AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE UNITED STATES

Historical background

Among the flood of immigrants to North America, one group came unwillingly. These were Africans, 500,000 of whom were brought over as slaves between 1619 and 1808, when importing slaves into the United States became illegal. Early American society was divided over the practice of slavery and some of the British colonies placed restrictions on its use, others banned it completely, such as Rhode Island in 1774. The practice of owning slaves and their descendants continued, however, particularly in the agrarian South, where many laborers were needed to work the fields.

The process of ending slavery was the subject of intense debate in the United States during the first part of the 19th century. A movement to end slavery, called abolitionism, grew in strength throughout the United States with influential leaders such as William Lloyd Garrison who published *The Liberator* newspaper, Harriet Beecher Stowe who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Frederick Douglas, a former slave who became one of the most powerful anti-slavery speakers and Harriet Tubman, who helped 350 slaves escape from the south and who became known as a "conductor" on the "underground railroad" which smuggled slaves to freedom in the north. Divisions over the issue of slavery continued to increase with the century. As Abraham Lincoln said in 1858, "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure permanently half-slave and half-free." In April 1861 the American Civil War began between the free states of the north and the slave states of the south, 11 of which had left the union. On January 1, 1863, midway through the war, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which abolished slavery in those states that had seceded. Slavery was abolished throughout the United States with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1865. An estimated four million slaves were freed.

Wide public support gradually developed for those members of Congress who believed that blacks should be given full citizenship. By July 1866, Congress had passed a civil rights bill and set up a new Freedmen's Bureau -- both designed to prevent racial discrimination by southern legislatures. Congress then passed a 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which states that "All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the states in which they reside," thus repudiating the Supreme Court's earlier Dred Scott ruling which had denied slaves their right of citizenship. All the southern state legislatures, with the exception of Tennessee, refused to ratify the amendment, some voting against it unanimously.

Even after the end of slavery, however, American blacks were generally hampered by segregation and inferior education, despite the establishment of some institutions dedicated to their advancement. For example, Wilberforce University was the first black school of higher learning owned and operated by African Americans. It was founded in 1856 by the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Between two great wars -- the Civil War and the First World War -- the United States of America came of age. In a period of less than 50 years it was transformed from a rural

republic to an urban state. Great factories and steel mills, transcontinental railroad lines, flourishing cities and vast agricultural holdings marked the land. With this economic growth and affluence came corresponding problems. Thirty years after the Civil War, the south remained largely poor, overwhelmingly agrarian and economically dependent. Its society enforced a rigid social segregation of blacks from whites, and tolerated recurrent racial violence. In search of opportunity, African Americans formed an internal wave of immigration, moving from the rural south to the urban north. But many urban blacks were unable to find work; they grouped in ghettos often by law in the south and for socio-economic reasons in the north.

In 1873 the Supreme Court ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment (citizenship rights not to be abridged) conferred no new privileges or immunities to protect African Americans from state power. In 1883, furthermore, it ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment did not prevent individuals, as opposed to states, from practicing discrimination. And in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) the Court found that "separate but equal" public accommodations for African Americans, such as trains and restaurants, did not violate their rights.

Soon the principle of segregation by race extended into every area of southern life, from railroads to restaurants, hotels, hospitals and schools. Faced with pervasive discrimination, many African Americans supported the program of Booker T. Washington, the most prominent black leader of the late 19th and early 20th century, who counseled them to focus on modest economic goals and to accept temporary social discrimination. Others, led by the African American intellectual W.E.B. DuBois, wanted to challenge segregation through political action. Calls for racial justice attracted little support, however, and segregationist laws remained common in the South well into the second half of the 20th century.

In 1955, Rosa Parks, an Alabama black seamstress, was arrested for refusing to give her seat on a bus to a white man. Her arrest triggered a 381-day boycott of the bus system by blacks that was organized by a 26-year-old Baptist minister, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. In the following years, African Americans and their supporters used boycotts, marches, and other forms of nonviolent protest to demand equal treatment under the law and an end to segregation. The 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* was a landmark event that led to the forced desegregation of public schools, which often required state and federal troops to enforce implementation, and the gradual dismantling of the “separate but equal” doctrine in the south. Civil rights activists faced campaigns of violence and intimidation from opponents of desegregation, as witnessed in the 1963 church bombing in Birmingham, which took the lives of four young girls, including a friend of Secretary Rice.

A high point of this civil rights movement came on August 28, 1963, when more than 200,000 people of all races gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., to hear King say: "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveholders will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood....I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." Not long afterwards the U.S. Congress passed laws prohibiting discrimination in voting, education, employment, housing, and public accommodations.

The Voting Rights Act, adopted initially in 1965 and extended in 1970, 1975, and 1982, is generally considered the most successful piece of civil rights legislation ever adopted by the United States Congress. The Act codifies and effectuates the 15th Amendment's guarantee that, throughout the nation, no person shall be denied the right to vote on account of race or color. The Voting Rights Act was adopted in response to historic, systematic disenfranchisement of African Americans and outlawed measures such as poll taxes, literacy tests, and gerrymandering of voting districts to dilute the voting strength of African Americans.

Today, African Americans constitute 13.3 percent of the total U.S. population, the second largest ethnic group after Hispanics. In recent decades blacks have made great strides, and the black middle class has grown substantially. The average income of blacks is lower than that of whites, however, and unemployment of blacks -- particularly of young men -- remains higher than that of whites. Blacks constitute the majority of the inner city populations in many major urban areas.

In recent years the focus of the civil rights debate has shifted. With anti-discrimination laws in effect and blacks moving steadily into the middle class, the question has become whether or not the effects of past discrimination require the government to take certain remedial steps such as “affirmative action.” Affirmative action is loosely defined as a set of public policies and initiatives designed to help eliminate past and present discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. In its most common form, affirmative factor means taking into account race or gender as a factor in consideration of already qualified candidates for job openings or school admissions; it does not mean instituting racial quotas or accepting unqualified individuals based on their race or gender.

Perhaps the greatest change in the past few decades has been in the attitudes of America's white citizens. More than a generation has come of age since King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Younger Americans in particular exhibit a new respect for all races, and there is an increasing acceptance of blacks by whites in all levels of industry and government and in all walks of life and social situations. Two recent, prominent African Americans have been Secretaries of State Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice.

Current Situation

Economic Indicators

- Blacks as a group have lower income than whites. On average, for every dollar earned by whites, blacks earn 57 cents.
- Black unemployment has remained fairly stagnant at 10.8 percent while white unemployment has dropped to 4.7 percent, making black unemployment more than twice that of whites in 2004.
- The annual median income in 2003 of black households was about $30,000, which represents 62 percent of the median income of non-Hispanic white households.
- In 2000, 19.1 percent of the black population received welfare assistance. The poverty rate in 2003 for those reporting black as their race was 24.4%. This rate was unchanged from 2002. It was 8.2 percent for non-Hispanics whites.
- Blacks are represented in a wide variety of occupations. For instance, there are about 64,800 black postsecondary teachers representing 5.4 percent of all teachers; 26,300 chief executives representing 8 percent of all CEOs; 33,900 lawyers representing 4.7 percent of all American lawyers; 5,600 news analysts, reporters and correspondents representing 4.7 percent of the total news media profession. The black press represents more than 400 publications and more than 15 million readers.
- There were 1.2 million black-owned businesses in 2002, up 45 percent from 1997. Their receipts were $92.7 billion, up 30 percent from 1997. Thirty-eight percent of black-owned firms operated in the health care and other service industries; health care and retail trade accounted for a fourth of their receipts.

Health

- Obesity rates for blacks are increasing faster and the life expectancy rate for blacks is 72 years vs. 78 years for whites.
- African Americans accounted for 49 percent of the estimated AIDS cases diagnosed in the U.S. in 2003. The rate of AIDS diagnoses for African Americans was almost 10 times the rate for whites and the rate of AIDS diagnoses for African American women was 25 times the rate for white women.

Education

- Black educational status is generally lower than whites.
- For every 10 whites that graduate with a college degree, 6.3 blacks do. Parity at four-year schools would require a 50 percent increase in graduation for blacks to close the education gap. 7 percent of doctoral degrees were granted to blacks or Hispanics at American universities in 2003.
- In 2004, 31.1 percent of black children benefited from the Head Start Program and 27.3 percent attended charter schools designed at the state level to help improve minority students' educational achievement.

- 80 percent of blacks age 25 and over had at least a high school diploma in 2003 — a record high. This proportion rose by 10 percentage points from 1993 to 2003. For blacks age 25 to 29, the proportion is considerably higher: 88 percent.
- 17 percent of blacks age 25 and over had a bachelor's degree or higher in 2003 — up 5 percentage points from 1993.
- 1 million blacks age 25 and over had an advanced degree in 2003 (e.g., master's, Ph.D., M.D. or J.D.).

Social Justice

- Statistically, blacks are three times more likely to become prisoners once arrested, and a black person's jail sentence averages six months longer than a white's for the same crime.
- Blacks are 13.3 percent of the U.S. population, but make up more than 40 percent of the prisoners on death row.

Hate crimes

- In 2003, law enforcement reported 4,574 single-bias offenses that were motivated by the offender's bias against race. Among those offenses, 66.3 percent were perpetrated because of an anti-black bias.

Political Influence

Executive Branch

- President Bush appointed the first black Secretary of State Colin Powell in 2000 and his successor, the first black female Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice in 2005.

Judicial Branch

- U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall was sworn in 1967 as the first black member of the court. He was replaced in 1991 by Clarence Thomas, also an African American.

U.S. Congress

- In 2005, there are 43 black males in the House of Representatives, and 14 black females. They are all Democrats. There is one black male in the Senate, Barack Obama from Illinois.

State and Local Government

- At the local state and city government level, there were 9,101 black elected officials in 2001, a historic high. Large cities such as Philadelphia,

Detroit, Columbus, Memphis, Washington D.C., New Orleans and Atlanta currently (2005) have a black mayor.

NGOS

- Several organizations have been created by black Americans to advance their cause. The most important one is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, founded in 1909 by civil rights activists.

Cultural Influence

- African Americans have contributed a great deal to American culture and its influence abroad through great writers such as W.E.B. Dubois, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Chester Himes, James Baldwyn and more recently Toni Morrison, winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize in literature.
- Blacks' contribution to American music is even stronger, especially for blues music and jazz which laid the foundation of American popular music with artists such as Bessie Smith, John Lee Hooker, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Miles Davis and Ray Charles. Black classical musicians include opera stars Leontyne Price and Barbara Hendricks.
- Black American dancers, such as Alvin Ailey, Bill T. Jones and Alwin Nicholais contributed to making modern dance a truly American art form.
- The first African American performer to win the Oscar for best actor was Sidney Poitier for "Lilies of the Field" in 1964. Since then many African American actors such as James Earl Jones, Denzel Washington, Danny Glover, Whoopi Goldberg and Halle Berry have starred in movies and won recognition for their performances.
- African Americans are also famous in sports with legendary characters such as boxer Muhammad Ali and runners Carl Lewis and Maurice Greene.

Legislation

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects individuals against employment discrimination on the bases of race and color, as well as national origin, sex, and religion. Title VII applies to employers with 15 or more employees, including state and local governments. It also applies to employment agencies and to labor organizations, as well as to the federal government.

It is unlawful to discriminate against any employee or applicant for employment because of his/her race or color in regard to hiring, termination, promotion, compensation, job training, or any other term, condition, or privilege of employment. Title VII also prohibits employment decisions based on stereotypes and assumptions about abilities, traits, or the performance of individuals of certain racial groups. Title VII prohibits both intentional discrimination and neutral job policies that disproportionately exclude minorities and that are not job related.

Equal employment opportunity cannot be denied because of marriage to or association with an individual of a different race; membership in or association with ethnic based organizations or groups; or attendance or participation in schools or places of worship generally associated with certain minority groups.

In fiscal year 2004, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission received 27,696 charges of race discrimination. EEOC resolved 29,631 race charges in FY 2004, and recovered $61.1 million in monetary benefits for charging parties and other aggrieved individuals (not including monetary benefits obtained through litigation). The EEOC has observed an increasing number of color discrimination charges.

On June 13, 2005, the Senate approved by voice vote a resolution apologizing to descendants of lynching victims for its repeated failure to enact anti-lynching legislation. Resolution 39 apologizes for more than 4,700-recorded cases of lynching in America between 1882 and 1963. It marks the first time members of Congress have apologized to blacks.

The “Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2005 “ will enhance the federal response to hate crime violence by covering all violent crimes based on race, color, religion, or national origin.

Supreme Court Decisions

On September 24, 1965, President Johnson issued an executive order which required government contractors to “take affirmative action” toward prospective minority employees in all aspects of hiring and employment.

In 1978, the landmark Supreme Court case “University of California v. Bakke” imposed limitations on affirmative action to ensure that providing greater opportunities for minorities did not come at the expense of the rights of the majority.

The most important affirmative action decision since the Bakke case occurred in 2003, when the Supreme Court upheld the University of Michigan Law school’s policy, ruling that race can be one of many factors considered by colleges when selecting their students because it furthers “a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body”.

Some Other Statistics

As of July 1, 2003, there were an estimated 38.7 million U.S. residents who were either black or black and at least one other race. This race group then made up 13.3 percent of the total U.S. population.

The projected single-race black population of the United States is 61.4 million as of July 1, 2050. According to this projection, blacks would constitute 15 percent of the nation’s total population on that date.

There were 2.3 million black military veterans in the United States in 2003 out of 23 million, representing 10 percent of the total veteran population.

There are 8.9 million black families in the United States. Of these, nearly one-half (47 percent) are married-couple families. Among black married-couple families, 34 percent consist of two members, and 19 percent consist of five or more members. There were 400,000 black/white married couples in 2002 out of 58 million of married couples. There were 167,000 in 1980.

71 percent of African Americans are Protestant, 15 percent non-denominational Christian, 7 percent Catholic, 4 percent have no religion, 2 percent are Muslim and 1 percent are "other." It is estimated that some 30 percent of U.S. Muslims are black, though precise data is unavailable.

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