

## On the Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement

As the twentieth century drew to a close, Americans had differing opinions on how much progress had been achieved in the field of civil rights. The following excerpts present contrasting views on race relations in the United States in the 1990s.

*As you read the views below, compare them with your own impressions of the legacy of the civil rights movement.*

### THE LEGACY

*Andrew Young, former director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), quoted in Life, April 1993*

When the Berlin wall came down, they were singing “We Shall Overcome.” When the Polish shipyard workers went on strike, they were singing “We Shall Overcome.” When the students went to Tiananmen Square, they wrote “We Shall Overcome” on their T-shirts. It’s clear that the legacy that both Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy understood is that the Constitution’s preamble was universal.

### SUBSTANTIAL PROGRESS

*Eileen Barth, retired social worker and child care professional, quoted in Studs Terkel, Race (1992)*

Before the civil-rights movement, there was a very wide separation between blacks and whites. I don’t think the separation is as great today. There has been more speaking out. Blacks now let themselves open up and say how they feel in no uncertain terms. I think there are friendships between blacks and whites that didn’t exist before. In spite of everything, I think the racial situation is healthier than it was before. Blacks are no longer invisible. . . .

Our street is middle-class, made up of various racial groups: Koreans, Chinese, a black family. We’re all friendly. In the neighborhood, cars and garages have been broken into and there have been several muggings. There’s a lot of poverty in this community and homelessness and desperate people, mostly black.

### SUBSTANTIAL PROGRESS

*Robert Staples, professor of sociology at the University of California in San Francisco, “The Illusion of Racial Equality: The Black American Dilemma,” from Lure and Loathing (1993)*

Perforce, 1990s America has witnessed a dramatic turnaround of this country’s determination to see and treat all black Americans as subhumans. . . . Civil rights laws, recruitment of blacks into heretofore excluded positions, affirmative action regulations, loans, scholarships, social programs, set asides, and so on were gradually used to reduce the absolute caste line extant in 1940.

Those measures bore fruit in the 1990s when the world’s largest black middle class was created. Overall, black Americans had a total income of \$300 billion a year, a figure that equals the income of the twelfth-largest nation in the world. The median household income of black married couples, in 1990, was \$33,893, giving them almost the highest standard of living in the world. Blacks also have a median educational level of 12.2 years, higher than most Europeans. More than a million blacks were enrolled in institutions of higher learning in 1991. More than other people of color, blacks appear to be integrated into the institutional life of American society. On the political level, they serve in the president’s cabinet as his advisers, on the Supreme Court, as governors of states, as presidential candidates, as the head of the military, and as mayors of the nation’s largest cities.