



William Raspberry

Critical Time for Blacks

THE THING that was so recently black America's major frustration may well turn out to be its chief hope: that America is such a massive, lumbering, mastodon of a creature that it is extremely difficult to alter its course, much less turn it around.

It was the despair of the freedmen that laws and constitutional amendments granting full rights to former slaves had so little effect on the way those former slaves were treated by their legal equals.

It was a frustration to blacks who fought in the two world wars, or who worked in American defense

plants during those crises, that the respect paid to black patriotism and black industriousness scarcely outlived the national emergency.

And it is agonizingly frustrating to leaders of the 1960s civil rights movement that, in spite of nonviolent restraint on the part of the activists and strong leadership on the part of the national government, the simple justice of the black appeal never quite seemed to make the nation repudiate racism. The beast lumbered on.

Or so it seemed at the time. What seems a good deal clearer now is that, although the change in direction was by no means complete, America during the 1960s did substantially reduce the speed at which it was headed in the wrong direction.

FOR A while, in fact, it appeared—at least to the optimists among us—that by the time the Kerner Commission addressed itself to the prospect of a headlong plunge toward two separate, unequal societies, the trend had almost ended.

At the very least, the country appeared for a while to be trying to turn around, albeit not very gracefully. The beast, it seems, was too ungainly.

But the very resistance to change may have had the effect of making each new change that much more permanent. It may be more apparent (because of the starker contrast) in the South than elsewhere, but it now has been demonstrated that people can learn new habits of dealing with each other. And while it may have taken a frustratingly long time for the new habits to take root, that may also mean that they will last for a time.

What makes this so important now is the growing pressure in the direction of undoing the racial progress of the 1960s, for a return to the days of bigotry without embarrassment.

The pressure was always there, of course. But enlightened national leadership had succeeded in repressing

it, reducing it almost to the level of a recessive gene.

George Wallace knew it was there; his political approach was based on that knowledge. Wallace, however, never was quite able to capitalize on his insight, thanks largely to America's new sense of guilt over its latent bigotry. Wallace fanned the sparks, all right, but rather like an attractive streetwalker fans sparks in a respectable gentleman. He's interested, and pleased that she's noticed him; but he's not about to embrace her in public.

PRESIDENT Nixon has demonstrated that he has the political savvy to capitalize on America's recessive bigotry by giving it dignity. What is embarrassing about embracing a tart is not that she is a tart but that other people know she is. Give her an air of respectability, and you'd be amazed at the number of respectable men who will take up with her.

The President's understanding of this is what makes him such a formidable politician, and it is what makes the next few years particularly hazardous for the aspirations of black people.

It isn't that Mr. Nixon is interested in undoing racial progress; it is that he is interested in the political support of those who are.

He won't stand in any schoolhouse door, or say "never" to racial progress. He will simply give bigotry a cloak of respectability.

It's embarrassing to be called a segregationist, or to be accused of denying hiring and promotion opportunities to blacks. But it sounds almost philosophical to be opposed to "forced busing" or "forced housing" or "quotas."

That kind of game could quite possibly lead to a replay of the post-Reconstruction period when the national government abandoned black America to its natural enemies.

The best hope now is that the country has sufficient momentum in the direction of racial justice that the next few years won't be enough to turn it around.