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A Lot Less Talk

The last thing America needs is more obsessing about race.

By Abigail Thernstrom

I don't know what nation the attorney general is living in, but it's not the one I know. Eric Holder's speech to Justice Department staff on February 18 was scandalously uninformed, as well as arrogant and incoherent. It should be an embarrassment to the president.

Given the already splendid commentary on this speech by Jonah Goldberg and others, I had intended to hold my tongue. But after reading the attorney general's remarks in full, I changed my mind. "A nation of cowards" — those attention-grabbing words have been much remarked upon. In fact, the rest of the speech is even more disturbing than that mud-slinging phrase.

Take the charge that "outside the workplace" the racial scene is "bleak in that there is almost no significant interaction between us. On Saturdays and Sundays, America in the year 2009 does not, in some ways, differ significantly from the country that existed some 50 years ago."

A little fact-checking is in order. Saturdays and Sundays looked quite different even less than 50 years ago. In 1964 only 18 percent of whites said they had black friends; the figure today is 87 percent. Raise the bar to "a fairly close personal friend" and the proportion jumps from a mere 9 percent in 1975 to 75 percent in 2005. The share of blacks with close white friends has soared from 21 percent to 82 percent over that same period.

We don't have much in the way of historical data on interracial dating because, not so long ago, the figure would have been too low for pollsters to bother tabulating. But we do know that in 1963 only 10 percent of whites approved of it. In 2006, however, a Washington Post/Kaiser poll found that 59 percent of black men and 41 percent of black women had dated someone who is white. And 41 percent of white women and 36 percent of white men had crossed the racial-dating divide. Today, the number of black-white marriages is up to almost half a million — still low, but a steep rise over the last 40 years. Presumably, these couples generally spend Saturdays and Sundays together.

Holder says that on the weekends blacks and whites lead separate lives. That's not so easy to do, given the racial composition of many American neighborhoods. Half a century ago, only 20 percent of whites reported having black neighbors; today the figure is above 60 percent. Blacks, on average, live in communities that are only half black. Do blacks and whites living in close proximity never chat about common concerns — the

schools, the traffic, and the life of their kids in and out of school? Do the whites who voted for Barack Obama refuse to talk to the blacks who live on their street?

In mentioning Sundays, of course Holder is talking about church attendance. But he has lost me. Is there something wrong with black churches that I don't understand? I didn't much like what I knew of the Afrocentric church that President Obama attended for 20 years, but that was his choice. What exactly is the problem with African-Americans deciding to worship at a black church? Or black college students signing up for a black fraternity or sorority — voluntarily, knowing other doors are wide open?

Harvard law professor Randall Kennedy, in his most recent book, *Sellout: The Politics of Racial Betrayal*, advocates a form of racial citizenship in which choice is always an element; “all Negroes should be voluntary Negroes,” he writes. (Kennedy's use of the term “Negro” is, of course, a sign of intellectual independence that Holder is not likely to appreciate.) What a novel and welcome thought: racial identity as a choice. The U.S. census may put us in racial and ethnic boxes, but we are free to reject those categories, and meet our friends and neighbors on the basis of friendship, with no racial obsession dividing us.

Holder asks us to imagine “situations where people — regardless of skin color — could confront racial issues freely and without fear.” Okay, but even Bill Cosby might find that hard to imagine today, now that he's been almost banished from the civil-rights community for his talk about black responsibility. In “confronting racial issues,” what would the attorney general like to hear us say? Surely the point of such a confrontation is to arrive at a common understanding about — what?

He claims to want a “nuanced, principled, and spirited” conversation about racial preferences — a.k.a., affirmative action. That principled and nuanced discussion is taking place, but it's too spirited for Holder, who maligns as “extremist” the views of those who are leading the conversation — people like Richard Sander of the UCLA law school, Tom Sowell, and Ward Connerly. Their views are those of the majority of Americans — and are we to consider these men “unprincipled”?

It's not obvious that there is value in a “dialogue” about race of the sort that Holder imagines. Yes, conversations are nice — about the Academy Awards, the NBA, the price of gas, our economic worries, the elderly parents we take care of, the resolutions we've made to get more exercise, or our love for junk food. But we don't need Holder's version of a conversation. The last thing Americans need is more race chatter. It doesn't bring us together; it separates us. And, in any case, our record on race in recent decades has been one of courage, not cowardice.

Abigail Thernstrom is the co-author with Stephan Thernstrom of *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible*. She is an adjunct scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and the vice chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

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