

# The President's *Race Initiative*

*Race-Conscious  
Judo Meets the  
Still-Funky Reality*

Howard Winant

## **Race-Conscious Judo**

Despite its lofty title, *One America in the Twenty-First Century: Forging a New Future*, the final report from the Advisory Board to the President's Initiative on Race is a politically realistic statement. It is not a blueprint for the future, nor is it a critical analysis of the enduring importance of race in the American social structure, cultural system, or psyche. Instead, it is an effort to present a practical program, an attempt to do some race-conscious judo on President Clinton and the Democratic Party. The report proposes a set of civil rights-based, social democratic reforms for the United States.

There is plenty to criticize in it. But before critical questions of content can be raised, before anyone begins to disparage this work of John Hope Franklin (a heroic figure who walks in the footsteps of W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and Alain Locke) and his associates, they would do well to consider the purposes and audience of the document and the forces that brought it into being.

The report is a fairly detailed proposal for the creation of racially egalitarian social policy in the contemporary United States. It projects a reorientation of the racial state in a wide range of policy arenas—among them education, housing, employment, law enforcement, and health. It calls for a decisive turning away from the laissez-faire (or “benign neglect”) that has characterized the entire post-civil rights era. It calls for the fulfillment of existing antidiscrimination law and the extension of civil rights principles into areas not contemplated in the 1960s. The report pushes for the full-scale enforcement of antidiscrimination laws, for example, noting that the civil rights laws have been reduced to merely symbolic gestures, not only by the courts but by successive administrations and Congresses. For example, the report calls for a revitalized commitment to residential desegregation, defends affirmative action at a moment when its future is deeply in doubt, and assails racist practices in policing and punishment. In short, *One America* is situated solidly within the civil rights legacy.



own, black, and white. Photo by Kristen Clarke.

Notably, the report is fully conscious of the racial multipolarity that characterizes the present-day United States, paying significant attention to Native American, Latino, and Asian-American concerns and defending immigrants' rights. In these and other matters, the report operates on a terrain that would have been quite unfamiliar in the 1960s, when black-white racial conflict and the "two nations" perspective of the Kerner Commission largely (though not totally) eclipsed other groups' demands and marginalized other voices.

Beyond these race-specific, civil rights-oriented positions, the report ventures into redistributive, human rights-oriented territory at a number of points: calling for large-scale state investments in universal health care, high quality education at all levels, a variety of anti-poverty measures such as increasing the minimum wage, and collective bargaining rights for all. In so doing, it recognizes the deep connection between civil and human rights, between racial justice and social justice, between political democracy and social democracy.

Writing *One America* was a formidable political task. The authors had to address the centrist Democratic president who had created their council out of a mixed set of political motives: some genuine support for racial equality and justice, no doubt, but also a hefty desire to propitiate black voters. He had both counted on his black constituents' votes and betrayed their trust, particularly with his welfare "reform" and with his pandering to white law-and-order swing voters on a range of issues. There were other motives behind the Clinton Race Initiative as well: For example, the future orientation of Latino and Asian voters was up for grabs, especially in California, and racial gerrymandering had reinforced the right-wing white Republicanism of the South. The authors of the report thus had to make the most of their limited opportunity to leverage the president; this is what I mean by "judo."

*One America*, as I read it, was crafted to appeal to those on the "mainstream left": minority voters and Sweeney-esque labor folk in particular. The report's social democratic

orientation and its many redistributive recommendations should be understood in this light. Its proposals are race-conscious judo, attempts to stake out a more progressive direction for Democratic Party politics by countering the wedge-issue politics that has worked well for the right. That challenge, that "forging," has to reunite the seriously divided bases of the Democrats: minority voters and white workers. Consider the report's suggestion that as a principal anti-poverty strategy, the government should "support organized labor and its outreach efforts to minority and immigrant workers. Organized labor has demonstrated its ability to protect job security, reduce wage disparities, and provide necessary benefits to working people" (p. 76).

With this sort of rhetoric (and numerous parallels could be cited), the report seeks to frame a more progressive alternative to neo-conservative racial politics. It aims at a social democratic rearticulation of the subtextual racism that has split the Democratic Party base since the dawn of the civil rights era (say, in 1948), which became critical in the 1960s, which was exploited by Nixon through the "Southern strategy," and which culminated in Reaganism. Challenging this isn't going to make for a very radical critique of racism, of its comprehensiveness and embeddedness in the deepest fabric of American society. It is, however, an important political effort, a serious attempt to leverage the president and influence the Democratic center to the left on racial matters.

### But Reality Is Still Funky

That's the good news. The bad news is that the report breaks virtually no new ground analytically. It is an articulate throwback to the good old days of civil rights, when indeed the problem seemed to be "rights" or the lack of

them. To what extent is that still the problem today?

Surely there are still issues of "rights." Discrimination thrives, and the state does not seriously contend against it, despite the reform efforts of the 1960s. Yet the dynamics of race have changed dramatically since the civil rights era, and this fact is only minimally recognized in *One America in the Twenty-First Century*. The report acknowledges the presence of multiple actors on the racial stage, as I have noted; it also does its best to handle new research on racial stratification and discrimination. So it is not hopelessly mired in the past.

But the report does not address the changing significance of race at the end of the twentieth century, the century whose central malady was diagnosed by Du Bois as "the problem of the color-line." Here in *Souls*, a journal dedicated to the Duboisian critique of U.S. racial dynamics, it is particularly necessary to raise the possibility that racial inequality and injustice no longer operate so clearly *across* any color line but also and in new ways *within* various racially identifiable groups. We must recognize that the complex realignments of the civil rights period and its aftermath greatly augmented the flexibility, the fungibility, of racial meanings and racialized social structures. It is incumbent upon the authors of the report, and upon us as its readers and critics, to comprehend the effectiveness with which new right and neoconservative policies and politics have incorporated and blunted the challenge of civil rights, of the black movement and its allies, of the 1960s. This the report does not do.

Although it is worthwhile to challenge the state to enforce antidiscrimination laws, perhaps the main problem antiracists face today is the claim of "postracialism." Frequently heard from the right, which has learned very

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well how to incorporate and reinterpret the demands of racially defined "minorities" for justice and equality, postracialism in the contemporary United States often takes the familiar form of putative "color-blindness." It isn't only a right-wing malady, though; centrists and even leftists are also prey to the blandishments of this position. And many unsophisticated folks (largely but not exclusively whites) are attracted to the idea. "I don't see color," my students (again, usually but not only white) tell me. "A person's just a person to me, no matter if they're black, white, brown, or purple. I judge everyone as an individual, everyone on their merits." This is the funky stuff that the movement has left us to deal with. Yes, the movement was idealistic, earthshaking, and revelatory, but it was only partially successful; it was also incomplete, stifled, and co-opted by the state and the right.

So the movement message of racial equality and justice has been absorbed and reinterpreted. It has been incorporated over the past decades into the regnant conservative "common sense." Although in a short essay I cannot fully analyze the significance of this ameliorative and tranquilizing "postracial" worldview, I believe it will be recognizable to most readers. It is our job to challenge the claim that the United States is now, or indeed could ever be, "beyond race."

It is probably too much to hope that a mainstream government initiative, like the one that produced *One America* at the behest of the president, could entirely join in that challenge. Indeed, it might have been unstrategic to do so, to urge too much change, to get too far down in the funk. Yet we critics, we proud radicals, we long-term antiracist scholars and activists, are at least obligated to question this report's tendency to collapse into collaboration with the rhetoric of "postracialism." Evident in its very title, and

amply documented in the effort to "heal the wounds" of racial injustice through dialogue, the President's Initiative on Race and its final report verge much too close, I think, to the illusory idea that this country could, or even should, transcend racial identities and racial difference, that it should somehow "become one."

This utopian idea is also kinda offensive, if you think about it hard. Since when has it been possible to "transcend" fundamental, structural, generative human differences? Suppose we were told that gender, class, or nationality were mere "illusions" that we should "get beyond"? Folks would, quite properly, go nuts! Why is it that race is still seen as something that ought to be "transcended"? I'm starting to get really impatient with that move, both politically and philosophically. Yo, "color-blind" people! It is not identity, not difference, that we should (or could) dispense with, but continuing hierarchy, oppression, bondage.

If we can't (and don't want to) "transcend" race, what can we pose as an alternative to the meliorism and inadequacy of *One America*? First, as I have noted, we should recognize the report's real value as a social democratic, reform-oriented, practical statement. Second, we should understand that its limits flow from the inadequacy of the 1960s movement legacy for our own putatively "postracial" times. The movement relied too much on the state and civil rights-era laws to protect us from racial injustice. This dependence on the state tends to put movements out of business, to discredit and delegitimize

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autonomous racial (i.e., civil society-based) mobilization.

Furthermore, as critical race theorists (CRTs) like Kim Crenshaw and Gary Peller among others have reminded us, we must re-examine our time-honored reliance on egalitarianism. For as the new right has seen more clearly than we, the real issues are no longer those of rights, but those of redistribution of power and wealth. In raising these points I don't wish to imply (and CRT advocates don't either) that rights politics and egalitarian demands are altogether wrong or bad. It's just that over an extended period of neo-conservative domination of racial policy and politics, they've reached their limits; they're way too available for rearticulation from the political right. That would not be true about the kinds of electoral reforms Lani Guinier has advocated, such as proportional voting. Nor would it be true about the redistributive wealth reforms Mel Oliver and Tom Shapiro have suggested: steeper inheritance and capital gains taxes, coupled with racial

reparations aimed at community development. Rearticulate that, Ralph Reed!

Although it falls short of advocating the radical interventions necessary to alter fundamental, structural, racism in the United States, *One America* strives to specify a program that could reform and ameliorate the continuing depredations of racism at this century's end. For its realism, and for the enormous effort invested by those who produced it and informed it, the project deserves our praise and support. For its limits—imposed by the conditions of its creation and its overreliance on a noble but no longer effective movement legacy—the project must be criticized. As valuable as reform will be, as indispensable as dialogue and mutual understanding are to the cause of racial justice, it is still true that only deep structural changes in American society can truly confront the enduring racism that shapes every relationship, every institution, every individual. To make those kinds of changes will require a new movement.