

THE WARPED PHENOMENON OF WHITE RACISM

Racism: A Short History

George M. Fredrickson

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Reviewed by Robert S. Griffin

On the History Channel recently, I saw what has become classic documentary footage from the mid-1950s of the entry of black students into the previously all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. President Eisenhower had dispatched federal troops to Little Rock to ensure that white resistance would not disrupt the court-ordered desegregation of the school. Two grainy black-and-white images come to mind from the footage: The first, a hundred or so soldiers marching down a city street twelve abreast toward the camera, rifles held diagonally in front of them, helmets obscuring their faces, heavy boots striking the pavement in unison. The second image, a black girl of about fifteen, dark-rimmed glasses, hair straightened and neatly combed, in a white blouse and dark skirt, clutching her school books tightly to her chest as she strides quickly toward the school steps amid soldiers and a throng of protesting whites.

I had seen these pictures time and again over the years and, as always, they were riveting—an incredibly tense time, a charged moment, that came through. But while the visceral impact of this footage was as strong as ever, I was struck by how drastically its meaning had changed for me this time. Always before, I had perceived these scenes in the same way. The protagonists had been the black students—I just looked it up, there were nine of them, and this was 1957. They were the focal actors in the drama, its heroes, if you will. They were the ones I cared about. Their fate was the central question at hand.

Drama involves conflict, and the conflict in this drama as I had always seen it until this last time was over whether or not these black children would achieve equal educational opportunity. The antagonists in the drama were the whites who were there that day. They were the “other,” faceless, nameless, the villains in the piece.

The morality in this conflict was clear-cut: the black children were on the side of justice, on the side of fairness and decency, on the side of progress, on the side of history. They were aligned with what America stands for at its core, at its best: justice for all. The whites, in contrast, represented the oppressive and cruel system of racial segregation. They embodied bigotry and backwardness. As for the soldiers, until this last time I saw them as being on the side of righteousness as they protected the innocent and peaceful black children from the mob of racist and violence-prone whites that pressed in upon them.

And every time but this last time the drama had had a happy ending: Through their bravery and determination, these black children, with the support of an enlightened civil rights leadership and a benevolent federal presence, won the right to go to school just like all children have the right to go to school, and that was a victory not only for them and the civil rights movement generally, but for us all. Their victory was a victory for America.

But this time for me the story was a different one. The pictures and the narration were the same as they had always been, but the drama had changed. This time, the protagonists weren't the black children but rather the white parents. I found myself looking beyond the faces of the black children in the foreground to the white faces in the background, bringing them into focus if I could. This time, instead of being “them,” the white people were “us,” my people. Who were they? I asked myself. Why haven't I ever heard from them? This time, the central issue wasn't justice for blacks; instead, it was whether the whites' cultural and racial integrity and freedom of association would be compromised. This time the drama was about democracy and the right of a people to control their own destiny rather than have it dictated from afar. This time the drama was about whether white children, as well as their parents, would be compelled at the point of a bayonet to acquiesce to something that in the deepest recesses of their beings they found abhorrent. This time the soldiers represented tyranny, not protection. And this time the story didn't have a happy ending. This time freedom lost, our republic lost, people of European heritage—white people, the white race—lost ... and this time I lost.

This Central High School footage had a completely different meaning for me this time and I knew why. I had written a book in the late 1990s—*The Fame of a Dead Man's Deeds*—about the late William Pierce, a white nationalist leader, and had followed that up with other writings that had brought me into contact with a number of racially conscious white Americans, and I had learned of another way of perceiving the race question in this country. Also, in the process

of researching these writing projects my own racial awareness and commitment had been heightened. So the change in my perception of the Central High School footage this last time is no great mystery.

What does intrigue me, however, is how I had come to see these events as I had all those other times. It certainly hadn't come from direct experience. I hadn't been in the South or around the people and events of that time. Rather, I had picked up my frame of reference—my basic assumptions, my outlook, what I thought the story was about—second hand: from what I had learned in school and from the media. That is to say, my contact with the civil rights movement in general and this Little Rock incident in particular had been mediated contact. What I knew, or thought I knew, had come to me vicariously, from, call it, the flow of public discourse, from the ideas and images in films, television, newspapers, mass market magazines, popular writings, from politicians, university professors and teachers in elementary and secondary schools. People had stood between me and reality, and they had depicted and interpreted it for me; that's what had happened.

I find it particularly interesting, looking back on this process, how absolutely certain I had always been that the facts and interpretations that had been presented to me and the frame, the story, I had created were valid. I find it remarkable now, thinking back on it, how I was completely, utterly confident that I knew what was going on in the area of race relations in America. It never occurred to me that there might be another way to look at these phenomena. The flow, or stream, of public discourse, as I'm calling it, had not simply given me a way to look at racial matters, it had provided me with what seemed to be the only defensible way to perceive this concern; to the point that, even though I hadn't investigated the situation for myself, I had a strong sense of superiority, a smugness, really. I was in the know and I was on the moral high ground. Plus, I belonged: I was a member of the enlightened group who were allied against the forces of darkness.

As I look back on it, I had done what we all do: I had distilled everything I had been told and shown about race and the civil rights movement and its leadership, all that I had taken from the stream of public discourse on this topic, and put together an overall sense of what was going on and ought to go on in the area of race in this country. The distillation had been easy in this instance. I hadn't encountered any conflicting views; there wasn't any complicating dissonance for me to resolve that I knew about. It's this process of deriving a "sense of it all" from the many particulars that is the angle I bring to a critique of George Fredrickson's recent book, *Racism: A Short History*. I look here at Fredrickson's book not from the perspective of his intentions or the specifics of what he writes but rather from the perspective of what I think a reader will take away from this book. My point is that the impact of this book on individual readers and on this society and culture will be less a function of what the book says than what readers take from it, what remains inside of them after reading it.

Fredrickson is professor emeritus of U.S. history at Stanford University and has a long publishing record in the area of race going all the way back to the 1960s. The titles of three of his books give a sense for how he approaches this topic: *The Black Image in the White Mind*; *White Supremacy*; and *Black Liberation*. *Racism: A Short History* is based on a series of lectures Fredrickson gave at Princeton University. The book is indeed short, but at least for me its plodding academic prose overcame its brevity and made for a long and tedious read. I suspect that the only people besides reviewers and academics in this area of inquiry who will read this book will be students who take it on as an assigned reading for courses. I know if I hadn't volunteered to review the book, I wouldn't have finished it.

Like so many so-called scholarly books, the Fredrickson book is largely a series of paraphrases of the writings of other academics. I didn't find it fresh: I brought only the average layman's level of knowledge on this topic to the book, and yet I'd heard just about all of this before somewhere or another. Frankly, the book read to me like the product of a sincere, dutiful, hard-working but uninspired graduate student. I work in a university and I have spent a lot of my time reading this kind of thing. What I find interesting is how much positive attention this pedestrian work has received in the mainstream media: "masterly," "learned and elegant," "intense, incisive," "crisp, clear prose," and so on. Clearly, this book is very appealing to those who metaphorically row their boats in the mainstream waters of public discourse. Fredrickson is telling them what they like to hear. Staying with the metaphor, Fredrickson doesn't rock any boats.

Racism: A Short History focuses on the persecution of Jews and blacks over the centuries, especially by Christians, and on three relatively recent phenomena: racism against Negroes in the Southern United States between 1890 and 1950; events in South Africa between 1910 and the 1980s; and the "horrendous climax," Fredrickson's words, of anti-Semitism in Germany between 1933 and 1945. I read the book a couple of weeks before writing this review and tried to be conscientious about it. Since I want to center this review on what is likely to be retained by the book's readers, I didn't go back through the book or any notes that I had made while reading it before answering the question, what am I left with after reading this book?

At the level of specificity, I remember very little of the flood of details I encountered in the book, and for the most part even with those I'm not altogether sure that something I think I recall wasn't actually gotten from some other source, some other time—again, so much of this book seemed familiar, derivative. One thing Fredrickson's book talks about that has stuck with me is the "curse of Ham." I remember that as the use of a passage in Genesis in centuries past to explain the plight of blacks. Blacks, so it goes, are descendents of Ham, who was the son of Noah, and are cursed and condemned to perpetual bondage because of Ham's mistreatment of his father. I just now checked the

book and found that with this curse of Ham idea, Fredrickson was reporting the work of a couple of other historians, Bernard Lewis and William McKee, and then reiterated it three times, which is perhaps why I remember it. There are a few other details like the curse of Ham business that I remember, but they don't amount to much. My contention, though, is that just because I and other readers—I assume I am a typical reader of this book—can't remember much of anything specific, it doesn't mean nothing came through to me, to us. Indeed, there were messages, generalizations, a basic feel of "all of it," what racism is about, that did come through to me and that I think add up to something important. Namely:

- *Racism is a failing of gentile whites.* In this book on the history of racism, every example of racist conduct, no exceptions, was committed by white gentiles. In the entire book, the only racists were white gentiles. It isn't much of a stretch to conclude, at a global, "totally felt" level, if not at the completely articulate level, that if you're talking about racism you are talking about white gentiles. And more, if you're a white gentile and the topic of racism comes up, it's about you.

- *There is absolutely no defensible reason at all for racism.* Its victims—minorities, Jews—have done nothing whatsoever to provoke racist actions against them. Racism is senseless and stupid and vile, period. No need to look any further into what precipitates it. Case closed.

- *Racism is a very wide-ranging phenomenon.* The Holocaust, enslavement, racial segregation, questions about the mutability of human beings, assertions that there are persistent physical or cultural differences among peoples, white separatist impulses, collective actions by whites, animosity toward Third World immigration, disapproval by whites of other groups, social exclusion—all are part of the same package, racism. In fact, the favorable critical reception of *Racism: A Short History* centers on Fredrickson's linkage of racism to a whole host of actions and thoughts (racism is thinking the wrong way as well as doing the wrong thing; a thought crime, if you will), especially as it ties racial animosity and anti-Semitism together. It should be pointed out, however, that this amorphous concept of racism has been common parlance in universities for years; it comes at students all the time. Fredrickson is simply reiterating and endorsing it.

- *The Christian church is suspect.* Yes, there is its universalism—we are all one under Jesus and so on—but that positive is outweighed by the negative of the Church's deprecation and abuse of Jews and blacks.

- *Gentile whites should carefully watch their step lest they be guilty of the sin of racism.* Affirmation of European traditions and one's white racial identity and solidarity with other whites? Criticism of minorities, refusal to defer to and serve minority interests? Talk about Jewish influence on American culture and foreign policy? Movement to create white organizations paralleling those serving the interests of minorities and Jews? Thinking or doing anything other

than liking and approving of minorities and Jews? Suppress those impulses; condemn them when they arise from within you. They are arguably racist in themselves, and in any case they place you on a slippery slope to outright oppression and even genocide.

Those basic messages are what I am left with two weeks after reading *Racism: A Short History*, and I suspect that that is what the university students who will read book for courses will be left with two weeks after the test.

So what do I conclude from all this?

First, unless you have insomnia that you are trying to combat I'm not recommending you read *Racism: A Short History*. Second, we need to keep in mind that the personal, social, and cultural impact of a book—or television show, or movie, or lecture, whatever—isn't what it says so much as it is what readers/viewers take away from it. Fredrickson's book may not be all that good as a piece of scholarship and work of prose, but it is very good at getting across certain fundamental messages to readers who choose to or, more likely, are compelled to read it. Third, what I am calling the flow of public discourse is very powerful in shaping how one perceives and lives in the world. To his credit, Fredrickson has actively participated in this public forum, this public dialogue, and other ways to put it. He has written books that generations of university students have read and will read. He has taught and graded thousands of the best and the brightest at one of America's premier universities. If you and I have a story about race to tell different from the one the Fredricksons of the world are telling, we are going to have to find a way to get our boats into the mainstream waters.

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