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Commentary

The Role of Universities in Racial Violence on Campuses

by
Wornie L. Reed

Racial violence against blacks on college campuses across the country has become a source of considerable and legitimate concern. This paper reviews the nature and extent of these incidents, discusses the national social context of their occurrence, and examines the role that universities play in the development of these incidents.

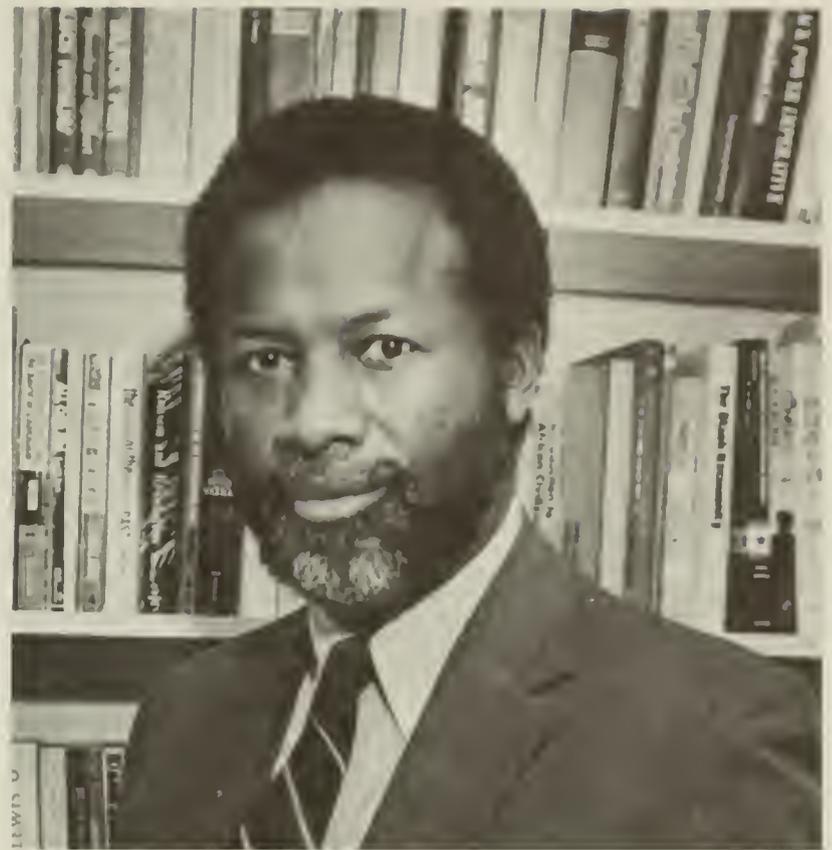
The number of racial incidents reported on college campuses in recent years has been on the increase. The International Institute Against Prejudice and Violence, located in Baltimore, documented racial incidents at 175 colleges for 1986-87. And, of course, this figure does not adequately reflect the total number of incidents as it is based solely on the events that receive newspaper coverage.

Professor William Damon gives this report in the May 3, 1989 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

Racism and bigotry are back on campus with a vengeance. Black students have been chased and beaten at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, taunted with defamatory posters at Penn State and Stanford Universities, subjected to racist jokes on a University of Michigan radio station, and subjected to a "mock slave auction" at a fraternity house at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Ku Klux Klan signs and other white-supremacist graffiti have been splattered on dozens of college buildings across the country, from Harvard to the University of California.

Violence Against African-Americans¹

During the past ten years several research centers have collected information on racially-motivated violence.² A study of the data reveals an upsurge of racism and racist violence—with the most deadly attacks coming against the African-American community. There has been an increase in the number of incidents of white mobs wielding baseball bats, threatening and even attacking blacks if they are caught stopping in segregated residential areas. There has been a steady increase in the fire-bombing of homes purchased by black families in predominately white neighborhoods. A study of violence in residential neighborhoods conducted by the Southern



Poverty Law Center indicates that between 1985 and 1986 there were at least 45 cases of vigilante activity directed at black families who were moving into predominantly white communities.

The events in Howard Beach, New York, which led to the death of 23-year-old Michael Griffith, reflect a long-standing problem of racist violence in white communities in Brooklyn. For example, in 1982 a gang of young white men beat three black transit workers who stopped in Brooklyn for pizza on the way home from work; one of the black workers was killed on the spot. Black youths working in or traveling through white communities have been attacked and beaten regularly in New York City. Racially motivated assaults had increased to at least one a week in New York City by the summer of 1987.

The Chicago Police Department reported a 58% increase in racial attacks for the first six months of 1986 over the same period in 1985. The New York City Police Department reported an increase in racially-motivated violence over the last eight years. These attacks go mostly unreported in the news media.

The Community Relations Service of the Justice Department and the Center for Democratic Renewal provide data that demonstrate a sharp upturn nationally in violent racial attacks. The increase was 42% between 1985 and 1986, largely fueled by the boldness of white terrorist groups in the United States. Nationally, the Community Relations Services of the Justice Department reports an increase in all cases of racial confrontations from 953 in 1977 to 1,996 in 1982. The Justice Department also reported a 460% increase in cases of racial violence involving the Ku Klux Klan between 1978 and 1979, and a startling 550% increase in the period 1978 to 1980.

Violence on College Campuses

Violence and hostilities towards blacks have occurred at a wide variety of universities. Two years ago at the Citadel Military Academy, five white cadets dressed in Klan robes invaded a black student's room. A few months later a cross was burned in front of a black cultural center at Purdue University, and two weeks after that the phrase "death to Niggers" was found carved into an office door. Buildings at Smith College were defaced with racist slogans. Racist graffiti was reported to be "everywhere" at Florida State University. Racist fliers were slipped under the doors to black women's rooms stating that it was "open season" on "porch monkeys" and "jigaboos." Following a speech by Jesse Jackson in February of 1987 at Northern Illinois University, flyers were spread over campus with racist threats and swastikas, and a student magazine printed racist poetry. One of the "poems" was as follows:

O.K.,
Look nigger,
We are white.
White is supreme.
Jesus was white.
God is white.
All of our Presidents have been white.
Thank you God.

Several black students at Columbia University filed a lawsuit after being attacked by a gang of white fraternity members on campus. A mob of white students chased and beat a small group of black students at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst following a World Series baseball game in 1986. During the same period of time black women at Mount Holyoke College complained that they were being harassed by white men from the same Amherst campus. A survey of campuses across the country suggests that racial hostility between students is extensive.

Influenced by adult organizations of the racist right, students at Sacramento State organized the White Student Union in 1979 as an off-shoot of the Aryan Youth Movement. Since then the White Student Union is reported to have grown from an initial three chapters to some 20 chapters across the country. A group of students claiming association with the White Student Union assaulted black students at the University of Texas at Austin. They threatened to drop a black student leader, whom they were hanging by his heels, from a dormitory window if a planned anti-apartheid demonstration on campus was not called off.

At Cornell University in 1986 a white campus bus driver threatened to run over three black male students as they crossed the street in front of the bus he was driving. At Princeton a black football player's room was broken into, and the epitaph "nig-

ger" was sprayed across the walls. Black faculty returning to their offices after the Christmas vacation in January of 1987 at California State-Fullerton were greeted with paint-sprayed terms such as "mud race" and "nigger." Later in May of that year the director of the University Center at the University approved a poster to advertise a talent show which depicted a minstrel character. And in another incident at this school, a white fraternity, during a party, displayed a 15-foot plywood cutout of a black man with a bone in his hair, huge red lips and wearing a Tarzan outfit. In a campus poll in the winter of 1987, students at the University of Virginia said that racism is the school's biggest problem.

The Justice Department also reported a 460% increase in cases of racial violence involving the Ku Klux Klan between 1978 and 1979, and a startling 550% increase in the period 1978 to 1980.

While racist behavior is hardly a new phenomenon in colleges and universities, the evidence clearly demonstrates that racial incidents have been taking place with increased frequency in the 1980s. Whether it is student magazines or student newspaper articles defaming and ridiculing black people or outright physical aggression, racial conflict is present at a cross-section of American schools. There is a national mood on campuses that tolerates, and even encourages, campaigns to demean, harass, and intimidate black students and other minorities.

The Social Context

As bad as they are, these racial incidents are only symptoms of a slowdown in racial progress in the 1980s. This slowdown was aided and abetted, if not engineered, by the Reagan administration. This administration carried on a virtual war against racial progress with code words, code activities, and some overt actions.

They used such code words as "welfare hustlers" and "welfare queens," and suggested distinctions between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. Perhaps their most significant "coded" activity was the kick-off of the presidential campaign in 1980 in Philadelphia, Mississippi, a city distinguished only by the fact that three civil rights workers—Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner—were lynched there in 1964. This was as clear as any signal the infamous Governor Bilbo could have given.

And once in office, this administration began a relentless attack on civil rights laws and regulations. Even Richard Nixon was too far left for them: they tried to repeal Nixon's affirmative action Executive Order.

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Affirmative Action

I am convinced that one of the reasons for the outbreak of racial violence on college campuses is the fact that faculty as well as students—who have no vested interest in civil rights gains, progress, or peace—are reacting to the misuses and abuses of *affirmative action*. Many individuals were quite in favor of the civil rights gains for blacks in the 1960s; others went along because it brought peace—and they preferred peace to strife. Currently we have a new generation—one that has neither of these perspectives of civil rights. And in addition, we have the maligned affirmative action laws. Many majority group faculty as well as students consider affirmative action programs to be racial-preference programs that unfairly discriminate against (white) individuals, which is to misinterpret the meaning of racism.

In 1981, before the Reagan administration's reorganization and redirection of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the Commission affirmed its "unwavering support for affirmative action plans and the full range of affirmative action measures necessary to make equal opportunity a reality for historically excluded groups." They supported this position by concluding that "a steady flow of data shows unmistakably that most of the historic victims of discrimination are still being victimized..."³

Arguments against affirmative action have been raised under the banner of "reverse discrimination." Obviously there have been incidents of arbitrary action against white males, but the charge of "reverse discrimination," in essence, equates efforts to limit the process of discrimination with that process itself. Such an equation is profoundly and fundamentally incorrect. Affirmative measures should end when the discriminatory process ends. On the other

hand, without affirmative intervention it is highly unlikely the discriminatory process will ever end.

On university search committees we often hear the term “affirmative action candidate.” In other words, the search in question has identified a minority person to interview in order to have an “appropriate” affirmative action search. I cannot think of a more perverse misuse of the process. No person should be interviewed unless they have the qualifications for the position. And when they do have the qualifications they should be seriously considered. To not take such issues more seriously is to demean the process and to effectively demean the minority person. When white professors and university staff persons reject or misuse affirmative action in their

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recruitment practices, they are indirectly inviting white students to reject the process and the minority students that process was designed to serve.

Competition for Dwindling Resources

Some observers also see the increase in violence against blacks as a result of the perception of whites that they are in competition for dwindling resources, and that black students are not only competing against white students for entry into the universities, they are also competing for jobs after graduation. Thus, black students are seen as an increasing threat to the future welfare of middle-class white students.

Is The University Culpable?

What role does the university play in the development of racial incidents? In other words, is the university culpable?

Universities have cultural goals, often so deeply implicit as to be transparent. One of these deeply implicit goals is the preservation of the belief system and the value orientations of society. Universities contribute to this preservation by transferring the cultural heritage from generation to generation through teaching.

It is in teaching that what is to be valued in the society is transmitted. It is not a long leap from

“what” is to be valued to “who” is to be valued. It is in one sense strange that Euro-Americans can obtain college degrees without ever studying non-European cultures, when most of the world is non-white, and when the population of the United States is significantly non-white with the non-white proportion growing. But in another sense, that is, in the context of “culture preservation,” it is not strange at all.

In this country we have had in the past couple of decades substantial discussions and analyses of the potentially harmful effects to minority youth of never seeing themselves, or persons like themselves, in their readings and coursework. As a result more and more grade school texts are including pictures and references to non-white persons. On the other hand, we have had relatively little discussion and analysis of the effects this situation has on white students. I would suggest that many white students learn or have reinforced “who” is of value as well as “what” is of value in society by what they study in school. If the coursework does not include the study of non-white persons, then it seems highly plausible that many of these students would act in a manner that is different from the way they would act if their coursework routinely included material on non-European cultures. By definition then, these non-Europeans tend to be seen as people who are not to be valued.

In conclusion, I would say that the university plays a major role in determining what happens on campus. If no changes are made in the definition of the “worthwhile” culture to be transmitted, we may have no change in the current racially-charged atmosphere. If changes are made so that the culture that is transmitted is reflective of a multi-cultural society—a *world* society—then we may be on the way toward changing the racial hostility on campus in particular and throughout the country in general.

References

¹Turner, J. E. *Racism and Racial Antagonism in Contemporary American Society*. Unpublished manuscript.

²These centers include the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Center for Democratic Renewal, and the Klan Watch.

³U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. (1988). *Affirmative Action in the 1980s: Dismantling the Process of Discrimination*. In P. Rothenberg (Ed.), *Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Study*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

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