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### Steele Sense

From white racism to White Guilt, America still struggles with race.

By Abigail Thernstrom

**M**any of us have had, at one time or another, what I will call a “Shelby Steele moment”—a moment in which the full realization of cultural change since the 1960s hits us. For Steele, it came when he was watching President Clinton wagging his finger on the morning news and saying, “I never had sexual relations with that woman.” At the time, he “thought two things: that he [Clinton] was lying and that he would be out of office within two weeks.” But the president survived, and that survival “spoke volumes about the moral criterion for holding power in the United States.”

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Of course many others have written about moral corruption in modern America. But not in Steele’s voice. The Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, it might seem, was about sex and the Oval Office. In fact, race was the real story, Steele argues in his stunning new book, *White Guilt*. “Race had dramatically changed the terms by which political power is won and held.” Race, not sex, “had become the primary focus of America’s moral seriousness.” It is our racial history that has “effectively renormed American culture around social morality.” Clinton’s generation “invented the practice of using social morality as a *license* to disregard individual morality.” What came to count was a commitment, first and foremost, to racial equality, not whom you slept with.

I had a Shelby Steele moment myself not long ago. I woke up not to Clinton-Lewinsky, but to the award of a Pulitzer prize for “distinguished criticism” to Robin Givhan of the *Washington Post* for “her witty, closely observed essays that transform fashion criticism into cultural criticism.” Givhan, for those who need reminding, is the lady who described Katherine Harris as a “Republican woman, who can’t even use restraint when she’s wielding a mascara wand”—a clear sign of her inability to make “sound decisions.” As for the children of Supreme Court nominee John Roberts, they looked like “a trio of Easter eggs, a handful of Jelly Bellies, three

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little Necco wafers.” And while the president’s hair is a “dull gray thatch,” that of John Edwards “practically cries out to be tousled the same way a well-groomed golden retriever demands to be nuzzled.”

Cultural criticism? Sounded more like *political* criticism to me. Unabashed partisan loathing.

I thought she would be fired; I was as naïve as Steele had been about Clinton.

In 1968, a few weeks before Steele’s college graduation, he and fellow black students had marched into the school president’s office with a list of demands. A lit cigarette in hand, he let the ashes fall onto the president’s plush carpet. It was, as Steele says, “the effrontery, the insolence, that was expected in our new commitment to militancy.” Givhan (who is also black) is Shelby Steele at 22: a racial exhibitionist who revels in making clear her freedom to indulge in the effrontery that arrogantly insults conventional (white) America.

And of course much of her white readership responds by asking for more. Legitimizing black anger undoubtedly makes them feel racially cleansed.

The search for racial virtue is the subject of *White Guilt*. Almost in the blink of an eye, Steele argues, America moved from the dark age of white racism to the dark age of white guilt. Not that the one is the equivalent of the other. But white guilt about the nation’s racist past has been a powerful and pernicious force over the last four decades, shaping public policy, as well as private and public institutions. It created a vacuum of moral authority into which specialists in moral indignation moved—“bargainers, bluffers, and haranguers” who delivered a message of white obligation and black entitlement. Blacks suddenly acquired an invaluable new race card: the status of aggrieved victims. And they used it “to shame, silence, and muscle concessions from the larger society.” In the new age of white guilt, a repentant America had to prove its virtue to blacks.

A new black identity emerged defined by group victimization. The results have been tragic, Steele argues. “Suddenly in American life the matter of responsibility was qualified by a new social morality. If you were black, and thus a victim of racial oppression, this new morality of social justice meant you could not be expected to carry the same responsibilities as others.” Whites were powerful; blacks were helpless. “It was an injustice to make victims responsible for their own problems.” And thus “whites and American institutions live by a simple formula: lessening responsibility for minorities equals moral authority; increasing it equals racism.”

As Steele acknowledges, America has come a long way walking in the right direction. Not all is bleak. On a family trip, if his father needed to find a place to eat or a house in which to sleep, he would search for a black resident to learn the “local geography of black possibility.” Those days are gone forever, and whites as well as blacks should celebrate racial change. But a thin line divides that celebration and the theatrical display of racial virtue—in the adoption of racial preferences, for instance—that is so ubiquitous and so corrupt.

*Publishers Weekly* complains that Steele “stops short of offering real-world solutions” to America’s racial problems. But the charge misses the point of the book. Steele is America’s racial therapist who attempts to lay bare the crippled emotional state of whites in positions of power who do bad by attempting to do good.

Some of Steele’s earlier writing has a Henry Jamesian density and complexity. But every paragraph in *White Guilt* is a little masterpiece—containing profound insight, yet totally accessible. That’s essential. The argument is so at odds with conventional thinking about race that only a work in which every word is right can hope to persuade readers who will undoubtedly be taken aback by the assault on their familiar, comfortable beliefs.

I just bought four copies; I’ll give them to friends as pearls of wisdom.

—Abigail Thernstrom is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and vice chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

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