States of the Union

THE STILL POSSIBLE DREAM

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

THE TENTH anniversary of the "I-have-a-dream" March on Washington drifted by last month, and to judge from the retrospective commentary, the main accomplishment of the March was to separate blacks from whites. "Ten years ago we entertained whites a lot in our home," Hannah Atkins, a black Oklahoma state representative, told a New York *Times* reporter. "We went to dances with whites, but we don't anymore. . . . I just don't feel like entertaining whites in my home."

Patricia Roberts Harris, a distinguished black lawyer, struck the characteristic note in a roundtable discussion taped by the *Times*. The March on Washington, she said, "was the end of effective white input. . . . Up until that time there had been an assumption that blacks and whites together would decide what the theory, what the approach of the civil rights movement would be." The complexion of the seven roundtable participants seemed to confirm Mrs. Harris' view of history: All were black.

It is easy to understand the blacks' disenchantment with the movement in general and with white liberals in particular. They have a right to mock the paltry consequences of a crusade that once promised so much, and to complain, with Jeremiah, that "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved."

One reason we are all not saved is that while Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed in black and white—he was that rare presence, a sincere integrationist—younger leaders in the movement dreamed in basic black. In fact, "white input" did not actually cease until nearly three years after the March, when Stokely Carmichael shouted "Black Power" on a Mississippi highway—a chant that thrilled many blacks even as it chilled many whites.

And behind Stokely's shout was that clenched fist, a not very subtle reminder that some blacks were ready to discard nonviolent tactics. When the violence came—in more than 100 black ghettoes—many suburbanites bought shotguns and bolted their doors; a surprising number of white liberals in Northern cities acquired a sudden enthusiasm for ecology.

Who can blame Mrs. Atkins for no longer dancing with whites? What is there to dance about?

Still, I remain uneasy. I believed Dr. King's black and white dream, and I am loathe to surrender it. Moreover, and perhaps more compellingly, I agree with Tocqueville's analysis of our dilemma: "As soon as it is admitted that the whites and the emancipated blacks are placed upon the same territory in the situation of two foreign communities," he pointed out, "it will readily be understood that there are but two chances for the future: The Negroes and whites must either wholly mingle or wholly part." At present we are parting when we ought to be mingling.

A woman acquaintance told me recently that you can spot a nation's values by the verbs it uses. "You know," she explained, "like when the bride has to promise to love, honor and *obey*." She may have meant approximately what Buckminster Fuller meant when he observed that "God is a verb, not

a noun." In any case, when Americans nowadays use the verb "to integrate," they usually mean psyches, not races. We have proceeded from confrontations in Washington to encounter groups at Esalen, a leap that may not be as far as it looks.

For instance, my 1928 Webster's International defines "integrate" in ways that echo both Esalen and Tocqueville: "To form into one whole; to make entire; to complete; to round out; to perfect." As an integrationist, I hold precisely that view of the matter.

When the Webster people compiled their 1928 edition it was possible to suffer from "negrophobia," defined as "Dread of, or strong aversion to, the negro." That disease doubtless still rages (as does its opposite number, caucasianphobia), but it is no longer cited in dictionaries. On the other hand, in my 1969 American Heritage dictionary, "integrate" acquires a new meaning, though not the first one offered: "To open to people of all races or ethnic groups without restriction; desegregate." American Heritage capitalizes "Negro" and lists "Black" as a synonym.

Such small lexicographic triumphs are not commonly celebrated in the New York *Times*. Yet we would do well to recall how much suffering and how many acts of individual courage were required to wedge those words, with their socially useful meanings, into our dictionaries. It wasn't too long ago that the best among us were willing to get their heads bloodied, indeed, to risk their lives, in order to *integrate* a lunch counter or a bus depot. Are we now to write off these deeds as no longer relevant, while we chase such chimeras as ethnic realism and black capitalism?

Even the capitalization of "Negro" —a word no longer in fashion—is a victory not to be scorned. That quaint old battle had its share of setbacks and humiliations. In 1948 a delegation of black leaders, calling on the editor of the Minneapolis *Star*, respectfully requested that the newspaper print the first letter of "Negro" in upper case. The editor was very sympathetic. He would like to do that, he said; he really would. Unfortunately, his shop wasn't set up for it—just not enough upper-case "N"s to go around. To make that change, he regretted to tell them, would be much too costly.

The *Star*, of course, was a liberal newspaper. Once in a while it even had kind words for Hubert Humphrey, that brash young Turk who had rammed a civil rights plank into the Democratic platform, causing Strom Thurmond and his friends to walk out.

TO SOMEONE like myself who came of age in Minnesota during that deluded time—someone, that is, who was christened by FDR, baptized by Joe McCarthy and bar mitzvahed by the early Humphrey—the torpor of the '70s is as baffling as the zeal of the '60s was exhilarating. We who once despaired of persuading editors to concede even a capital "N" to our sense of morality, or of persuading Congress to admit that lynching was a crime, now suffer from contradictory illusions: The first is that America has come a long way; the second is that nothing has changed.

On paper, it seems to me, the fight has been won. The courts have rendered their verdicts, Congress has spoken, and desegregation is the law of the land. But a nation that wants it two ways—both to mingle and to part—readily permits its judges and lawgivers to enact statutes it does not intend to obey. If we can assess our values by our verbs, then why is "integrate" in our dictionaries but not on our minds? And why is "busing" a nasty word?

At present, according to the latest census figures, our Northern schools and towns are more hopelessly segregated than ever. Something there is that loves a wall. Segregation, which has been banished by Congress and the Supreme Court, nevertheless looms as a fixed shadow on our social landscape and on our collective imagination. The shadow is self-perpetuating, for by separating the white child from the black child we hand on to both our own phobias of race. The children will grow up not wishing to dance with each other.

Myself, I'm an awful dancer (a common white foible, I'm told), but I would like to live in an America where Mrs. Atkins might be willing to waltz with me, and where it is thought sensible for a roundtable discussion on black-white relations to include blacks and whites. The America I have in mind would be a nation of minglers, and no one race would call the shots. We would agree in advance that black, brown, red, yellow and white are beautiful.

For a moment there, on August 28, 1963, that America seemed within reach. But for reasons I think none of us entirely understands—a failure of nerve, perhaps, in the face of all that joy—we let it slip away. Or maybe it was just a dream.

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