

(Editorial Climate!)

Sociology

THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

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Page 6

Monday, November 3, 1980

The Seeds Of Racism

A CONSIDERABLE part of the nation's racial problem was explained, perhaps unwittingly, by Ronald Reagan during the presidential debate last week.

Reagan said that he thought the United States had made great progress in race relations "since the days when I was young and this country didn't even know it had a racial problem."

President Carter was quick to pick up on that, saying the victims of discrimination "certainly knew we had a racial problem."

Tragically, however, Reagan was right to a large degree. Sixty years or so ago, most Americans outside the South didn't understand the extent and severity of discrimination. As a result, the patterns of racial prejudice became deeply ingrained and even institutionalized without being effectively challenged or resisted until the civil rights movement began to gain momentum in the late 1940s.

Tampico, Ill., where Reagan was born, didn't have many, if any, black residents. Throughout most of the North and West, it was the same. Residents there, in cities as well as towns, might have been horrified at the injustices against blacks in the South. But they had little occasion to analyze their own racial feelings or to compare the discrimination against Southern blacks with the ethnic hostilities and prejudices that existed closer to home.

It was easy in those days for "concerned citizens" to think that the problem was mostly confined to the South and that, when the lynchings were stopped and the state segregation laws were abolished, all black Americans would have gained equal rights.

They could look about them and see a black class president at a predominantly white high school, a black couple eating in a public restaurant, blacks and whites talking easily in a factory, and they would feel reassured. But they weren't seeing — or looking for — the barriers to black advancement in jobs and professions, the barriers to black

mobility in white residential areas, the barriers to black employment where white applicants stood in line.

They weren't aware, any more than young Ronald Reagan was, of the insidious discrimination that business and government practiced without any Jim Crow laws being necessary.

School desegregation suits in the late 1960s began to open the country's eyes to the wide extent of this "unofficial" discrimination and to give the lie to what had been thought of as a sharp difference between *de facto* and *de jure* segregation. The South had laws against blacks going to school with whites. But many cities in the North managed to create the same conditions by gerrymandering school districts and by teacher assignments. At-large elections kept blacks out of public office. Real estate covenants confined them to "their own" neighborhoods.

REAGAN'S MEMORY wasn't faulty. Nor was he being insensitive, then or now. He reflected the society in which he was reared — one ignorant of reality — and he reflects the changes that have occurred in the larger society into which he moved as an entertainer and a politician.

President Carter was perhaps the most forgetful. In his autobiography, the President wrote that he was a member of the Sumter County, Ga., Board of Education for several months back in 1956 "before it dawned on me that white children rode buses to their schools and black students still walked to theirs." And some probably passed each other on the way.

The evils of racial prejudice grew strong and deep not only or primarily because of Southern law, but also because of the willing blindness of the rest of the country. The South wasn't right. The North wasn't right. And racial wrongs continue to be perpetrated — in some cases, even more subtly.

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Historical perspective regarding MATTERS OF RACE, coupled with compassion and common sense, are building THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL into an ever-stronger democratic force, and through it (let us hope) our entire mid-South community.

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The Rise Of Black Politics

Sunday, June 8, 1980

FORGETTING FOR the moment any questions about the individual personalities, past records, leadership qualifications or potential issues among those currently involved in the Eighth District congressional race this summer, it is encouraging simply to see a spirit of political competition surfacing in the black community of this city.

No matter who wins or loses this one campaign, the very fact that the voters may be challenged to make a real choice bodes well for the growth and development of black participation and influence in municipal affairs.

And lest we be misunderstood or falsely accused, the hope we speak of here is for the kind of competition which will eventually produce more and better black leaders and black office holders. We do not advocate, nor would we support, strategies which would divide the loyalties of one constituency in order for another constituency to rule it. Or one group "single-shooting" its own interests against the larger interests of a whole community. Those are perversions of the democratic system which have contributed so much to the polarization which has stultified local politics for years.

Free and vigorous competition will breed a growing, healthier democratic system in which candidates and issues can be viewed on their real merits instead of their color or emotion, whether in a black precinct or across the whole local electorate. It is the lack of choice that creates the existing climate in which politicians of both colors

prey on and manipulate the suspicions and fears of the voters.

White Memphians who deplore black racism in district-level politics must remember that it was white racism in municipal-level politics that caused black politicians and black voters to turn inward. We remember when better black political candidates were offered the community and we remember their sure rejection on citywide ballots.

There appears to be little doubt that the best choice for the voters in the Eighth District Democratic primary this year, including those of the white minority, will be between two black candidates. And that's the point.

Black leaders and black community groups must move more candidates and more ideas on their stages if they want broader and more attentive audiences. That is necessary not only to their particular causes but to any cause which aims at a unified, progressive and more prosperous city, as well.

BLACKS NEED political choices if they are to be more effective politically on a scale wider than a handful of legislative districts. Memphis needs more political choices, black and white, if the city is to be effective on any scale wider than its current universe.

The Eighth District competition is surely not so keen that it might be an end in itself. But we can at least hope that it is a beginning.

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