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## Last Chance for Desegregation

Will Black and White Workers Live Together?

As soon as it is admitted that the whites and the emancipated blacks are placed upon the same territory in the situation of two foreign communities, it will readily be understood that there are but two chances for the future: the Negroes and the whites must either wholly part or wholly mingle.

—Alexis de Tocqueville

Early last June a rumor spread through Rosedale, Queens—a blue-collar community of Irish, Jews, and Italians—that a black man had bought a two-family house there and planned to move in with his white wife, his black brother and sister-in-law, and ten black children. The neighbors' reaction was conventional. With picks and axes they raged through the house, shattering windows, ripping out fixtures, flooding the basement, and scrawling graffiti on the walls: "We hate niggers. . . . Stamp out niggers." Others stood outside and cheered. No one called the police. (The rumor proved unfounded. Actually, the house had been bought by two Chinese brothers, one of whom was married to a white woman. *They* never moved in.)

On the same day, by coincidence, President Nixon issued a major policy statement on housing and race. He began with the usual pieties, deploring racial discrimination and extolling justice; but then he proceeded to take a hard line against what he called "forced integration," by which he meant federally supported efforts to move black families out of urban tenements and into decent suburban dwellings. "We will not seek to impose economic integration on existing local jurisdictions," the President reassured white suburbanites. He thus threatened to snuff out the few embers of integration that his Secretary of Housing and Urban Development

George W. Romney had bravely been fanning. Romney's constant plea to suburban officials had been to loosen local zoning restrictions and accept their "fair share" of subsidized low- and moderate-income housing. Now the President was saying they need not listen.

The two "statements" made that day last June—one by the man in the White House, the other by a mob in Queens—would seem to reflect America's continuing commitment to some form of apartheid, no matter what the social cost. Indeed, much of the segregation we now endure is a product of these two forces—upper-middle class manipulation of our land and our laws for political and financial profit, and ad hoc blue-collar violence.

Through the years blue-collar families have gained nothing from this casual alliance, other than the consolation, perhaps, of social superiority over blacks. (Even that dubious advantage is disappearing.) In fact, white working-class families have nearly always suffered from the segregating system. Their panicky reaction to black move-ins both lowers their property values and, as a rule, forces them to flee to newer, more expensive neighborhoods.

The depth of white panic should not be underestimated (although that is precisely what some leaders of the latest "white ethnic" renaissance—of which more later—seem to

be doing). To many white people segregation has the force of natural law. A few years ago in Skokie, Illinois, about 85 white residents met to protest the presence of the town's first black family. Until 1949, when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down restrictive covenants, Skokie had been almost exclusively a WASP suburb. But in the '50s thousands of Chicago's Catholic and Jewish families, most of them only a few years and dollars removed from their blue-collar origins, had moved in. Now they were frightened. "I moved out here so my kids could have grass and trees and sunshine," a young father shouted. "And now look what's happening!" He was clearly under the impression that blacks blotted out the sun.

People who suffer from such primal fears are likely to make the rest of us suffer, too. Their terror seeps into the body politic, with the result that our leaders fail to pursue those policies which might deliver us from apartheid. Nevertheless, the two segregating impulses mentioned above—blue-collar panic and white-collar profiteering—appear to be weakening; or, to put it more precisely, a new set of circumstances may be rendering segregation less interesting to the establishment and integration less odious to the public. It is already too late for Americans to slip through the horns of Tocqueville's uncompromising dilemma. Ultimately, it seems to me, we are more likely to "wholly mingle" than to "wholly part."

The new set of circumstances can be quickly summarized. First, the laws of the land now explicitly forbid racial discrimination in housing. The force of these laws (and several Supreme Court decisions) does not ensure desegregation, but for the first time in history it offers fair housing supporters a legal base from which to operate. Second, the establishment—especially the *federal* establishment—now tends to favor a certain amount of ghetto dispersion; the new attitude reflects a complete reversal of traditional federal thinking. And third, the current housing shortage, which for blue-collar workers will

get worse before it gets better, makes possible a grudging but useful coalition between white ethnics and blacks, both of whom seek better housing.

None of these factors guarantees desegregation of our cities and towns. But they do offer reasonable grounds for hope and action.

There has always been a kind of Gresham's Law at work in the civil rights movement, in which the obvious issues have tended to drive out the more complicated ones. Liberals spent decades, for example, trying to abolish lynching and the poll tax, before making any serious effort to attack segregation per se. As late as 1962 President Kennedy was capable, without irony, of telling a delegation of black leaders that he saw no need for new civil rights legislation.

Then, for a variety of reasons, the logjam began to break up; and now we appear to be heading, with many painful detours, toward at least partial desegregation of our schools. Neither Mr. Nixon nor Mr. Wallace has been able to alter that drift of affairs. When the citizens of Mobile decided to heed federal busing guidelines rather than the rantings of their governor, something fundamental, perhaps revolutionary, had occurred. Similarly, when school systems throughout the North started to desegregate—not because segregation was wrong but because it was illegal—we were getting very close to the heart of the matter.

All this activity is prologue to the main event: the breaking up of our black ghettos and the concomitant integration of our white suburbs. That fight, as we shall see, has yet to be waged. It remains one of the toughest challenges in the '70s.

There was a time, not very long ago, when desegregation of our neighborhoods was viewed as a relatively simple matter by most of its supporters. It seemed then to depend upon a "change of heart" among white residents, a sudden seizure of conscience that would magically open the ghetto gates. Accordingly, fair housing enthusiasts preached tolerance to real estate brokers and signed

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petitions pledging to welcome black neighbors, provided those black neighbors had a suitable income. All this was naive but understandable. Over the years a substantial segment of the white population has, in fact, undergone just such a change of heart. National polls invariably indicate that at least half the white population "would not object" if a black family moved next door. But the ghetto gates have remained closed.

It soon became clear that many whites were capable of deploring neighborhood segregation without necessarily abolishing it. At this point the emphasis switched from conscience to legislation, and during the '50s many states and cities passed laws banning discrimination in various types of housing. Today 26 states and more than 200 cities have such laws on their books. Still, the ghetto gates have remained closed.

During the '60s antisegregationists pinned most of their hopes on federal reforms, beginning with President Kennedy's 1962 Executive Order, which barred discrimination in new housing that was federally financed or insured. Then, in 1968, both Congress and the Supreme Court struck blows at segregation many observers at the time considered decisive. The Congress passed a fair housing law that banned discrimination in virtually all of the nation's 65 million housing units; the law applied not only to landlords and sellers but also to banks, insurance companies, and real estate brokers.

Almost simultaneously the Supreme Court affirmed the old Civil Rights Act passed in 1866, which forbids racial discrimination in the sale or rental of all housing and land. "When racial discrimination herds men into ghettos and makes their ability to buy property turn on the color of their skin," said the justices, "then it . . . is a relic of slavery. . . ."

Even then the ghetto gates did not open. Why not? The reason most frequently advanced, both by the New Left and the old Right, is that blacks no longer wish to inte-

grate white neighborhoods (if, indeed, they ever did). There is some truth in this. In a study on *Protest and Prejudice* (Harper & Row, 1967), Gary T. Marx notes that less than a third of the urban blacks he interviewed preferred to live in racially mixed neighborhoods and only 4 percent would choose neighborhoods that were "mostly white." Yet, most blacks seem to recognize the theoretical truth that the road to better housing usually leads to neighborhoods beyond the ghetto. A 1969 *Fortune* survey, for instance, indicates that 93 percent of the nation's blacks favor desegregation in housing.

A far more likely reason for the failure of legal reforms to produce fair housing is white ambivalence. A nation that wants it both ways—to mingle and to part—has a tendency to make laws it will not enforce and promises it will not keep. In general, and despite new pride and militancy among blacks, *the main barrier to neighborhood desegregation remains white intransigence, not black clannishness*. In any case, the new laws are on the books and the new promises are on our conscience. We can cash them in whenever we're ready.

I concede, on the face of it, that we do not appear to be ready. All the indices of recent years suggest that whites and blacks are more rigidly and irreversibly estranged from one another today than ever before. Thanks to sociologist Karl E. Taeuber we have a rough statistical index of our madness. Taeuber used 1960 census figures to analyze the degree of racial segregation in 207 cities, placing them on a scale from zero (no segregation) to 100 (absolute segregation). The *least* segregated city, San Jose, California, had an index rating of 60.4. Half the cities had segregation ratings above 87 and one-quarter exceeded 91. Only eight cities were rated below 70.

The migrations of the sixties have brought us still closer to total apartheid. Today only 7 percent of our suburban population is black, while more than half of all American

blacks live in central cities. At least four cities already have black majorities. If the trend continues for another decade, the 1980 census will list more than 50 cities with black majorities.

It is all too easy to interpret these events fatalistically; that is, as the inevitable product of powerful and impersonal forces that sweep all before them. After all, the two great migrations—that of blacks from rural South to urban North, and that of whites from benighted cities to sunny suburbs—have been going on for generations. Back in 1890 Jacob Riis noted that “New York has been receiving the overflow of colored population from Southern cities. In the last decade this migration has grown to such proportions that it is estimated that our Blacks have quite doubled in number since the Tenth Census.” During the same period Alexander T. Stewart, a New York department-store magnate, conceived the idea for a planned residential development in Garden City, Long Island, and thus inaugurated what might be called the Age of the Suburbs.

Most authorities, of course, attribute these twin migrations to industrialization—that is, to the new farm machinery that drove people off the land, and to the automobile that allowed others to move out to the suburbs. These are undeniable facts, yet they do not take into account the vital role racism played in the process. Not only did racism impel millions of black people northward, it also drove millions of white people outward to places like Garden City. It would have been more logical, after all, for blacks to have moved to suburbia, where land was cheaper and where the environment more closely resembled that of their rural origins. But it was not logic that moved populations. Riis cites the maxim of New York City’s landlords: “Once a colored house, always a colored house”—a sure sign of creeping segregation.

It was clear from the start that “drawing the color line” was good business. By creating artificial housing shortages for black families, landlords were able to charge outra-

geous prices for shoddy housing. This cruel game is still being played. A post-riot study of Watts, for example, revealed that greater congestion had led to higher rents—this despite more than 100,000 housing vacancies in greater Los Angeles. Similarly, in Chicago almost half the black families earning \$7,000 or more live in substandard dwellings; for white families with comparable incomes the figure is 6 percent.

Nor can anyone doubt that the white stampede to suburbia has filled the pockets of many a businessman—land speculators, realtors, bankers, home builders and road builders, to name a few. In fact, one could make a fairly strong case for neighborhood segregation as a pillar of the American economy. Few suburban land developers would disagree with Mr. Dooley’s dictum: “Life’d not be worth livin’ if we didn’t keep our inimies.”

It is far from accidental that for generations real estate firms and lending institutions viewed racial segregation as axiomatic. “A Realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood . . . members of any race or nationality . . . whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in the neighborhood.” Thus spoke the National Association of Real Estate Boards as late as 1957.

The point to remember here is that segregation did not simply “happen”; it was assiduously planned, promoted, and pampered by those who had most to gain from it. Eventually, it came to be taken for granted, a fixed shadow on our social landscape. City planners with Ph.D.’s drew their blueprints for future communities in black and white; school systems quietly shifted their boundaries to arrange for what they would later call *de facto* segregation; and, most significant of all, the federal government allied itself with the forces of segregation.

From the moment the government entered the housing business, back in the early ’30s, it also entered the segregation business. In 1938 the official Federal Housing Adminis-

tration (FHA) *Underwriting Manual* cautioned home buyers: "If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial group." ("*Once a colored house, always a colored house.*") The manual recommended use of restrictive covenants to keep out "inharmonious racial groups," and even provided a model restrictive covenant for readers too innocent to write their own.

In another manual, not revised until 1949, FHA urged its mortgage valutors to consider whether "effective restrictive covenants against the entire tract are recorded, since these provide the surest protection against undesirable encroachment. . . ." It warned valutors to beware of "adverse influences," such as "infiltration of business and industrial uses, lower-class occupancy and inharmonious racial groups."

Other federal agencies were behaving no better. The Home Owners Loan Corporation, for example, which was organized in 1933 to buy up and refinance delinquent mortgages, sold houses *only* to members of the dominant race in a given neighborhood. And the public housing agency early established a policy of "racial equity"—a polite way of saying separate but equal housing—which to this day is honored by a majority of local housing authorities.

The government did its work well. It fixed segregationist patterns in thousands of new suburbs, where 80 percent of all new housing is now being built. Since World War II the FHA and the Veterans' Administration together have financed more than \$130 billion-worth of new housing. Less than 2 percent of it has been available to nonwhite families, and much of that on a strictly segregated basis. "It is one thing," notes Gunnar Myrdal in the *The American Dilemma*, "when private tenants, property owners and financial institutions maintain and extend the patterns of racial segregation in housing. It is quite another when a Federal agency chooses to side with the segregationists."

There remains both within the federal government and the housing industry a considerable amount of segregationist sentiment. As recently as last summer, for example, an investigation by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights revealed that federally subsidized houses—especially those subsidized by the Section 235 mortgage assistance program—were being sold along the same old segregated lines: inner-city houses to blacks and suburban houses to whites.

But segregation has become less fashionable within the establishment, with the result that the private prejudices of government and industry leaders are less frequently translated into public policy. Indeed, public policy seems now to be moving, albeit unenthusiastically, toward desegregation.

In *Politics of Federal Housing* (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1971), Harold Wolman cites results of interviews he conducted with 67 members of "the decision-making elite" in formulation of housing policy. These included HUD officials, White House officials, congressmen, state and municipal government leaders, home builders, bankers, labor leaders, and a few civil rights representatives. Wolman asked them, among other things, whether they thought public policy should be directed more toward: (a) improving housing conditions within the ghetto; (b) dispersing the ghetto; or (c) both in about equal proportions. Only 8 of the 67 favored dispersing the ghetto, while 19 favored improving it. But 31 wanted "both in about equal proportions." (The remainder either voiced a different opinion or no opinion.)

Furthermore, 23 of the "influentials" thought more federal control was needed in forming low-income housing policies, thus appearing to embrace President Nixon's nemesis—"forced integration." (Twenty-eight of the respondents favored more local control.) In general, one can conclude from Wolman's data that the people who make housing policy nowadays, while not exactly the avant garde of integration, are considerably more sympathetic to notions of desegre-

gation than were their predecessors. It was the policy-makers of the '30s and '40s who laid the ghetto's cornerstone; and it is that cornerstone, at which some of their successors are now beginning to chip away.

The public, meanwhile, may also be adjusting gradually to a desegregated future, but the transformation is no more inevitable than was segregation 50 years ago. It will have to be planned and even popularized. In particular, desegregationists will have to find an accommodation with blue-collar families, who offer us the paradox of simultaneously being the most obdurate of segregationists and the most promising candidates for integration. Historically, the Northern white blue-collar worker has been among the first to insist on his racial prerogatives. Frederick Douglass found this out when as an escaped slave in 1838 he secured a job on a ship-builder's wharf in New Bedford, Mass., the heart of abolitionist country. On his first day at work, "I was told that every white man would leave the ship in her unfinished condition if I struck a blow at my trade upon her." Douglass, a skilled calker and copperer, had to settle for common, unskilled labor at half the pay.

In those days integrated employment seemed a more serious threat to whites in the North than did integrated housing. But after Emancipation, as blacks began coming North in greater numbers, the residential neighborhood became a symbol of white supremacy. It was meanly defended. In the years immediately following World War I, for example, dozens of blacks were killed for venturing across the community color line, and scores more were beaten and sent packing.

"Where will these people live?" asked Clarence Darrow of a Detroit jury in 1925. Darrow was defending Dr. Ossian Sweet, a black physician accused of committing murder while protecting his house against a white mob. (The neighborhood Sweet had moved into was a bastion of first-generation white ethnocentricity.) "The colored people must

live somewhere," Darrow continued. "Somewhere they must live. Are you going to kill them? Are you going to say they can work but cannot get a place to sleep? . . . Oh, gentlemen, what is the use! You know it is wrong. Everyone of you knows it is wrong."

In 1951, to cite a later instance, Harvey E. Clark, Jr., a black war veteran, tried to move his family into a \$60 apartment in Cicero, Illinois. A mob, aided by local police, started fires in the building and forced Clark to flee at gunpoint. "Get out of Cicero," the police chief told him, "and don't come back to town or you'll get a bullet through you." A year later an investigating grand jury—with "a passion for irrelevancy," as the late Charles Abrams observed—indicted an NAACP attorney defending Clark as well as the owner of the apartment house, her lawyer and her rental agent, charging them all with conspiracy to injure property by causing "depreciation in the market selling price." (The indictments were later dropped.)

But surely the reader is familiar with this melancholy history. I have dredged up a bit of it here not to indict the past but to clarify the present. For it is clear that the Rosedale incident is but the latest footnote to a very old story.

It is well to state this plainly, because white ethnics nowadays are getting more than their fair share of sentimental whitewash. When the television comedy *All in the Family*, about a "lovable bigot" who doesn't want any "coons" living next door to him, attracts 100 million weekly viewers and wins an Emmy, the cause of desegregation has not been served.

Similarly, when the sociologist Andrew M. Greeley, in *Why Can't They Be Like Us?* absolves white ethnics from violent tendencies, one wonders at his grasp of history. "White ethnics are afraid of violence," Greeley assures us. "There was much of it in their past, both in this country and in Europe. . . . They now have much more to lose than they did in the past. The threat of

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violence implies that their efforts may have been in vain, and that their hard-won gains are in jeopardy." It is true, of course, that most white ethnics, like everyone else, are nonviolent in most contexts; but not always in the context of race relations, and hardly ever in the context of neighborhood segregation. When protesting blacks prepared to march through Cicero for the announced purpose of desegregating that town, the white residents were hardly "afraid of violence." The protesters deemed themselves lucky to finish their trial march alive.

Everything Greeley says about white ethnics could be said, *mutatis mutandi*, about blacks. There was much violence "in their own past." Their gains were "hard-won" and are "in jeopardy." Yet when Greeley discusses the blacks, he chooses to see them through the eyes of his white ethnics: "I must still insist that violence in American cities is real. Many streets are unsafe, most parks are unsafe . . .; quiet residential neighborhoods are open to easy attack, and the threat of violent eruption hangs over the city each summer. . . ." As if the streets in Rosedale are any safer for blacks than the streets in Harlem for whites!

What this amounts to, it seems to me, is old wine in new bottles; but now it is sanctified by the mass media as "lovable" and advertised by academics and others as harmless, or even healthy. The rhetoric of this new movement often has a familiar aura. Speaking at one of several recent conferences devoted to white ethnics, a Baltimore lady named Barbara Mikulski declared: "The ethnic American is sick of being stereotyped as a racist and dullard by phony white liberals, pseudo black militants and patronizing bureaucrats. . . . He himself is the victim of class prejudice." To be sure, the white ethnic *is* frequently a victim of class prejudice. But such belligerent apologies, replete with *their* stereotypes, are not reassuring. They could as easily have been spoken by a Rosedale rioter as by a Baltimore orator.

Some civil rights spokesmen who should

know better have adopted a similar propaganda line. The Urban League, for instance, has published results of a national survey claiming to prove that "white 'native' Americans are more likely than Polish, Irish, or Italians to have antiblack attitudes." But the Urban League does not say what proportion of those antiblack native Americans live in the South, where most whites are WASPS.

One need not look far to see what the Urban League is driving at. It is the old dream of a blue-collar coalition between blacks and whites. "Close to half . . . of all households of Irish, Polish, or Italian origin are in manual occupations, or in so-called blue-collar work," notes the League. "They therefore may identify with many of the problems of lower-income minority members. Many of the white ethnics, in fact, work as peers with blacks, Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans. . . ."

The fallacy in all this is not that such a coalition is impossible—it *is* possible, provided we do not confuse white ethnics with white knights; the fallacy lies in the assumption that a coalition can be easily achieved, that white ethnics are psychologically "ripe" for it. The current vogue of glossing over historic conflicts between blue-collar blacks and blue-collar whites may undermine our last chance to form an effective coalition based on realities rather than myths.

For desegregationists the key reality today is a cruel housing shortage that for decades has plagued blacks and white blue-collar families as well. The situation is roughly as follows: In 1968 the Congress committed the nation—in principle at least—to the "construction or rehabilitation of 26 million housing units" during the next ten years. The figure reflected official estimates of what America would require if every family were to be decently housed. (According to the 1970 census, 4.3 million of our dwelling units are "substandard.")

These goals, in the opinion of many observers (including Mr. Romney), have been grossly understated. Yet even they are not

being met. Tight money and inflated building and land costs are the reasons. The average new house today costs about 30 percent more than it cost in 1967, and payments have shot up 56 percent in that period.

The result is that many low- and moderate-income families are compelled to live in crowded, substandard housing. And the present "housing boom," which will probably produce more than 2 million new units, has done little to relieve the pinch. Mainly, this boom is for the affluent. The mobile home industry is breaking all sales records, because mobile homes are the only dwellings most blue-collar families can afford to buy. But mobile homes are far from satisfactory: they provide less space for the money and tend to depreciate at a faster rate than does conventional housing. The mobile-home boom is a function not of public preference but of public desperation.

So far the Nixon administration has done little to redress the housing inequity. In fact, in 1971 the President released \$2 billion in previously impounded "Special Assistance" money to keep the lid on the mortgage market for nonsubsidized, high-priced housing. Originally, Congress had intended this

money to aid low- and moderate-income housing.

It seems likely, then, that the pressure for low-cost housing will continue to increase, and that this pressure will be generated at least as much by white ethnics as by blacks. If the two can work together, they will hasten the day when the Congress must act; and when that happens, the federal government will go into the housing business on a scale unprecedented, not only in central cities but in the suburbs as well.

Yet everything in our history suggests that a large portion of white America will try to secure better housing without paying the price of desegregation. If we allow this to occur, then in a relatively short time the nation will proceed to subsidize total apartheid through the construction of some 30 million housing units, about half again the number of units now extant. On the other hand, if whites and blacks, liberals and trade unionists, make desegregation a nonnegotiable item, there may still be time to undo the work of the past hundred years—that is, to get ourselves together. In any event, America will soon learn whether the two races are fated to wholly mingle or wholly part.

### Bibliographical Note

The best historical survey of segregated housing in the U.S. can be found in Charles Abrams, *Forbidden Neighbors* (New York: Harper & Row, 1955); for more recent history, see James L. Hecht, *Because It Is Right* (Boston: Little Brown, 1970). The federal government's role in segregation is documented by Gunnar Myrdal, Richard Sterner, and Arnold Rose, in *An American Dilemma* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1944), and more recently by Richard and Diane Margolis in a pamphlet, "How the Federal Government Builds Ghettos" (New York: National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing, 1967).

Current attitudes toward segregation among the federal "elite" have been studied by Harold Wolman in *The Politics of Federal Housing* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1971). See also *A Report to the President: AFSC Experience and Recommendations re: Executive Order 11063 on Equal Opportunity in Housing* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1967).

For a look at blue-collar fears pertaining to interracial housing, see *Forbidden Neighbors*, *op. cit.*, as well as Kenneth G. Weinberg, *A Man's Home, a Man's Castle* (New York: McCall Publishing, 1971). See also portions of Mike Royko's *Boss* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1971), particularly chap. 2.

Current blue-collar, or "white ethnic" attitudes toward race are subject to debate. For one point of view see Andrew M. Greeley, *Why Can't They Be Like Us?* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1971); see also, Stephen Clapp and Geno Baroni, "I'm a Pig, Too," in the *Washingtonian*, July 1970. For another viewpoint, see Timothy Lee's article, "Rose-dale: Might Makes Right," in the *New York Post*, June 30, 1971.

The best continuing source of information on the national housing shortage and federal nonsolutions is *The Low-Income Housing Bulletin*, a monthly published by the Rural Housing Alliance, Washington, D.C.; see especially the issues of December 1970 and of September 1971.