just what it means to this family. I think it sends a message . . . that when a man does his duty, his color isn't important." Perhaps she, too, was measuring her words.

Yet I think not. Even in the prime of their anger, Vernon Baker, John and Arlene Fox, and black leaders and writers of their generation—such as A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison—did not urge the importance of color as much as they found color imposed on them in ways that affronted something inside them that was not black at all, or was black only ironically, or even absurdly, as Ellison would portray it. Proud though they were of what blacks had endured and overcome (as Baker “knew” they would), they shared with whites an important belief—not yet, alas, a consensus that racism was wrong, but a certainty that even despite it, they were all bound passionately to the promise of the nation.

Soon after the war in which Baker fought, that certainty became the country's best weapon against racism itself. If General Colin Powell succeeded Lieutenant Baker, it was thanks not only to affirmative action and other explicitly racial remedies but also to what people like Baker had affirmed and embodied: an America incandescent with a promise that cannot be comprehended by race. Neither blackness nor whiteness could be of much use in fulfilling that promise, for blackness was, at best, the noble survivor of a whiteness that had no coherent meaning outside of its oppression of blacks.

But what is that national promise? Whatever the answer, nothing can come of it if we fear letting go of race because we think that we would have nothing of value to say or give to one another once racism lost all weight in our social equations or disappeared entirely through interracial marriages and offspring. If we find it difficult now to say that a black person's color isn't important, it is because we no longer know how to say that being an “American” is important enough to transcend racial identity in a classroom, in a jury room, or at the polls.

As the writer James Alan McPherson posed the black American experience of this dilemma, in a 1993 essay,

... something very tragic happened to a large segment of the black American group during the past two decades. Whatever the

causes of this difficulty were, I believe that they were rooted more in the quality of our relation to the broader society than in defects in our own ethos. That is to say, we entered the broader society just at a time when there was the beginning of a transformation of its basic values. The causes of this transformation are a matter of speculation. In my own view, we became integrated into a special kind of decadence . . . one which leads to personal demoralization.

The problem is indeed deeper than racism. It is that, since the 1960s, whites have opened doors to admit blacks into a great civic and cultural hall whose walls have been falling down. As early as thirty-five years ago, writer James Baldwin asked, “Do I really *want* to be integrated into a burning house?” It's a good question, asked not about a brick-and-mortar structure but a spiritual and emotional home.

For hundreds of years, the very rigidity of racism in our triumphalist national procession gave blacks at least some moral footholds in their struggle to belong to the society into which they had been plunged, yet from which they were kept apart. But American blackness cannot sustain itself in “solidarity” against a whiteness that no longer knows itself, and no longer should. Black Americans who cling to fantasies of a separate racial destiny are doomed to careen in unanswered reproach and desperate flailing, from O. J. Simpson's acquittal to Eldon-ics, from Farrakhan's pseudo-Islamic gew-gaws and posturings of defiance to the bizarre “exonerations” of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s murderer, James Earl Ray, by King's own son Dexter and other members of his family who seem bent on uncovering a much wider conspiracy.

There will be no racial justice until blacks are willing to affirm—and whites, at last, are ready to understand—that the descendants of slaves are in some ways the most “American” of us all. Precisely because this is a society which blacks didn't choose to join and cannot hope to dominate, yet cannot really leave, they have much more at stake in society's fulfilling its stated, oft-violated promises than most of the rest of us comprehend. There always will and should be communities based

on common memory, loss and longing and pride, but the best that blacks can expect of the rest of us (and the most that most have ever asked of us) is to embrace and judge them—and to let ourselves be embraced and judged by them—as individual participants in a common national experiment. As brothers, some used to say. Only a joint renunciation of blackness and whiteness as arbiters of our public life can lift the burdens of white supremacy and a retaliatory black demagoguery.

The black religious historian C. Eric Lincoln recalls that, since growing up under segregation during the 1920s, he has thought of white liberals as “friends who have done something to relieve me of the ponderousness of a system that is bearing down on me all the time.” But many of today’s liberals betray blacks by casting them all as the bearers of disadvantage and grievement whose end is not in sight. Like the old segregationist establishment, the new liberal racist one has black retainers including “critics” such as the law professor Derrick Bell, the black historian Robin D. G. Kelley, and the political minstrel and street-theater impresario the Reverend Al Sharpton, who reinforce its illusions. They abet liberal racism by telling professional antiracists what they want to hear, without expecting or effecting substantive change. Today’s liberal racist establishment notoriously lacks the self-confidence and self-definition of its predecessors; what it wants, as I have noted, are ritual condemnations of its racism that implicitly credit its virtue.

Those who know how to deliver such condemnations profit handsomely. It is one thing to defend a community that has developed a distinct identity in oppression. It is another to foresee a Sisyphean struggle against racism that will never end. “Racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society,” writes Derrick Bell. The blackness he, Kelley, and Sharpton espouse is oppositional only, as if they were saying, “I am excluded; therefore, I am.” Full inclusion would bring their implosion. So would full exclusion, of course; so they strike evasive, sometimes ingratiating poses of dignity-in-adversity, resisting inclusion just gently and sorrow-

fully enough to make white liberals uneasy and eager to offer support. Playing this game involves finding racism in every leaf that falls while relying on reservoirs of white racial guilt and deference whose existence black racists deny even as they accept media pulpits, book royalties, academic tenure, and constitutional protections.

Nice work, if you can get it—and skilled race pros certainly do. Robin Kelley’s New York University voice-mail message, when I called in March 1997, included this advice:

... If you’re calling about speaking engagements, reading a manuscript, serving as a consultant, joining an editorial board, participating in a conference, or writing an essay, the answer is probably no: I will not be undertaking any new projects until the spring of 1998. Thank you very much.

At Harvard, the black leftist philosopher and preacher Cornel West’s machine included the following:

... At the beep, please leave a detailed message and it will be personally relayed to Professor West. Due to the high volume of calls, it is impossible for him to respond to all the calls received. Please understand that Professor West appreciates your interest, and we respectfully request that you do not call a second time. If you are calling concerning a Harvard engagement, please leave a message for [name, number]. For outside engagements, please call Professor West’s agent: [name and number in New York]. Thank you for calling.

Such are the wages of oppression. Even the old calypso Louis Farrakhan fascinates many white liberals, but since he goes too far, he gets overtures from conservatives like Jack Kemp and the columnist Robert Novak.

Our destiny hinges on whether countless individual blacks and whites can leave the old black-white embrace to create a new culture together, as we see and feel some doing every day. A lot depends on the steadiness and good sense of people who won’t be corralled or stampeded in the name of race loyalty or racial guilt.

♦ **Where To?**

"Everybody has two heritages: ethnic and human," says the black jazz musician Wynton Marsalis. "The human aspects give art its real enduring power. . . . The racial aspect, that's a crutch so that you don't have to go out into the world. Jazz music teaches you what it is to live in a democracy, to be American." That is the astonishing story that unsung civic heroes, from Vernon Baker to Rafael Olmeda, are trying to tell and to live every day. Their Americanism is no more conservative than jazz or baseball. Its ethos is what the American literary historian Daniel Aaron calls "ethical and pragmatic, disciplined and free." It confounds the liberal imagination because it scrambles its moralistic and ideological thinking. That is why a rediscovery of American civic traditions can spare us the Balkanization and religious absolutism that grip so much of the rest of the world.

When it is well told and well lived, our civic story has two levels. On one, many Americans ground their personal dignity in ethnic and religious subcultures, the best of which prompt universal aspirations even while providing for their own members along parochial lines. On a second level, many of the same Americans "graduate" into a national civic culture, some of it drawn from their subcultures yet transcendent of them. When the larger civic culture is alluring enough, ethnic enclaves become staging grounds for transethnic leaders. The rural yet outward-facing Southern black Baptist subculture taught something about the promise of America not only to Martin Luther King, Jr., and his followers, but, through them, to many whites as well.

"The law can open doors and knock down walls, but it cannot build bridges," Thurgood Marshall wrote. "We will only attain freedom if we learn to appreciate what is different and muster the courage to discover what is fundamentally the same." Do we violate that vision and betray its raceless promise? All the time. Mid-century liberalism's greatest achievement was to assail and stop such violations more than ever before in our history. The new liberal racism is reviving them in sugarcoated but poisonous form.

Full citizenship in the American republic entails a commitment to join in a race-transcendent human experiment. Our civic culture cannot be blueprinted or parceled out along race lines. We affirm individual dignity when we refuse to treat any citizen as the delegate of a subculture or race. Our best leaders are those who show their neighbors, every day, how to leave subgroup loyalties at the doors of classrooms, jury rooms, hiring halls, and loan offices. They will embrace liberalism's preeminent challenge: to dissolve the color line by ceasing to treat whiteness and blackness as vessels of hope.

"If race is a concept with dubious biological and philosophical foundations, why continue to validate it? Why not argue, as Sleeper has done, for a more nuanced accommodation and celebration of ethnic differences and abandon the theoretical construct race and its destructive corollary, racism?"

—Mary Lefkowitz, *The New York Times*, author of *Not Out of Africa*

"A lot of us would agree with Sleeper that if you scratch through the surface of skin color, you will find a good deal of common morality—mostly based on the primacy of individual character and integrity."

—William Raspberry, *The Washington Post*

"Like a Toto in Oz, Jim Sleeper has made his mark lifting the curtain on liberal racism's inconsistencies and hypocrisies. Sleeper's discerning eye details a host of political absurdities, and his lucid prose is a pleasure to read."

—Salim Muwakkil, *Newswatch*

"Jim Sleeper has written an important book that deserves to be read and carefully considered, especially if Americans are going to engage fruitfully in that 'national conversation' about race that President Bill Clinton has promised. Sleeper's essays on black identity and what he contends is our lost civic culture are particularly strong, especially the chapter focusing on Harvard Law Prof. Randall Kennedy and Boston University economist Glenn Loury, two of the most thoughtful and intriguing black intellectuals in the nation today."

—Don Wycliff, *Commonweal*

"Sleeper will be called a whiner, a bellyacher, even a racist. Of course, of course. But he is a liberal whose knee does not jerk. He has been examining liberals' rejection of a common American civic culture for several years, but nothing he has written is as candid as what he gives us here. . . . These are words liberals need to hear. They need to hear them because they are true."

—Michael Skube, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

"To read this frequently brilliant book is to realize just how far we have gone toward exalting race and racial differences as the dominant realities of our civic life! Sleeper's strict and sweeping definition of liberal racism catches many of us—Democrats and Republicans alike—in its net."

—Chris Tucker, *The Dallas Morning News*

Praise for *Liberal Racism*

An *Amazon* "recommended book":

"A tough-minded, provocative indictment of the failure of liberalism in the post-Civil Rights era . . . a much needed corrective to race-based thinking that has proven unproductive."

—David Nicholson, Black Studies and Literature Editor of *Amazon*

"Before President Clinton's national conversation on race goes any further, he should take the time to read this important contribution."

—Richard D. Kahlenberg, author of *The Remedy: Class, Race, and Affirmative Action*

"Sleeper doesn't sneer; he argues skillfully and persuasively. And he takes pains to make *Liberal Racism* a critique of the left, not an endorsement of the right. . . . If he is particularly disappointed in liberals, Sleeper tells us, it is only because he expects more of them in the first place."

—Eric Liu, *The Washington Post*

"In this short, highly accessible and often insightful book, Sleeper scores several strong points: . . . the liberal left has always been compelled to use race instead of class to bring about social change and has become trapped in this strategy by a combination of genuine puritanical moralism about racism and sheer political opportunism."

—Gerald Early, *Chicago Tribune*

"To truly inspire a new dialogue on race, President Clinton will need to push further. Jim Sleeper frames the challenge well: 'Our best leaders are those who show their neighbors, every day, how to leave subgroup loyalties behind at the doors of classrooms, jury rooms, hiring halls. . . . That's far better advice than anything Clinton's advisory panel has offered so far.'"

—Ronald Brownstein, national correspondent, *Los Angeles Times*

"Jim Sleeper's provocative confrontation with liberal ideology is no defense of the conservative approach to race. Rather he challenges liberals, who once fought to help America rise above color, to get back to their abandoned program of a transracial civic faith. Read *Liberal Racism* and then, if you dare, take a long look in the mirror."

—C. Eric Lincoln, Duke University, author of *The Black Muslim in America* and *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*