

WILL WE BE ONE NATION, INDIVISIBLE?

Racial tensions will ease and disparities will narrow, but experts disagree on whether racism will disappear even in 100 years. **By Bruce Agnew**

NEARLY 100 YEARS ago the African-American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois predicted that the challenge of the 20th century would be “the problem of the color line.” Echoing Du Bois, historian John Hope Franklin, who headed the advisory board of President Bill Clinton’s 1997–98 Initiative on Race, wrote recently, “I venture to state categorically that the problem of the 21st century will be the problem of the color line.”

Will we solve it this time around?

No, say many who have studied, worked against and lived with racism. “I would think people sitting down in 2099 will say, ‘Well, how much progress have we made? And how much longer do we have to go?’” says Roger W. Wilkins, who headed the Justice Department’s Community Relations Service during the Lyndon B. Johnson administration and now teaches history at George Mason University. “I do not believe that we will have a racially equal society 100 years from now. Antiracism is too deep, and it’s too entrenched.”

Others are more optimistic. Abigail Thernstrom, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and co-author of *America in Black and*

White: One Nation, Indivisible, points to growing rates of intermarriage among whites, blacks and other minority groups and predicts, “As we move toward a country increasingly made up of Tiger Woodses, I think this whole mind-set [of racial classifications] is going to crumble over time, and it’s going to change public policy.”

THE NUMBERS GAME

The difference between the experts is one of perspective—and emphasis—not a quarrel over facts. The facts themselves, the statistical measurements of where U.S. race relations have been and where they are headed, are both heartening and dismaying.

Since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, African-American and other minority groups

have made enormous strides toward equality with whites. More than 40 percent of African-Americans described themselves as “middle class” in 1996, compared with just 12 percent in 1949. About 42 percent of black householders own their own homes; more than 30 percent are suburbanites. About the same proportion of blacks and whites finish high school—nearly 90 percent—and more than 13 percent of blacks older than 25 years of age have completed college, compared with 3 percent in 1960. Nearly a quarter of black families had incomes above \$50,000 a year in 1996, compared with 44 percent of white families and about 22 percent of Hispanics. Asian-American incomes exceed those of all other groups.

Harvard University historical sociologist Orlando Patterson was surely right when he wrote in *The Ordeal of Integration* that “the changes that have taken place in the United States over the past 50 years are unparalleled in the history of minority-majority relations.”

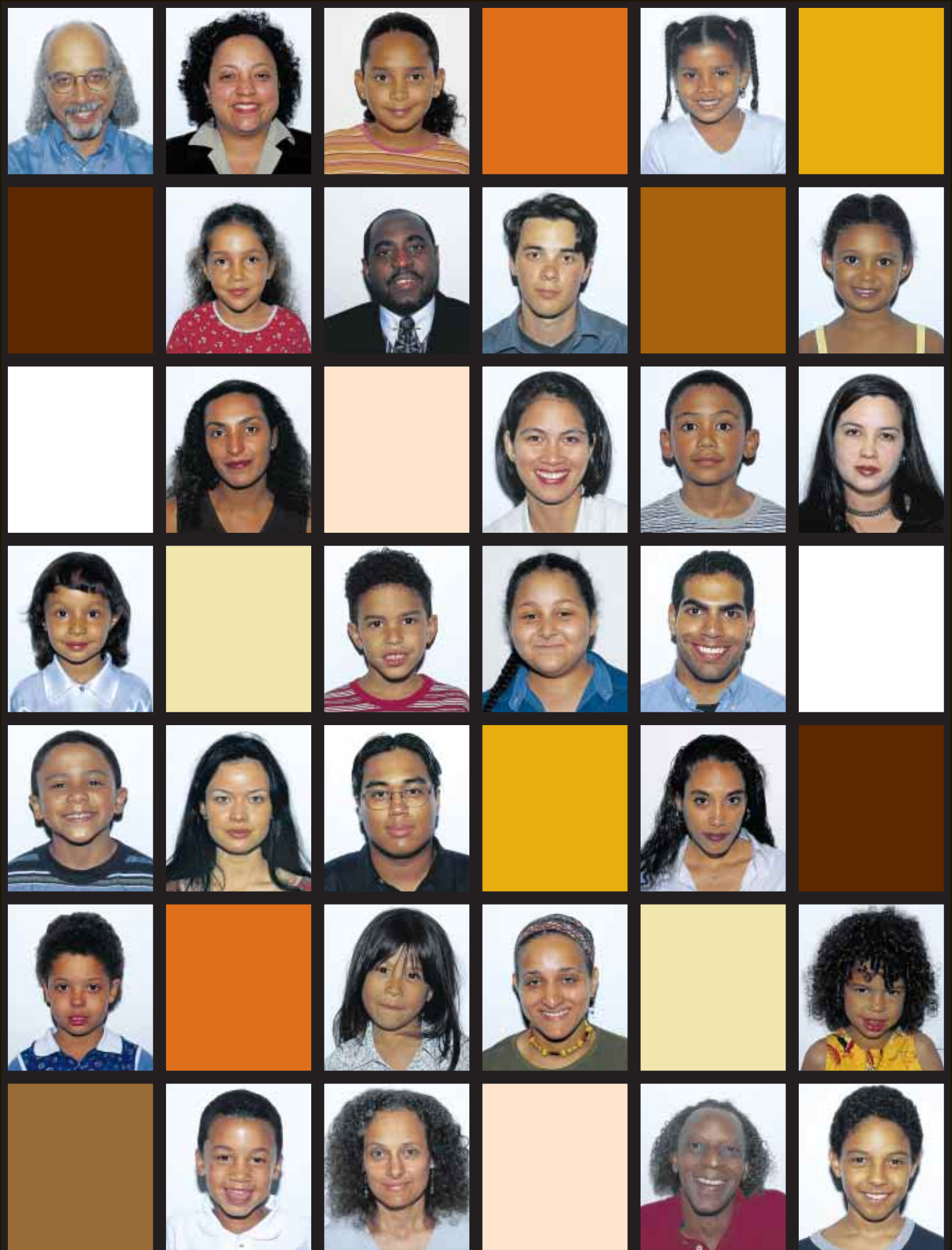
But a significant proportion of African-Americans have been left behind. More than a quarter of black families live below the poverty line. Blacks are arrested at a rate more than twice their proportion in the population. And about 70 percent of African-American babies were born out of wedlock in 1996 (23 percent to teenage mothers), compared with 26 percent of white babies born out of wedlock. “A social pattern with devastating economic consequences has become the norm in the black community, while it is still the deviant pattern among whites,” write Thernstrom and her co-author (and husband), Harvard history professor Stephan Thernstrom, in *America in Black and White*.

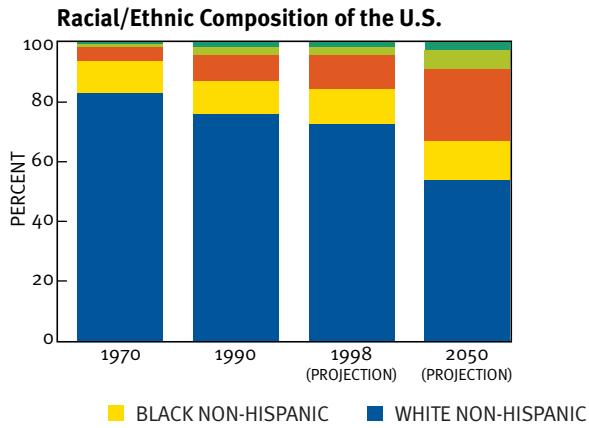
So Harvard law professor Lani Guinier—whose 1993 nomination as assistant attorney general for civil rights was blocked by conservative opposition—is right when she calls the landmark civil-

The future of the U.S. population is rosy—and tawny, dusky and olive. Demographers predict the melting pot will contain an even richer broth as people marry outside their race and ethnicity and have children who can lay claim to a mixture of heritages. The question is, Can we all just get along?



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The U.S. Census Bureau projects that by the year 2050 non-Hispanic whites will constitute barely a majority of the population at 52.8 percent—and the century will be just half over. Almost two thirds of the population growth between now and 2050 is expected to come from immigrants, their children and their grandchildren.

rights laws of the 1960s “a significant step, [but] a baby step.” Guinier was branded a “quota queen” in 1993 because of law review publications advocating novel voting procedures, such as so-called cumulative voting, to enhance minorities’ electoral clout. Today she says the structures of segregation and voting-rights denial that were torn down in the 1960s “both camouflaged and reinforced tremendous inequities in the distribution of resources, and if we’re going to talk about a just society, I think we have a lot of work to do.”

Guinier and Patterson both consider themselves optimists, however. “If the American people were aware that there are other policy choices, I think that we could create a national will to change,” Guinier says.

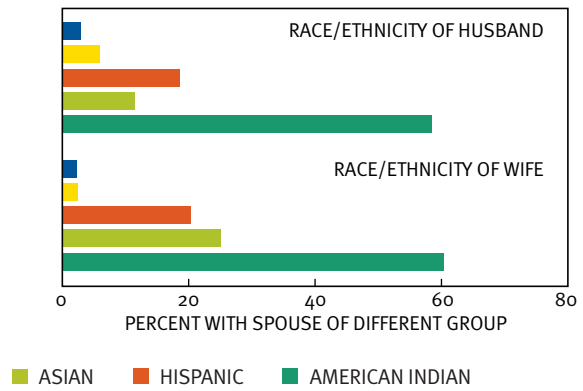
At least one dramatic change already seems inevitable: sometime in the late 21st century, white Americans will no longer be a majority. Currently about 72 percent of the population is white, 12 percent non-Hispanic black, 11 percent Hispanic, 4 percent Asian/Pacific Islander and 0.7 percent American Indian, Eskimo and Aleut. But by the year 2050, the U.S. Census Bureau projects that whites will account for only 52.8 percent of the population, non-Hispanic blacks 13.6 percent, Hispanics 24.5 percent, Asian/Pacific Islanders 8.2 percent and American Indian, Eskimo and Aleut 0.9 percent. “I think that means that an awful lot of white people will have to make very serious identity adjustments,” Wilkins says.

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In fact, many Americans are already making surprisingly serious identity and attitude adjustments. Interracial marriage, outlawed in some states as recently as the 1960s, is growing. “We already have half of all Asians marrying non-Asians and half of all Hispanics [marrying outside their ethnic group] by the third generation,” Abigail Thernstrom notes. “The black-white intermarriage rate is higher than the Jewish-gentile rate was in 1940. It won’t go up at the same rate, but nevertheless, it’s going up.”

The numbers are still tiny, but the trend is clear. In 1980 there were just 167,000 married couples in the U.S. in which one partner

Marrying across Racial Barriers



Interracial marriages are already rising and can be expected to accelerate. “The concepts of race and the language we use to discuss our diversity today may change as fast and dramatically as our diversity itself,” according to *One America in the 21st Century*, the final report of the Advisory Board of the President’s Initiative on Race.

was white and the other was black. By 1997 that figure had nearly doubled, to 311,000. That is equal to only 0.7 percent of married couples in which both partners are white, but it is a more significant 8.4 percent of married couples in which both partners are black. And new marriages are even more biracial: 12.1 percent of new marriages by African-Americans in 1993 were to partners who were members of other races.

“It’s amazing how much change we’ve made,” observes Boston University sociologist Alan Wolfe, author of *One Nation, After All*. “In 1967 the Supreme Court ruled Virginia’s miscegenation law unconstitutional. If that law were still on the books, Clarence Thomas would be in jail rather than on the Supreme Court.”

WHICH BOX DO I CHECK?

The most certain, though possibly least significant, consequence of growing intermarriage is that it will play havoc with Census Bureau racial breakdowns. An increasing number of multi-racial Americans—such as, most prominently, golf star Tiger Woods—have balked at the racial classification boxes on survey and other government and business forms. The Clinton administration has now decided that in the year 2000 census, people will be allowed to check more than one racial box. Government racial statistics may never be the same—and as the numbers become

blurred, the now heated controversies over affirmative action and other race-centered issues may lose some of their force.

But intermarriage and the increasing ease of interracial dating among young people are a signal of a far deeper change in U.S. society. One of the biggest reasons for optimism about the 21st century, according to American Enterprise Institute fellow Dinesh D’Souza, author of *The End of Racism*, is “the very healthy attitude of young people, who are in general much less haunted by the specter of old-fashioned racism.”

Interracial marriages (and, to a lesser degree, dating) do not

affect just the two people involved. Such relationships cannot help but have a ripple effect on each partner's family and circle of friends. Stephan Thernstrom notes, "My cousin is married to a black woman, and that certainly had an enlightening impact on my aunts and my mother and father and my uncle. It had many reverberations throughout the whole extended family."

Of course, intermarriage and interracial dating are only an indirect signal of narrowing economic and social differences. Public opinion polls tell the same story, however. In particular, an unpublished poll by the Gallup Organization last year suggests that African-Americans' lives have improved since midcentury. Seventy-nine percent of black respondents last year said they were satisfied with their standard of living; only 45 percent answered that question the same way in 1963. Eighty-four percent were satisfied with their jobs, compared with only 61 percent of those who responded to a similar question in 1963.

About half of both blacks and whites polled rated race relations as "very" or "somewhat" good, and 83 percent of whites and 80 percent of blacks thought relations between the races had gotten better or at least remained the same over the past year. (The poll, updating a 1997 Gallup study, was based on telephone interviews with 2,004 adults, roughly half of whom were white and half black. Responses from the black and white subgroups could have a sampling error of plus or minus 4 percentage points.)

Although both blacks and whites appeared to believe race relations are improving, the Gallup poll revealed a dramatic gap in their perception of today's reality: whites think race relations are better than blacks do. For example:

- Forty-three percent of blacks, but 76 percent of whites, thought blacks and whites are treated about the same in their communities. Fifty percent of blacks, but only 19 percent of whites, thought blacks are treated "not very well" or "badly."
- Forty-two percent of blacks, but only 9 percent of whites, thought blacks are treated less fairly on the job. Fifty percent of blacks, but 83 percent of whites, thought blacks are treated "the same or better."
- Fifty-five percent of blacks, but only 29 percent of whites, thought blacks are treated less fairly by the police, such as in traffic incidents.

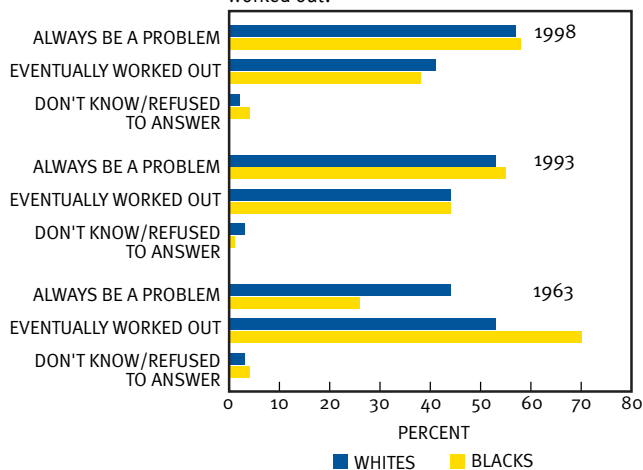
Moreover, in responses that offer some measure of daily slights and insults, 46 percent of blacks said that within the past 30 days they had been treated unfairly in a store, in the workplace, at a restaurant, bar, theater or other place of entertainment, by the police or while using public transportation. Fifty-four percent of black males reported such unfair treatment, adds Jack Ludwig, vice president and research director of Gallup's Social Audits Division.

Still, by most measures, the 1960s civil-rights-movement goal of all races together is closer today than ever before—with one horrific exception: urban poverty.

"I think it's clear that if we were ever to 'solve' the race problem, we'd have a tremendous class problem and that really the race problem is becoming a class problem," says Wolfe, whose 1998 book reported that the views and outlooks of suburban, middle-class whites and blacks are more united by class than they are divided by race.

His view is widely shared. "Urban poverty and education are at the top of the want list, the need list, of this country," Franklin

Do you think that relations between blacks and whites will always be a problem for the U.S. or that a solution will eventually be worked out?



Whites and blacks appear noticeably less confident today that U.S. race relations will eventually be resolved than they were in late 1963, when the legislation that would become the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was wending its way through Congress. Experience may be a factor: in recent polling, people under age 25 are most likely to say race relations will always be a problem; people over 65 are most likely to say a solution will eventually be worked out.

declares. Rainbow/PUSH Coalition president Jesse Jackson warned in a 1997 PBS interview that "while there's a focus on the race gap, the bigger gap today is the class gap."

The long U.S. economic expansion of the 1990s has brought a few tentative hints of improvement. Crime rates have dropped for most of the decade. Black unemployment rates and births to teenage unwed mothers have also dipped. But the country has barely begun to scratch the surface of this problem.

When Gallup asked its 2,004 black and white respondents last year whether U.S. race relations would ever be solved, the answer was grim. Fifty-eight percent of blacks and 57 percent of whites said race relations "will always be a problem."

But 100 years is a long time, and there is no reason to think that the 21st century will not bring changes as dramatic as those of the 20th. "We have made enormous progress since 1899, when they were running my grandpa out of Mississippi," Wilkins notes. "They were going to lynch him."

And in 1899, Stephan Thernstrom says, "if you had asked what will be the racial future in the 20th century, people would not have used our racial categories. They would have said, 'Well, let's talk about the Jewish race and the Mediterranean race and the Nordic race,' and that way of thinking has become entirely discredited." Thernstrom believes such "utterly unscientific, 19th-century anthropological concepts [are] not likely to have sway over the American public a century hence."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BRUCE AGNEW is a freelance journalist based in Bethesda, Md., who writes about science, politics and economics. As a reporter for UPI, he covered the 1963 civil-rights March on Washington.