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The Nation (ISSN 0027-8378) is published weekly (except for the first week in January, and biweekly in July and August) by The Nation Company, L.P. © 1995 in the U.S.A. by The Nation Company, L.P., 72 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011 (212) 242-8400. *Washington Bureau*, Suite 308, 110 Maryland Avenue N.E., Washington, DC 20002 (202) 546-2239. Second-class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. International Telex: 667 155 NATION. Subscription orders, changes of address and all subscription inquiries: *The Nation*, P.O. Box 10763, Des Moines IA 50340-0763, or call 1-800-333-8536. *Subscription Price*, 1 year, \$48, 2 years, \$80. Add \$18 for surface mail postage outside U.S. Please allow 4-6 weeks for receipt of your first issue and for all subscription transactions. Back issues \$4 prepaid (\$5 foreign) from *The Nation*, 72 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011. *The Nation* is available on microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Member, Audit Bureau of Circulations. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *The Nation*, P.O. Box 10763, Des Moines IA 50340-0763. This issue went to press on October 12. Printed in U.S.A. on recycled paper.

EDITORIALS.

The Great Divide

Despite the rapid growth of Asian and Hispanic populations that renders this country's familiar bipolar racial paradigm increasingly obsolete, the black-white divide remains the most intractable fissure in American life. The acquittal of O.J. Simpson has underscored, once again, the chasm that separates black and white Americans. With nationalist sentiment on the rise in the black community, a conservative politics indifferent to racial inequality ascendant among whites and many on the

left entranced by their own group causes, the ideal of an integrated society seems more remote than ever. In the face of these realities, is it possible to reassert the validity and vitality of a politics of integration?

I believe it is not only possible but necessary. First, however, we must candidly assess what has and has not changed in the three decades since the Kerner Commission concluded that the United States consisted of two societies, black and white, separate and unequal. Today legal segregation is dead, blacks vote in the same proportion as whites, and many realms of life—sports, politics, entertainment, higher education and certain echelons of middle-class employment—are far more

integrated than was conceivable at the dawn of the civil rights era. On the other hand, not only have the black working class and poor fallen further behind their white counterparts but the crucial, interrelated areas of housing and schools remain predominantly segregated, if not by law then by custom but-tressed by economics and public policy.

To reaffirm a politics of integration it is necessary to confront the uncomfortable truth that, contrary to fashionable punditry, there never was a golden age of racial harmony, a liberal consensus destroyed by black nationalists and white multiculturalists. America's residential apartheid results from a long history of government policy, individual choices and the inequitable operation of a putatively free market. Well before the turn from civil rights to black power or the rise of crime rates, illegitimacy and drug use in poor black communities, the federal government institutionalized racial segregation in New Deal public housing and mortgage policies, and private developers systematically excluded blacks from the postwar suburban boom. The September issue of the *Journal of American History* contains revealing and disturbing articles about the prolonged, violent opposition in postwar Chicago and Detroit to even the smallest black presence in white neighborhoods. The residents' fear was not crime or drugs but a decline in property values and black competition for jobs traditionally reserved for whites.

Then as now, whiteness had an economic value. It soon revealed its political potency as well. Even at the height of the 1960s, for example, it was a successful referendum campaign to rescind a fair housing law that galvanized California's grass-roots conservatism.

The point is not to paint all whites with the brush of unyielding racism. Such a generalization would be as unfair as current conservative dogma that blacks are immersed in a culture of drugs and illegitimacy. Throughout our history, from the abolitionists to the civil rights era, countless whites have fought for a society in which all citizens enjoyed equal rights and equal opportunities.

It is too often forgotten that integration is a very radical idea, not a stuffy nostrum, as critics of the N.A.A.C.P. have long claimed. In fact, our society can far more easily accommodate a program of separatism, group identity and autonomy for local black institutions—whether emanating from the Garvey movement, black power advocates or the Million Man March—than a program of genuine integration.

From Frederick Douglass and Wendell Phillips in the nineteenth century to Martin Luther King Jr., integration has meant not the absorption of blacks into the pre-existing white social order but the *transformation* of American society so

as to give real meaning to the principle of equality. Properly understood, integration means not only the removal of economic, social and political obstacles to full participation in every area of American life but changes in the contours of personal life so that friendship, comradeship and intimacy between the races can become far more common than is possible today. To our cynical age, this sentiment may seem rather mawkish, just as the old abolitionist maxim about the slave—Am I Not a Man and a Brother?—appears to many naive or paternalistic. But ultimately, a belief in brotherhood lies at the heart of any politics of integration.

At a time when many blacks express an understandable despair for the future and nostalgia for segregation, with its strong black-run institutions, and when many whites seem content to retreat into private schools and gated communities, the idea of integration seems more utopian than ever, requiring not only the passage of new laws but a change in Americans' hearts and minds. Since the days of the abolitionists, however, the role of the left has been to put forward utopian ideas, to offer a moral and political critique of existing institutions, to worry less about what is politically possible than about what might be. The time has come to reintroduce integration into our political vocabulary—not as a code for whites dictating to blacks or as "color-blindness," a term appropriated from the civil rights movement by conservatives and made into an empty slogan, but as a vision of a nation transformed, one in which equality is a reality for all Americans.

ERIC FONER

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Jury's Still Out

Los Angeles

The bitter reaction to the O.J. Simpson verdict among whites threatens to linger as long as the trial itself. You can't channel-surf for more than five minutes without bumping into a smirking Andy Rooney, an incensed Dominick Dunne or a smug Dinesh D'Souza reassuring us there is such a thing as "rational discrimination." Away from the TV cameras, in the bowling alleys and bars of suburban San Fernando Valley, the "N-word" peppers the verdict post-mortems in alarming measure.

The breadth of the white reaction to the verdict reveals a deeper truth: that while there has been endless speculation on how a black-dominated jury would evaluate Simpson's hero status, the Fuhrman matter and Johnnie Cochran's closing remarks, and on how the whole black community might respond to a guilty verdict, few commentators seemed to notice how intensely *whites*—especially here in Los Angeles—had invested themselves in the trial.

Much of the white audience seemed to luxuriate perversely in their conviction that there would be no conviction. It was self-evident: America was going to the dogs, affirmative action and political correctness had gone too far, minorities and immigrants were costing too much, and now to top it off, O.J.

STAFF NOTES

We are pleased to announce that Perry Janoski has joined *The Nation* as vice president and advertising director. Perry spent the past five years helping build up the *Voice Literary Supplement*, where he was associate publisher. Welcome aboard, Perry.