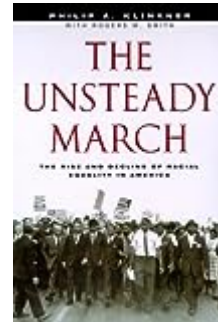


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Philip A Klinkner, Rogers M Smith. *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. vii + 417 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-44339-3.



Reviewed by John Barnhill (Yukon, Oklahoma)

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Klinkner is associate professor of government and the former director of the Arthur Levitt Public Affairs Center at Hamilton College; working alone he has produced *The Losing Parties* (1994). Smith is professor of government and co-director of the ISPS Center for the Study of Race, Inequality, and Politics at Yale. His solo effort, *Civic Ideals*, was a finalist for the 1998 Pulitzer Prize in History. Together, they survey vagaries in the political status of African Americans over the centuries. Because this is a survey, it relies heavily on secondary sources. The book is well put together, although it has no bibliography.

The authors contend that three elements must coincide if African Americans are to advance. The nation must be in a war large and long enough to require the use of all its resources, including African Americans. The enemy has to be hostile to our concepts of equality and justice, forcing us to confront our hypocrisy. And a domestic advocate for African American rights must be strong enough to press government to act. If only two of the three conditions occur, progress will not happen. Only three times have all three been in place simultaneously. African American improvement has come only as a result of the American Revolution, the Civil War, and World War II (defined to continue through the Cold War). At all other times, African Americans have endured at best stagnation and more often regression or repression.

This argument is not at all controversial. An old cliché is that the squeaky wheel gets the grease (unless we don't need the wheel, in which case it gets tossed behind the barn). Politics is not a humanitarian profession. And there is no open door; somebody has to push the door open. Further, the door has to be unlocked before it even has a chance of opening. But, as the authors remind us, the myth persists that our founding fathers gave us an almost divine self-correcting system of government to bring justice and the full benefits of the American miracle to all who live here. So, once again, we need a reminder that the African American story is one of ten years forward, seventy years back. There is no inevitability, no magic system created by the founding fathers, nothing to justify the current complacency that progress will continue and there will be no falling back.

Either the authors or this reviewer missed a spot in the discussion of the Civil War. That section portrays an increasing consensus north and south between 1790 and 1860 that blacks, free or slave, weren't worth fighting for. Nobody to speak of challenges the right to own slaves, and the Southern institution is depicted as becoming increasingly protected right up to the eve of the war. There's even the aborted Constitutional amendment on war's eve to firm up slavery. In this scenario, secession makes no sense. A mere handful of abolitionists, clearly

with a highly unpopular minority view, would not be sufficient threat to force such radical action. Why, then, did the states secede, forcing the Civil War? Could it be that the turnaround in African American status came earlier, came without the necessary preconditions? There's a significant gap in the story here, and it disrupts the flow.

Additional shortcomings appear throughout. For instance, the authors state, "Racial progress has never come in the United States without urgent pressures from domestic reform movements, usually led by African Americans" (p. 289). This statement doesn't fit two of the three cases as described, the Revolution or the Civil War; thus, it does not seem usual. The focus on the three factors also diminishes the role of political leaders and downplays both the moral imperative and the people's involvement. In this theory, there's no real need for moral leadership or sincere belief in black equality on the part of our presidents. Washington, Lincoln, and Kennedy certainly didn't make the Negro cause a top priority, and their arguments tended toward the pragmatic more than the moral. And there's no real need for supportive public opinion. Early 1960s surveys of whites, north and south, showed majorities saying that blacks were moving too fast; the Wallace vote and the success of the Republican "Southern Strategy" also were indicative. For that matter, the Civil War Draft Riots and the Copperheads could be used as indicators that would serve as well as public opinion surveys. In this approach, African American advancement is merely a tool to reach another, more important, goal. There's little concern for the well being of the black population or of individual black people. It's a cynical world indeed.

The authors are solid in describing the current situation. We Americans are resegregating, and if we do away with affirmative action and cut back on government we will see the erosion of economic gains. The progress in income over the last third of the twentieth century happened because of affirmative action for skilled and selec-

tive jobs and government hiring for less selective white collar work. And the authors express legitimate concern that if government quits on blacks, we might well slide back into something similar to the post-Reconstruction era. After all, this remains a white racist society even if the racist rhetoric is subdued. Habits do not go away easily. But there is a cumulative effect that reduces the degree of the declines. There will be no going back to slavery or to blatant KKK racism.

When the authors do cite numbers, they clearly establish that the peaks occurred twenty or more years ago and that we're living with declining economic improvement, an increasingly segregated society, and a federal government that's lost interest in taking on new tasks. This information leads to the authors' analogizing of the present with the post-Reconstruction collapse but not with the presumably comparable post-revolutionary collapse.

The authors say it is time to overturn the historical pattern. With pluck and grit, we can reverse the slide. The solution is a revival of progressive governmental activism. Let's reinforce the civil rights laws, bring back the draft and public service, reform the justice system, and start working toward economic justice. Let us have progressivism without the stimuli that brought it to life the other three times. This concluding cry for change is weak. But the authors are right that it takes vigilance and effort to continue improvement in the absence of other driving factors. Optimistically, the authors think that the effort is possible, even if their prescriptions for continuing progress are somewhat stale.

The Unsteady March is not definitive. The authors acknowledge that more work remains. But they have provided a reasonably good attempt to track the ebb and flow of African American access to the American system, a good progressive political history, and a good corrective to what is clearly misplaced optimism and complacency in today's society.

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