

Jim Crow's Children- The Broken Promise of the Brown Decision
Irons

Too complex of a problem for a single simple solution, June 28, 2003

Mr. Irons is an advocate. A graduate of Harvard Law school. He does a magnificent job of presenting the history of Jim Crow from a legal perspective. It is a splendid refresher course in High School Civics: The Dred Scott decision that negroes were property; Plessy vs. Ferguson establishing the doctrine of "Separate but Equal," and the myriad cases argued by Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP leading up to the desegregation decision in "Brown vs. Board of Education."

Segregation advocates recognized even fifty years ago that their arguments for separate schools were weak in light of the 14th Amendment. The surprise is the degree to which the Warren Court took psychological testimony, the self esteem argument, into account. Separate schools, they concluded, could not be equal simply because of the stigma that separation imposed on black children. Full and equal citizens must enjoy the right to participate fully and equally in the society.

The book traces the progress of desegregation from 1954 onward, including busing and other measures to force integration. Mr. Irons laments the limited success of these measures in achieving their objective, equal educational and financial achievement by blacks in an integrated society.

Why, then, do differences persist? Mr. Irons argues that ongoing differences result from continued de facto separation of the races in schools, the inferior economic status of blacks, and the high incidence of single mothers among the black population. These situations perpetuate a cycle of lower expectations, lower self-esteem and lower achievement among blacks. Take them away, he suggests, and blacks would perform at the same level as everyone else in society.

Mr. Irons takes the obligatory swipe at "The Bell Curve," leading with the phrase "Virtually all reputable scholars reject claims, most recently leveled by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray.....who conducted no research of their own." It is true that they saw their task as compilation.. They acknowledged that the relationships among social

status, income, intelligence and race are vastly complex. Their goal was to bring together and analyze all the significant statistical data from diverse studies in many countries over many decades. Though one would not know it from the reception it got, the book is not even primarily about race. Mr. Irons did not footnote his claim about "all reputable scholars." The only one he cites, Richard Nisbett, has not written a book on the subject, only a 16-page tract entitled "Race Genetics and IQ," ..It cites a handful of studies with limited numbers of subjects dating mostly from the 1930s to the 1970s. Mr. Irons chooses to ignore a number of published authors he must regard as disreputable, among them William Shockley, Arthur Jensen, and Philippe Rushton. Whatever their shortcomings, they have published books to offer their thoughts for public scrutiny. Mr. Irons should not have ducked the chance to refute them.

Mr. Irons is totally focused on U.S. society. The book would be richer, though his thesis would be more difficult to support, if he were to consider the situation of blacks elsewhere in the world. He would find that whatever their situation with regard to education and income, the degree of equality between blacks and whites in the U.S far exceeds that in any other part of the world, including Africa, Europe, the Caribbean and Latin America. Jim Crow is a weak explanation for the status of blacks in France or Haiti.

Thinkers throughout the history of our country, including great minds such as deTocqueville Twain and Mencken have devoted a great deal of thought to the natures of the races and relationships between them. While there is no agreement, all would say it is tremendously complex. School integration and busing were simple ideas that had their opportunity to resolve the situation. They didn't. We can thank Mr. Irons for a wonderful history lesson. Sadly, his thinking is trapped in his own history.