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Racial Attitudes of Black Students during the Reagan Era

Luke Trip

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INTRODUCTION

The 1980s was a period when Blacks experienced setbacks and reversals in various areas of social life. Did the setbacks cause Blacks to turn away from whites? This is the question that is addressed in this study of the racial attitudes of Black college students. The purpose of this research is to describe the attitudes of Black students toward Whites during the Reagan era and compare their attitudes with the attitudes of the general Black population. To provide a background to interpret our findings, we will review the major political and economic events of the 1980s or the Reagan years.

THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY UNDER REAGANISM

The 1980s was the decade of Reaganism, a period in which the right wing of the Republican party held sway over the political direction of the country. This did not bode well for life in the African-American community. Virtually all of the major indicators of the well being of the African-American community showed that it was in a state of crisis. The social fabric of the community, which had been weakened in the 1970s by some general conservative trends, was torn further apart in the 1980s by long-term unemployment and underemployment, low wage jobs, reduced real income, smaller college participation rates, increased deterioration in the quality of elementary and secondary education, increased impoverishment of the youth, reduction of health and social services, a drop in the accessibility of decent housing, and a general increase of anxiety and insecurity (Albelda et al., 1988; Blackwell, 1985; Palmer and Sawhill, 1984).

Despite these devastating forces and trends, which weakened the economic security and eroded the income of a large segment of the African-American community, the middle class continued to grow in the 1980s (Dingle, 1989). However, the gulf between the middle class and lower class also grew. According to a recent National Research Council study, the proportion of African-American families with incomes over $35,000 grew from 15.7 percent to 21.2 percent between 1970 and 1986, while the proportion of African-American families with incomes of less than $10,000 also grew substantially, from 28.8 percent to 30.2 percent (Dingle, 1989).

Political Gains and Community Decline

Although the Reagan administration attempted to stifle African-American political participation through a program of reducing the role of the Legal Enforcement Assistance Administration in dealing with matters arising under the provisions of legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, African-American political activism increased dramatically in the 1980s (Franklin and Moss, 1988). This increased level of political

participation was reflected in the growth of the number of African-American elected officials, which rose from 4,912 in 1980 to 6,056 in 1985 (Franklin and Moss, 1988). Two political campaigns, which greatly inspired the active involvement of the African-American community, were those of Jesse Jackson who was a presidential candidate in 1984 and again in 1988, and Harold Washington who became the first African-American mayor of the city of Chicago in 1983 and won re-election in 1987 (Franklin and Moss, 1988). Even though the African-American community made impressive political gains in the 1980s, it seemed to many that those gains were not translated into decisive economic power to significantly reverse the continuous decline in the living conditions of the majority of African-Americans (Tilly and Valenzuela, 1990). Nevertheless, the main point is that Blacks responded to the conservative political climate with greater political activity rather than with resignation (Gurin, Hatchett & Jackson, 1989).

Cultural Changes

An invigorated cultural movement, which emphasized the African heritage of Blacks, gained momentum during the 1980s. African jewelry and medallions and clothes with African inspired patterns came into vogue along with Afrocentric artifacts. This reaffirmation of African values and standards was also reflected in hair styles, music, and dance, particularly among the youth. The rapid growth of this cultural movement has been noted by the retail industry which has witnessed an expanding market for Afrocentric products and a boom in the number of Afrocentric shops (Gadsden, 1990).

The negative impact of the policies implemented under the Reagan administration on the African-American community and the growth of the Afrocentric cultural movement during the 1980s may help explain the increased student activism around the issues of racial and social diversity as it relates to the curriculum (Watkins, February, 1990; Magner, November, 1990), the rise in the number of Black student protest rallies and demonstrations against administrators on various campuses (Leatherman, September, 1990; Manger, June, 1990; Magan, May, 1990), the increased enrollment at historically Black colleges (Wilson, October, 1990), the growing number of students who choose academic majors that meet some social need (Dodge, December, 1990), the rise in tensions between Black and white students (Cage, November, 1990; Magner, November, 1990; Chronicle, January, 1990), the formation of Afrocentric student groups, and the popularity of militant Black leaders, especially Louis Farrakhan and Malcolm X (Collison, February, 1990). This broad multi faceted description of social reality for the African-American community in the 1980s is one which suggests that the social conditions were ripe for a shift away from White society.

Black Racial Attitudes

What effect did these changes have on the African-American psyche as it relates to Blacks' attitudes toward Whites? We will examine how these conditions may have affected the racial attitudes of Black students during this period. Studies of racial attitudes indicate that during the latter 1960s at the height of the intensity of the Black liberation movement, Black students were becoming much more negative in their perception of White people (Banks, 1970). In the 1980s, the rhetoric and actions of Black students suggested that they were becoming more alienated from White society. On many campuses the strident call for Afrocentricism coupled with pro-

Black rhetoric frequently prompted questions as to the extent of anti-white feelings present in young Blacks.

Marx (1967) found that Black pride and anti-White attitudes were inversely related. In fact, his data indicated that variables such as intellectual sophistication, high morale, and positive self-image correlated negatively with anti-White sentiment. Pettigrew (1969) cautions us not to confuse "Black power" ideas with racial separatism. He thinks that as a presumed intervening stage, Black separatism is more concerned with group pride and "local control," more a retreat from Whites than an attempt to dominate them. On the basis of their extensive 1968 survey of Black residents in fifteen major cities, Campbell and Schuman (1968) concluded:

> Separatism appeals to from five to eighteen percent of the Black sample, depending on the question, with the largest appeal involving Black ownership of stores and Black administration of schools in Black neighborhoods, and the smallest appeal the rejection of Whites as friends or in informal contacts. Even on questions having the largest appeal, however, more than three-quarters of the Black sample indicate a clear preference for integration. Moreover, the reasons given by respondents for their choices suggest that the desire for integration is not simply a practical wish for better material facilities, but represents a commitment to principles of nondiscrimination and racial harmony.

Bobo (1987a) found that alienation from contemporary White society does not vary substantially between persons of low and high social status (as measured by education and family income), between younger and older people, northerners and southerners, or between men and women. His research also revealed that Blacks increasingly expressed skepticism that progress in civil rights was being made in the 1980s (Bobo, 1987b). What emerges from these and other studies is a rather complex and sometimes contradictory description of the attitudes of Blacks. What do the data show in this study regarding the racial attitudes of Black students toward Whites?

METHOD

This is a longitudinal study of a non random sample of the racial views and attitudes of 679 African-American undergraduate students (375 males and 304 females) who attended Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, a large predominately White institution, in the 1980s. The students were enrolled in August 1984 (118 males and 86 females), January 1985 (57 males and 59 females), August 1986 (54 males and 52 females), September 1987 (93 males and 56 females) and March 1989 (53 males and 51 females). This sample represents about 7 percent of the Black students. About half were from the Chicago Metropolitan area. Slightly more than half described their own neighborhoods as predominately Black and middle class.

During a regularly scheduled class hour, the students completed a questionnaire that elicited their social views and attitudes. Their racial attitudes were measured in terms of responses to social distance questions concerning their willingness to take part in various social settings involving contact with Whites. The survey instrument consisted of items constructed to measure their feelings about racially mixed neighborhoods, schools, places of work, parties, marriages, and political organizations. The data was analyzed using statistical techniques appropriate for

nominal variables; chi-square was used as the statistical test of significance and Cramer's V provided the statistical measure of association.

SOCIAL RELATIONS AND ATTITUDES

Neighborhood Background

First, let us get a background profile of the students in terms of their home environment. About 60 percent of the respondents described their neighborhoods as mostly Black, and a consistent majority over the years, ranging from 80 percent to 67 percent, characterized their neighborhoods as being at least middle class.

Most were familiar with Whites through personal social interaction. Close to a majority had almost daily contact with Whites in their neighborhoods, and they were open to socializing with them in their neighborhoods. However, only about a third had frequent contact with Whites in their homes. A rather small minority ranging from 27 percent to 10 percent indicated a negative attitude toward socializing with Whites.

Table I shows that a consistent majority over the years ranging from 74 percent to 56 percent preferred to live in a neighborhood that was about equally mixed rather than a neighborhood that was either predominantly White or Black.

TABLE I Respondents' description of the racial composition of the type of neighborhoods they would like to live in: 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1989 • What type of neighborhood would you like to live in?					
NEIGHBORHOOD	1984	1985	1986	1987	1989
Almost completely	9%	9%	5%	13%	13%
Mostly Black	12%	15%	18%	20%	21%
Equally integrated	73%	74%	72%	56%	60%
Mostly White	5%	2%	5%	7%	6%
Almost completely White	1%	1%	1%	4%	1%
Number	202	117	108	162	126

School

When we consider schools, we see the same pattern. A consistent majority over the years ranging from 80 percent to 68 percent preferred to enroll their children in a school that was about equally mixed rather than one that was either predominantly White or Black. (See Table II.)

TABLE II Respondents' description of the racial composition of the type of school they would like their children to attend: 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1989 • What type of school would you like to send your children to?					
RACIAL MIX 0F SCHOOL	1984	1985	1986	1987	1989
Almost completely	3%	2%	5%	9%	5%
Mostly Black	6%	10%	11%	9%	14%
Equally integrated	79%	80%	78%	68%	73%
Mostly White	9%	9%	5%	9%	9%
Almost completely White	3%	0%	2%	5%	0%
Number	202	116	107	161	125

It seems that their preference for racially mixed neighborhoods is reflected in national surveys. For the past three decades, national samples of Blacks have been surveyed about their preferences between racially mixed and Black neighborhoods. Two-thirds to three-quarters of Black respondents have consistently chosen mixed neighbors (Jaynes & Williams, 1989). Similarly, their preference for racially mixed schools was in accord with data from national surveys. An analysis of survey trend data collected between 1972 and 1982 by Gallup, National Opinion Research Center (NORC), and Institute for Social Research (IRS) reveal that the majority of Black respondents believed Black and White children should go to the same school (Schuman, Steeh, & Bobo, 1985).

Church

The most prevalent religious affiliation among the students was the Baptist denomination. Over the years only a small minority ranging from 31 percent to 20 percent worshipped on a regular basis with Whites in church. However, a solid majority ranging from 81 percent to 67 percent indicated that they were open to worshipping with Whites.

General Social Interactions and Attitudes

What about places and institutions outside of their neighborhood? One of the most significant places of social interaction is the workplace. The data indicated that about two- thirds of the students frequently (at least once a week) worked with Whites at jobs, and only a small minority ranging from 20 percent to 10 percent indicated a negative attitude toward working with Whites at their jobs. Moreover, a consistent majority over the years ranging from 77 percent to 60 percent preferred a workplace that was about equally mixed rather than one that was either predominantly White or Black.

With regard to other social settings, the data show that the students had a liberal attitude about socializing with Whites. For instance, a majority, ranging from 74 percent to 58 percent, had

frequent contact with Whites in voluntary organizations, but only a small minority ranging from 16 percent to 7 percent indicated a negative attitude toward working with Whites. Likewise, only a small minority ranging from 12 percent to 9 percent indicated a negative attitude toward participating with Whites in sports. Regarding more intimate and informal settings such as parties, the data again revealed that most of the students were open to socializing with Whites at parties, however, only a minority did so on a frequent basis. Over the years about a third of the students frequently (at least once a week) socialized with Whites at parties. These findings suggest that their attitudes concerning their willingness to socially interact with Whites in various social settings were fairly stable. Furthermore, their unchanged preferences were for social settings that could be generally described as racially integrated.

Interracial Marriage

Interracial marriage between Blacks and Whites is a controversial issue framed by America's strongest mores and taboos. This issue remains a very sensitive one in the U.S., especially for White people. Myrdal (1944) hypothesized that Whites' greatest concern regarding social contact with Blacks was intermarriage and sexual intercourse involving White women. Recent attitudinal survey data support his hypothesis (Jaynes and Williams, 1989). Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo (1985) examined responses to questions concerning interracial marriage that were included in a series of national surveys conducted by Gallup and the National Opinion Research Center. In response to the question, "Do you think there should be laws against marriage between Blacks and Whites?", the proportion of Whites who responded yes was 62 percent in 1963, 61 percent in 1964, 44 percent in 1968, 60 percent in 1972, 29 percent in 1977, 22 percent in 1980, and 34 percent in 1982. And in response to the question, "Do you approve or disapprove of marriage between whites and nonwhites?", the percent who disapproved was 96 percent in 1958, 73 percent in 1972, 67 percent in 1978, and 60 percent in 1983. More recently, in 1990, a significant proportion of Whites, 1 in 5, still believed that interracial marriages should be illegal. Only 4 percent of Whites actually viewed interracial marriages in a favorable light. Furthermore, about 66 percent were opposed to close relatives marrying Blacks (Wilkerson, 1991). In contrast, the disapproval response pattern of Blacks to interracial marriages was 24 percent in 1972, 23 percent in 1978, and 22 percent in 1983. The results of a 1990 study showed that among Blacks, 66 percent neither favored nor opposed interracial marriages.

This decline in the level of disapproval of interracial marriages among Blacks and Whites, but especially Whites, is reflected in an increase in the number and rate of mixed marriages. However, there are probably factors more important than this shift in attitudes that explain the trend of a growth of interracial marriages. The number and rate of interracial marriages is increasing, and Black men are more likely to marry outside their race than Black women. According to the U.S. Bureau of the census, There were 211, 000 Black-White interracial marriages in 1990, 150,000 (71 percent) involving Black males and White females and 61,000 (29 percent) and uniting White males and Black females (Pinkney, 1993). Black/White marriages in U.S.A. was 1.5/1000 in 1970 as compared with 4/1000 in 1990 (Wilkerson, 1991; Tucker, 1990). Another indicator of the trend of intimate interracial social contact is the so-called interracial baby boom. Black/White births increased from 8,700 in 1968 to 45,000 in 1989 (Futurist, 1993).

What are some of the social factors that may explain the rise in interracial marriages? For the past three decades, there has been an increase in the number of concrete situations and opportunities for informal social interactions between Blacks and Whites. Concurrently, there has been a general weakening of social taboos and inhibitions. These trends may help explain the increase in the rate of interracial marriages.

Consistent to a remarkable degree with national survey data, the findings from this study indicated that over the years only a small minority of the Black students disapproved of interracial marriage. Table III shows that over the years only a small minority ranging from 27 percent to 10 percent disapproved of interracial marriage. However, it should be noted that the trend was toward higher disapproval. Further analysis revealed that the trend could be attributed to a shift among men toward higher disapproval. The gender difference between those who disapproved of interracial marriage was statistically significant in 1984 when only 5 percent of the men disapproved of interracial marriage as compared with 18 percent of the women. By 1989, about 28 percent of both groups disapproved of interracial marriage. The shift among the men toward higher disapproval may be related to the increased influence of the Afrocentric movement with its emphasis on Black pride which may, in the area of family life, translate into the idea of marrying only black women (Tucker, 1990). To keep this in perspective, however, a large majority of both men and women did not disapprove of interracial marriage over the years, and their attitudes reflected the national pattern for Blacks.

TABLE III Respondents' attitudes toward interracial marriage: 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1989 • Do you approve of interracial marriage?					
INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE	1984	1985	1986	1987	1989
Strongly approve	20%	15%	18%	7%	14%
Approve	39%	43%	26%	23%	26%
Indifferent	31%	29%	42%	43%	33%
Disapprove	3%	5%	7%	13%	13%
Strongly disapprove	7%	8%	8%	13%	14%
Number p<.003.	198	112	105	136	120

Why would Black women tend to disapprove of interracial marriage more than Black men? Black women as compared with Black men may tend to feel more threatened by the phenomenon of interracial marriage. Their image of an interracial couple tend to be one of a Black husband and a White wife. Thus, many may see themselves as competitors with White women for "desirable" Black men. For them, interracial marriages represent a threat to their chances of finding eligible Black men (Paset, 1991). Their perceptions are consistent with the findings of some studies. Gonzales (1992) noted that Black men with White wives tend to have higher status jobs, greater incomes, and more education than Black men with Black wives. There are other important factors, but competition may be the most relevant.

Racial Discrimination

The data of this study show that the students tended to become somewhat more pessimistic about dramatically reducing racial discrimination. There was a significant increase (from 45 percent in 1984 to 65 percent in 1989) in the proportion of students who chose the pessimistic alternative "Whites are so opposed to Blacks getting their rights that it's practically impossible to end discrimination in America," rather than the optimistic alternative "Certainly enough Whites support the goals of the Blacks for Americans to see considerable progress in wiping out discrimination."

The data also show that over the years, there was an increase in the proportion of students who indicated that they had experienced some racial discrimination in employment (from 61 percent to 87 percent) and housing (from 24 percent to 47 percent). However, only a small minority ranging from 6 percent to 18 percent indicated they experienced a great deal of discrimination. This trend could be related to the observed shift among the students toward pessimism about dramatically reducing racial discrimination.

National surveys document a widespread belief among Blacks that racial discrimination continues to be a major problem. The 1979-1980 National Survey of Black Americans found that 41 percent of Blacks believed that most White people want to "keep Blacks down," 36 percent thought most Whites "don't care" one way or the other, and 23 percent thought most Whites wanted to see Blacks get a "better break." The 1982 General Social Survey revealed that one-third of Blacks believed that Blacks with qualifications comparable to those of Whites could "almost never "expect to obtain as good a job as a White person, and 55 percent responded that Blacks would obtain comparable earnings only "sometimes" (Jaynes and Williams, 1989). In a more recent nationwide study of more than 1,100 American youth age 15-24, almost half (46 percent) of the Blacks viewed Blacks as victims of discrimination and 60 percent supported affirmative action initiatives (Baskerville, 1992).

In contrast, 48 percent of Whites believed that Blacks have special advantages; a mere 4 percent believed that Blacks are discriminated against; also, not surprisingly, 65 percent of Whites oppose affirmative action initiatives toward minorities (Baskerville, 1992). Many studies indicate that for the past 40 years there has been a growing White acceptance of racial equality in the abstract, but this trend has not been reflected in their approval of concrete policies designed to make the idea of racial equality a reality (Schuman, Steeh, & Bobo, 1985).These patterns suggest a paradox which underlies the dynamic social tensions between Blacks and Whites.

Perceptions of Other Groups ' Feelings toward Blacks

This study also attempted to describe the students' perception of the feelings of other groups toward Blacks. In general, two groups' favorable or unfavorable attitudes toward each other tend to be mutual. Since the major social cleavages in America are along racial and class lines, it may be useful to examine the students' perceptions of the racial feelings of other groups who can be categorized in terms of race and class. The students were asked to consider the racial attitudes of four groups: White upper middle class, White middle class, White working class, and non Black

groups of color. They responded to two questions , one phrased positively and the other negatively, to get their perceptions. The positive question was "Which group do you think is friendliest toward Blacks?" and the other was "Which group do you think is the most hostile toward Blacks?"

The data revealed a consistent pattern that indicated the students perceived the non Black groups of color as friendlier toward Blacks as compared with any of the other White social classes. In 1989 approximately 61 percent thought that non Black groups of color were friendliest as compared with 3 percent who thought that the White-upper middle class was friendliest. Negatively underscoring this finding, Table IV shows that the respondents perceived the White upper middle-, White middle-, and White working classes as more hostile toward Blacks than non-Black groups of color. A consistent majority thought that the White upper middle class was the most hostile toward Blacks. Kluegel and Smith (1986) suggest that the estrangement between Blacks and upper income Whites may be greater than it is for lower income Whites. They found that higher income Whites tend to adhere to equalitarian principles to a lesser extent than lower income Whites.

Both the 1979-1980 National Survey of Black Americans and the 1982 General Social Survey tapped the extent to which Blacks believed that White individuals and institutions can or cannot be relied on to treat them fairly. Responses to questions on feelings of trust and affinity with whites revealed many Blacks expressed moderate to high levels of estrangement (Jaynes and Williams, 1989).

TABLE IV Respondents' perceptions of non Black groups hostility toward Blacks :1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1989 • Which group do you think is the most hostile toward Blacks?					
NON BLACK GROUPS	1984	1985	1986	1987	1989
White upper middle class	60%	57%	51%	51%	60%
White middle class	12%	13%	15%	18%	19%
White working class	21%	29%	33%	25%	19%
Racial minorities	7%	3%	1%	6%	2%
Number	201	115	106	159	123

Political Attitudes toward Whites

Are these perceptions of the students related to some of their political views? When asked to choose the group that would make the best ally, the data revealed that the students perceived non Black groups of color as being better allies than any one of the White classes. The students' did not indicate a significant preference among the different White social classes.

By large majorities (93 percent to 86 percent) they tended to approve of inviting other racial minorities to join Black political organizations. Moreover, the data showed that the students were also receptive to political alliances with White social classes. It is reasonable to expect that Black students would think that other non Black groups of color would probably be more reliable

allies than White groups given the saliency of race over social class. This suggests a strong inclusive tendency to unite in struggles with other groups of color. This inclusiveness even extended to Whites. This tendency was evident further by their responses to questions related to the presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson.

Another way this study attempted to gauge the students' attitudes toward Whites was to examine their views on Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign themes. The data indicated that a large majority of the respondents (about 87 percent for each survey) thought that Jesse Jackson's presidential campaigns had increased Black political influence in the political arena. Amazingly, this finding is exactly the same as the one in a national study conducted by Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson (1989).

When asked "What single national or local leader or organization best expresses your views on the relations between the races ?", the overwhelming majority (over 90 percent) mentioned Jesse Jackson. Others mentioned included Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Harold Washington, Andrew Young, Coretta Scott King, Louis Farrakhan, and Tom Bradley. In response to the question "What views of this person or organization do you agree with?" The main themes were, Black advancement (38%), interracial cooperation (29%), racial equality (25%), and Black unity (7%). Typical comments were the following:

Black advancement : "strive for excellence," "We must take an active part in our political system to achieve social reform," "Blacks can be whatever they want to be; all it takes is hard work," "Blacks are oppressed and we need to excel and to break free,"

Interracial cooperation: "Rainbow coalition," "Blacks and Whites should come together," "Unification of the races," "All races can be united under the Rainbow coalition," " Sooner or later Blacks, Whites, Spanish, and all races must come together," "People of all colors should love each other and live together," "We are all Americans and must work together as best we can," "We must stop thinking of our society as being Black and White but together."

Racial Equality: "I agree with his Rainbow Coalition view, the view of everyone regardless of race is to be treated equally," "Blacks are just as good as anyone else," "I agree with everything he says about equality for the world and peace," "I believe that Blacks must speak up and be heard and also use the power of politics and votes to get fair and equal treatment in the United States," "The right to give Blacks a chance. Not to judge a person by his color but by his ability All people should be treated as equals.," "There should be no separation of the races.," "We were all created equal and we all deserve a fair shake, but we will not sit still waiting for that day to come."

Black unity: "Blacks have to stick together," "We as a people have to unite to accomplish the many goals that we are striving to obtain," "Black people should unite as one to overcome the barriers erected by the White man."

Based on the main themes derived from the students' comments about Jackson's campaign: Black advancement , interracial cooperation, racial equality , and Black unity , in that order, it seems that the students' support of Jesse Jackson tended to reflect an endorsement of multiracial

approaches to bring Blacks and whites together rather than sentiments of hostility toward Whites. From their national study, Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson (1989) concluded "The racial solidarity behind support for Jackson did not necessarily imply racial hostility or insensitivity to the plight of other deprived groups. Supporters whose solidarity was based on a politicized sense of common fate were simultaneously pro-Black and inclusive; they were not anti-White. The rainbow metaphor was especially apt for them."

CONCLUSION

This longitudinal study focused on the racial attitudes and perspectives of Black students who attended college during the Reagan era, a period marked by a deterioration in the social and economic conditions in the African American community, persistent assaults on civil rights, and the gutting or elimination of social programs which were vital to the health of the Black community. The extreme anti-liberal policies of the Reagan administration coupled with the conservative mood of White America fostered a social climate in which one would have expected Blacks to shift in the direction toward hostility toward Whites. However, the data show that such a shift did not occur.

From these findings emerges a picture of Black students who can be best described as social liberals who favor racial integration. According to the data, they did not become more negative in their perceptions of White people during the Reagan era, nor did they become further alienated from White society. Thus, it seems that the rise of Afrocentrism during this period reflected a stronger affirmation of an African American identity rather than a rejection of the idea of an integrated society.

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