

# *The Race Card*

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Tuesday, October 3rd, was a bright, crisp autumn day. I had been invited to deliver an address to a conference in Attleboro, Massachusetts, and so I found myself, that morning, driving through New Jersey, into New York and on through Connecticut. Traffic was light--at least by the standards to which I have become accustomed--and the road was dry. The first hints of autumn were appearing in the foliage by the side of the road--brilliant red sumac, and yellow and orange autumn flowers. In the woods, the predominant color was still the lush green of late summer, but here and there was a splash of yellow, a smear of orange, a blaze of red--a promise of the greater glory to come.

As is my custom, I had the car radio tuned to a public radio station, listening to music as I drove along, the car running smoothly, my mind quietly in neutral, simply soaking up the sounds and the beautiful sights. At some level, I must have been quite aware of where I was and what I was doing, for I managed not to collide with other vehicles, or swerve into a ditch or plow into a tree. I know that I negotiated several sections of road which were under construction, but the truth is that I have very little specific memory of that journey. The impressions are quite strong, but precisely how I got from route 287 onto the New York thruway, across the Tappan Zee Bridge, across Westchester County, onto the Merrit Parkway and then to route 95 is rather a blur.

Suddenly, however, I was called from my reverie by a recognition that I was growing hungry and thirsty. Looking at the clock, I realized that it was after noon. So, when I saw a sign indicating a shopping mall outside New London, I pulled off the road and into the parking lot. There were a number of cars parked there--enough to indicate that the mall was open for business, but not so many that I would have trouble finding a place to eat. I walked into the brightly-lit mall, commenting to myself that this was clearly one of those upscale temples to the gods of commerce in which we all worship more or less avidly these days. But there was something strange about this one.

Looking down the long corridor lined by glittering store-fronts, I did not see a single shopper. As I proceeded down the deserted corridor, I noticed that while the shops were open for business, there were very few clerks in evidence. Puzzled, I walked into the large Sears store. Here and there, among the displays of merchandise were one or two clerks vaguely arranging things, but no customers. Somewhere off to my left, I heard the unmistakable sound of a broadcaster. Locating the escalator, I headed down to the lower level, and there they all were.

At the foot of the escalator stood a mob of people, silently staring at the bank of television sets. And then it struck me: A few minutes before one o'clock on the afternoon

of Tuesday, October 3. All of these people were waiting for the verdict in the Simpson murder trial. Quietly they endured the mindless chatter which broadcast journalism uses to fill the airwaves while waiting for something to happen.

Well, I was one who had studiously avoided the Simpson craze for over a year. I was one of maybe a half-dozen people in the country who had not watched the infamous slow-speed car chase on the California throughways with which the drama had begun. I had not watched the televised trial; I had read little of the printed accounts of the trial and I was not going to stand before a bank of television sets in New London, Connecticut, awaiting the outcome.

I left the store and wandered the deserted mall, looking for a place where a clerk might be coaxed into serving me a sandwich, prepared to walk and stretch my legs for a bit until the place returned to normal. My feet carried me into another department store, where I encountered another clot of people gathered around a television set. Just as I approached, I heard a collective gasp, and then the television reporter saying, "To repeat, the Jury in the Simpson murder case has just returned a verdict of not guilty on all counts." The crowd stood staring at the television screen in obvious astonishment; then, shaking their heads in disbelief, people began to wander off singly, or in groups of two or three.

As I walked back through the mall, and as I finally consumed my sandwich, I could overhear fragments of conversations going on around me: One woman, almost in tears, frustration edging her voice, commented bitterly about the callous disregard for women's lives. Another voice, a man, repeated the conventional wisdom that if you have enough money you can get away with anything you want in this country; his friend replied, no its just that a Black jury will not convict a Black man--its all a matter of race.

It occurred to me, as I walked back to my car, that I had not seen a person of color anywhere in that mall. The crowds around the television sets were all Caucasians. There were no African Americans to be seen at that moment in that place. I wondered what the response would have been if this temple of merchandising had catered to a Black community. As I started the car and prepared to return to the highway, the radio came on, this time the music replaced with a report of the reaction in New York and in California among African Americans. Unable to keep the tone of incredulity out of his voice, the reporter was describing the elation, the cheering, the sense of victory with which the jury's verdict had been greeted by many people of African descent. Clearly the White customers of that New London, Connecticut, shopping mall, and the Black citizens of the Bronx and Harlem and Watts saw very different meanings in the outcome of what has been called the trial of the century.

As you well know, the pollsters went to work immediately to document what was obvious to even the most casual observer--that an overwhelming majority of African Americans believed that the jury had come to the right verdict, while an overwhelming majority of White Americans believed that the verdict of the jury represented a travesty of justice. All of sudden, a cottage industry was born, dedicated to explaining and exploring the chasm which had opened between the races in the last decade of the

century. And in the weeks which have passed, in the wake of the Million Man March on Washington, the nation has been plunged into another of its periodic soul-searchings focused around the question, "What do these people want?"

Those of us who have been around for a while may understand that the Simpson trial did not open a chasm between the races. Rather, it simply forced us to look at an ancient wound in the body politic which has never healed. Some of us remember when the Koerner Commission warned, decades ago, that the nation was in danger of becoming two nations, separate and unequal--one nation Black and poor; the other White and rich. In the intervening decades, the nation focused upon the symbols of progress--the appearance of Black faces on television programs, in board rooms, in the political arena. In the process, many of us were able to ignore the fact that the underlying inequities and injustices, the fundamental racism to which the Koerner Commission had pointed remained unaddressed.

Throughout the Simpson trial, commentators continued to reflect upon the use of what they called "the race card" by the defense attorneys, suggesting that race was a strategy of dubious relevancy to the issue before the court. It seemed to me, as the trial proceeded, and as the outcome was announced that once more we were being reminded that racism is alive and well and so much a part of our society that none of this nation's business can be accomplished without stumbling over the issue of race. There is no way to conduct public business in our society without confronting the race card.

There was a time, within my memory, when the card was dealt from the top of the deck, without apology. The signs were everywhere--hanging over drinking fountains, separating seating sections of waiting rooms and busses and trains and theaters, outlining neighborhoods where people might or might not live, defining jobs people might or might not do; segregating restaurants and motels and swimming pools and schools. But in the fifties and the sixties, with much struggle and pain and suffering, the nation finally agreed that legal segregation cannot be made consonant with the vision of a just and equitable society. The race card would not be dealt from the top of the deck any longer.

But that did not mean that the race card disappeared from the deck. Many of us made the mistake of assuming that racism would disappear when its outer manifestations crumbled. Surely African American faces on television, and the ability of middle-class Blacks to move into suburban communities and place their children in integrated schools, the election of African Americans to local and national office--surely this was an indication that racism was on the wane. Surely it meant that we were on the way to a color-blind society at long last. What we did not realize, many of us, is that segregation is only the more obvious, more easily identified consequence of racism. What we did not realize is that the more subtle, the more pervasive, the more persistent consequence of racism is something called "White privilege." Because of the consequences of White privilege, the race card continues to be played in this society, only now it is regularly dealt from the bottom of the deck.

Most of us who are not people of color have great difficulty getting our minds around the notion of white privilege. After all, most of us would insist--to use an African American image--"life for us ain't been no golden stair." We have struggled and worked for what we have. No one gave it to us because we are White. And after all, there is a growing perception that the people who have really been dealt a raw deal are angry, middle-class White men, who are being "affirmative-acted" out jobs and opportunities. Even the President has conceded that perhaps these are the people who have just cause for complaint. Just what is all this talk about "White privilege" any way.

Part of our difficulty in understanding the role of white privilege in maintaining a racist society results from the fact that most of us who are not people of color simply refuse to think of ourselves as belonging to a race. Our attitude toward race is like the little girl from rural Mississippi, who wondered why I had an accent when every one she knew spoke without any accent. We adopt ethnic identities--Irish, Italian, Polish, Scandinavian, German, English, Scottish, Russian--but we do not often think of ourselves as having a race. Therefore, it is difficult for us to comprehend the advantages which come to us simply because of our racial identity. In the introduction to his book, *RACIAL HEALING*, Harlon Dalton puts it this way:

The challenge for White folk is to realize, even when they are not in the minority, that *their* race matters too. It establishes their place in the social pecking order. It hangs over the relationships they establish with people of color. Like it or not, their unchosen racial identity has a profound influence on their life prospects. Like it or not, their fate as individuals is tied in complex ways to the fate of Whites as a whole.

We have long since grown accustomed to thinking of Blacks being "racially disadvantaged." Rarely, however, do we refer to Whites as "racially advantaged," even though that is an equally apt characterization of the existing inequality. "Membership," as the folk from American Express remind us, "has its privileges." Whites move to the head of the line simply by being born White.

Many of my White friends blanch at this idea. It makes them deeply uncomfortable. It makes them feel complicitous in something over which they have little personal control. It leaves them feeling somehow guilty while providing no ready way to discharge that guilt. And, frankly, it raises the uncomfortable question of whether they ought to give up something, hand something back, surrender the fruits of their privilege. But even though acknowledging White skin privilege is difficult, awkward, and discomfiting, real progress depends on it. For to ignore the reality of race-based privilege is to deny the very meaning of race in our society.

Indeed, to ignore the reality of race-based privilege is to blind ourselves to the experience of people of color in this country, and to refuse to understand that an end to dejure segregation is not an end to racism. It is that blindness which fuels the demand that it is time to end affirmative action programs. After all, why should government attempt to skew the process in favor of people of color and women. Ideally, if we rely on merit and

ability, everyone will have an equal playing field. We are blind to the fact that White privilege results in the race card being played from the bottom of the deck.

It is the same blindness which fuels the conviction that it is time "to end welfare as we know it." No matter what the facts may be, most of us carry in our minds an image of the welfare cheat--she is young, unmarried, dropping babies with breathtaking irresponsibility in an effort to increase her wealth, and although she is only twenty years old, she has been on welfare for forty-five years, and she is Black. If we stop coddling her, supporting her irresponsibility, she will grow up, get married, stop having babies, get a job and get off welfare. We never add that ideally she should become White, but that is the implicit assumption behind much of the determination to end the system of welfare--to twist the words of the misogynist Henry Higgins in *MY FAIR LADY*, why can't this woman be more like us.

And it is this same blindness to White privilege which makes it so difficult for us to understand the response of many African Americans to the verdict in the Simpson murder case. For generations Black Americans have known that tainted evidence, and often no evidence at all but simply the accusation has been enough for the courts to convict and punish Black men. It is not lost on African Americans that fifty percent of their young men between the ages of twenty and thirty are in jail or otherwise caught up in the criminal justice system. It is not lost on African Americans that Black men are much more likely to be executed for crime than White men convicted of similar crimes. It is not lost on African Americans that the President has just signed a bill which makes the penalty for use and sale of crack cocaine, the drug used by poor Black people, far more severe than the use and sale of powdered cocaine, the drug used by affluent White Americans. It is not lost on people of Color that in the courts of this land, White privilege is not a theoretical possibility--it is a daily reality. It is not lost on people of color that in the workings of the criminal justice system, the race card is always being played, and it is dealt from the bottom of the deck. That knowledge is what fueled the rejoicing at the jury's verdict--for once, no matter whether he was guilty or innocent, a Black man was not convicted by tainted evidence and sloppy police work, and a racist system was called to account.

I do not call you to agree with this judgment concerning the Simpson case. Whether you believe that justice was done or that it was thwarted, the long-term importance of this trial may be the opportunity it presents us to rethink the nature of racism in our society. By recognizing that race is important in our society and has always been important, we might begin to shape a new vision of our future. It may well be that the old dream of a color-blind society must be abandoned, for that dream is based on the assumption that the majority culture in this country is the standard to which all must conform and that anyone can be welcomed into the community who is willing to give up his race and become White, a double bind for people of color who finally cannot give up their race no matter how hard they try. It may be that our future depends upon our ability to create a society in which race is acknowledged as one of the realities, one of the gifts each of us brings to the public space. How would it be different if Caucasian were seen as one of the races,

rather than the standard to which others must conform? Harlon Dalton talks about that difference, using as a metaphor, his experience in an interracial gospel choir:

...the curious thing about the Salt and Pepper Gospel Singers is that our common humanity is rooted in an explicit recognition of race. Our racial differences are right there in the name....Although it is fair to say that each and every member of Salt and Pepper has been transformed by the experience of performing with the choir, in important respects we also remain the same people we were when we joined. No one has changed color. No one has changed race. No one's culture has been lost or sacrificed. We have managed to blend and be respectful of difference at the same time. The only thing we have given up is the right to dominate one another. No one's history has been altered. But together we have the power to transform the future.

And there it is, the challenge which the Simpson verdict laid bare. The public life of this nation, all our efforts to achieve justice, to evolve effective social policy, to build a great society will continue to be twisted and distorted by the consequences of racism until we discover how to live in a culture of mutual respect--a culture which honors the differences between us as an enormous resource, which renounces the drive to dominate and which affirms that while we cannot change the past, we have it in our power to create a different future. In such a culture, the race card would be like the joker in the deck--set aside because we do not need it in the game we have chosen to play together.