

New Directions

Volume 8 | Issue 3

Article 3

4-1-1981

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Recommended Citation

Gill, Gerald R. (1981) "The National Mood," *New Directions*: Vol. 8: Iss. 3, Article 3.
Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol8/iss3/3>

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The National Mood

By Gerald R. Gill

The middle years of the 1970s saw the continuing erosion of governmental and societal efforts on behalf of Blacks, other minorities and the poor. Instead of a changing mood, there was a *changed* mood. In areas of public policy, the nation's mood had changed towards postures and positions more *hardened* and more *hostile* towards Blacks and the poor. In the view of many, the nation was continuing its rightward move, but the pace has quickened. Thus we arrive in the 1980s with conservatism very much a fact of life.

Growing fears of economic uncertainty among many Americans, due in large part to the current state of the economy, and increasing feelings of both indifference and hostility towards Blacks help to further explain the "conservative drift."

Much of the current impetus, direct or indirect, for the growing disinclination and/or hostility to help Blacks, stems from the present perceptions, or better yet misperceptions, of the status and situation of Blacks. Throughout the 1970s and continuing into the 1980s, a majority of white Americans surveyed in public opinion polls have expressed the view that Blacks have made great progress toward achieving equality and are no longer the victims of discrimination.

Black respondents, however, are hardly as optimistic in their responses and assessments as whites. They certainly do not agree with those who assert that there is a "post-racist America" where discrimination is virtually non-existent.

In repeated polls conducted over the last few years, an increasing number of Black respondents have indicated that discrimination in all levels of employment, in job opportunities and in housing still exists.

Increasingly, social scientists and other academics, some of whom were former friends and allies of the civil rights movement, have emerged as leading proponents of attempts and efforts to limit or to thwart the continuance of social welfare programs. Many of the aforementioned can be labeled as "neo-conservative," the subjects of considerable scholarly and lay examination in recent years.

Strong and rather impressive evidence exists that the programs of the Great Society were not costly failures. Much of this evidence points to the benefits both to individuals and to society at large that have resulted and can continue to result from the continuance of social welfare programs.

Contrary to earlier "evidence," the results of the great majority of studies of the implementation of busing have found increases in the achievement scores of Black students. While increases have been noticeable under both voluntary desegregation plans and mandatory desegregation plans, the gains are far more likely to result from mandatory desegregation plans.

Has affirmative action been worth the hostility? The answer is "yes." Many of the "emergent Black elite," so widely touted in conservative and neo-conservative literature as examples of "Black progress," have benefitted from affirmative action programs. Affirmative action, according to the results of a recent poll released by *Black Enterprise* magazine, has been "the biggest single factor in the dramatic upsurge in the number of Blacks in corporate management and the skilled trades."

Historians, sociologists and other social scientists have long observed that in times of economic frustration and dis-

content in this country, acts of violence directed against Blacks have increased. Economic frustrations and discontent have led historically to an increased number of lynchings and race riots. Many individuals, instead of channeling their dissent and anger at the source of their discontent, look for scapegoats.

Similar frustration exists at the present and explains the source of much of the current discontent. In the current economic climate, any move or effort designed to benefit Blacks is perceived to be at the expense of whites. And in such a climate of hostility, the acts and activities of those "striking back" at Blacks are looked upon with less disdain.

Throughout the decade of the 1970s and now into the 1980s, the political and social mood of the nation continues to move further and further to the right. Nowhere has the more pronounced conservatism been evident than in the mounting attacks on "big government," "government spending" and "government regulation." These attacks in large part are reflective of the increased hostility toward social welfare efforts on behalf of Blacks and the poor.

A review of social welfare efforts and strategies designed to bring about equal educational and employment opportunities shows that these initiatives have not been the "failures" so commonly depicted. In spite of charges of "fraud" and "welfare dependency," social welfare programs—food stamps program and AFDC—provide assistance to genuinely needy recipients. Early childhood intervention programs, manpower training programs and affirmative action programs in education and in employment have brought, and will continue to bring, real and lasting benefits to countless individuals. While successes worth the costs have been noted, much still needs to be done through the auspices of both the public and private sector to bring about a more equitable society. □