

# Two Wands

By Gov. RICHARD D. LAMM

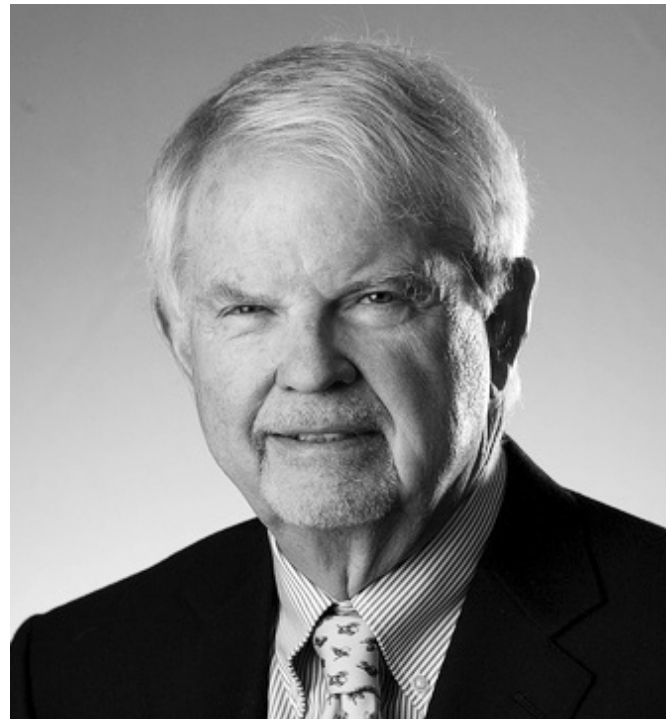
John Gardner once said that Higher Education was “caught between unloving critics and uncritical lovers.” To my mind that clever aphorism applies to discussions about minority status and performance in America. There are “unloving critics” who, for a variety of reasons, despair of Blacks and Hispanics ever fully joining the American community and pulling their own weight. On the other hand there are the “uncritical lovers” of minority culture who explain all low performance and all minority social problems as the effects of “racism and discrimination.” They generally brand all critical comments on minority underperformance as “racism,” or “blaming the victim.” But America’s future, in many important ways, depends on solving the problem of minority underperformance. The growing percentage that Blacks and Hispanics make up of our population demands that this discussion not be put off. America is not producing the skills, talents, and educational achievement in its young people to keep us competitive in the new global world. We are fast growing a second underclass, an Hispanic underclass, not having fully solved the problems of the first underclass (Blacks). We are overdue for an honest and candid dialogue on race and ethnicity, and all America, including White America, must candidly participate in this dialogue. America deserves no less.

A candid dialogue on minority status has been a long time coming, delayed for some very good reasons. It took a lot of psychic energy and dedication to overcome the deep strain of racism that clearly was in the American society of my youth. This revolution of laws, attitudes, and hearts was nothing less than a Social Revolution, and revolutions are not known for their nuances or subtleties.

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But revolutionary fever is hard to sustain and it often becomes counterproductive. No society can govern itself in a constant state of revolutionary fever. Balance and objectivity are required to sustain governance.



Gov. Richard Lamm

America cannot wait and allow every minority group to self-diagnose its own problems and come up with its own solutions in isolation from the rest of America. We must make room for some “loving critics” of minority underperformance from outside those communities. All America has a stake in the success of minority America.

This dialogue is not for the faint of heart. The book to which this is a preface arose out of an act of censorship by a Vice Provost at the University of Denver (DU), which, while outrageous in itself, was compounded by the failures of either the DU Provost or the Chancellor to overturn that censorship. This book had its genesis in the words “too controversial.” Let me explain.

I read one evening a hysterical column in one of DU’s in-house publications, *The Source*, finding white America guilty of “prejudice, racism and systemic racial

oppression” and implying this was the cause of minority failure patterns. The offending article transported me back to my monthly meetings as Governor with the Hispanic caucus in which the only subjects on the table were Hispanic appointments, bilingual education, and affirmative action. There was never even a hint in these meetings that the plight of Hispanics was partly self-imposed. So having had a solid diet of “victimization,” and to enlarge the menu, I wrote the following:

#### TWO WANDS

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 exist. But the problem, I fear, is deeper than the current dialogue. We need to honestly think 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 minorities that have been discriminated against earn the highest family incomes in America. Japanese Americans, Jews, Chinese Americans, and Korean Americans all out-earn white America by substantial margins and all have faced discrimina-

tion 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 was 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; 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.

Our Vice Provost for Communications turned down this column as “too controversial.” “Too controversial!” What sad words to hear on an American college campus. The column I tried to respond to (printed in full in Appendix A to my book) is a broadside against all of white America, and I was outraged that this was acceptable to *The Source*, but my answering column was “too controversial.” Yet I was not particularly surprised. This response is, sadly, symbolic of attitudes on college campuses across America.

This episode redirected my attention at how hard it is to honestly and candidly discuss problems of minority underperformance. Anywhere in America. White America has essentially been excluded from the dialogue. The fear of being called a “racist” is preventing us from discussing some of the more profound problems in American society. Such fear is paralyzing and constipating our national dialogue on a myriad of immensely important subjects.

I seek an honest dialogue, by people of good faith and caring, about minority underperformance, diversity, and immigration. We need a candid public debate about what social glue is necessary to keep diverse people living together in peace. Tragically, one has to risk being called a “racist” to even begin some discussions. This is more than a personal risk; it is a serious threat to America’s future. When we inappropriately use a word like “racist” indiscriminately, we diminish the original meaning of the word. There is a Gresham’s Law to language and we do not want to dilute the word because, clearly, there are still racists out there, and it still has valid application.

America is in trouble when it cannot candidly discuss its problems. All great nations have problems, but those problems feed upon themselves when they cannot be discussed openly and candidly. I believe America will face a time of testing in our immediate future. We shall need to call upon the talents and best efforts of all Americans. We need to honestly address some important issues we have too long avoided. Three deficits—the federal deficit, the trade deficit, and the savings deficit—have locked in a series of economic traumas in the years ahead. Global warming will challenge our political and social structure.

America’s new “diversity” raises questions of community, unity, and assimilation. Immigration, which is running four times larger than the historical numbers, threatens our environment and is building into America a second underclass when we are already challenged to fully incorporate our existing underclass. The unprecedented disproportion of Spanish-speaking immigrants challenges America’s tradition of assimilation and the historic American melting pot threatens to become a pressure-cooker. We will need unity, good will, patience,

and sacrifice to solve these problems, and these seem in short supply in contemporary America.

Issues of minority underperformance demand honest debate and reflection, yet there exists on American college campuses a stifling conformity when it comes to race, immigration, and ethnicity. To a large degree, the only acceptable explanation for minority underperformance is “racism and discrimination.” To observe that part of the fault and part of the correction agenda lie within the minority community itself is immediately challenged as “racist” and “blaming the victim.” If some diversity is good, a whole lot more is certainly better, goes the argument, and if you don’t agree, you surely must be unenlightened at best, or a closet racist. The liberal agenda demands total loyalty.

**The mistaken notion that this is still a pervasively racist society has ironically become one of the chief barriers to upward mobility of minorities. The “solution” (“fight racism”) has become the new problem. (The enervating idea that “I can’t get ahead because of our racist society.”) .... The concept of “I can’t succeed because I live in a racist society” has become as serious a problem to twenty-first century America as racism itself.**

But it is becoming increasingly apparent that this problem of minority underperformance is much broader and more nuanced than the impact of racism. When over two-thirds of black births are out of wedlock births, it is hard to write a happy or prosperous future for Black America. When close to 50 percent of Hispanic students don’t graduate from high school, it is hard to see Hispanics following the normal American route to prosperity. Blacks and Hispanics are not succeeding in numbers great enough to keep America competitive, and too often, the entire blame is laid at the feet of White America.

Yet when Black and Hispanic students do *half* as much homework as Asian and Jewish students, and get *half* as good grades, the minority community is itself going to have to take a share of the responsibility. I am increasingly convinced the key to prosperity for Black America and Hispanic America lies mostly in their own hands and by their own efforts. The search for racial justice must be broadened to look inward.

It is interesting to me that a similar dialogue is going on in other parts of the world that can help us here. Latin America is rejecting the “dependency” theory that for 100 years blamed most of the problems south of our

border on the United States. Traveling in South America in the 1960s, how often we heard, essentially: “Our poverty is your fault!” Slowly that attitude is changing and South America is recognizing most of its problems are self-imposed. An example of this new candidness internationally is found in a recent Latin American best seller, *The Perfect Latin American Idiot’s Guide* when the authors observe, “In reality—except for cultural factors—nothing prevented Mexico from doing what Japan did when it almost totally displaced the United States’ production of television sets.”

Increasingly African intellectuals are recognizing that “colonialism” is an inadequate explanation for Africa’s low level of development. A new honesty and willingness exist to admit that much of their underdevelopment originated with their own culture and leaders and that the cures are in their own hands. Internationally we see that some cultures are better than others in developing institutions that promotes freedom, prosperity and justice. South America and Africa are asking anew: “What is the path to progress?” More and more nations are turning inward, taking responsibility for their own problems, and examining themselves and their own institutions. Less and less they are blaming others. It is a very hopeful trend that I expand upon in the chapter “The New Wealth of Nations.”

Yet in our own country, white America is often intimidated from voicing an opinion on the subject of minority underperformance. At some point in our recent past, this reluctance has made white Americans co-dependents to minority failure. There is a “soft racism of lowered expectations” where majority Americans have too often come to excuse and even to expect lower performance from minority America. We felt guilty in the past *and we should have felt guilty* considering our poor racial history.

But public policy is a continuum and one generation’s solutions become another generation’s problems. We cannot forever look exclusively to racism. The “minority as victims” was indispensably relevant in the 1950–1990 time frame. We needed a great crusade to overcome the legacy of slavery and a culture corrupted by racism. It is still a fight not completely won. But the “victim” model puts all the burden and emphasis on the majority community. It often eclipses the need for minorities themselves to develop habits and disciplines to take

advantage of the new, less discriminatory climate.

“Victimhood” has become, in my mind, more of an excuse than an explanation. It was a valid excuse in my youth because no matter their talents, minorities were often precluded from participating in American society. Think Marian Anderson. Think W.E.B. Dubois and John Johnson. Think hundreds of millions of lives stunted of their promise. This is America’s most historic tragedy and our greatest collective sin. But the vestiges of racism left in our society are now more of a hurdle than barrier. Today the total emphasis on “minorities as victims” is enervating and self-defeating to minorities themselves. It allows minorities themselves to excuse low performance even when discrimination is not the cause. I believe that the mistaken notion that this is still a pervasively racist society has ironically become one of the chief barriers to upward mobility of minorities. The “solution” (“fight racism”) has become the new problem. (The enervating idea that “I can’t get ahead because of our racist society.”)

While it is not yet the majority opinion among minority leaders, some brave souls are also speaking out. Black scholar Shelby Steele maintains that Blacks constant focus on being victims keeps minorities:

mired in a victim-focused identity, gives them a disinvestment in success and an investment in failure...the most pernicious feature of real oppression is that it is always, in itself, an argument that others should be responsible.... He comes to feel that his individual life will be improved more by changes in society than by his own initiative. Without realizing it, he makes society rather than himself the agent of change.

We need to re-balance our thinking and re-conceptualize the problems and solutions of minority failure. The concept of “I can’t succeed because I live in a racist society” has become as serious a problem to twenty-first century America as racism itself.

Others strongly disagree and think I am being insensitive to the depth of racism’s pathology. Perhaps. But shouldn’t it be debated? Are these ideas so dangerous that they should be censored? Bottom line: the debate/dialogue is overdue. America needs a cathartic discussion on race and minority underperformance for the sake of our nation’s future. ■