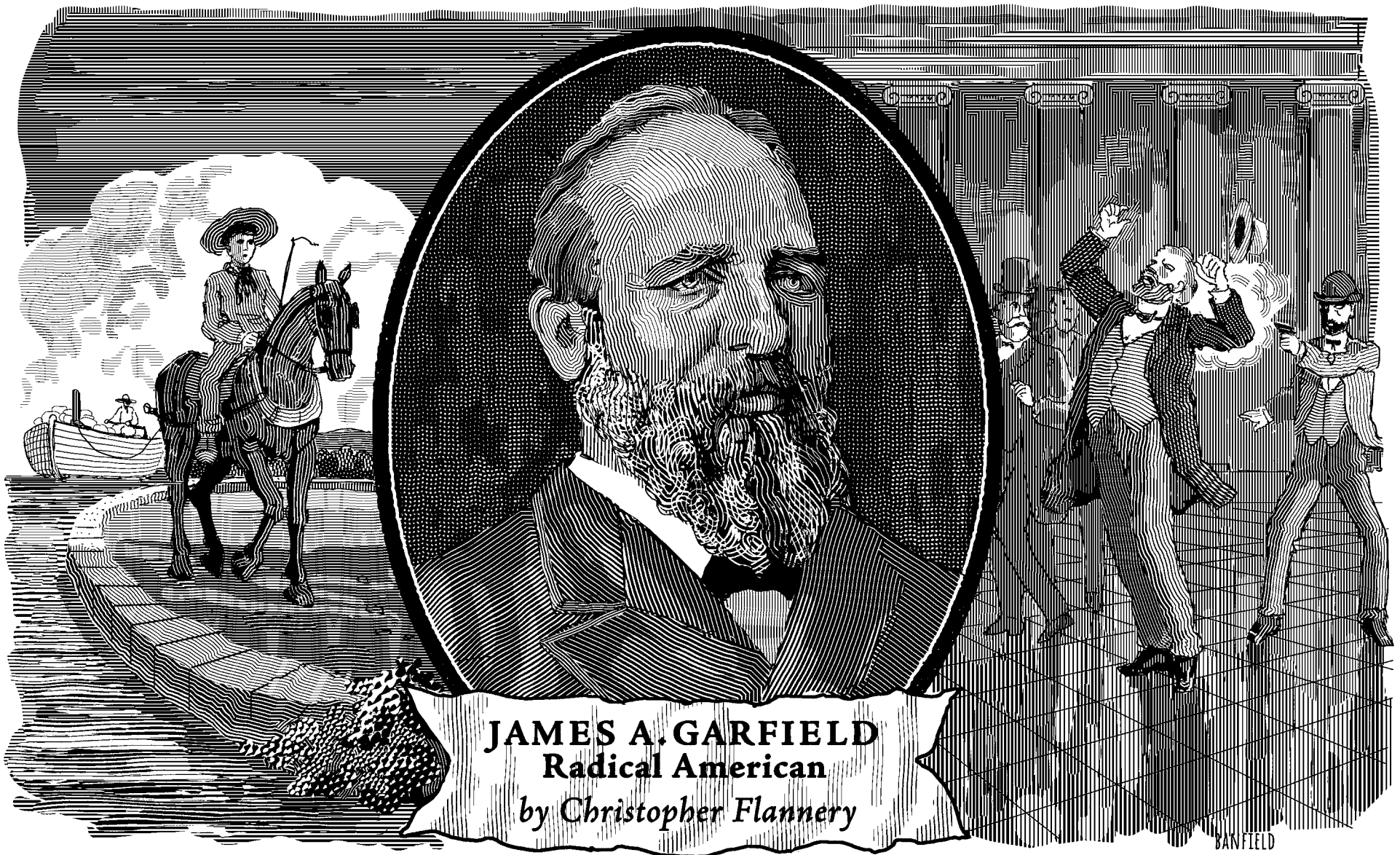


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A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship



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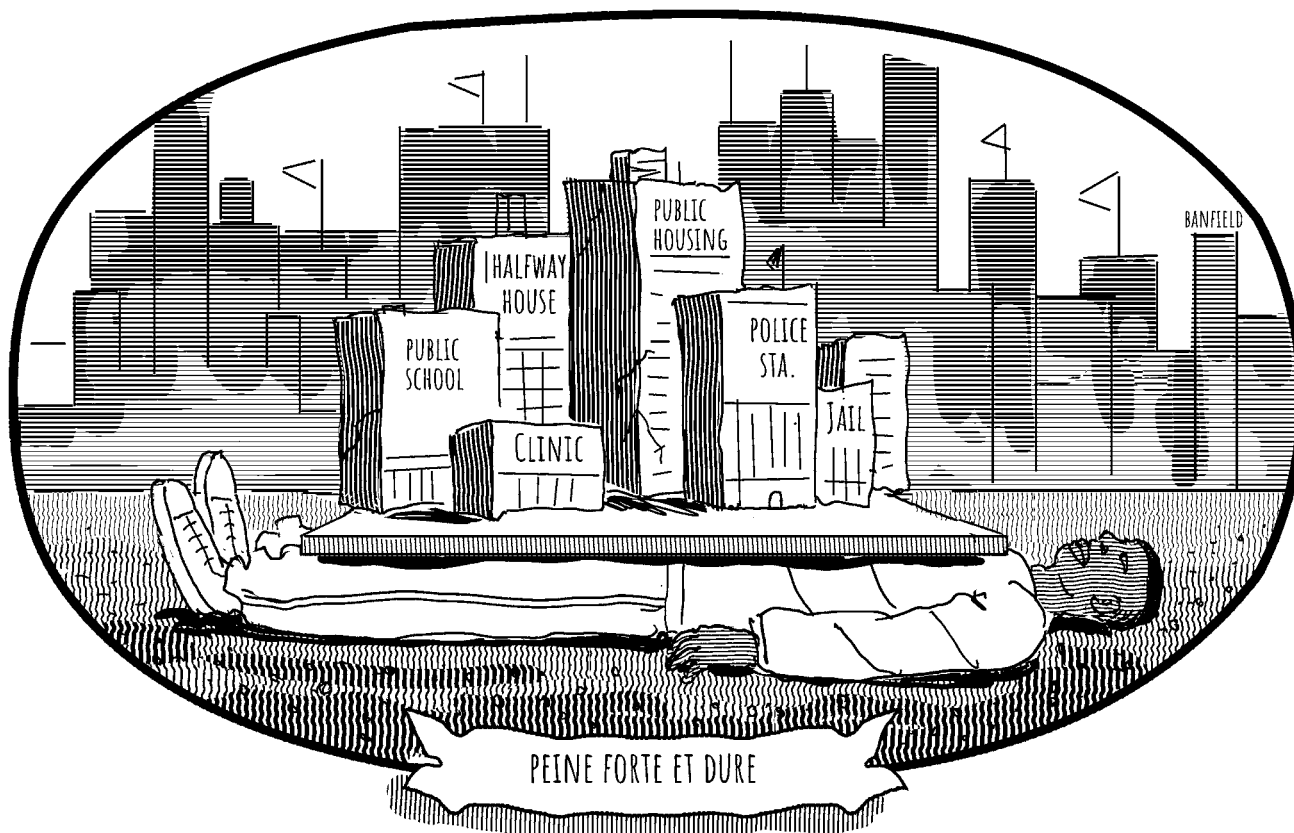
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THE DREAM AND THE NIGHTMARE

The State of Black America: Progress, Pitfalls, and the Promise of the Republic, edited by W.B. Allen.
Encounter Books, 352 pages, \$31.99



WHAT DOES *THE STATE OF BLACK America* have to do with *Progress, Pitfalls, and the Promise of the Republic*? Has the United States been more boon than bane to Africans on American soil and their descendants? These questions are disturbing for the simple reason that they continue to be asked generations after racial slavery was abolished and *de jure* segregation ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. The arguments and evidence presented in this unconventional collection of essays, edited by William B. Allen, indicate that for black Americans “progress” and “pitfalls” remain contested matters.

As Claremont Institute board chairman Thomas D. Klingenstein notes in his foreword, this kind of book is made necessary by widespread acceptance of the twin claims that America’s political institutions are “systemically racist,” and that black Americans are incapable of prospering under such a system without substantial government intervention. All but one of the essays refute these claims categorically. They proceed from the premise that the American promises of freedom and

equality, both in principle and law, have provided sufficient opportunity for blacks to improve their lot and their posterity’s.

Even before the American Revolution had secured political independence from Great Britain, enslaved blacks on American soil were petitioning for the protection of their rights. In other words, they were acting like Americans. This desire to assume the burdens and receive the benefits of living as equal citizens under the law has always driven the long civil rights movement that constitutes American history—a movement that far predates the more familiar struggle of the 1950s and ‘60s that secured civil and voting rights for black Americans.

IN A CHAPTER APTLY TITLED “COMPETING Visions,” William B. Allen starkly highlights the fork in the road that has led America away from its original promise to secure the blessings of liberty. He locates this wrong turn in the career of Martin Luther King, Jr., criticizing his shift in focus from the rights of the individual to the relevance of race as the key to progress for blacks in America.

Allen, a professor emeritus of political philosophy at Michigan State University, rejects the traditional emphasis on King’s dream of an America where blacks “will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” That dream, “deeply rooted in the American dream,” depicted an even playing field where federal legislation would eliminate racial classifications in allotting benefits or burdens among the citizenry. The 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act would satisfy those requirements, creating the conditions for achievements of character to shine and be rewarded.

From 1964 to his assassination in 1968, however, King emphasized the insuperable obstacle that color would pose for black Americans without “a radical restructuring of the architecture of American society.” As early as his 1964 book, *Why We Can’t Wait*, King maintained that reparations in the form of monetary compensation would have a quick and demonstrable impact on the black psyche: “The most profound alteration would not reside so much in the specific grants as in the basic psychological

and motivational transformation of the Negro," King wrote. He expected nothing short of a "[c]hange in human psychology" as a result of "a massive program by the government of special, compensatory measures" for the "handicaps he has inherited from the past." By the time he published his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967), King was adamant that color would supersede character as the chief determinant of black prosperity unless the federal government intervened. "The ultimate way to diminish our problems of crime, family disorganization, illegitimacy and so forth will have to be found through a government program," King insisted. He thought that "society" needed to change its "concepts" by "placing the responsibility on its system, not on the individual." In other words, freedom began from outside rather than from within the souls of black folk.

QUOTING LIBERALLY FROM KING'S radical writings, Allen challenges the notion that hereditary injustice from many generations ago can prevent a person from developing the habits of heart and mind to succeed today. If King's argument proved anything, it proved too little. For, as Allen points out, blacks in America have also inherited "the three hundred and sixty years of broader American experience and the much longer European experience stretching back to prehistory." The past for black Americans includes not only slavery but also the republican principles and institutions that their ancestors—even enslaved ones—claimed as the basis of their individual and collective struggle for freedom. King's reductive assessment of black Americans' capacities also leaves out what Allen identifies as their individual advantages—their "natural endowments," "family circumstances," "friends," and even "the accidents that befell them in the course of their lives." Moreover, King failed to appreciate that black Americans' triumphs over slavery and segregation reflected a strength of character and culture that could facilitate further progress. The later King presented a one-sided caricature of a beleaguered black America, trapped by an oppressive past—the kind of black America that could never have produced the Nobel Prize-winning Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.!

If America looks more like chaos than community when it comes to the race question, Allen blames King's flawed diagnosis and proposed remedies. Since King taught America that it would be "impossible for [black Americans] to attempt cultural or economic improvement as long as they were poor

and disadvantaged," both blacks and whites learned that black Americans could not flourish under policies that treated them the same as white Americans. Instead of continuing to appeal to the equal rights of humanity and what he famously called "citizenship rights," King maintained that black Americans needed something more than what God had given them in order to thrive as self-governing human beings. In doing so, he sowed the seeds of present-day demands for "diversity, equity, and inclusion," rather than legal redress of racially discriminatory harms that demonstrably violate the equal protection under law guaranteed by the 14th Amendment.

THUS ALLEN SETS THE TERMS FOR DISCUSSING what would constitute progress and pitfalls for black Americans in the 21st century. Many of the remaining essays elaborate on those terms by addressing what Brown University economist Glenn Loury calls "unspeakable truths." These include not only empirical observations regarding racial disparities in crime, educational achievements, and wealth, but also the basic practices necessary to build "an opportunity society," as highlighted by Academic Enterprise Institute Senior Fellow Ian Rowe in his chapter. Exhortations to build stable families, finish high school, and establish solid work habits may seem like commonsensical truisms that hardly need repeating. Nevertheless, as Loury points out in his academic *cri de coeur*, "cancel culture" has produced a discursive environment that severely limits the range of acceptable propositions for easing the social ills that befall Americans of all races. Policy analysts Star Parker and Robert Borens argue that this embargo on personal responsibility has enabled "the destructiveness of a culture of government reliance" among black Americans—especially since the 1960s and the breakdown of the traditional family.

In "The Last Generation of Radical Republicans," University of Tennessee historian Robert D. Bland recovers a "lost history" of black Republicans in the South even as Reconstruction succumbed to white supremacist "home rule." Bland highlights Robert Smalls, a slave from South Carolina who gained national attention when he won freedom for his family and several others by piloting a Confederate ship into Union lines. Smalls held a variety of political offices in South Carolina at the state and federal level during Reconstruction and the decade following the Hayes-Tilden Compromise of 1877. Bland includes a section on black Republicans in 19th-century Washington, D.C., to illustrate the tenacity with which black Republicans fought for the

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New Perspectives on the Civil War

JEWISH SOLDIERS IN THE CIVIL WAR THE UNION ARMY
ADAM D. MENDELSON

“Compelling and complex...A fine addition to a comprehensive Civil War collection.” ~Library Journal

SYMBOLS OF FREEDOM SLAVERY AND RESISTANCE BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR
MATTHEW L. KLEIN

“Argues persuasively that... iconic national symbols and images fueled and shaped slave and anti-slavery resistance.” ~Kirkus Reviews

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ideals of the party of Lincoln and Grant long after the party left them.

In his chapter, political scientist Edward J. Erler shows that the principles of the Declaration of Independence, as developed in and through the Constitution, found their greatest champion in the greatest Republican: Abraham Lincoln. His wartime presidency preserved the Declaration's relevance to the governance of the nation for generations afterward—even as President Andrew Johnson, along with most white southerners, tried to prevent Republicans in Congress from securing the rights of the newly freed slaves. Lincoln's legacy culminated in the ratification of the 14th Amendment, which Erler calls "the formal completion of the founding." He recounts Republican Congressman Schuyler Colfax's appeal to the Declaration's principles as the basis for amending the Constitution to ensure that the rights of black Americans would not be imperiled by future Congresses or state legislatures. Erler hastens to add that subsequent rulings by the Supreme Court, and implementation by administrative agencies, would undermine this understanding of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. The focus shifted from protecting the rights of the individual regardless of race, to taking "affirmative action" to tilt the scales according to "racial class entitlements."

THE LONE DISSENTERS FROM THE BOOK'S otherwise unanimous defense of equal opportunity are political science professors Precious D. Hall and Daphne Cooper. In a joint essay, Hall and Cooper interpret the state of black America through the lens of Critical Race Theory. Though they acknowledge that "poverty rates for African Americans and Hispanics did reach an all-time historic low in 2019," Hall and Cooper observe that "inequality persists." They assume that economic disparity must have root causes in some form of racial animus, whether personal or systemic. They evaluate the merits of several analyses before proposing a more comprehensive method of assessing harms and creating solutions. "True equality," they argue,

is not possible if black Americans remain "a permanent underclass." In one of their many agreements with King, they state that poverty must be alleviated before black citizens can become full members of American society.

Drawing directly from the socialist feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young and her "five faces of oppression," Hall and Cooper sum up the problem with America as "institutionalized cultural imperialism." They contend that America's social, economic, and political institutions, whatever the intentions behind their creation, have had a cumulative detrimental impact on black Americans from generation to generation. Whether it's "marginalization" by a "system of labor [that] either cannot or will not use them," "the universalization of the dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm," or the "myth of the bootstrap mentality," the cause of black poverty is the lack of an "economic floor" that was "granted to white Europeans...not granted to black Africans (now Americans)." In sum, "industrial capitalist society" is to blame for its perpetual "exploitation," which the authors define as "a steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of one social group to benefit another."

This might serve in a pinch as a crude economic description of slavery. But its intent is to bring the free market and private property themselves under suspicion, as well as the traditional American understanding of the rights of the individual. But like all analyses based on Critical Race Theory, this argument overlooks how much black Americans both shaped and were shaped by the very culture and institutions which supposedly imposed "culturally imperialistic norms upon African Americans." In the end, the chapter spends most of its time repeating critiques of American society as structurally biased against black people and reiterating that "this is the primary reason why African Americans have remained poor and underprivileged in the United States." It is an unfalsifiable claim, since Hall and Cooper will not allow evidence to the contrary: though they admit that "[m]ore African Americans today are educated and have obtained midlev-

el and executive careers than ever before, and African Americans have achieved the greatest levels of wealth that have ever been seen in the United States," they describe these successes as "exceptions" that should not be "turn[ed]... into the rule." As long as there exists a gap between the economic achievement of blacks and whites in America, "economic justice has not yet been realized."

THE NOVELIST RALPH ELLISON ONCE claimed that black Americans "symbolize" the nation's "most stringent testing and the possibility of its greatest human freedom." In a *Time* magazine essay titled "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," Ellison commented that "it is the black American who puts pressure upon the nation to live up to its ideals,...demanding that there be a closer correlation between the meaning of words and reality, between ideal and conduct, our assertions and our actions." That was 1970. Could the same thing be affirmed today?

This summer, the Supreme Court ruled in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* that affirmative action practices violate the Constitution and (according to some concurring opinions) the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The door is open for a return to America's original promise—that character, and not race, truly will count as definitive before the law and in civic institutions. Will black Americans have the faith that Frederick Douglass had in himself and his compatriots, to thrive in a society governed according to the equal protection of the laws? Or will they listen to Boston University's Ibram X. Kendi, who views life only as a battle between oppressors and oppressed, thereby reinforcing the myth of white supremacy and black inferiority? The answer will determine, as W.B. Allen and policy analyst Mikael Rose Good conclude their opening chapter, "whether there will be a state of black Americans or only a free America."

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