

WHAT A LONG, STRANGE TRIP IT'S BEEN

White Guilt

How Blacks and Whites Together

Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era

Shelby Steele

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Reviewed by David Wilson

As a biracial man¹ critical of affirmative action, Shelby Steele proves his own point. His writings appear in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, and he has been awarded the National Humanities Medal by President George W. Bush for his “learned examinations of race relations.” Meanwhile, no white critic of affirmative action finds himself hoisted as high on fellow whites’ shoulders.

Whites would be too guilt-stricken. Credibility on racial matters today is reserved to nonwhites (or farcically penitent white liberals), leaving white conservatives confined to channeling their frustrations through the occasional pundit with the proper ethnic credentials. Not even white advocacy is immune to the desire for the protection that comes with “but a black person said that, not me.”

Typically, the phenomenon is limited to black exhortations for more personal responsibility on the part of blacks, or less blaming of whites for their ills. But in *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era*, Steele transcends this by making a close examination of the effects of having stripped white America of its moral authority on the way to “civil rights” for blacks. Not all were salutary, he says.

Steele predictably lauds the death of “white supremacy.” And it will not serve as a spoiler to say that inherent differences between blacks and whites do not figure in his analysis. Still, as a writer naturally divested of white guilt himself, Steele makes useful observations that deserve consideration. His personal reflections about how easy it was for him to take advantage of white guilt are especially revealing.

Part of Steele's inspiration came while watching the Clinton/Lewinsky sex scandal unfold in the 1990s. He observed how it might have played out in the 1950s compared to how President Eisenhower's reported use of a racial slur would have played out in the 1990s. Steele stands in awe of the fact that Clinton, caught receiving oral sex from a White House intern and then willing to lie about it, would be able to finish his presidential term. In Eisenhower's day, there is no question that such a scandal would have ended the term immediately. Meanwhile, Eisenhower in his day was reported to say "nigger" casually while playing golf, something that in Clinton's era would have just as quickly ended a presidency.

Both men, Steele says, were able to skate through because the morality of the time held no sanction for their respective actions. Today, race has replaced sex as the North Star of moral obsession. He rightly describes the new racial morality as not simply inflexible, but hysterical in the face of dissenting opinion. "America is puritanical rather than relativistic around racism, and if Clinton had been caught in this way, it was very likely that nothing would have saved him," Steele writes. "The very legitimacy of the American democracy in this post-civil rights era now requires a rigid, if not repressive, morality of racial equality."

Part of Steele's thesis in *White Guilt* is bold even when measured against the writings of white advocates: It is that the gutting of white moral authority led not only to an imbalanced approach to race, but to the entire parade of left-wing horrors of the 1960s that continues to this day. If it is not too much to say that what Steele derides as "white supremacy" was in fact a central pillar in our cognitive framework, then its destruction was a catastrophe for us.

The conditions of that era were ideal for toppling white society. As American society came to require unquestioning adherence to the notion of racial equality, such trifles as traditional roles for men and women or sexual modesty became short work for the culture-subverters. In other words, if whites were so fundamentally wrong about something as central as race, how could they be right about anything? The onset of white guilt, Steele writes, became "the vacuum in moral authority created by *all* of white America's moral failings and infidelity to democracy: racism, sexism, imperialism, materialism, conformity, environmental indifference, educational inequality, superficiality, greed, and so on...the resulting loss of moral authority was the great vacuum that literally called the counterculture consciousness into being."

In a *Wall Street Journal* article² published after the book, Steele further characterizes white guilt as a general loss of will that extends to both racial and ostensibly nonracial matters: immigration, education, and so on. We tread lightly in our military adventurism because we are bound by guilt over attacking poor brown countries, for instance.

Like so many others, Steele allows no room for positive forms of white consciousness, such as recognition of differences that call for social boundar-

ies or group self-determination. There is only “white supremacy,” and this means, roughly, genocide, slavery, and overt dominance. Yet Steele’s apparent acknowledgment of the centrality of race is a good start. Race is a topic on which you are either very right or very wrong, and the remaining issues orbit accordingly. Steele, as a conservative champion of many positions that once orbited “white supremacy,” might ask himself about the chances of those physics.

What Steele would likely never say is that it wasn’t an untruth whites were stripped of—it was an essential truth. Races are indeed different, and solutions to racial conflict that do not account for this are bound to fail. This, I believe, is what explains the utter mental paralysis that continues to this day. Forced to mouth a belief in racial equality despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, whites became as broken-minded as Winston Smith in the throes of his Big Brother acceptance training.

The societal collapse unfolding today is not the expected result of a necessary corrective, as with a population wrenched away from backward superstition and steered firmly toward scientific truth (resulting in, say, better medical treatment or greater industrial output). It is instead the result of a population forced to accept a terribly mistaken notion as the foundation for all other moral, social, and political thought: absolute racial equality, deviations from which are explained only by white evil.

Steele is stronger when criticizing the whites who posture most ardently as antiracists or racial egalitarians. These whites would presumably have us all know that the happiness and progress of blacks is their only priority, but Steele is almost certainly correct that it is much more an exercise in making those whites themselves feel good. Says Steele, “In the age of white guilt, whites support all manner of silly racial policies without seeing that their true motivation is simply to show themselves innocent of racism.” To catalogue examples of this would be exhausting.

Another strong point of Steele’s is that black defiance of whites is not often a function of white oppression—and in fact might demonstrate its absence. Black slaves, Steele notes, were undeniably oppressed, yet for them to react violently would have meant only swift punishment. Today, many blacks nurse a deep sense of grievance against whites, but it is white guilt that clears the field for their charge. “Anger is acted out by the oppressed only when real weakness is perceived in the oppressor,” Steele writes. Whites are now at the nadir of their weakness, unable as they are to even think privately to themselves about being white as anything but unwanted membership in a loosely defined group properly bound only for subservience and an eventual blessed extinction that will clear the path for global utopia.

But for all the sound observations Steele makes, it is when prescribing solutions to race problems that he reverts to more predictable—and thus wrong—ideas. To overcome both inequality and white guilt, whites are

advised to treat blacks more as individuals than abstractions or members of a sacred group. Yet whites cannot do this today for the very reason they erred in another era: They correctly perceive a deeply foreign people, and in attempting to process this in a manner acceptable to the times, react with awkward and outsized gesticulations. Where whites once enslaved blacks, they now offer themselves for enslavement.

A better path would be to acknowledge inherent difference and allow racial groups to proceed in their own respective directions. The “promise” of civil rights Steele refers to in his title cannot be kept because race cannot be made not to matter. Until “blacks and whites together” is considered as the problem and not the goal, we will continue to struggle in vain.

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ENDNOTES

1. Steele’s father was black and his mother was white.
2. “White Guilt and the Western Past,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 2, 2006.