

THE DISADVANTAGED GROUPS OF AMERICA AND HOW TO
REDRESS ALL THEIR GRIEVANCES

or

The Decline and Fall of the WABMAIMS

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I think most of us feel an additional responsibility when our turn to give a paper falls on the open meeting night. In this instance I was glad, however, because I had been thinking of writing this paper for some time but was reluctant (for reasons that I will be glad to explain later if they do not become clear) to give it only with Society members present.

Most of you are aware that it is a cardinal rule of the Athenaeum Society that we not give papers on either politics or religion. Let me inform you at the outset, therefore, that this paper is not on politics or religion. It is, rather, a kind of social treatise that does happen to mention both politics and religion in several places but does not take a partisan view. I am sure, therefore, that it is within the rules of the Society.

The title of this paper is "The Disadvantaged Groups of America and How to Redress All Their Grievances." Or you may prefer the subtitle which is "The Decline and Fall of the WABMAIMS." If you do prefer the subtitle, then you will have to be told what the word WABMAIM means. It is a new word that I have coined--a rough acronym for "white American born middle-aged middle-income males." The WABMAIMS are not to be confused, of course, with the WASPS (white Anglo-Saxon Protestants)--a term long since passé, nor with the more recently born YUPS (young urban professionals) or their close kin the YUMPIES (young upward mobile people). The latter groups are the darlings of entertainment and advertising executives, and their every whim is courted by campaign managers. No one, of course, has the slightest concern for the whims of WABMAIMS or even knows whether WABMAIMS have whims.

Having selected this topic as appropriate open meeting fare, I feel obligated to provide you with some information as to how I personally have stood on certain issues through the years.

For example, when the Southerners who bolted the Democratic party convention in 1948 because of Harry S. Truman's insistence on a civil rights plank in the platform failed to bring about his defeat, I was very pleased. When President Truman ordered the racial integration of the armed forces and veterans administration facilities I felt that his action was justified and long overdue. I pulled hard for Jackie Robinson and the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, because I thought they were doing the right thing.

I was encouraged by the 1954 school desegregation decision, only sorry that it had not come earlier; and I greatly admired then Senate majority leader Lyndon Johnson's perseverance in pushing through the far-reaching Civil Rights Bill of 1957. A few years later I was enamoured of his phrase "The Great Society," which was to be built on the outcome of a courageous "War on Poverty." And when the Equal Rights Amendment was first introduced I looked forward with anticipation to its eventual passage and ratification.

But about that time, it began to appear that something had gone wrong. By 1970, we were in the midst of urban riots, campus demonstrations, civil disobedience, massive litigation, and a new form of discrimination called affirmative action. At the time, I could not understand how people who had condemned racism, sexism, and ethnic quotas could suddenly conclude that such discrimination might be right in another context; nor could I understand why a

20th century white boy like me should be made to pay for the sins of ^a slave owning ancestor who had lived and died in the 19th century--if, indeed, I even had a slave owning ancestor.

I must confess that I was slow to grasp the real problem with which we were faced, but I was not the only one. This nation's founding fathers had been well meaning, but, of course, naive. My own study of campaign rhetoric, editorials, and the Congressional record has helped me to see that guaranteeing equal opportunity is quite insufficient as a means of attaining the Utopian society.

It is obvious that if you have two groups, one of which has a history of being disadvantaged and you insure equal opportunity for both, then you only perpetuate the basic inequality, because the advantaged group will exceed the disadvantaged group in achievement, having had a head start.

This fact was correctly perceived by a school board in the Washington, D.C. area recently when a local PTA raised money to purchase three computers for an elementary school. The board was appalled at the PTA's insensitivity to true social justice, and voted to purchase five computers for every other elementary school in the system, leaving the beneficiary of the PTA with only three, as a way of punishing them for their error in thinking that those parents had a right to provide a valuable learning tool for their own children without realizing that they were penalizing all of the other children who did not get the same advantage. Often school boards and other public officials do not act so promptly to correct obvious disadvantages.

The real problem began to dawn on me one afternoon as I sat in a meeting listening to a federal official explain a proposed new law that would require special programs and guarantee easy access to services for certain disadvantaged, minority groups, among which were (1) racial minorities (i.e., nonwhites); (2) native Americans (by this they meant Indians and persons born in the Aleutian Islands); (3) women; (4) children and youth; (5) the elderly; and (6) the poor.

As I listened, I fell to musing on the fact that this set of "disadvantaged groups" which was to be named in many state and federal laws in the next few years, included all of my own immediate family (after all, my parents were "elderly," my children were "youths," and my wife was a "woman"), and it included most of the other people I knew, but it did not include me! For the first time, I felt a sense of alienation, perhaps a feeling of growing old or somehow falling out of the mainstream. The "rainbow coalition" had been born (long before the Reverend Jesse Jackson opportunistically coined the term), and I had been left out.

My suggestion that the law should state simply that discrimination was permissible only if practiced against white, middle-aged, middle-income males was considered to be neither amusing nor constructive, and it was patiently explained to me that all the groups named in this statute were disadvantaged people, having been victimized by the one minority group not named, i.e., the WABMAIMS.

Being a WABMAIM myself, I failed to take the rainbow coalition seriously at first. It was, after all, a conglomeration of such disparate groups, with only a single, apparently common thread

running through its multicolored fabric; namely, that each was keenly aware of being disadvantaged. From adolescents who felt that adult rules were too restrictive, to the elderly who felt pushed aside; from white women, who felt they had been kept on a pedestal to black men, who felt they had been used as the white man's footstool; from the Hispanics, who wished to preserve a foreign language and culture in a nation that was supposed to be a melting pot to American Indians, who felt that the contents of that pot had been poured illegally over the land of their ancestors, all agreed on only one thing: the WABMAIMS had all the advantages and were responsible for the disadvantaged state of everyone else.

My own membership in this privileged class seemed to prevent my understanding that there was a plethora of rights that obviously should have been guaranteed by the Constitution--mere oversights on the part of the founding fathers--and correctable by assuming that that is what they meant in the first place.

Thomas Jefferson, a noted WABMAIM of the 18th century, had referred to ". . . the minority . . . which equal laws must protect and to violate which would be oppression." Obviously, Jefferson understood that democracy existed not only to establish the will of the majority but also to protect the rights of the minority. But it is doubtful that Jefferson ever envisioned a federation of states in which the interpretation of rights would lead to dangerous criminals being set free, because prisons had been declared too crowded to guarantee the "right" of comfortable living arrangements during their incarceration.

A noted syndicated WABMAIM columnist, George Will, observed, "as the distinction between civil rights and economic entitlements has become hazy, the idea of civil rights has lost its lustre." Like Mr. Will, I found myself almost ready to give up the effort to solve the problem. But then came a happy day of enlightenment, a day of realization that there was a key that could unlock the whole mystery. It is so simple that I marvel that no one ever thought of it before. This problem, like so many others, is susceptible to the scientific method.

As a nation, we have wasted most of our energy and resources on such projects as sending men and women into space, developing computer technology, perfecting organ transplant surgery, and improving concentrated orange juice, to the neglect of more important tasks. Now we must realize that to correct disadvantages we must develop a new technology, indeed, a new science. The job can be left to chance or at the level of mere politics no longer. I would suggest the name disadvantology as the name of the new science. The term may be slow to catch on at first, but don't be surprised if we someday have departments of disadvantology in our major universities and an office of disadvantology as part of the Department of Health and Human Services.

So far, disadvantology is no more than a collection of varying opinions and different points of view, but that is much the same as the precursors of other sciences. To become a science, a discipline must have constructs that are quantifiable, for it is mathematics, or the reduction of complex issues to simple numbers, that moved each modern science from the realms of religion,

philosophy, or mythology to the status of science. In other words, it is quantification that determines whether an article should be published in The Scientific Monthly or The Enquirer. I am prepared, therefore, to offer the first quantifiable constructs in order to launch the new science of disadvantology on its way.

First of all, disadvantology needs a test. Nothing helps a science get established like a good test. After all, look what people like Binet did for psychology and Wasserman for medicine. Of course, scientists and applied practitioners are never so happy as when they are interpreting to the naive public the results of some test that no one outside the fraternity can understand. Even people who read weather forecasts on radio or television nowadays call themselves meteorologists and cite an array of different quantitative measurements they have taken from various gauges, when all we want to know is whether it is going to rain tomorrow.

So I propose that the correcting of disadvantages begin with the careful assessment of every person's current state of disadvantage. To accomplish this task I have devised a test which will yield a Disadvantage Quotient (or DQ) for every citizen. It shall be the goal of disadvantology to redistribute, on the basis of these DQ's, all advantages, including (but not necessarily limited to) admission to prestigious colleges and professional schools, employment opportunities, salary increases, promotion, etc.

The assessment works as follows: a person is rated on each of six dimensions or categories of disadvantage. These are race, sex, age, national origin, economic status, and religious

affiliation. Scores will vary from 0 to 10 on each dimension, with 0 always standing for no disadvantage and 10 for the maximum amount of disadvantage dictated by our culture.

Thus, for sex, the scoring is simple: men get 0's, women get 10's. For race it is slightly more complicated, but obviously whites would get 0's, black's 10's, and American Indians and Orientals about 5 or 6. In the scoring for economic status, the poor would get 10's, the middle class 0's. Where national origin is concerned, I gather that Hispanics should get 10's, Asians and Pacific Islanders perhaps 5's or 6's, and the so-called Anglos would get 0's. Age presents a problem, since the distribution of disadvantages would vary along the age continuum. The middle-aged would get 0's, while those in their teens would get 5's, and those over 65 would get the 10's. Religion hardly qualifies in our part of the country as a basis for disadvantage nowadays, though, in all fairness, I think we should assign scores of about 3 to those of Jewish faith, 2 to Roman Catholics, and 1 to Protestants (except Southern Baptists, who would get the 0's). The only people who would get 10's would be certain exotic groups like the Moonies and Hari Krishna.

Now to calculate the disadvantage score, you simply add the individual scores for each dimension (the maximum would be 60, i.e., six categories with a maximum of 10 on each category), divide the sum by 30, and multiply by 100. The result is your Disadvantage Quotient, or DQ. I will cite a couple of examples to show you how the assessment would work. Let's take Case #1, a black female of 19, who is single, unemployed, and of the Baptist faith. She gets

10 for being black, 10 for being female, 5 for being a teenager, 10 for being unemployed (i.e., poor), 0 for religion and 0 for national origin. Her total raw score is 35. Divide by 30, and you get 1.17, which multiplied by 100 yields a Disadvantage Quotient of 117, a very healthy, above average DQ, which should yield great dividends for its possessor. Now take Case #2, a white male, 50 years old, named O'Brien, whose income is in the average range. Poor O'Brien has no claim to disadvantage in any category and would have a 0 score except that we can give him a 2 for being Catholic, which yields a Disadvantage Quotient of only 7--in his case not a lucky number.

Of course, after we have become adept in using the scoring system we may develop certain refinements to improve our ability to measure and correct some of the subtler sources of disadvantage, such as being too fat in a skinny world, or left-handed in a right-handed culture, or too tall or too short, or having patterned baldness, or being slightly bowlegged, or having a wife who talks too much, or being flat chested, or not being flat chested. And so on we could go. As you can see, the number of disadvantages in this world far exceeds any idea the average person might have. But correcting those subtler disadvantages will have to be the province of those properly trained in disadvantageology. If the general public tries to do so, we will have to have laws prohibiting helping your neighbor without a license and boards to enforce those needed laws.

Obviously, one's Disadvantage Quotient would eventually become more important than one's name, and almost as important as

one's Social Security number, since all of life's advantages (i.e., whether to get them if you don't have them and whether to keep them if you do) would depend on that score. To correct a tendency to elect too many WABMAIMS to public office (a regrettable habit still being practiced by an ignorant electorate), we might adopt the rule of multiplying the number of votes obtained by one's DQ. This would succeed in getting most of the current legislators and Congressmen out of office.

I could go on with the various advantages that this system obviously makes possible, if time permitted, but I think you get the idea. It is apparent that we WABMAIMS have outlived our usefulness. Our current condition may be described as being, at best, in a state of sociological menopause, and we must pass into extinction along with the other fossils, whose places in the world have been eroded by physical or social evolution. The "old boys" as we like to refer to ourselves, must become a thing of the past, like dinosaurs; like King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table; like T-model Fords; like vaudeville performers, like Western gunfighters; and like golden wedding anniversaries--people and institutions who have no place in today's world.

Actually, the extinction of the WABMAIMS may be little more than a ripple on the sea of history. They are, after all, a much smaller group than most people realize. When you consider that 52 percent of the American population is female, 30 percent teenagers and children, over 12 percent 65 years old and over, and then you account for the proportion of Hispanics and other ethnic groups,

you will see that the WABMAIMS are only a small minority group, making up no more than 15 percent of the U.S. population.

I close, therefore, with a quotation from the ancient Roman gladiators, their final salute to the spectators before turning to face their deadly opposition (a quote that I consider to be an appropriate WABMAIM motto): "Morituri te salutemus!" which is to say, "We who are about to die, salute you!"