

Antiracist Strategies and Solutions

The liberal wing of the white elite has an inordinate fondness for setting up commissions to study matters of racism in the United States. Over the last century at least a dozen major federal government commissions have looked into problems of racial discrimination or racism. For example, in 1997 President Bill Clinton set up a seven-member advisory board to start a “national conversation on race.” The advisory board heard much important testimony about racial and ethnic discrimination across the nation. Its final report, *One America in the 21st Century*, incorporated important findings on racial stereotyping and discrimination but concluded with mostly modest solutions. The report did not provide an integrated analysis of how and why institutional racism still pervades the society, nor did it call for major restructuring of institutions to get rid of racism.¹ Most important, no serious congressional or presidential action was taken to implement the report’s more significant recommendations, such as increasing enforcement of the civil rights laws.

Today, U.S. society remains a racist system. It was founded as such, and no large-scale action has ever been taken to rebuild this system of racism from the foundation up. From the first decades European colonists incorporated land theft and slavery into the political-economic structure of the new nation. After the Civil War slavery was replaced by the near slavery of legal segregation in the South, while some legal and much de facto segregation continued in the North. These institutional

arrangements were designed to keep antiblack oppression firmly in place. Periodically, the racist structure has been altered, particularly in the 1860s when slavery was abolished and in the 1960s when legal segregation was replaced by the current system of more informal racial oppression. Other Americans of color have been incorporated into U.S. society by whites operating from within this well-established white supremacist framework. The American house of racism has been remodeled somewhat over time—generally in response to protests from the oppressed—but its formidable foundation remains firmly in place.

What is the likelihood of societal change on the scale required to replace this racist foundation? On this point, there is some pessimism among leading American intellectuals. For some time, African American analysts have pointed to the great difficulty of bringing large-scale changes in the system of racism. In the 1940s sociologist Oliver C. Cox noted that “because the racial system in the United States is determined largely by the interests of a powerful political class, no spectacular advance in the status of Negroes could be expected.”² More recently, Derrick Bell has contended that “[b]lack people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary ‘peaks of progress,’ short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance.”³

Nonetheless, the racist patterns and arrangements of U.S. society do regularly generate open resistance and organized opposition. These patterns have been altered to some degree by antiracist movements in the past, and they can conceivably be changed again. Historically, other societies have experienced large-scale revolutions. Future domination of U.S. society by whites is not automatic. Viewed over the long term, no hierarchical system is permanent, and such a configuration must be constantly buttressed and diligently reinforced by its main beneficiaries. If we think dialectically and discern the social contradictions lying deep beneath the surface of this society, we see that the racist system has created the seeds of its eventual destruction. Thus, this system is legitimated by widely proclaimed ideals of equality and democratic participation, ideals that have provided it with some respect internally and internationally. While the equality ideals have been used to gloss over persisting racial inequalities, they have also been adopted as bywords for movements of the oppressed. The ideals of equality and democracy are taken very seriously by black Americans and other Americans of color and have regularly spurred them to protest oppression. The honed-by-struggle ideals of equality, justice, and civil rights are critical tenets of the antiracist theory that has emerged over centuries of protest, and they are periodically implemented in antiracist strategies. They have served as a rallying point and have increased solidarity. The situation of long-term racist oppression has pressed black Americans—and, sometimes, other Americans of color—to unite for their own survival and, periodically, for large-scale protest.

The Demographic Challenge to White Domination Until major crises in this society occur, most whites are unlikely to see the need for large-scale egalitarian reforms. They are too constrained by their own privileges and conforming minds, by their social biographies, to see the need for radical structural change. Still, at certain times in human history new social options appear. What complexity theory calls “cascading bifurcations” can mean great societal instability and possibly a new social order.⁴

The Coming White Minority Current demographic trends are creating and amplifying societal contradictions that could eventually lead to a major social transformation, including the reduction or destruction of white domination over Americans of color. As we begin a new millenium, Americans of European descent are a decreasing proportion of the U.S. and world populations. Whites constitute less than half the population of four of the nation’s largest cities—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston. They are less than half the population in the state of Hawaii, as well as in southern sections of Florida, Texas, and California. Demographers estimate that if current trends continue whites will be a minority in California and Texas by about 2010. By the middle of the twenty-first century, whites will be a minority of the U.S. population if birth rates and immigration trends continue near current levels.⁵

Over the next few decades this demographic shift will likely bring great pressures for social, economic, and political change. For example, by the 2030s a majority of the students in the nation’s public school system will probably be black, Asian, Latino, and Native American. They and their parents will doubtless strive for greater representation in the operation, staffing, and curricula of presently white-dominated school systems. In addition, by the mid-2050s demographers predict that a majority of U.S. workers will be from these same groups, while the retired population will be majority white. One has to wonder whether these workers will raise questions about having to support elderly whites (for example, by paying into Social Security) who have long maintained a racist society. As voting majorities change from majority white, there will likely be changes in jury composition, operation of the criminal justice system, and the composition and priorities of many state, local, and national legislative bodies. Where voting majorities change, we will probably see far fewer white politicians opposing affirmative action or pressing for laws restricting Asian and Latin American immigrants. These transformations will, of course, only take place if whites have not reacted to the demographic trend with large-scale political repression.⁶

Negative White Responses and Reactions? Pressures for change do not necessarily mean a complete overthrow of existing power arrangements and social hierarchies. Even with changes like getting the vote and greater participation in the jury system, over the last century or two the white working class and white women have taken only modest power away from the white male elites. Today, those in the white working class are still substantially manipulated by elite action—such as by well-funded political and commercial advertising—and

they must participate politically through undemocratic mechanisms such as the wealth-corrupted political party system.⁷ Whether black Americans and other Americans of color become substantially more powerful economically and politically depends on several factors, including the strength of their social and political coalitions and the potency of countering measures taken by white elites and the white public.

Whites may respond to a new minority status with the old means of political and social repression. They may try to set up by force a racial apartheid system like that in the old South Africa, where the white minority used police and military forces to subordinate the majority-black population. In the United States we see some evidence of a renewed apartheid in the growing balkanization of residential patterns: since at least the 1970s many whites have moved away from large cities with growing populations of black, Asian, and Latino Americans to whiter suburban and exurban areas or into guarded-gated communities in those cities. In one interview study a white Californian stated that his ideal home would be on twenty acres, surrounded by a moat filled with alligators.⁸ One recent research study found that most U.S. counties with substantial population growth from domestic (internal) migration had little growth in the overseas immigrant population—and thus are becoming whiter and older. Most of the seventy large counties with significant growth in immigrants had low net numbers of domestic migrants.⁹ They are thus becoming less white and younger. As detailed in [chapter 5](#), U.S. society is still segregated, a society where most white citizens and most citizens of color live largely separate lives at school and in neighborhoods. The workforce continues to be substantially divided along racial lines, with many workers of color in special job niches or at the bottom with low wages or facing chronic unemployment.

We also see some political separation or segregation by whites. Ralph Reed, a Republican Party leader, recently reviewed the past and future of his party, candidly commenting that “you’re going to see a new Republican Party that is still primarily white and that is fiscally and morally conservative, but that also is attempting to project an image of racial tolerance and moderation.”¹⁰ Established political leaders like Reed suggest that they want to keep the party predominantly white, while trying to look tolerant. Clearly, an antiracist vision of the party would have strongly rejected the party’s recent racist strategies (see below) and instead accented aggressive recruitment of a racial-ethnic diversity of voters representative of the general population.¹¹

Over the last few decades the Republican Party, which dominated the U.S. Congress in the 1990s, has moved away from the once sought-after black voters. Today, the party is antagonistic to key issues of concern to black Americans and garners relatively few black votes. Beginning with the 1964 presidential campaign, the Republican Party intentionally abandoned black voters and

strongly targeted the interests of white voters. While the party lost nationwide in 1964, this prowhite strategy captured five southern states. Reinvigorated by Richard Nixon in the late 1960s, the prowhite strategy captured more white voters, especially in the South, and helped to bring Nixon to the White House. Kevin Phillips, a key Republican strategist, argued that Republicans did not need “urban Negroes” to win major victories.¹²

This strategy was again used successfully by the party in the Ronald Reagan and George Bush campaigns of the 1980s. In [chapter 4](#) we noted the 1988 Bush presidential campaign, which in one advertising effort used the scary image of a black rapist to try to discredit the views of the Democratic Party candidate and attract white voters. The party would not have run such a biased ad (no white rapists were shown, for example) if it had been concerned with winning black voters. Since the late 1960s many working-class and middle-class whites, particularly in the South, have moved away from the party of Franklin D. Roosevelt into the Republican Party, substantially over racial issues. Not surprisingly, since the 1980s the Republican Party has been overwhelmingly white in the composition of its presidential conventions and has rejected aggressive government programs aimed at reducing discrimination or greatly strengthening civil rights laws.

Recently, some conservative Republican officials—including Senate Majority leader Trent Lott, Representative Bob Barr (Georgia), Mississippi Governor Kirk Fordice, and dozens of state and local politicians in several states—have given speeches to or maintained political ties to certain racist-right organizations such as the Council of Conservative Citizens (CCC). The CCC has chapters in twenty-two states and twenty thousand subscribers to its publication, *Citizens Informer*, which has published articles attacking mixed marriages and the Martin Luther King holiday and celebrated nineteenth-century racist thinkers like the Count de Gobineau.¹³

Some human rights activists have underscored the troubling growth of a renewed and broad-based *white nationalism*, which is increasingly linking conservative white politicians and openly white-supremacist groups. Leonard Zeskind, a leading human rights activist, has pointed out that these individuals and groups unite around the “notion of this country as Anglo-American, a white country. That idea is being put forward in a very mainstream way and that has not happened successfully since at least before World War II.”¹⁴ There are now many extremist groups, including older groups like the Klan and a variety of neo-Nazi groups and armed militias. Nationally, the number exceeded 540 by the late 1990s. At that time, there were at least 254 U.S. Internet sites disseminating extreme racist diatribes.¹⁵ As the nation becomes less white, a substantial period of increased unemployment could trigger a large-scale increase in this racist-right extremism.

Black Resistance to Racist Oppression In the United States the system of racism has developed within a framework of constant protests from its targets. Many whites

have traditionally viewed black Americans as unwilling to help themselves, but this is a myth. For centuries black religious, civic, and civil rights organizations have not only engaged in self-help community projects but also have striven to improve the nation's general welfare by regularly pressing forward on the goals of equality and social justice. Black Americans have not quietly accepted their oppression as hapless victims. They have fought back, like most oppressed peoples historically. They protest, survive, and even thrive in spite of the racist subjugation they endure. Black Americans have taken much strength from the heritage transmitted through extended families and other social networks. The knowledge carried there includes positive values and perspectives on life. Living in a society with a dominant white-European culture has forced black Americans, as well as other Americans of color, to become bicultural. They have had to know white society well and become experts on how to respond to antiblack actions. As we discussed in [chapter 6](#), this expertise includes learned strategies of protest against oppression passed across the generations.¹⁶ The culture of African Americans stems partly from the heritage that Africans brought with them, and partly from centuries of experience with systemic racism in North America.

Historically and in the present, a small group of black conservatives have argued that blacks as individuals should exercise their free will to achieve, whatever the racial odds.¹⁷ They, and most liberal whites as well, hope that individuals can overcome oppression working by themselves. In contrast, the progressive wing of black leadership—by far the overwhelming majority of that leadership—accents not only working individually to overcome racism but also organizing collectively and actively against it.

A comprehensive theory of racist oppression should recognize the impact of the resistance strategies developed by black Americans on the type and character of the arrangements in the system of racism. Out of their experience with everyday racism has come an individual and collective consciousness that periodically leads to protests, petitions, and large-scale revolts. To this stage in U.S. history, significant alterations in systemic racism have only come when black Americans and their allies, including other Americans of color, have organized and battled for change. U.S. society has usually moved backward when that pressure ebbs.

Past and Present Patterns of Resistance Black resistance began in the earliest days of slavery. Those enslaved responded in many ways—ranging from passive acquiescence, to flight on a large scale, to attacks on slaveholders and their property, to insurrections. Slave revolts and conspiracies to revolt averaged one per year over the first 250 years of slavery in North America.¹⁸ Moreover, in the early decades of the nineteenth century black and white abolitionists held many protest meetings and demonstrations against slavery and created increasingly militant antislavery organizations—thereby helping to bring about the abolition of slavery. As Merton Dillon has noted, the growing abolitionism “was stimulated—and justified—by the slave unrest for which rebels and swelling numbers of runaways supplied tangible evidence.”¹⁹

Black Americans engaged in extensive political and community organizing during the postwar Reconstruction period of the late 1860s and 1870s. The Reconstruction South was perhaps the closest the United States has come to multiracial political democracy—with large numbers of black men (but still no women) in many areas voting and participating in politics. The new state constitutional conventions and legislatures included many black delegates, and twenty-two black men served in the U.S. House and Senate during that period. Whites and blacks worked together to bring much progressive change and democracy to southern politics. Yet this experiment in democracy was soon repressed by the terrorist actions of thousands of whites led by the southern gentry and working through such white terrorist organizations as the Ku Klux Klan.

A new civil rights movement was born in the early 1900s, taking the form first of the Niagara movement and then of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). After decades of legal efforts and political organizing by the NAACP and other organizations laid the groundwork, there was a spurt in civil rights protests from the 1940s to the 1970s, with black men, women, and children participating in protests for freedom and equality. There were local and national protests within the framework of the growing civil rights organizations, and there were many protests organized at the local level by smaller groups of working-class black Americans.²⁰ In the 1950s one successful strategy was the economic boycott. This included the important boycott that targeted segregated buses in Montgomery, Alabama, and brought Rosa Parks, the seamstress who refused to be segregated on a bus, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was asked to lead the movement, to national attention as leaders of the reinvigorated civil rights movement.

Soon thereafter came many sit-ins, freedom rides, and other demonstrations by black Americans challenging legal segregation in the South and informal segregation in the North. New organizations oriented toward greater political and economic power for black Americans included the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Black Panthers. Often rooted in a strong base of black churches, civic clubs, and civil rights organizations, this activism provided money and mobilized people, which enabled regional and national civil rights organizations to achieve successes in dismantling racial segregation. One of the lessons added to the book of antiracist strategies by this movement was the well-honed idea that the destruction of the racist system would require more than speeches and traditional electoral politics. Nonviolent civil disobedience was a key strategy that black Americans developed for dealing with official and informal racism. Dr. King and other black leaders became the critical American theorists of the idea that significant change only comes from creative social disruptions, especially those carried out by strong indigenous organizations.²¹

Successes and Limitations Many victories came out of this 1950s and 1960s civil rights movement, including the passage of major laws prohibiting discrimination in such areas as employment, voting, and housing. The 1964 Civil Rights Act, perhaps the most important of a number of such acts, prohibited discrimination in many areas. Title I set down protections for voting in state and federal elections. Title II asserted, “All persons shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, and accommodations of any place of public accommodation...without discrimination or segregation on the ground of race, color, religion, or national origin.” Title III required the desegregation of all public facilities operated by local or state governments. Title IV authorized federal action to encourage and facilitate the desegregation of public schools, and Title VI prohibited discrimination in programs receiving federal assistance. Title VII prohibited discrimination in employment. It became illegal for an employer (1) to “refuse to hire or to discharge any individual or otherwise discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual’s race, color, religion, sex, or national origin”; or (2) to “limit, segregate or classify his employees in any way which would deprive or tend to deprive any individual of employment opportunities or otherwise adversely affect his status as an employee, because of such individual’s race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.”²² Title VIII required the collection of registration and voting statistics. The civil rights movement had forced the passage of one of the most strongly worded antidiscrimination laws ever established in any nation.

Pressures building from the civil rights movement also prodded federal courts to act against certain extreme manifestations of structural racism. The Supreme Court was often a force for progressive change away from patterns of segregation from the mid-1950s *Brown* decision, which began the process of dismantling school desegregation, to the early 1970s *Griggs* decision, which began an effort to reduce covert discrimination in employment.²³ The *Brown* case was part of an NAACP strategy to dismantle legal segregation and marked a temporary turn by that court to significantly redressing some grievances of black Americans.

However, civil rights laws and desegregation decisions have been overwhelmed by the massiveness of racial discrimination. As we discussed previously, these laws were crafted by the liberal wing of the white elite—mostly in the face of grass roots protests in the period from 1954 to 1972—with only modest concern for the group interests of African Americans. The laws were never intended to uproot systemic racism. While they have gotten rid of legal segregation, they are for the most part ineffective in regard to much informal discrimination and segregation. Each year now there are millions upon millions of instances of racial discrimination perpetrated by whites against black Americans and other Americans of color. Most are *not* countered by effective enforcement of local, state, and federal civil rights laws. Across the nation local, state, and federal agencies with civil rights responsibilities have

neither the resources nor staff to vigorously enforce antidiscrimination laws. State agencies like the New York Division of Human Rights and federal agencies such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission typically have such a large backlog of cases that most victims of discrimination cannot achieve timely remedies. All local, state, and federal agencies dealing with discrimination complaints process fewer than perhaps one hundred thousand or so cases each year, and most of these are resolved with little in the way of serious penalties for discriminators (see [chapter 5](#)).

As they have been enforced—or, more accurately, weakly enforced—over several decades, the civil rights laws often contribute to the persistence of racial discrimination by making it more difficult to file a successful complaint against a white discriminator.²⁴ The procedures are usually lengthy and bureaucratic. Moreover, by providing a strong rhetoric of rights and equal opportunity, these laws allow white Americans to assume that the problem of serious racial discrimination has largely been solved. Unquestionably, a first step in a renewed antiracist strategy for dismantling systemic racism would be an aggressive program of enforcing the civil rights laws passed in the 1960s.

Community Control as Strategy Between the 1970s and the 1990s the civil rights movement declined in public protests and visibility. One reason was the apparent achievement of key civil rights goals. For a time, the civil rights laws, court decisions, and government affirmative action efforts suggested a societal commitment to change. Another reason was the hiring or cooptation of many black leaders in corporations and government agencies. Yet another was government repression of more radical change-oriented groups such as the organized police campaign against the Black Panthers, who were calling for an end to police brutality and an increase in black control over black communities. Historically, it appears that the more the pressure builds from below, the more action the white elite takes to repress or reduce that pressure.

Government-sponsored civil rights progress came to a standstill, even backtracked, in the 1980s to 1990s when enforcement of the civil rights laws and implementation of affirmative action programs were significantly cut back under the conservative presidential administrations of Ronald Reagan and George Bush. Yet, even in the difficult period since the 1980s, black organizations have periodically responded with public demonstrations for expanded civil rights and other social programs in Washington, D.C., and several other cities. Since the 1980s there have been numerous local protests against racism, as well as a few national demonstrations, such as the 1995 Million Man March in Washington, D.C., a march accenting the need for black solidarity and community development. There have also been numerous efforts to organize black workers against exploitative employers and to organize against the waste dumps and other environmental hazards often located in or near black communities.²⁵

Dissatisfaction with stalled progress or backtracking on the commitment to

societal desegregation has periodically led black activists, organizers, and intellectuals to press for separatist and cultural-nationalist strategies. During the 1920s and 1930s, for example, there was a new outpouring of novels, music, dance, and other arts celebrating African American traditions, values, and interests—a movement called the Harlem Renaissance. Coupled with this cultural renaissance was an accent on fostering more black businesses and community institutions. Beginning with Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in the 1920s, and continuing with the Nation of Islam since the 1940s, a significant number of black Americans have rejected societal integration as the major goal for black Americans and instead accented a community control or separatist strategy. Sometimes, this strategy has been coupled with a call for compensation for racist oppression. Thus, in 1994 the Nation of Islam petitioned the United Nations to investigate the provision of reparations to black Americans and to intervene in pressing for such compensation under the umbrella of international law.²⁶

Periodically since the 1960s many black Americans have shown a major interest in separatist or community control strategies. A *New York Times* reporter, Isabel Wilkerson, interviewed several dozen middle class black Americans in Los Angeles after a major riot there in the 1990s. She found them to be angry over police brutality against blacks and other racism issues. As a group, those in the middle class were becoming increasingly committed to the idea of buying from black businesses and to greater black community solidarity and separation from whites.²⁷ Moreover, in a major policy-oriented book, *Integration or Separation?* the leading legal scholar Roy Brooks has documented the defects and drawbacks of the racial integration strategy as often practiced. Brooks argues that black Americans should keep the traditional integration strategy in their arsenal but couple it with community-focused strategies that have long been necessary for their long-term economic, physical, and psychological well-being.²⁸ In his view a mix of strategies is essential to future progress.

Working in the tradition of Garvey, Malcolm X, and W.E.B. Du Bois, numerous black scholars and community leaders have reiterated the importance of African values and traditional perspectives for black Americans. They reject myths of European cultural superiority and call for African Americans, as anthropologist Marimba Ani puts it, to refocus their “energies toward the recreation of cultural alternatives informed by ancestral visions of a future that celebrates Africanness.”²⁹ In their view revolution begins not with open warfare but with a counterhegemony of ideas created by the oppressed.

Some Individual Strategies of Resistance As the 1960s civil rights movement demonstrated, successful antioppression movements require a shattering of negative racial images in the minds of the oppressed themselves. How to increase this self-consciousness remains an ongoing task for antiracist struggles. Consciousness raising among black Americans, as well as among other Americans,

includes self-inquiry into one's own attitudes as well as a parallel dialogue with others. The Algerian revolutionary Frantz Fanon cogently stressed that an "authentic national liberation exists only to the precise degree to which the individual has irreversibly begun his own liberation."³⁰

Many black Americans have pioneered in this process of individual liberation, and have developed considerable experiential intelligence. Since I and several other researchers have documented and discussed these individual strategies for dealing with discrimination in detail elsewhere,³¹ I will note just one major example here. In a national study of middle-class respondents, a black professional explained her approach to whites, saying, "I know I have very little tolerance for white people who expect me to change my behavior to make them comfortable. They don't change their behavior to make me comfortable. I am who I am. Either they sit with me and work with me respecting that, or you can't sit and work together." After indicating that she does not generally tolerate racist attitudes or remarks, she then adds, "Then there are other people, who are personal friends, who may make a racist statement, and it's really based on their ignorance and their lack of understanding, and I'll take the time to deal with it. There's a young white woman that I work with now, and she's really not worked with a lot of different people of color, and she uses the term, 'you people,' and I bring it to her attention, And she's like, 'oh, oh,' and so it's an education, we're working together. But I don't generally accommodate white people's conflicts."³² Like most black Americans, she tailors her response to racist attitudes to fit the situation and the person.

Over a lifetime of many experiences with whites, a black American is forced to develop an array of strategies to fight racist attitudes and discriminatory practices. Sometimes black respondents in interview studies speak of withdrawing to fight another day. At other times, they describe open confrontations with white discriminators, with all the costs that frequently entails.³³ As in the above account, they often distinguish among whites, taking time to educate those whites who seem to be open to change. Like many black Americans, the woman quoted here has seen to her own liberation from racist oppression. It is on this individual knowledge and experiential intelligence that black Americans have built their individual and collective responses to everyday racism.

The Equality Ideal: Black Support, White Resistance From the early 1600s to the present day, the subordination of black Americans has conspicuously contradicted the political ideals enshrined in the Declaration of Independence—the stated emphasis on "all men are created equal" and on the inalienable rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." These grandly stated ideals were certainly radical in their day, and the documents of the American Revolution were banned in many European countries. As white men with property, however, the founders

had in mind their own freedom and equality. However, once the genie of freedom was let out of the bottle, many other groups of Americans have pressed for their full inclusion under these great ideals.

White Americans have not been the main carriers of *robust* ideals of freedom and justice. For centuries the strongest commitment to fully implementing the ideals of freedom, justice, and equality has been that of black Americans. From the first decades of the new republic, black leaders have been at the forefront of those strongly articulating these concepts. In most generations black Americans have forced white Americans to confront and deal with the ideals of equality and justice. Perhaps the first great manifesto for full human equality in the history of the United States was the 1829 *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* by the young black abolitionist David Walker. In this widely circulated manifesto, Walker quotes the words “all men are created equal” from the Declaration of Independence and then adds, for his white readers, “Compare your own language above, extracted from your Declaration of Independence, with your cruelties and murders inflicted by your cruel and unmerciful fathers and yourselves on our fathers and on us—men who have never given your fathers or you the least provocation! ...I ask you candidly, was your sufferings [sic] under Great Britain, one hundredth part as cruel and tyrannical as you have rendered ours under you? Some of you, no doubt, believe that we will never throw off your murderous government and ‘provide new guards for our future security.’”³⁴ He then assured his white readers that black Americans would indeed take strong action to achieve freedom, equality, and justice. Walker’s manifesto created great fear in the white population, especially among slavery interests who saw it as an incitement to revolution. A bounty was placed on his head by slaveholding interests, and he appears to have been poisoned in June 1830 for his militancy.

After the Civil War black Americans pressed hard to secure greater freedom and equality, especially the right to vote and equal treatment in public accommodations and on juries. In the nineteenth century black leaders like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth forcefully enunciated the ideals of freedom and equality. In the early 1900s, with the new movements for civil rights, a growing number of black leaders spoke out for the implementation of these ideals. In a 1902 lecture to a Quaker group, Anna Julia Cooper, a leading activist for the poor and an early feminist, noted how “dragged against his will over thousands of miles of unknown waters to a strange land among strange peoples, the Negro was transplanted to this continent in order to produce chattels and beasts of burden for a nation ‘conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.’”³⁵ Elsewhere, she added that black men and women are endowed with the unalienable rights of “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” and thus have a “right to grow up, to develop, to reason and to live” just like other Americans.³⁶

During the 1950s and 1960s the nation once again witnessed a reinvigorated movement for freedom and equality for African Americans. The participants in these antiracist movements were greatly influenced by national and international ideals of social justice and equal rights. Just before his assassination, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., passionately argued for equality for African Americans. He noted that a major problem was getting whites to understand the meaning of the black struggle for liberty, for there is “not even a common language when the term ‘equality’ is used. Negro and white have a fundamentally different definition.”³⁷ King added that black Americans “have proceeded from a premise that equality means what it says, and they have taken white Americans at their word when they talked of it as an objective. But most whites in America in 1967, including many persons of goodwill, proceed from a premise that equality is a loose expression for improvement. White America is not even psychologically organized to close the gap—essentially it seeks only to make it less painful and less obvious but in most respects to retain it.”³⁸

Because of centuries of black pressure, as well as the rise of movements among other people of color since the 1960s, the white public’s understanding of equality across the color line has slowly been transformed from the idea of the founders that only white men had a right to liberty and representation to a broader view. Surveys suggest that the white majority now holds to this view: At least in principle, all men and women have a right to legal and political equality, as well as to equal opportunities in employment, housing, and education. However, for the majority this new understanding of equality dates only from the 1960s and 1970s and does *not* mean that most whites wish to see a truly egalitarian social reality or even thorough racial integration.³⁹ Today, as in the recent past, a majority of whites support equality only if that means some chances for individual improvement, and not the goal of real group equality along political, economic, and social lines. Indeed, according to one national survey just over half of white respondents felt that “equal rights” had been pushed *too far* in the United States.⁴⁰ Another survey found that many whites are moving backward to the older view that a racially separate-but-equal society is acceptable if formal equality of opportunity is provided.⁴¹

In contrast, for almost all black men and women the central goal remains real political, social, and economic equality with whites, including being treated fairly and justly in all institutions. As Ralph Ellison long ago expressed it, the goal is the creation of real democracy in which a black person will be “free to define himself for what he is and, within the large framework of that democracy, for what he desires to be.”⁴²

Elite Responses to Black Pressures Since the early 1900s renewal of the black movement for equal rights—and especially since the 1960s civil rights revolution—white Americans, including the white elite, have faced a continuing

ideological crisis. They have had to confront a growth of antiracist ideas among black intellectuals and leaders, as well as other Americans who are enemies of racism. Protest against white hegemony includes not only overt confrontation with the dominant group but also development of countering perspective—in the case of black Americans an antiracist perspective generated over a long period of fighting domination. Georg Lukacs once noted that an ideological crisis is “an unending sign of decay” that forces the ruling class on the defensive.⁴³ In addition, the ideological crisis is closely linked to a policy crisis.

The Remedial Strategies of White Liberals Faced with black pressures for racial desegregation, the liberal wing of the white elite has been willing to accept some meaningful changes, if only to damp down black protests. During the period from the 1940s to the 1960s an accent on modest black assimilation and some antisegregation action was the orientation of the liberal wing of the white elite, though not of that elite as a whole nor of the white population generally. Recall the discussion of the pioneering work of Gunnar Myrdal in [chapter 6](#).⁴⁴ Reflecting the new social science of his era, Myrdal argued in *An American Dilemma* that biological racism was discredited and that the extent of antiblack discrimination should be recognized. Myrdal’s solution for this discrimination was to call for ethical changes on the part of individual whites, who should eventually come to welcome integration. One of his solutions was to reeducate whites to see that their prejudiced views were against their American ideals. He pressed for the gradual, one-way integration of black Americans in white society: It would be, he believed, “to the advantage of American Negroes as individuals and as a group to become assimilated into American culture, to acquire the traits held in esteem by the dominant white Americans.”⁴⁵ One-way assimilation, however, does not aim at remaking basic institutions.

By the 1950s the white elite and public were confronted by black protestors willing to risk their lives in the new strategy of civil disobedience. By making some policy concessions to these pressures in the 1950s and 1960s, white liberals probably averted more serious protests and more extensive societal changes. The new civil rights laws did eliminate legal segregation, and affirmative action programs began a gradual process of placing some, often token, numbers of black Americans, other Americans of color, and white women in historically white male workplaces and other institutional settings. However, for the most part white liberals have only sought to eliminate the most egregious forms of discrimination and segregation and to provide some increased opportunities. As we showed in [chapter 3](#), liberal white leaders have been successful in placing the idea of equality of opportunity at the top of the list of remedial solutions for the U.S. “racial problem.”

The much criticized affirmative action programs of recent decades were originally created *by white men* in the liberal wing of the business and political elites. Since they were put into effect, initially by white men at the top of

corporations, universities, and other organizations, these affirmative action programs have involved modest, often successful efforts to bring some people of color and white women into institutions where they had, historically, been excluded. These remedial programs have the look of going beyond equality of opportunity, but actually they have mostly opened up opportunities to those who are highly qualified. Moreover, even from the viewpoint of most white liberals, these government policies were designed to be temporary measures designed to get the opportunity game to work for Americans of color. In recent years most critics of affirmative action seem to have forgotten, or wish to conceal, the fact that the idea called affirmative action was originally created by liberal white male politicians and officials as a limited, and often paternalistic, response to pressures from black and other protesters seeking change in the turbulent 1960s. Not surprisingly given its origin, virtually no affirmative action program has seriously challenged white male domination of historically white and male institutions.

The Conservative Advance The liberals in the white elite have been in retreat most of the time since the conservative resurgence of the late 1970s. We examined the ideological shift to a conservative approach on racial matters in [chapter 3](#). This ideological shift, with its denial of significant racism, its assertions of white innocence, and its romanticizing of the past was accompanied by actions that moved the nation away from its course of modest attempts at racial change. The conservative wing of the white elite has grown in power since the 1970s. In recent decades conservative white politicians have been elected at all levels of government. Conservative and neoconservative intellectuals have served increasingly as experts, advisors, and speechwriters for leading politicians in the local, state, and federal governments. They have helped in getting conservative politicians elected and in preparing legislation, and they have participated actively in manipulating the views and inclinations of the general public by serving as op-ed writers in newspapers, appearing as experts on news programs and talk shows, and writing best-selling books.⁴⁶

They have worked hard to legitimate conservative political strategies with arguments about the alleged failure of various governmental programs, including affirmative action. Recall the extensive development of conservative theories about black Americans, which we examined in [chapter 3](#). In addition to developing notions of the black “underclass” and black inferiority in “IQ,” some white conservatives have engaged in open attacks on the stronger versions of the American ideal of equality. For example, Irving Kristol, a leading white intellectual, wrote that too many Americans prize equality over liberty and that this “egalitarianism ... will, if permitted to gather momentum, surely destroy the liberal society.”⁴⁷ Similarly, the influential social scientist Daniel Bell fears that democratic populism has a desire for “wholesale egalitarianism” that unfortunately insists “on complete leveling.” He contends that fairness is not the

goal of egalitarians, but rather their goal is to get rid of the idea of merit and achievement.⁴⁸ Recall too *The Bell Curve* by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray. In addition to arguing for white superiority and black inferiority in intelligence, they go farther to question the idea of human equality. In their view social inequality is inevitable, necessary, and good.⁴⁹

As part of this conservative resurgence, white men in power in governments and businesses have cut back or ended many antidiscrimination programs. The concern for racial, ethnic, and gender diversity is now more rhetoric than reality in many, if not most institutions. For example, most U.S. companies now do little significant training of their white and other employees for interracial cooperation and management. One recent study found that a minority—less than one-fifth—of human resource specialists in large companies reported that diversity training was provided to employees in most jobs.⁵⁰ Most affirmative action programs were originally intended to alter the racist system only in modest ways and usually for a short period of time, and often with an eye to preserving the underlying reality of white (or white male) privilege. In recent years conservative whites have moved aggressively to weaken or destroy even this moderate level of remedial action against racial and gender discrimination. Since the 1970s they have filed numerous lawsuits, including those that have resulted in anti-affirmative action Supreme Court decisions, such as the Croson decision (see [chapter 5](#)). In that and similar cases, a conservative Supreme Court rejected the well-documented argument that general societal discrimination is the context and shaper of individual instances of discrimination, arguing instead that the rights created by the Fourteenth Amendment are for individuals and cannot be used to destroy institutionalized racism. Since the 1980s, a string of cases from a conservative court have treated white interests in keeping white status and privilege as more important than the interests of black Americans in eradicating the current reality of systemic racism. Such governmental action clearly reflects the racial and class interests of whites in the present system of white privilege. Ironically, by drawing on the civil rights laws, whites, especially white men, have recently claimed the status of victims of discrimination. Using oxymoronic terms like *reverse discrimination*, whites have successfully pushed aside the central issue of the systemic racism still routinely oppressing Americans of color. As Cheryl Harris has noted, white identity is treated as no different from “any other group identity when, at its core, whiteness is based on racial subordination.”⁵¹

As we saw in earlier chapters, preferential treatment for whites has long been legitimate in the United States. It is action to remedy discrimination against African Americans and other people of color that has been controversial. In an important dissenting opinion in the 1978 Bakke decision, the liberal Supreme Court justice Harry Blackmun chided his conservative colleagues for forgetting that racism is still present; he argued that the Constitution as amended does allow

recognition of societal discrimination and direct remedial action: “In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race...and in order to treat some persons equally, we must treat them differently. We cannot...let the Equal Protection Clause perpetrate racial supremacy.”⁵²

A Liberal Program that Brought Significant Change In the conservative resurgence since the 1980s many analysts have routinely attacked government programs that were developed as part of the white liberal response to the civil rights movement, including affirmative action programs, programs to provide education, and programs creating job opportunities. Supposedly, these liberal programs did not bring the major societal changes promised, so they should be cataloged as failures and thus abandoned.

However, this conservative attack ignores the one program of remedial action against discrimination that did bring substantial changes in a major U.S. organization. Presumably, this is because this program challenges many conservative assumptions and arguments. The showpiece of the liberal strategy of job desegregation can be seen in the U.S. Army. Today the army, which has about half of all black personnel in the military, is the most desegregated large institution in U.S. society. In the late 1990s black Americans made up about 11 percent of all officers, a figure much higher than that for executives in almost all large corporations or that for professors at almost all historically white colleges and universities. The 7,500 black officers there constitute the largest group of black executives in any historically white organization in the entire history of the United States. African Americans also make up one-third or more of the sergeant ranks in the army, a proportion much higher than that for comparable supervisors in most other workplaces. In addition, surveys indicate that black personnel generally see intergroup relations as better in the army than in the larger society, which is one reason that many reenlist.⁵³

How was this desegregation of an organization with a very long history of institutional racism accomplished? One explanation lies in the fact that the U.S. Army is an authoritarian organization that punishes overt prejudice and blatant discrimination engaged in by white personnel and that often rewards white and other officers who work for desegregation in meaningful ways. The army has widely attended courses for personnel on racial, ethnic, and gender issues, and diversity in units is often taken into account in personnel decisions. To meet the problem of enlistees without the skills necessary to move up the ranks—a common problem for civilian employers as well—the army has developed the strongest array of compensatory education programs in the nation. Rather than lower its standards, the army has set up major programs to bring skills to the levels necessary for satisfactory performance and promotion. According to Charles Moskos and John Butler, “One program brings young people up to enlistment standards, while another raises enlisted soldiers to NCO standards. A third brings black undergraduates to officer-

commissioning standards, and a fourth raises high school graduates to West Point-admission standards.”⁵⁴ At any one time in recent years, some 100,000 personnel have been enrolled in 150 education centers. These programs are usually well-crafted and remarkably brief (typically three to eight weeks), and they have generally been successful in providing many black personnel and other personnel of color with the skills necessary to meet entrance and promotion standards. Given this real opportunity, black Americans have excelled in the job structure of a historically white institution with a long tradition of segregation. There are also spinoff effects from the army and other similar military desegregation programs. For example, the most residentially integrated towns and cities in the United States are generally those near military bases. In these areas white-black differentials in health, such as in the infant mortality rate, often disappear because black military families there have more adequate housing and health services than many black families in the civilian sector.

The desegregation of the army demonstrates that the conservative view of government intervention as useless in dealing with discrimination is wrongheaded. The army programs demonstrate that much more can be done to reduce discrimination in the civilian sector, even without a complete restructuring of U.S. society. In the enforcement of antidiscrimination laws and the desegregation of operations, army leaders and ordinary personnel have accomplished far more than white executives and managers in other government agencies, in large corporations and most other businesses, or in most unions. Once the changes were well underway, they developed a critical mass of black personnel in the army, which in turn has fueled further changes. Developing a critical mass that can perpetuate changes is essential to this type of antiracist strategy. However, much remains to be done. The recent Armed Forces Equal Opportunity Survey shows there is still much subtle and covert discrimination, and some blatant discrimination, in all the military branches. For example, three-quarters of black military personnel, across all branches, reported racially offensive encounters with other personnel in the last twelve months, including such things as racist jokes, racial comments or stares, and exclusion from social activities. Yet a substantial proportion of the black military personnel—from 34 to 46 percent depending on the question—felt that freedom from hate crimes, racial harassment, and general discrimination was greater in the military than in the civilian sector. Very small percentages (3 to 7 percent) evaluated the civilian sector as better, with the rest evaluating the two sectors as similar.⁵⁵ Thus, in spite of these continuing problems, the 1964 Civil Rights Act has been implemented much more effectively in military units than in the larger society.

It is important to note that this significant desegregation of the U.S. Army has not had a corrosive effect on certain other types of oppression, such as that often involved in U.S. military adventures in postcolonial areas overseas. It is not yet clear what spinoff effects this racial desegregation will have on such operations in

the future. Historically, the U.S. military has been used to suppress the rights and aspirations of many peoples around the globe. There is great irony in the fact that an organization that has historically suppressed the freedom of people of color in the United States and across the globe also has made the greatest progress in integrating black Americans and other Americans of color within its own ranks. This integration may conceivably, in the long run, have some effects on U.S. military policy in regard to peoples of color overseas.

Whites Taking Action with Others against Racism One classical study of prejudice, *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), concluded that the racist views of whites vary with their social milieu: “What people say and, to a lesser degree, what they really think depends very largely upon the climate of opinion in which they are living; but when that climate changes, some individuals adapt themselves more quickly than others.”⁵⁶ The social context can restrict or encourage the possibility that whites will take action against the system of racism and for a social system that is more humane, egalitarian, and just. Historical conditions and existing social structure set limits on what individuals can do, but they are not all-determining. There is plenty of evidence, as Karl Marx once wrote, that people “make their own history” even if that action is within limiting and restrictive social arrangements. Today, even within a society thoroughly grounded in racism, a significant number of white Americans are working actively to destroy that racism in their own lives and in the larger society.

Individuals Taking Action In lecture sessions and classes that I have given across the United States, some whites ask, usually in frustration and after they are convinced white racism is still commonplace, “What can I do to bring change? I am only one individual.” The answer to this may lie in the old idea that one individual, however lowly her or his status, can topple a system if the action is taken at the right place and at the right time. The example sometimes cited to illustrate the point about individual actions having a larger impact is that of the one-dollar screw poorly installed that causes an engine on an airliner to fail. One person’s actions can often make a difference.

In the U.S. case, the history of antiracist action indicates that individual whites often begin the process of becoming activists by working on their own racist attitudes, stereotypes, and proclivities. Such a step is not easy, because it is seldom encouraged within families and other historically white institutions. For most people the approaches to life learned at an early age, from parents, other relatives, and peers, are repeated in everyday actions throughout their lives. Still, the learned approaches reinforcing systemic racism are not part of the natural order of the universe. They are socially and psychologically constructed. With effort they can be unlearned and replaced, by individuals and groups. To get rid of these views takes great effort through a series of steps. A number of effective programs have been created to assist

this unlearning process. Psychologist Patricia Devine has noted some critical steps in an unlearning process: “The individual must (a) initially decide to stop the old behavior, (b) remember the resolution, and (c) try repeatedly and decide repeatedly to eliminate the habit before the habit can be eliminated. In addition, the individual must develop a new cognitive (attitudinal and belief) structure that is consistent with the newly determined pattern of responses.”⁵⁷

A new cognitive framework will doubtless require a process of education or reeducation in which whites, as individuals and as groups, move toward understanding how the system of racial privilege was created and how they maintain it in everyday life. This reeducation will likely probe deeply into the character and composition of this society, including its extended racist history, and will require purposeful unlearning of the mythology and sincere fictions most whites use to paper over continuing racist realities. Systemic racism has persisted so well because its operation is often concealed and disguised. As we showed in earlier chapters, collective forgetting is central to the way in which most whites have dealt with the history of racism. Most have chosen not to know their history. Typical high school and college textbooks, as Jim Loewen has shown, try to put a pleasant face on U.S. history: “When textbooks make racism invisible in American history, they obstruct our already poor ability to see it in the present.”⁵⁸ Thus, learning much about the reality of that history, about its brutality and unjust impoverishment for people of color, and its unjust enrichment for whites, may be critical to increasing the number of whites who join in antiracist efforts and movements at the local and national levels. As of now, this educational project is in an early stage.

Thinking and practicing racism requires a breakdown in empathy across the color line. Racism is about the destruction of natural human empathy; it means a lack of recognition of the humanity of the racialized other. Identification across the color line is hard for most whites to make. It involves understandings and emotions. Whites who change in this regard seem to develop through at least three different stages: *sympathy*, *empathy*, and what might be called *autopathy*. The initial stage, sympathy, is important but limited. It typically involves a willingness to set aside some racist stereotyping and hostility and the development of a friendly if variable interest in what is happening to the racialized other. A considerable number of whites have moved to this position since the 1960s civil rights revolution. Empathy is a much more advanced stage of development in that it requires a developed ability to routinely reject distancing stereotypes and a heightened and sustained capacity to see and feel some of the pain of those in the out-group. For whites, empathy involves the capacity to sense deeply the character of another’s torment and to act on that realization. Autopathy is a third stage of white development, which has not as yet been fully analyzed. Discussing this matter with legal scholar Sharon Rush, I have come to this view of the step beyond empathy: This understanding and feeling is one in which a white person has intentionally put herself or himself, if only partially, into the racist world of

the oppressed and thereby not only receives racist hostility from other whites but also personally feels some of the pain that comes from being enmeshed in the racist conditions central to the lives of the oppressed others. This case of feeling pain more directly often comes when whites are the close friends, lovers, parents, or other relatives of blacks who are the direct targets of racism. Recent accounts by some white parents of black children reveal the great autopathic pain the former often endure as they deal with the racism faced by the child.⁵⁹

Today the challenge for those seeking to expand the antiracist strategy seems to include the creation of conditions where more whites will have to confront the reality of the pain that their system of racism has caused African Americans and other Americans of color with whom they come into contact. A large-scale educational campaign—one that is candid and blunt about the past and present reality of racist ideas and practices—seems to be required if more than a handful of whites are ever to move into the stages of empathy and autopathy. Beyond that, the building of more personal networks across the color line seems necessary. This idea may seem elementary, yet it is difficult and profound.

Today, many whites seem to wish to claim a friend across the color line. For example, in a 1976 survey one-third of whites said that they or a member of their immediate family had contact socially with a black friend. By the time of a 1998 survey some 42 percent of whites polled now said that they had a black friend they personally felt close to. However, when this latter survey asked white respondents for the first names of their good friends, only 6 percent actually listed a black person as part of their friendship network.⁶⁰ It appears that many whites who say they have a close black friend actually do not have one. Building more cross-racial friendships will likely be a difficult task.

A History of Interracial Organization Antiracist action began in the first centuries of American development. There is a long history of interracial cooperation and organization against racism. Multiracial groups have periodically helped to bring some social changes, as the 1840s–1850s abolitionists and 1950s–1960s civil rights activists demonstrated. Some whites have even given their lives for such antiracist movements. For example, in October 1859, John Brown, a white abolitionist, led a small band of whites and blacks in an attempt to seize weapons at a federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, with the goal of arming those enslaved. Today, one needed educational step is for all levels of American education to offer courses that discuss the views and actions of white antiracist activists like John Brown. Radical abolitionists constituted one of the first multiracial groups to struggle openly and aggressively against the oppressiveness of systemic racism. Some died as a result. John Brown’s lucid comment on his own sentence of death indicates his commitment to racial justice: “Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the

blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments,—I submit, so let it be done!”⁶¹

Since the antislavery efforts of the Harper’s Ferry band in 1859, a long line of whites, blacks, and others of color have worked together, often against enormous opposition, to bring freedom and justice for all Americans. Recall the creation of the NAACP in the early 1900s, an organization seeking to fight racial exclusion. For many years this organization had black and white officials at its head. In addition, the black-led civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s had participants from several different racial and ethnic groups, including many whites. In a social system there seem to be only a few high leverage points from which to precipitate lasting changes, and U.S. history suggests that large coalitions of black and non-black Americans working against racism can create such high leverage points.

Antiracist Organizations Today Over the last several decades, antiracist whites have helped to organize or have joined in a number of grassroots organizations working against U.S. racism. For example, the Institutes for the Healing of Racism hold seminars and dialogues on racism in more than 150 cities. These multiracial groups of Americans work at the local level to heighten awareness of racism, educate local citizens about how racism works and how to fight it, and provide dialogue across local racial and ethnic boundaries. These groups deal openly with racist prejudices and the reality of institutional racism.⁶²

Typical of the range of current antiracist organizations are the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond (PI) and Anti-Racist Action (ARA). Located in New Orleans and created by black activists, PI is a community-oriented group that sets up “Undoing Racism” workshops to train people in community and nonprofit organizations. These multiracial workshops, which had trained about twenty thousand people (about half of them white) as of 1999, are designed to help officials in organizations and community activists understand racism and cultural diversity and to show them how they can undo racism in their own lives and in their organizations. Taking a somewhat different tack, the mostly white ARA groups are working aggressively against racism in several dozen cities in the United States and Canada. Originally established to combat neo-Nazi and Klan organizations, ARA groups have developed other antiracist programs. For example, their Copwatch program attempts to reduce police brutality by having members take video recorders into the streets to tape the police in their dealings with citizens of color. While their objectives and timing have varied, several other organizations have also pressed for changes in institutionalized racism across the United States. A sampling of these would include the Dismantling Racism Program of the National Conference (St. Louis), the Anti-Racism Institute of Clergy and Laity Concerned (Chicago), the Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment, the Southern Empowerment Project, and the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence.⁶³

One next step in a broad antiracist strategy for the United States might be to expand the number of these antiracist organizations and to connect them into a national association working against systemic racism. Broad organizations against racial and ethnic oppression seem to be needed, though sustaining them may be difficult. For example, since the 1980s the Reverend Jesse Jackson, the black civil rights leader, has worked with Americans from several different racial and ethnic groups, including whites, to build the Rainbow Coalition. This organization has pressed for key social justice goals: better jobs and government job creation; more aggressive government efforts against racism, sexism, and homophobia; and government efforts to protect the environment. For a decade the organization helped to win some progressive electoral battles in various states and supported Jackson's bid for the presidency. However, after a period of influence in the 1980s and early 1990s, the organization seemed to decline in its national impact by the late 1990s. Today there are numerous other movements organizing Americans of color and white workers against injustice. One example is the New Party, an alliance of labor, community, and environmental coalitions working for social justice goals, including the rights of workers, consumers, and communities to organize without interference; the creation of a sustainable economy and full employment; and "an absolute bar to discrimination based on race, gender, age, country of origin, and sexual orientation."⁶⁴ With this social justice agenda, the New Party has won a number of local and state elections across the country. Renewed efforts at coalitions like the Rainbow Coalition and the New Party might be a valuable aspect of a broader antiracist and antioppression strategy.

A New Constitutional Convention: An Idea Whose Time Has Come In 1787 fifty-five white men met in Philadelphia and wrote a Constitution for what was seen as the first democratic nation. They met at the end of a long revolutionary struggle and articulated their perspective using strong language about human equality and freedom. However, they had a very restricted view of those grand ideas. As we saw in [chapter 1](#), this Constitutional Convention did not include white women, African Americans, or Native Americans, who collectively made up a majority of the population. Nor did it include representation for white men with little or no property. The representatives of less than 10 percent of the population framed a new constitution that has governed, with some amendments, the United States since the late eighteenth century. The document created by these propertied white men reflected their racial, class, and gender interests. While some of these interests encompassed the desires of all Americans to be free of the tyrannies of Europe—such as the constitutional prohibition of aristocratic titles and of a state religion—it took strong protests in the colonies before a Bill of Rights was added.⁶⁵

The 1858 Constitution Not one of the original Constitutional Convention's delegates saw black Americans as human beings whose views, interests, and

perspectives should be seriously considered in the document being created. How then should black Americans, whose ancestors were present in large numbers in the nation but excluded at the convention and whose enslavement was ratified by the Constitution, regard the document? Why should they accept the authority of a constitution their ancestors played no part in making? As I see it, this undemocratic Constitution and its often biased tradition of prowhite interpretation should be replaced, for this tradition has constrained progressive change toward equality and justice for too long. All attempts to change the system of racism since the late 1700s have been constrained by this document and the interpretations of it by the mostly white and male judges and members of Congress holding office since that time. All court decisions on racial discrimination, the amendment abolishing slavery, all civil rights laws, and all civil rights efforts have been made within this biased and constraining framework. The American democratic project yet remains to be accomplished.

Significantly, only one multiracial group of Americans has, to my knowledge, tried to formulate and implement an antiracist constitution and declaration of independence. On May 8, 1858, more than a year before the Harper's Ferry raid, John Brown and his allies, black and white, met in Chatham, Canada, to formulate a new constitution to govern the band of revolutionaries fighting for liberty—a constitution looking forward to a new antiracist nation of the United States. Twelve white Americans and thirty-three black Americans were present at this convention. The preamble to the document they created read as follows:

Whereas slavery, throughout its entire existence in the United States, is none other than a most barbarous, unprovoked and unjustifiable war of one portion of its citizens upon another portion. . . in utter disregard and violation of those eternal and self-evident truths set forth in our Declaration of Independence: therefore, we, citizens of the United States, and the oppressed people who, by a recent decision of the Supreme Court, are declared to have no rights which the white man is bound to respect, together with all other people degraded by the laws thereof, do, for the time being, ordain and establish ourselves the following provisional constitution and ordinances, the better to protect our persons, property, lives, and liberties, and to govern our actions.⁶⁶

Their declaration of independence further insisted “that the Slaves are, & of right ought to be. . . free.”⁶⁷ This 1858 constitution and declaration of independence appear to be the only ones in U.S. history to be prepared by representatives of the oppressed black residents of the United States, with their interests substantially in mind.

A New Constitutional Convention As I see it, it is time to have yet another constitutional convention, one that represents all Americans. The base of the U.S. system must be replaced if systemic racism is to be removed, just as the sinking foundation of a dilapidated building must be replaced. A new convention is required

not only to address restitution and rights for oppressed groups but also to ensure that the governing document of the new multiracial democracy is produced by representatives of all the people. The egalitarian and democratic ideas associated with the Bill of Rights and U.S. civil rights laws could well be points for important discussion at this new convention. However, no existing laws should automatically be part of a new constitution because the meaning of these laws usually rests on their interpretation by the current white-male-dominated judiciary.

What would be a more adequate set of starting points in beginning the debate on a constitution for a true multiracial democracy? The new convention might use the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related human rights documents that have expanded that declaration (especially those on women's rights). First ratified in 1948 by the United Nations, the declaration today represents a growing consensus across the globe on what human rights are essential for a healthy society (see below). Without respect for a broad array of basic human rights there can be no democracy. Thus, the official call for the new convention might indicate a grounding of its discussions in a mutual respect for the broad human rights of all Americans and in a mutual respect for the plurality of U.S. cultures and heritages.

Some civil rights scholars and leaders have opposed the idea of a new constitutional convention because they fear the white majority there might roll back existing civil rights protection, that the situation could be made worse. For example, Roy Brooks has criticized an earlier framing of this idea of a new convention because it "would open debate and reconsideration of the existing document, and the consequences could be dire."⁶⁸ He fears that in a society where many whites appear to be moving in a more racist direction that a new convention might be dominated by conservative whites and ban such things as free speech and reproductive rights.

These fears are reasonable if the new convention were to be dominated by white male conservatives. However, in my hypothetical scenario the convention would *not* take place unless those who write the new constitution are fully representative of *all* sectors of the current population. No other arrangement will create the necessary conditions for full and open debates on matters of concern to all the people. If the convention were to be held in the early part of the new millennium, this stipulation would mean that white men would be about 36 percent of the delegates, instead of the 100-percent representation they had at the first convention. Indeed, that 36 percent would include a much more diverse array of white men—such as labor union and gay rights activists—than those at the first convention. In addition, more than a quarter of the delegates would be Americans of color, and women would make up a little more than half of the delegates. Moreover, if the convention were to be delayed for a few decades, the majority of delegates might well be people of color.

Prior to calling an official convention those committed to the creation of a diverse and viable democracy might set up a trial constitutional convention to test how such a truly representative convention might be called and how it would operate in dealing with an array of difficult decision-making, human-rights, and related political issues. Indeed, there could be a practice convention in each U.S. region, which might well generate important human rights and other political debates in every area.

A truly representative assembly would insure that, for the first time in U.S. history, the white majority hears much discussion of, and faces pressure to take seriously, the group interests and rights of all Americans of color. This assembly will be diverse enough that many decisions on constitutional provisions will have to be negotiated among contending groups; they will require a consideration of the originally excluded interests of women and Americans of color, as well as of the more recently asserted interests of gay and disabled Americans. As with the first convention, the debates will likely be revealing and educational, not only for delegates but for the nation as a whole. These debates would likely remove the smokescreen disguising the undemocratic reality of U.S. society and show unequivocally how racial, gender, class, and other forms of exploitation operate to the detriment of many Americans. A true democracy is one in which all people are not only represented but also have equitable input into the creation of its laws and political institutions. Moreover, this new constitutional convention is only a first step. A truly democratic constitution becomes the political basis on which to build an array of effective democratic institutions.

For all its possible difficulties, a new constitutional convention seems required not only to guarantee full human rights for previously excluded Americans but also to insure that the new founding document is actually made by the representatives of all Americans. Even if this convention is a failure, and the white majority there creates a more racist system, that would at least mean a more honest and open system of exploitation, one not hiding behind a veneer of equality and colorblindness. Such a convention might be an important part of a reinvigorated antiracist strategy to build a new democratic foundation for the United States. Equally as important to this antiracist strategy is the symbolism of having a truly representative assembly making the nation's constitution. Once those who have never participated in politics see that their representatives have been actively involved in making the founding document, commitment to the new democracy will likely increase. A strongly democratic constitution—with broad citizen participation in its associated institutions and recurring citizen activism on behalf of human rights—seems the only guarantee of liberty and freedom.

Restitution and Reparations As yet, no major group of white Americans has taken responsibility for the past and continuing negative impact of slavery, segregation, and modern racism on black Americans. For the most part, white leaders and

rank-and-file whites have ignored or rejected proposals for large-scale reparations and compensation for those who have suffered from systemic racism. Indeed, in the late 1990s President Bill Clinton entertained, then rejected, the idea of a formal public apology to African Americans for slavery. Even the suggestion of an apology was attacked by many whites. Once there is a new constitution in place, a comprehensive antiracist strategy would likely require an early addressing of reparations for the damage done by centuries of oppression to African Americans and other Americans of color. Let us consider here the African American case.

Arguments against Restitution and Reparations Recall how presidential candidate Bob Dole questioned whether white men should have to pay through programs like affirmative action for slavery and discrimination before they were born. Today a majority of white Americans would likely still answer “no.” The common reaction would be, “Let bygones be bygones.” The unjust enrichment gained by whites over centuries should be forgotten. Such collective forgetting is one way in which whites handle the tension between the values of liberty and justice and the long history of racist oppression. Unquestionably, this distancing of oppression is useful in the construction of a rationalizing ideology. However, there are major problems in the argument that whites should not be accountable for what their ancestors did, as many whites say, “hundreds of years ago.” For example, slavery ended less than 140 years ago. Some black Americans are only a couple of generations removed from their enslaved ancestors. Moreover, the near slavery of legal segregation only came to an end in the late 1960s, well within the lifetimes of many Americans alive today.

In the thinking of most white leaders and the white public, the actions of the founders and later political leaders that have benefited whites are given great weight and legitimacy. Such actions include the making of the Constitution and subsequent court decisions interpreting the Constitution in the interest of whites. However, according to the prevailing white view, the racially oppressive actions by the same white founders and later leaders should be forgiven and forgotten by those whose ancestors were victimized by their oppressive actions. Not surprisingly, a majority of whites do not see the earlier structures of oppression like slavery and legal segregation as relevant to present-day racial inequalities. Nonetheless, these whites will insist that black Americans accept the Constitution and laws established by whites as binding on them, even though they had no say in the laws’ creation. Richard Delgado has summarized this point well in the form of a comment from a black professor: most whites insist that blacks “owe obligations arising out of that social contract, but no obligation is owed to us arising from the abuse we suffered in connection with it. Ahistorical young conservatives want the benefit of social compliance from blacks with a system that provides young whites with security, schools, and liberty. But they don’t want to pay for it by recognizing a debt they owe blacks arising from their forefathers’ wrongs.”⁶⁹

Another common white argument against restitution and reparations is that societal discrimination against black Americans is too impersonal and amorphous for the development of remedies. In several recent federal court cases, such as the aforementioned Croson case, the majority of judges have accepted the view that, while there may still be some societal discrimination, no one can determine who in particular is responsible and who has benefited. As a result, these judges argue, one cannot expect government officials to take action to redress the continuing societal discrimination. Martin Katz has pointed out the wrongheadedness of the majority opinion in Croson: if injuries from past or present discrimination cannot be remedied, then “whites will be allowed to retain an advantage which they did not earn, and Blacks will continue to lag behind as a result of acts which, although they may not be amenable to documentation, no one denies were performed in contempt of individuality. Racism has made race relevant to productivity. Treating race as if it were irrelevant will not help to make it any less relevant.”⁷⁰

The Case for Restitution and Reparations In the Charter of the Nuremberg Tribunal convened to deal with Nazi war crimes after World War II, “crimes against humanity” were defined as “murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts committed against any civilian population.... whether or not in violation of the domestic law of the country where perpetrated.”⁷¹ White Europeans and white Americans have a long tradition of such crimes against humanity. The large-scale enslavement and oppression of Africans across the globe for more than four centuries was, and remains, one of the most serious of the “crimes against humanity.”

Most whites have benefited from centuries of racist oppression and the transmission of many privileges and substantial amounts of ill-gotten wealth from that oppression to later generations. As we have seen in previous chapters, enslaved Africans and African Americans created much wealth and capital that to a significant degree spurred not only the economic development of the South but also the industrial revolution in the United States and in Europe. “Western production levels were transformed,” Ali Mazrui informs us. “But so were Western living standards, life expectancy, population growth, and the globalization of capitalism. How do we measure such repercussions of slavery?”⁷² The current prosperity, relatively long life expectancies, and relatively high living standards of whites as a group in the United States, as well as in the West generally, are ultimately rooted in the agony, exploitation, and impoverishment of those who were colonized and enslaved, as well as in the oppression and misery of their descendants. As we have seen throughout this book, white Americans as individuals, families, and communities have done much damage to black Americans. This damage is not just in the past, for black Americans today suffer from the many psychological, economic, political, and social costs of past and present racism.

Recall that in traditional Western law the concept of unjust enrichment includes not only receiving benefits that justly belong to another but also the

obligation to make restitution to victims. Numerous court decisions have provided remedies measured more by the gain to a defendant than by a plaintiff's loss. The defendant must give up the unjust enrichment, including gains made from it.⁷³ Thus, U.S. law does not allow the children of a thief to benefit from the theft once that illegal action is known. However, the law on remedies has traditionally ignored group claims against unjust enrichment, and systemic racism involves injuries to a large group. An antiracist strategy might well extend the remedies law aggressively to conditions of group discrimination and oppression. Whites whose families have been in North America for a generation or more, which is the majority, benefit today from the significant racial advantages that their ancestors gained, often including gains under slavery or segregation. A majority of whites have benefited from the economic, political, social, and educational discrimination that favored their ancestors—and still favors themselves today (see [chapter 5](#)). As with individual remedies, group remedies should encompass stopping the unjust extraction of benefits now and in the future (prospective action) as well as making restitution to the victim group for past actions (retrospective action). Restitution and reparations are inadequate without stopping the processes that distribute, maintain, and increase the ill-gotten gains for present and future generations.

Interestingly, a few white judges have recognized the principle of large-scale restitution as relevant to eliminating the effects of past discrimination. In one 1980s case, *Larry Williams et al. v. City of New Orleans, et al.*, liberal appellate justice John Wisdom argued in a partially dissenting opinion that the Congress that crafted the antislavery amendments to the Constitution and a major civil rights act at the Civil War's end intended to grant the federal government power “to provide for remedial action aimed at eliminating the present effects of past discrimination against blacks as a class. Wholly aside from the fourteenth amendment, the thirteenth amendment is an affirmative grant of power to eliminate slavery along with its ‘badges and incidents’ and to establish universal civil freedom. The amendment envisions affirmative action aimed at blacks as a race. When a present discriminatory effect upon blacks as a class can be linked with a discriminatory practice against blacks as a race under the slavery system, the present effect may be eradicated under the auspices of the thirteenth amendment.”⁷⁴ Given this historical argument, one can understand why many whites wish to break the historical link to past oppression. Recognition of that linkage creates great pressure for compensation and restitution.

Support for Some Reparations Most white Americans probably would consider significant reparations for group-based damages suffered by black Americans to be a radical and undesirable policy. However, white political leaders, white judges, and even ordinary whites have on occasion accepted the principle of reparations for past damages done to other groups. For example, U.S.

courts have required corporations to compensate the deformed children of mothers who in the past took harmful drugs during their pregnancies without knowing of the drug's side effects. The courts have held that such harm done to later generations was foreseeable by the corporate executives in power at that earlier point in time. The argument that those executives are gone or deceased was not allowed to take the corporation off the hook. Harmed children received significant compensation even though the damage became evident only years later.⁷⁵ This compensation principle is essentially the same as that asserted by those arguing for reparations for African Americans, whose current conditions often reflect the damage done by many earlier generations of whites.

Significantly, the U.S. government has justifiably been active in efforts to force the German government to make large-scale reparations (about \$60 billion) to Jewish and other victims of the Nazi Holocaust, even though no one in the current German leadership that is making the reparations was part of the Nazi government. Occasionally, U.S. leaders have also recognized a reparations principle in regard to discriminatory action taken against U.S. citizens. Belatedly, and after years of resistance, the U.S. government agreed to pay some very modest reparations to Japanese Americans wrongfully interned as “dangerous” in barbed-wire internment camps in the United States during World War II. In 1987 Congress passed a law including a formal apology to Japanese Americans for their oppressive internment, which was undertaken for essentially racist reasons, and providing \$1.2 billion in reparations. Significantly, this modest compensation was not made until Japanese Americans had a strong partner in an increasingly powerful Japanese government.

Specific Proposals for Black Reparations From the earliest days of abolitionist activity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries black leaders and their white allies argued that abolition of slavery and citizenship for African Americans were not enough. Some restitution enabling those freed to provide for their families was required. As we discussed in earlier chapters, during and after the Civil War anti-slavery leaders called for compensation for newly freed African Americans. At an 1865 Republican convention in Pennsylvania, one important congressional leader, Thaddeus Stevens, called for the taking of 400 million acres from former slave-holders. Another leading abolitionist, Senator Charles Sumner (Massachusetts), called for land grants to those recently enslaved. Legal equality was not enough, for that would not eradicate the “large disparities of wealth, status, and power.”⁷⁶ In 1866 and 1867 reparations legislation was brought to Congress, but it failed. After the southern oligarchy resumed control in the late 1870s, little was heard on the matter of assistance or restitution to those recently freed from slavery. Since the 1960s civil rights movement the idea of reparations has seen a major resurgence. In a 1963 book Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called for compensation for the slavery, segregation, and continuing discrimination faced by

African Americans. He recognized the principle of compensation for stolen wages.⁷⁷ Recall too the 1994 petition by the Nation of Islam to the United Nations for reparations for antiblack racism.

Over the last few decades scholars and activists have developed several international campaigns for reparations to Africans or African Americans. In mid-1992 a dozen experts were selected by the Organization of African Unity to develop a campaign for African reparations like those provided by the German government to Nazi Holocaust survivors. Moreover, in March 1996 the British House of Lords had a serious debate on the impact of slavery on Africa and Africans, with a few members of that House proposing the idea of reparations to Africa from Britain and other colonial nations. Lord Anthony Gifford eloquently defended the idea that international law requires those who commit crimes against humanity, including enslavement, to make significant reparations to their victims or their descendants. He noted there is no statute of limitations for crimes against humanity, so the still-harmed descendants of earlier victims of oppression deserve reparations. He also offered a concrete procedure, saying, “The claim would be brought on behalf of all Africans, in Africa and in the Diaspora, who suffer the consequences of the crime, through the agency of an appropriate representative body.... The claim would be brought against the governments of those countries which promoted and were enriched by the African slave trade and the institution of slavery.... The amount of the claim would be assessed by experts in each aspect of life and in each region, affected by the institution of slavery.”⁷⁸ Such a debate needs now to be held in the U.S. Congress. Indeed, every year since 1989 Congressman John Conyers, Jr. (Michigan) has introduced a bill in Congress to set up a commission to look into the continuing impact of slavery on black Americans and to examine the possibility of reparations for slavery and its lasting impact. A key feature of the commission would be to educate the public, especially the white public, on the racist realities of U.S. history. While Conyers has been unable yet to secure hearings on his bill, he has gotten thirty-one cosponsors and continues to work patiently for a public discussion of reparations. As he had recently commented, some day the “most hidden, important, silent subject we’ve ever had in this country” will come to the forefront. He added, “what we’re trying to do now is just get the debate going to see where it will lead us.”⁷⁹

In the case of African Americans, reparations might take several different but interrelated forms. One type of action would be the transfer of an appropriate amount of compensating wealth from white communities to black communities. For instance, the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N’COBRA), which is developing a reparations lawsuit, has sought nearly \$400 million in reparations—not just individual compensation but provision of programs enabling black communities to prosper over the long term. One way to

make some restitution is to provide well-funded and extensive programs, over several generations, at the local and state levels for upgrading the incomes, education, and skills of black Americans as individuals. A similar program could provide government resources to significantly upgrade major public facilities, including public schools, in all black communities. Yet another type of reparations would guarantee representative political participation in all local, state, and national legislatures, so that black Americans could have an appropriate voice in government decisions about their communities. These programs could be critical steps in an antiracist strategy designed to restore African Americans to the place they would have been, had not trillions of dollars worth in wealth been taken from them by means of slavery, segregation, and contemporary discrimination. Even the beginning of reparations would have significance beyond the monetary compensation, for it would constitute a dramatic symbolism, a recognition of the damage done by whites under nearly four centuries of systemic racism.

Building a Real Democracy It appears that few white Americans have ever envisaged for the United States the possibility of a truly just and egalitarian democracy grounded solidly in respect for human rights. Certainly, the founders did not conceive of such a possibility, even in the long run. Nor did later white leaders such as Presidents Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Dwight D. Eisenhower envision that type of democratic future. In my judgment, as the nation and the world change demographically and dramatically in the future, whites everywhere will face ever greater pressures to create and to participate in a new sociopolitical system that is nonracist, just, and egalitarian.

A Standard for Expanded Rights As another phase in a comprehensive antiracist strategy, Americans might be pressed to think futuristically and rigorously in terms of what an authentic democracy might be like. Americans, especially white Americans, might be pressured to step outside the existing U.S. system, as best they can, to think carefully about an ideal humane society. To evaluate the U.S. system and suggest a replacement, we might begin by drawing on the international rights perspective as described in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—a perspective that views every person as having a broad range of basic rights by virtue of being human. The idea that basic human rights *transcend* the boundaries and authority of any particular society or government was early articulated by Thomas Jefferson and his fellow revolutionaries. Today, we need to extend this idea well beyond what the founders envisioned. The international perspective on human rights was greatly strengthened by the Nuremberg trials of former members of the Nazi government just after World War II. The trials established the principle that some crimes, “crimes against humanity,” are so extreme that they are condemned by principles higher than the norms and laws of any particular nation-state.⁸⁰

The struggle to deal with the Nazi Holocaust, together with ongoing struggles for human rights by people in many countries around the globe—including black Americans in the United States—led to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This important international agreement stipulates in Article 1 that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights,” and in Article 7 that “all are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.” Article 8 further asserts, “Everyone has the right to an effective remedy...for acts violating the fundamental rights,” and Article 25 states that these rights extend to everyday life: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing.” Since 1948 numerous other international covenants on economic, social, and political rights have been signed by most United Nations members, and agencies like the UN Commission on Human Rights have been established to monitor human rights issues globally. The UN International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), put in force in 1969, specifically requires governments to make illegal the dissemination of ideas of racial superiority and the operation of organizations set up to promote racial discrimination. This convention, first ratified by some nations in the late 1960s, was ratified by the United States only in 1994. Today CERD commits the U.S. and other governments to “adopt all necessary measures for speedily eliminating racial discrimination in all its forms and manifestations.”⁸¹ These agreements provide some legal support for implementation of the human rights principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

International Pressure for Change Since its adoption the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been used in crafting many international treaties and agreements, and many of its major provisions are part of international law. Virtually all international documents on human rights at least allude to this declaration. At a 1993 World Conference on Human Rights more than one hundred nations reiterated support for its principles. Court systems in numerous nations have cited the declaration—on occasion in overturning patterns of discrimination. The United States has made less use of the declaration than many other nations. As of 1999, the Declaration had been cited in only 101 of the many U.S. federal court decisions, and then usually in an insignificant footnote. The Declaration has been cited only five times by the U.S. Supreme Court, and *not at all since 1970*. To this point in time, most U.S. courts have been unwilling to take this strong international statement of broad human rights seriously.⁸²

Recently, the International Human Rights Law Group (IHRLG) has begun an effort of public advocacy and assistance to U.S. civil rights groups that seeks to show the latter how they can use the language and techniques of international human rights agreements to further the antidiscrimination cause in the United States. This advocacy group is seeking to go beyond traditional civil rights approaches to build broad coalitions and familiarize civil rights groups with knowledge of international

human rights laws. They hope that placing continuing racial discrimination in the United States in the international spotlight will pressure the U.S. government to take more action to eradicate discrimination.⁸³

The comprehensive human rights perspective expressed in these UN documents draws not only on the progressive human rights traditions of Europeans but also from the human rights insights and perspectives of Native, African, Latino, and Asian Americans, and of other peoples around the globe. These UN agreements strongly affirm that human beings have rights independent of particular governments and press those governments to incorporate basic human rights into their everyday operations. They provide an internationally legitimated standard that can be used to judge and critique systemic racism in the United States. As noted above, they can be the basis for discussion at a new constitutional convention. Implementing this egalitarian standard of human interaction and development by new institutionalized arrangements to effect real democracy would dramatically restructure or eliminate current racist structures and institutions.

Major change away from racist institutions will require much more than one-way integration into existing institutions. Multifaceted integration and adaptation are critical—among European Americans, African Americans, and all other Americans of color. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once spoke of the movement of black Americans to be “creative dissenters who will call our beloved nation to a higher destiny,” and not to seek to integrate “into existing values of American society.”⁸⁴ A new U.S. society will require new human rights commitments, which will perhaps lead to the higher destiny that Dr. King contemplated. Ideally, the new social system would insure equality and justice in practice as well as in principle.

Certain human needs seem universal: the need for self-respect, for substantial control over one’s own life, for significant group self-management, and for access to the necessities of material life. In an authentic democracy there would need to be respect for a diversity of individuals, communities, and cultures. In the process of societal change, European Americans would come to view themselves as what Marimba Ani has described as “limited beings with limited powers, existing in a culture among cultures.”⁸⁵

Links with Other Antioppression Efforts Ultimately, a robust democracy is not possible without an elimination of all major types of oppression. Significant destruction of systemic racism is likely to be corrosive of other types of oppression. In this relatively short book, even as I have tried to dig deeply into one major type of social oppression, I have needed to discuss, albeit too briefly, some connections between racial, class, and gender oppression. Numerous scholars have noted the important interconnections between these types of oppression. For instance, Sandra Harding has argued that “We should think of race, class and gender as interlocking; one cannot dislodge one piece without disturbing the others.”⁸⁶ Not only racist structures, but capitalistic, sexist,

homophobic, ageist, and bureaucratic-authoritarian arrangements will have to be dismantled if the lives of individuals and the functioning of their communities are to be democratic and rid of anti-human oppression.

Historically, Marxist analysis has played perhaps the greatest role in generating protest movements against oppression in modern societies. Labor movements, many of them inspired by Marxist analysis, have brought improvements to the lives of workers in capitalist systems. Clearly, all Americans need access to sufficient economic, housing, and other social resources. Labor progressives have long argued that a full-fledged economic democracy is a requisite step in destroying structures of oppression and exploitation.⁸⁷ There are strong similarities and cross-cutting linkages between antiracist and class struggles. Ordinary white workers are exploited by the capitalist class and the latter's political and intellectual elites. White workers have little role in how their workplace or the general economy is run. However, as we have seen in earlier chapters, the white elite has worked hard to secure the acceptance of the existing racial and class hierarchies by white workers by offering them the psychological wage of whiteness, and white workers as a group have more privileges and opportunities than black workers.⁸⁸ A successful antiracist coalition across the color line will need to deal with white workers' commitments to racist privileges, stereotypes, and practices. Ultimately, many aspects of societal oppression will have to be dealt with, including not only antiblack and other racism among white male and female workers but also sexism among men of color and homophobia among whites and people of color.⁸⁹

Clearly, there are multiple societal oppressions, and no one analysis can adequately deal with all major oppressions. My argument in this book is that systemic racism is a central part of the foundation of U.S. society, and that a deep understanding of racism's history, framing, character, operation, and maintenance is essential both to making sense of this society generally and to destroying racist oppression. Having set this task, by no means do I downplay the importance of analyzing and fighting the other types of social oppression central to U.S. society, including class exploitation, sexism, and homophobia.

Over the last century there has been much conflict between those in one group fighting against a particular type of oppression and those in another group contending against yet another oppression, and so far there has been little joining together in more general antioppression efforts. Yet at the heart of each of these social movements are certain paramount issues that can be accented by those seeking to build successful coalitions now and in the future. Perhaps the most important idea held in common is that of ridding the society of oppressive domination by one group over another, together with the related idea of self-determination to the fullest extent possible for every group. With great effort and new imagination in organizing, perhaps this shared vision of a nation free of all such oppression and domination can be used to build successful coalitions in the future.

Conclusion Antiracism is more than a theoretical framework organizing, explaining, and interpreting the realities of systemic racism. Antiracism now and in the past has encompassed numerous strategies to eradicate racism. Many researchers have studied racial oppression. The point is to eradicate it.

The eradication of systemic racism requires more than removing inequalities and disparities in existing institutions. Steps in the direction of removing discrimination and inequalities, as we have seen, are important and will improve people's lives. However, the full eradication of racism will eventually require the uprooting and replacement of the existing hierarchy of racialized power. A developed antiracist strategy will eventually go beyond reform of current institutions to the complete elimination of existing systems of racialized power. One analysis of liberation strategies for the United States concluded that "oppressors cannot renounce their power and privilege *within* a racist relationship; they must *abandon* that relationship...there is no historical example of genuine, peaceful abdication of racist supremacy by the whole ruling group."⁹⁰ Historically, oppression leads to conflict, and major conflict often leads to significant social change. Most of the progressive developments in human rights in the United States and across the globe have come only after large-scale protests, people's movements, civil disobedience, open conflict, and revolutions. As Paul Lauren has noted, from the "emancipation of slaves after the French Revolution and United States Civil War to the gaining of independence by colonial peoples after World Wars I and II, the cause of human rights invariably has required some drastic upheaval to shift power away from those unwilling to share it voluntarily."⁹¹ Antiracist theorists and activists cannot prove that there will be change again, but they can act on the assumption that it is likely. As Ben Agger has noted about antioppression theory generally, "the future is a risk, a choice, framed by the past, the legacy of which is difficult to overcome. But critical social theorists...are certain that the past and present do not neatly extend into the future without any slippage."⁹² Human agency is possible in spite of oppressive structures, but it must be regularly supported and regenerated.

Why should whites support major changes in the system of racism? We have described the reasons that most whites resist societal change. Yet, we have also seen reasons for change as well. One is general but essential: whites have a moral obligation to take action, as individuals and as groups, to overturn the system of racism that they and their ancestors have created and make meaningful the clichés of freedom, equality, and justice they often proclaim. Jean-François Lyotard has underscored the deeper standard here: "Thou shalt not kill thy fellow human being: To kill a human being is not to kill an animal of the species *Homo Sapiens*, but to kill the human community...as both capacity and promise. And you also kill it in yourself. To banish the stranger is to banish the community, and you banish yourself from the community thereby."⁹³ Destroying the racial other means destroying one's own humanity.

If there is no real societal change in the near future, pressures for change will increase dramatically as whites become an ever smaller minority of the population over the course of the twenty-first century. As Abraham Lincoln once predicted, a “house divided against itself cannot stand.” At the time, Lincoln’s provocative metaphor accented the centrality and contradictions of slavery in U.S. society. We can extend it today to the reality of a nation still divided because of “slavery unwilling to die.” The question hanging over white Americans is this: Do white Americans wish to face open racial conflict, even racial war, for themselves, their children, or their grandchildren? During the 1960s urban rebellions numerous black leaders and a few white leaders pointed out that without social justice there can be *no* public order. This is still the long-term reality in the United States. Without social justice the nation will never achieve a democratic social order.

Black Americans remain at the center of the U.S. system of racial oppression, and their antiracist consciousness has perhaps the greatest potential for continuing challenges to the racist order. They have developed large-scale social change movements a few times in U.S. history, and smaller-scale movements many other times, and there will doubtless be more such movements in due course. While large-scale liberation movements have come and gone, strong efforts against racism have never disappeared. As a group, black Americans have not retreated to an enervating pessimism but have slowly pressed onward. They continue to join religious, civic, and civil rights organizations working to eradicate racism, to get civil rights laws enforced, and to secure better living conditions for themselves and for all Americans. Historically, this nation has seen periods when black Americans have changed what their “rulers perceive to be in their own best interests. The destabilizing effects of protest and resistance can alter the cost-benefit calculus so that change favorable to blacks actually comes to be in the interest of dominant forces.”⁹⁴ This was true during the abolitionist period from the 1830s to the 1860s and again during the civil rights movement and black rioting of the period from the 1950s to the early 1970s. Perhaps it can be so again.

The efforts of black Americans to free themselves from oppression have often stimulated other Americans of color to do the same. Inspired by black efforts or acting on their own, the latter have often reacted strongly to the variations of white oppression that specifically target them. Today, there are numerous antiracist and civil rights groups in the United States, including the American Indian Movement, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Puerto Rican Legal Defense Fund, the Japanese American Citizens League, the Asian American Legal Defense Fund, and the Organization of Chinese Americans. These and similar groups are working now for change in patterns of racial oppression. To take just one example, today Native American activists are organizing protest movements and fighting legal battles to force the federal

government to honor its hundreds of legal treaties. Today these groups are joined by an array of other organizations pressing for social justice, including women's organizations and gay and lesbian organizations. One major challenge today is to build united coalitions against the many types of established oppression.

The world around the United States is slowly but dramatically changing. A number of contradictions have emerged out of the global racist order originally created by the various colonial adventures of European nations. This imperialism created social and political structures that, then as now, have imbedded racist images, norms, and ideologies of subordination. International relations, global markets, global financial institutions, and multinational corporations are all racialized, with white European perspectives and agents often at their core. For centuries these Eurocentric institutions have been globalizing, dominant, and resistant to change. Today, however, there is much ferment against various types of oppression across the globe. Over the next century neither the United States nor the world is likely to stay the same. It seems likely that over the next century many groups and nations will move farther out from under the dominance of white Americans and Europeans. People everywhere are organizing for change. In recent years we have seen strong antiracism movements in South Africa and Brazil, and renewed labor movements in South Africa, Brazil, China, and Nigeria.

Today, people of African descent remain the globe's largest racially oppressed group, a group now resident in many countries. In the 1980s and 1990s we saw a systemically racist society, the Republic of South Africa, move from white to black political control and begin to change the rest of its social and economic structure of racism (apartheid) with relatively little bloodshed. Few social analysts predicted such a sea change, and even though South Africa faces many serious challenges before it attains full economic and political democracy, it has already changed faster and more substantially than any Western commentator or analyst had predicted. The possibility of a global democratic order rid of racism remains only a dream, but the South African revolution shows that it is a powerful dream. More changes in the world's racist system will likely come as the human spirit conquers the continuing realities of oppression, however daunting they may be. The chair of the Special United Nations Committee against Apartheid has recently expressed this hope: the "world can never be governed by force, never by fear, never by power. In the end what governs is the spirit and what conquers is the mind."⁹⁵