

The Two Magic Wands

by Richard D. Lamm

Let me offer you, metaphorically, two magic wands that have sweeping powers to change society. With one wand you could wipe out all racism and discrimination from the hearts and minds of white America. The other wand you could wave across the ghettos and barrios of America and infuse the inhabitants with Japanese or Jewish values, respect for learning, and ambition. But, alas, you can't wave both wands. Only one.

Which would you choose? I understand that many of us would love to wave both wands; no one can easily refuse the chance to erase racism and discrimination. But I suggest that the best wand for society and for those who live in the ghettos and barrios would be the second wand.

This metaphor is important in correctly diagnosing one of the most significant problems facing contemporary America: the large economic, education and employment gap between Black/Hispanic America and White/Asian America. The problems of crime, educational failure, drugs, gangs, teenage pregnancy, and unemployment that burden certain groups threaten our collective future. They form a nation-threatening social pathology that must be addressed in broader terms than we have done to date.

Most discussion of minority failure blames racism and discrimination. I'm an old civil rights lawyer and such racism and discrimination clearly still exists. But the problem, I fear, is deeper than the current dialogue. We need to think honestly about these problems with a new sophistication. One of these new areas is to recognize that increasingly scholars are saying "culture matters."

I'm impressed, for instance, that the highest family incomes in America are earned by minorities that have been discriminated against. Japanese Americans, Jews, Chinese Americans, and Korean Americans all out-earn white America by substantial margins and *all* have faced

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discrimination and racism. We put Japanese Americans in camps 60 years ago and confiscated much of their property. Yet today they out-earn all other demographic groups. Discrimination and racism are social cancers and can never be justified but it is enlightening that, for these groups, they were a hurdle, not a barrier to success.

The Italians, the Irish, the people from the Balkans – America has viewed all these groups and many more with hostility and suspicion, yet all have integrated and succeeded. Hispanic organizations excuse their failure rates solely in terms of discrimination by white America and object vociferously when former Education Secretary Lauro Cavazos observes that Hispanic parents "don't take enough interest in education." But Cuban Americans have come to America and succeeded brilliantly. Do we discriminate against Hispanics from Mexico but not Hispanics from Cuba?

I suggest that those groups whose culture and values stress delayed gratification, education, hard work, success, and ambition are those groups that succeed in America – regardless of discrimination. I further suggest that, even if discrimination were removed, other groups would still have massive problems until they developed the traits that lead to success. Asian and Jewish children do twice as much homework as Black and Hispanic students, and get twice as good grades. Why should we be surprised?

A problem well-defined is a problem half-solved. We must recognize that all the civil rights laws in the world are not going to solve the problem of minority failure. Ultimately Blacks and Hispanics are going to have to see that their solution is largely in their own hands. Lionel Sosa, one of America's leading Hispanic businessmen, in his book *The Americano Dream*, titles his first chapter "Escaping the Cultural Shackles."

Daniel Patrick Moynihan has insightfully observed, "the central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself."

Thus, morally, I would want badly to wave both wands, but if I had to choose I would wave the second wand. A Confucian or Jewish love of learning would gain

minorities far more than any affirmative action laws we might pass.

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