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Using race to divide, not unite

Nat Hentoff

While Al Gore and Bill Bradley compete for the black vote, the racial divide remains — often encouraged by those who say they want to repair it. And reactions to these confusing and confused separatists adds to the tension.

Hamilton College in upstate New York commissioned a survey last year — "The Racial Attitudes of Young Americans" — from John Zogby. Since he is the only national pollster to whom I pay serious attention, I find the results illuminating and important, but also disturbing.

The questions were asked of 1,001 randomly selected 18- to 20-year-olds around the country. Among the somewhat more heartening results was that 56 percent said that government should ensure fair treatment of blacks in the workplace.

The majority also accepted interracial dating and marriage. And 61 percent agreed that "the government in Washington should see to it that white and black children go to the same schools."

However, neither the current president — nor any prospective president — has indicated that school integration is a priority. And more public schools are segregated now than when the Supreme Court, in 1954, declared segregated public schools unconstitutional in *Brown vs. Board of Education*.

Professor Phillip Klinker of Hamilton College, who directed the survey, said that it is "troubling that only some 60 percent of these young Americans felt strongly that the schools must be integrated as a constitutional mandate. Thurgood Marshall, while on the Supreme Court, used to say that 'people who don't learn together are not going to know how to live together.' "

What I found most disturbing were the answers to the question that read: "It's okay if the races are basically separate from one another as long as everyone has equal opportunities." That used to be called "separate but equal." Slightly more than half agreed that separate but equal was all right. "This indicates," Professor Klinker told me, "that many young Americans are comfortable with the notion of a

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segregated society."

This is not entirely surprising when so many elementary, middle and high schools remain segregated, and when some champions of black pride determinedly emphasize separatism.

On college campuses, meanwhile, well-meaning but patronizing administrators have narrowed the meaning of "diversity" and "multiculturalism." When "diversity" results in one group focusing primarily on its own special moral and cultural virtues, the outcome is hardly a concern with the value of diversity in the larger society.

This kind of separatism is encouraged by colleges that create separate orientation programs for blacks and other minority newcomers so that they'll be "comfortable" on campus. Then administrators encourage them to live in "theme" buildings apart from the rest of the residences, isolating them further. To learn how this thought control works, see Alan Kors' "Thought Control 101" in the March issue of Reason magazine.

Vinnie Tong, a student at the University of California in Berkeley, told The New York Times: "When you first get here, they give you this talk about diversity — what kind of place did you come from? What kind of people did you live with? They really shove that down your throat. I come from a predominantly white, Republican town in Northern California, and all of a sudden, I'm an Asian girl, whether I like it or not. I really resented it."

Not surprisingly, in a report on affirmative action at the University of Michigan, the widely respected Chronicle of Higher Education noted, "Most students' close friendships tend to be with people of their own race." Teaching at Princeton University two years ago, I was given similar responses by black and white students.

Malcolm X was a friend of mine, from the time he was in the Nation of Islam to his assassination. In one of his last speeches, he said: "We don't judge a man because of the color of his skin. We don't judge you because you're white; we don't judge you because you're black or brown. We judge you because of what you do and what you practice."

Louis Armstrong also believed that. He often spoke of how much he enjoyed, as a young trumpet player in Chicago, jamming with the white cornetist, Bix Beiderbecke. For black and white jazz players, improvising together, on the job or later, became a normal part of their lives.

We are considerably behind Malcolm and Louis. In Newsweek, Ellis Cose wrote: "The color line is fraying all around us. Disparities will remain. But with the rudest reminders of racism washed away, it will be a lot easier to tell ourselves that we finally have overcome."

But there is still a long way to go before we see each other, as individuals, beyond the color line. And Thurgood Marshall was right. That day will come sooner if our children learn together from kindergarten on, and are not separated later by college administrators with limited vision.

Nat Hentoff is a columnist for The Washington Times. His column runs on Mondays.



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