

The Shame of America

Anthony Lewis

The Persistence of the Color Line: Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency

by Randall Kennedy, Pantheon, 322 pp., \$26.95

Elizabeth and Hazel: Two Women of Little Rock

by David Margolick, Yale University Press, 310 pp., \$26.00

1.

Randall Kennedy is a professor at Harvard Law School, widely regarded as one of the most perceptive and eloquent commentators on racial matters. His two siblings are also lawyers, one of them a federal judge. All three graduated from Princeton; Randall was a Rhodes Scholar.

Their father, Henry Kennedy Sr., grew up in poverty in Louisiana. The achievements of his family sound like an embodiment of the American dream. But he rejected any such notion. What the Kennedys achieved, he said, had been in spite of it. His father's view of the United States, Professor Kennedy writes, "was more unforgetting" than that of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, whose "God damn America" so embarrassed his parishioner Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential campaign.

What the senior Mr. Kennedy could not forgive was the contumely he and others suffered because they were black. He saw blacks humiliated and terrorized, without a hint of disapproval from authorities. During the 1960s he drove his family from their home in Washington to his wife's old home in Columbia, South Carolina. Several times they were stopped by a policeman who told Mr. Kennedy that this was the South and he should take care to behave himself. "Yassuh," Mr. Kennedy replied, in a way "calculated to provide the maximum safety to himself and his family."

As we read in "Reverend Wright and My Father: Reflections on Blacks and Patriotism," one of the essays collected in Professor Kennedy's remarkable new book, *The Persistence of the Color Line: Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency*, such incidents profoundly alienated Kennedy's father. And his father was not alone in his feelings. "The fact is," Professor Kennedy says,

that much of what Reverend Wright voiced strikes a chord with many black people: his contempt for American hypocrisy; his anger at American unwillingness to face squarely the two great social crimes that haunt United States history—the removal of the In-

dians and the enslavement of the Africans....

Wright's angry words outraged many whites. Obama had to calm that reaction without too greatly disturbing his black base, which knew the cruel history behind the anger. Kennedy traces how he did that. Obama broke with Wright and gave his famous speech, which ended the flap. Kennedy recognizes its political skill but calls the content of the speech "banal."

Obama's victory in 2008 brought on a wave of what Kennedy calls "racial euphoria," the belief that this country had at last solved its racial problem. The

Kennedy cites a study by two political scientists, Michael Tesler and David O. Sears, who wrote:

Much of the driving force behind the dogged unwillingness of so many to acknowledge that Obama was born in the United States is not just simple opposition to a Democratic president but a general ethnocentric suspicion of an African American president who is also perceived as distinctly "other."¹

Then there was the claim that Obama was a secret Muslim. As with the claim

particularly delicate, for example on interracial intimacies, and on race, crime, and the law. His current book is on race in politics, but it really has a broader vision. In eight interrelated essays, each examining a different aspect of "the racial issues that have surrounded Obama's election and presidency," Kennedy's book makes clear how much we must do to overcome the bitter legacies of racism, and to make the United States a country where every black citizen has an equal opportunity with every white to live the American dream.

Writing on the persistence of racial divisions in the 2008 elections, for instance, Kennedy emphasizes the importance—overlooked by the mainstream press—of the way in which Obama presented himself to black voters. He won the black vote, Kennedy says,

by identifying himself as a black man, by carrying himself in a dignified manner as the loving spouse of a black woman... and by showing that his candidacy was "for real" in the sense that he could garner sufficient support from whites to prevail.

Had Obama not appealed to the black electorate in this way, Kennedy writes, "he would not have enjoyed the overwhelming support he has received from Negroes and would thus have been unable to win the presidency."

At the same time, in order to attract white support, Obama, keenly aware of the stereotype of the "angry black man," was careful to present himself as "calm, measured, [and] unthreatening," and to reassure whites "that he harbored no racial resentment, that he loved America." The use of such different appeals in an election that was billed largely as post-racial should, Kennedy suggests, "have counseled caution in interpreting [Obama's] election as the ultimate racial breakthrough."

Though an admirer of Obama's, Kennedy is nevertheless quite critical of him. He laments Obama's shift from unequivocal support for same-sex marriage to the more politically tenable position that marriage should be sanctified only between a man and a woman. "That the nation's first black president defends separate but equal in the context of same-gender intimacy is bitterly ironic," Kennedy writes. He recognizes that Obama has been diffident on racial matters—he calls Obama's few comments on the American racial dilemma "vague and unilluminating"—and observes that he has done little to address the mass incarceration of black men. But Kennedy notes that Obama has still made a significant impact on America's



Elizabeth Eckford trying to enter Central High School, with Hazel Bryan in white shouting behind her, Little Rock, Arkansas, September 4, 1957; photograph by Will Counts

about his birth, there was nothing to support it.

Obama had no illusion that his election would end American racism. In his speech on race, "A More Perfect Union," given on March 18, 2008, he said:

I have never been so naive as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy—particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own.

Kennedy is an unusual writer on the difficult and divisive subject of race. His voice is measured, calm. He can discuss highly emotional issues with detachment. But underneath there is an unmistakable passion: for truth, for justice.

He has published four other books, on aspects of race relations that are

¹See Michael Tesler and David O. Sears, *Obama's Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 153.

racial environment, not only by promoting racial minorities like Sonia Sotomayor to high office, but also, most importantly, simply by being elected.

It is easy for white Americans to believe that the enormous gains of the civil rights movement, the service of two blacks on the Supreme Court of the United States, and the election of a black president have removed the last vestiges of racism in this country. The reality of a society that is still in many ways segregated is quite different. Readers of Kennedy's book will understand that it will take much awareness and effort to end American "inertia" on race; and he is not optimistic about the prospects of doing so.

2.

The story told by David Margolick in *Elizabeth and Hazel* began with a photograph. It was taken outside Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, by Will Counts, a young photographer for the *Arkansas Democrat*, on September 4, 1957. That was the day that Central High School was to admit its first black students, as ordered by the federal courts.

The picture showed a black girl, Elizabeth Eckford, walking toward the camera carrying a large notebook against her left side. Elizabeth was accompanied by no friend or supporter. She was fifteen years old.

A crowd of white people walked behind her. Some of them shouted at her, and reporters watching the scene wrote down some of what they said: "Lynch her! Lynch her!" "No nigger bitch is

going to get in our school!"

At the front of the crowd, right behind Elizabeth, was Hazel Bryan, a fifteen-year-old white student at Central. Her face was contorted with rage. She was shouting, "Go home, nigger! Go back to Africa!"

That was the picture that Will Counts took. The natural light somehow focused on Elizabeth and Hazel. It was published in that afternoon's *Democrat*, and then around the United States and the world.

Central High School was surrounded that day by National Guard troops. Governor Orval Faubus had called up the Guard—to preserve the peace, he said. But the soldiers had been told by their officers that their orders were: "No niggers in the building." When Elizabeth approached the front door of the school, guardsmen blocked her way. She walked toward a distant bus stop, the menacing crowd trailing her.

At the bus stop she sat on a bench and waited. The crowd surrounded her, shouting catcalls and threats. After a half-hour a bus came. Elizabeth went home.

Forty years after that day, Little Rock celebrated the event and the changes since then. There was a new visitors' center, with pictures of the Little Rock racial conflict—including Will Counts's photograph of Elizabeth and Hazel. The two women were invited to the visitors' center and agreed to come. Elizabeth reluctantly. She had struggled in the intervening years. She dropped out of college (though she would later earn a degree in history), spent time in the

army, and by the 1980s was a single mother of two sons. She also suffered from depression, an affliction that she would pass on to one of her sons, who, tragically, was killed after committing what Elizabeth called "suicide by cop."

Hazel Bryan suggested to Elizabeth that they have lunch together sometime. Soon they did. They went to a home and garden show. They heard Maya Angelou read poetry. At one event a film of the 1957 confrontation was played, with a loud soundtrack. Elizabeth began trembling; Hazel held her hand. They took trips, and met often.

A happy ending. But it wasn't. After years of appearing together at public speaking engagements, awards ceremonies, and talk shows, the two began to grate on one another. Apparently minor incidents—Elizabeth taking over a microphone from Hazel, or Hazel telling an innocuous story about her children that irritated Elizabeth—multiplied and widened the rift between the two.

Within a few years the two women fell apart. Bad feelings festered on both sides. Although Hazel had often said, in private and public, how sorry she was for what she did in 1957, Elizabeth began to doubt her sincerity. Maybe, she thought, Hazel is in this for fame and, somehow, money. Hazel, for her part, began to wonder whether Elizabeth had really told anyone of the apology she had made to her, and if Elizabeth was in fact determined not to reconcile, but to preserve an image of Hazel as "a bogey-woman."

Hazel thought Elizabeth and some other black people were not ready for reconciliation—they wanted revenge. But the more she read up on history, Margolick writes, the more Hazel "understood why black skepticism, and bitterness, were so deep. If she were black, she would feel the same way."

Elizabeth had always been an unservative person: "sensitive, brooding, fragile," Margolick says. She looked brave in 1957, and was, but she paid a high price in tears and feelings that she was discarded, unprotected. When President Eisenhower sent the 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock three weeks later to enforce the legal desegregation order, the black children were able to return to school. But that did not end the trauma of desegregation for Elizabeth. She was continually harassed by unregenerate white students: kicked, body-slammed, scalded in a shower.

When Margolick went to see the principal of Central High School, Nancy Rousseau, a poster made from Will Counts's photograph of September 4, 1957, hung on the wall. "I just had hoped," Rousseau said,

that I could show this picture and say, "this happened, and that happened, and now..." and there is no "now." And that makes me sad. It makes me sad for them, it makes me sad for the future students at our school, and for the history books, because I'd like a happy ending. And we don't have that.

David Margolick was obviously moved by the story of Elizabeth and Hazel, as readers will be. They "represented racial reality in 1957," he says, and they still do today, with the lingering difficulties between white and black. But perhaps, Margolick says, "somewhere down that road, when no

one else is looking, they will find a way to meet."

3.

The story of Elizabeth Eckford shows, as does that of Henry Kennedy Sr., how hard it can be to overcome the legacies of American racism. Not just the climactic moments like Little Rock but the daily grind of modern Jim Crow: the menacing insolence of policemen, a child's knowledge that the only place in town where she can buy an ice cream cone and eat it there is the railroad station. Some people can get over such humiliations even when they linger in unofficial ways. Others do not find it so easy; nor should we expect them to.

Not only in the past but in the actualities of life today black Americans continue to face greater challenges than whites. Criminal law is notoriously unequal in application. For similar offenses black defendants are convicted more often and given far longer sentences. In 2005, blacks were 12.8 percent of the population but nearly 50 percent of prison inmates. One analyst reckoned that 32 percent of black boys born in 2001 would spend part of their lives in prison, state or federal.² Can there be any more damning evidence of the obstacles confronting blacks from birth?

If we get over the "inertia" that Randall Kennedy mentioned, we could, at least, do something to assure more equal sentencing—and to attack the miserable living conditions that foster crime among young black men. And we could persistently call to account those, mostly conservative, who tell us that we are in a "post-racial period" and should pay less attention to race problems.

While I was writing this review, I read an article in *The New York Times* about a young black baseball player named Jared Williams. He was good enough that major league scouts were interested in him. But his hopes ended on October 6, 2005.³ That night Williams and two friends, also black, were arrested by a New York City policeman, Michael Daragjati. He took them in on suspicion of assaulting a man in a bar on Staten Island. The emergency call from the bar had actually said that three white men were causing trouble. The charges against Jared Williams were eventually dropped. But by then his minor league team had dismissed him because of his arrest. After a couple of attempts to play in independent leagues he gave up baseball.

On October 17, 2011, Officer Daragjati was charged with violating federal civil rights laws in the arrest of a black man this year. Federal prosecutors said that in an intercepted telephone call Daragjati had told a friend that he had "fried" another black man. The prosecutors said he had used racial epithets in at least twelve other phone calls.

Why is it that we cannot get over our deep racial animosities? Why is it that police are still abusing their power when they encounter black Americans? Not in Alabama fifty or one hundred years ago: in New York City today. □

²Michael Tonry, *Punishing Race: A Continuing American Dilemma* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

³Hunter Atkins, "Doubt Over Arrest That Ended a Dream," *The New York Times*, November 12, 2011.

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