

The Race Case

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One of the pleasant fictions that helps justify the Bush administration's opposition to affirmative action is the pretense that America has left behind the evils of segregation and achieved something approaching a race-blind society. "Every day that our nation was segregated was a day our nation was unfaithful to our founding ideals," the president said in response to Sen. Trent Lott's (R-Miss.) ill-considered remarks about Sen. Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.).

The president's use of the past tense is indicative of a broader conceit in American society: that the era of racial segregation is over and people are free to live wherever their dreams and resources can take them, regardless of skin color. Unfortunately, when it comes to where we live, we are still very much a racially segregated society.

A recent U.S. Census report confirms that blacks and whites continue to occupy separate neighborhoods in large U.S. cities. The most common measure of residential segregation is an index that ranges from 0 to 100, where 0 indicates that blacks and whites are evenly distributed among neighborhoods and 100 means that blacks and whites share no neighborhood in common. Scores greater than 60 are considered to be "high"; those above 70 are "extreme."

In 2000 the average level of black-white segregation in U.S. metropolitan areas stood at 64, compared with figures of 33 for American Indians, 41 for Asians and 51 for Hispanics. Although average black-white segregation has moved downward since 1980, indices remain extreme in the nation's largest urban black communities, especially in the Northeast and the Midwest, where average segregation indices stood at around 74 in the year 2000. The most segregated U.S. metropolitan area is Detroit, with an index of 85, followed by Milwaukee (82), New York (81), Newark, N.J., (80) and Chicago (also 80). Other areas with "extreme" segregation scores include Buffalo, N.Y., Cincinnati, Cleveland, Kansas City, Philadelphia and St. Louis. Most other multiracial societies are not this segregated -- not Brazil, Canada, Australia or the United Kingdom. The only other place where black-white segregation indices routinely exceeded 70 was the Union of South Africa -- under apartheid.

The ongoing segregation of African Americans partly reflects the legacy of past exclusion and discrimination. But it also stems from ongoing discrimination in real-estate markets that the Bush administration has chosen to ignore. Despite the fact that racial discrimination in housing has been illegal since 1968, few efforts have been made to enforce the law, except during the early years of the Clinton administration. After analyzing levels of housing discrimination in 23 metropolitan areas in 2000, researchers working for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development recently concluded

that "discrimination persists in both rental and sales markets of large metropolitan areas nationwide."

The evidence is clear and overwhelming that African Americans do not have full access to the nation's housing market. This fact has dire implications in the current debate on affirmative action, for continued residential segregation means continued school segregation. According to Harvard Civil Rights Project data, the proportion of blacks attending integrated or majority-white schools declined by 13 percent during the 1990s, the lowest level since 1968. At present, around one-sixth of the nation's black students and one-ninth of Hispanic students attend schools that are 99 percent nonwhite. Such schools spend far less money per pupil than white or integrated institutions even though their students, for many reasons, are far more costly to educate. Segregation inevitably concentrates poverty, social disorder and poor health in dysfunctional schools that place African Americans, and increasingly Hispanics, at a severe competitive disadvantage in attempting to enter America's better colleges and universities.

There are steps that can be taken. Fair-housing organizations, in cooperation with HUD, have developed sound, constitutional procedures to identify and prosecute discriminators. What is lacking is political will.

The ongoing segregation of American cities permits President Bush to oppose affirmative action on the grounds that it upholds racial equality, while few blacks and Hispanics will be in a position to attain the educational credentials and cognitive skills needed to get into a university such as Yale. And unlike him, they will not benefit from a special admissions quota to facilitate the enrollment of children of wealthy alumni. If the Bush administration is really serious about improving conditions for African Americans, it will devote more time to civil-rights enforcement and less time to empty platitudes about racial equality.

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