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Book review, *Unfinished Journey Racial Equality in American History*, by Michael J. Klarman

A More Perfect Union Year Three

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The novel, *Unfinished Business Racial Equality in American History*, written by Michael J. Klarman is a thought-provoking novel. The book chronicles the racial struggles that took place throughout our nation's history, with particular focus on the adversities faced by African-Americans. It brings a new (and conceivably unpopular) perspective on the length of time it took for minorities in American society to make real, tangible gains on the road to equality in America. More than that, it looks at the status of minorities in contemporary American society, and questions the legitimacy of whether or not any real gains have been achieved.

Early in the book, the author sets the tone that the white majority did not grant rights and privileges to minorities over the years and decades following Reconstruction due to a sudden, and popular awareness of the inherent evil of discrimination and racism. Nor was progress towards equality made in direct response to the efforts of those fighting for it. Rather, Klarman notes that the apparent successes in the struggle toward racial equality were won almost as coincidental side-effects of other National adversities with which the country was struggling at the time. "Racial progress has often been an unintended consequence of other developments. The Civil War was not initially fought to end slavery, and the goal of World War II was not to launch a civil rights movement; yet such were the consequences of these wars." p 5.

Inequality still exists in our country on a large scale, but it is not given any likeness of the attention that it had during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. In the years leading up to

the decade of the 1960's, the Supreme Court began issuing rulings in favor of desegregation. The country, however, was not ready to embrace this idea. Many fought strongly and violently to ensure that it would never happen. The Court lacked the ability to enforce the desegregation rulings, and most citizens of the country, even government officials charged with the duty of enforcing the Law of the Land, made reasoned decisions to ignore the legislation that the collective conscience deemed unconscionable. "When Congress passed the 1964 Civil Rights Act fewer than two black children in a hundred attended a racially mixed school in the South. The federal judiciary, acting without significant support from either Congress or the President, had failed to accomplish more." p160.

The tide seemed to turn in favor of the Civil Rights movement during the 1960s. The Supreme Court rendered many rulings in the 60's that favored racial equality. Schools were actually starting to be desegregated, buses and trains were desegregated and blacks had earned the right to vote. What differentiated this period in the struggle was that finally, there appeared to be some unity of purpose exhibited by all three branches of government, as well as a more temperate acceptance on the part of the American public of the changes that were beginning to be enacted. For years, both Congress and the President had been reluctant to take a stand on the racial issue, but it all began to change. "During the 1960's, more than in any previous era, the Supreme Court sided with racial minorities against their oppressors. Yet by this date, the justices were following the lead of Congress and the President, who in turn were reflecting a transformation in public opinion on race." p182. The three branches of our government working together helped the country make effective progress during the 1960's and 1970's.

As our country moved into the 1980's and 1990's the spot light shifted away from racial equality and desegregation. The Supreme Court began to release school districts from court

ordered desegregation. “In short, the conservative majority’s patience for court for court-ordered school segregation had run out. So had public support. An opinion poll conducted around this time revealed that 93 percent of whites supported school integration in principle, but only 26 percent favored government intervention to accomplish it.” p192 .

Court ordered school desegregation was becoming an issue of the past. Another ruling that has led to more racial inequality is the ruling on *Washington vs. Davis*. “In *Washington vs. Davis* (1976) the court ruled that the Equal Protection Clause required proof of illicit motivation. Even though blacks were four times as likely as whites to fail an aptitude test to become a police officer, the test was constitutionally permissible so long as it had not been adopted for the purpose of disadvantaging blacks.” p193. The focus clearly, on racial equality had been lifted.

Racial inequality is still an enormous problem in our country. This was the part of the novel that made me second guess some of my own notions about the status of racial equality in America today. I thought we were still moving in a positive direction towards a more equal society. If Michael Klarman’s views are right about social equality, then my previously-held views on the matter could not be further from the truth.

“Spatial segregation means social isolation, as most inner-city blacks are rarely exposed to whites or broader culture. As a result, black youngsters have developed a separate language is sorts, which disadvantages them in school and in the search for employment. Even worse, social segregation has fostered an opposition culture among many black youngsters that discourages academic achievement –“acting white”- and thus further disables them from succeeding in mainstream society.” p 202.

According to Klarman's research, unlike other minorities, the racial divide between whites and blacks continues to grow. At the same time, other minorities in America seem to be surpassing African-Americans in their collective labor to achieve the 'American dream'. "The growing success and assimilation of other racial minorities highlights the extent to which some African Americans remain isolated and impoverished. For many blacks, the goals of equality and racial integration are as distant today as they have been ever." p203. Why is this happening?

Klarman wrote about many issues still facing blacks in America and the need to focus on the lack of growth in equality or the step backs in racial relations that has happened and continues to happen in our country. "Blacks comprise less than 12 percent of the nation's population but more than 50 percent of its prison inmates and roughly 48 percent of those on death row. Black men are seven times more likely to be incarcerated than white men." p 203.

Statistics like this make me feel sick to my stomach. Still in the 21st century, "They are likely to have dilapidated housing, poor schools, broken families, juvenile pregnancies, drug dependencies, high crime rates, and a lack of positive role models for youngsters. The percentage of blacks living in neighborhoods of extreme poverty increased dramatically between 1970 and 1990." p202.

This just seems wrong to me. I do not want to believe that these statistics are right. Klarman's novel is thought provoking and intense. It has made me question many ideas I had previously held. I believe more needs to be done in our country about this issue. Our country needs to make it a priority that everyone is given the opportunities to be successful.

Bibliography

Klarman, Michael J. *Unfinished Journey Racial Equality in American History* (2007).