

RESEARCH REPORTS

Reviews of new research by public agencies and private institutions

“Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations.”

Harvard University Press, 79 Garden St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138. 260 pp. \$22.50.
Authors: Howard Schuman, Charlotte Steeh, and Lawrence Bobo

The startling images of black teenagers being chased by enraged whites in Little Rock, Ark., were for many younger viewers of PBS's *Eyes on the Prize* a first glimpse of what America's blacks endured only three decades ago.

Even Thomas Jefferson, the preeminent architect of American democracy, considered a harmonious biracial society unattainable. “Deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites,” he wrote, and “ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained,” meant that any meeting of free blacks and whites would lead to “the extermination of one or the other race.”

The post-Civil War era did not fulfill Jefferson's apocalyptic prediction. But during the 1930s, a majority of whites still considered blacks inferior. And during World War II, when blacks entered the expanding labor market, white factory workers often rejected them with slurs: “I'd rather see Hitler and Hirohito win the war than work beside a nigger on an assembly line.”

At the same time, white American scholars, revolted by Nazi racism, began to perceive racial prejudice as a national sickness. This new intellectual consensus helped prompt President Harry Truman to appoint a committee in 1947, charged with exploring what its report called the “pervasive gap” between “our aims and what we actually do.” The report concluded on an optimistic note that the people's “vision” and “high principles” would prevail.

Is the Truman report's optimism justified in the 1980s? That is the question posed by Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, researchers at the University of Michigan. Their answer: Yes—and No.

White Americans have steadily moved toward the *principle* of equality. But polls

indicate that they continue to harbor some reservations. In 1972, for example, when virtually the entire white population professed to believe that blacks and whites were equally competent workers, one-fourth of whites polled rejected the idea of a black U.S. president. This, say the authors, is a clear sign of residual prejudice.

But some later signs are less clear: More than 90 percent of whites now say they favor school and neighborhood integration, yet the same percentage oppose dispersed public housing or school busing programs. Some researchers have inferred that most whites still suspect blacks of spurning traditional American values such as self-reliance and hard work.

The authors do not draw such a starkly negative conclusion. They suggest that whites may be reacting to local threats of black *domination*—the predictable response of any empowered group. Blacks themselves, they add, increasingly respond “no interest” when polled on busing, affirmative action, and other government measures aimed at assuring racial integration. And black leaders such as Jesse Jackson have lately stressed “self-help” and “redistribution” of income over integration.

Slow progress has been made. Vis-à-vis their white peers, young black college-educated couples are narrowing the income gap, and more than 5,000 blacks hold public office, among them the mayors of five major cities.

Faster progress toward integration will depend heavily on leadership, the authors say—the emergence of another Martin Luther King, Jr., or Lyndon Johnson. Until then, race relations in America will be defined by “progress and resistance, certainty and ambivalence, striking movement and mere surface change.”

"American Trade Politics: System Under Stress."

Twentieth Century Fund, 41 East 70th St., New York, N.Y. 10021. 336 pp. \$30.00 cloth, \$18.00 paper.

Author: I. M. Destler

In 1985, U.S. senators and representatives introduced in Congress 634 trade bills—at least 99 of which were meant to protect U.S. firms against foreign competition. "Industry by industry," the *New York Times* editorialized, "the battle to maintain open markets is being lost."

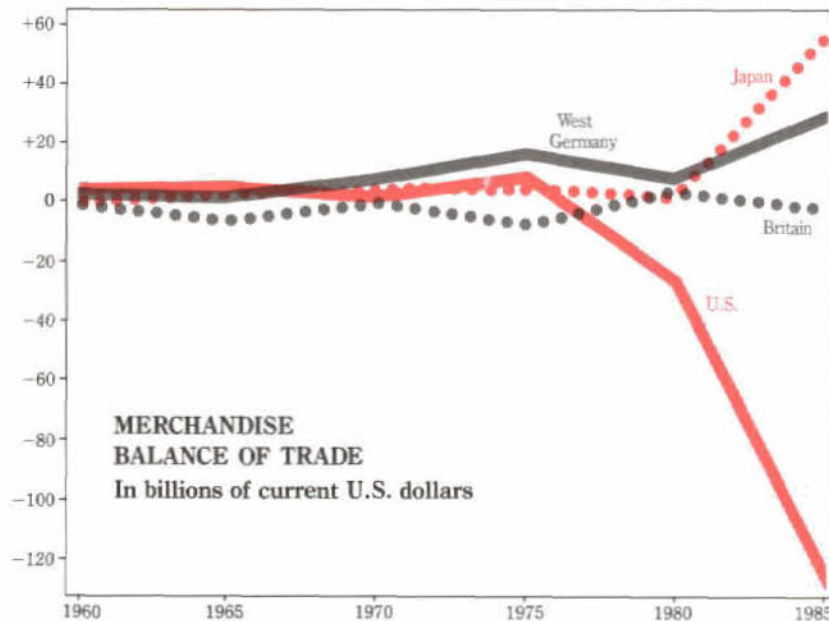
Indeed, domestic firms threatened by foreign auto, steel, and textile firms have often won protectionist laws from Congress. Such measures, says Destler, a Senior Fellow at Washington's Institute for International Economics, may save some domestic firms, but will do little to reduce U.S. trade deficits overall.

During most of this century, Destler observes, Congress has let the executive branch handle trade matters. In 1930, legislators enacted the famous Smoot-Hawley

Act, which increased tariff schedules for over 20,000 goods. But the measure backfired. The law not only caused U.S. exports to plummet (from \$5.2 billion in 1929 to \$1.6 billion in 1933); it also invited other nations to raise their tariffs—thus helping to trigger the worldwide economic depression of the 1930s.

Thanks in part to Smoot-Hawley's failure, free trade gained favor during Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal (1933-45). Secretary of State Cordell Hull spoke for many of his peers when he said that "unhampered trade dovetailed with peace."

Policymakers also believed that Congress was too large and volatile a body to deal with highly complex and politically charged trade matters. Washington devised a system, Destler says, "that would



From 1894 to 1970, the value of goods Americans sold overseas exceeded the value of goods they bought; since 1970, U.S. merchandise trade deficits and Japanese surpluses have become the norm.

make the buck stop somewhere else.”

That “somewhere else” was the White House. In 1934, Congress passed the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act, which authorized the president to negotiate trade pacts with other nations; under it, tariffs could be reduced, without congressional approval, by up to 50 percent. Secretary Hull made 32 such bilateral trade agreements with 27 countries by 1945.

The spirit of free trade persevered through the Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy administrations. Congress created a cabinet-level Special Representative for Trade Negotiations in 1962. Destler praises the government’s skill in “diverting and managing trade-restrictive pressures [which] opened up the U.S. market and fueled our postwar prosperity.”

Relatively free international trade made other countries richer and more competitive too. In 1960 Japan and the United States exchanged roughly the same value of goods. But in 1985, the United States exported \$22.6 billion worth of goods to Japan, and imported \$68.8 billion. In that

year, the U.S. merchandise trade deficit with Japan and all other nations reached \$125 billion.

In the author’s view, such deficits do not add up to a trade crisis. “It was natural,” he says, for Americans to “buy more foreign products, just as an individual with a substantial investment portfolio can spend more than his job earnings would allow.” However, angry domestic producers charged that they bore the brunt of unfair foreign competition.

But tariffs on imports, and other trade barriers, Destler says, will not, in the long run, eliminate U.S. trade imbalances. He blames the budget deficit on the dollar’s present high value (relative to other currencies), which makes American goods expensive abroad.

The solution? Congress and the president, he argues, *must* confront the federal budget’s red ink. Public borrowing to finance the U.S. debt (\$2.4 trillion through 1987) drives up interest rates; high interest rates, in turn, attract foreign capital, which bids up the value of the dollar.

“The Main Source: Learning from Television News.”

Sage Publications, Inc., 275 South Beverly Dr., Beverly Hills, Calif. 90212. 272 pp. \$28.00 cloth, \$14.00 paper.

Authors: John P. Robinson and Mark R. Levy

Every weekday more than 100 million Americans tune in to a local or national television news broadcast. In addition, special TV “newsbreaks,” sandwiched into soap operas and football games, keep viewers up-to-date on late-breaking events. Hour-long news “magazine” shows, such as “60 Minutes” or “20/20,” give some events special attention. Many newscasters add colorful charts and graphs to illustrate major points.

TV, it seems, has become for most Americans the “main source” of news.

Not so, say University of Maryland professors Robinson and Levy. Drawing on several dozen media studies that have been conducted over the last 20 years, they found that television ranks as only one of

many news sources—and not a very effective one at that.

To keep up with current events, most literate American adults read newspapers and news magazines, listen to the radio, attend lectures, and watch television. TV, the authors point out, may not be the most-used medium. One 1978 study of urban households showed that 52 percent of all adults watched either the local or national news on television, while 67 percent read the morning or evening newspaper.

More importantly, Levy and Robinson find that most Americans do not necessarily learn or remember much from television news. A host of studies have shown that respondents absorbed more information by reading newspapers and magazines.

Only those with less than a high school education did better by watching TV news.

The authors also stress the importance of "interpersonal conversation." People who discuss the news at work or at home understand more than those who do not.

Why do Americans learn so little from watching TV reports? Television news, Robinson and Levy say, is not easy to grasp. The typical network TV news program crams 20 rapid-fire stories into 22 minutes of commercial-interrupted air time. Television watchers sometimes cannot tell when one news report ends and the next begins. Nor can they go back and re-view news they missed or did not understand. Moreover, TV reporters lack the air time needed to provide background in-

formation for their stories.

A 1972 study conducted in Syracuse, N.Y., showed that the TV news stories on the election campaign between President Richard Nixon and George McGovern discussed substantive issues for an average of 10 seconds. Several other studies have shown that within a few hours of having watched a TV news program, most viewers recall only one or two of the 15 to 20 stories aired.

"For many viewers, watching the news may produce an experience of having been informed," say Robinson and Levy. "But it is a false sense of knowledge, for it is based only on a vaguely understood jumble of visual and auditory stimuli that leave few traces in long-term memory."

"The Writing Report Card: Writing Achievement in American Schools."

National Assessment of Educational Progress, Educational Testing Service, Rosedale Rd., Princeton, N.J. 08541-0001. 112 pp.

Authors: Arthur N. Applebee, Judith A. Langer, and Ina V. S. Mullis

Tell students to describe their favorite music, and they can write enthusiastic, if rambling, responses. But ask them to argue a position, such as convincing a principal to change a school rule, and even 11th graders produce writing like this:

[A] rule I dont like is the Cafeteria rule that iF their is something under your Feet you have to pick it up and I think that is sick because sometime that stuFF is not yours and its been stepped on . . .

Such are the unhappy examples cited in *The Writing Report Card*, a 1984 study conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) of 55,000 public school students in the 4th, 8th, and 11th grades. Despite recent reforms, NAEP found that young Americans still write poorly. Even at grade 11, fewer than *one-fourth* of the students had the writing skills "required for success in academic studies, business, or the professions." [Half of all high school graduates, nevertheless,

go on to college.]

NAEP, a congressionally mandated group overseen by the Educational Testing Service, assesses students' skills in reading, writing, and mathematics every five years. The latest survey finds little improvement since 1979 and contains few surprises. For instance, students who read more tend to write better. Even so, although the content of most classroom papers indicates that the students understand their writing assignments, few are able to express their thoughts in coherent prose.

The students may be responding to the lead of their teachers. The most common teacher comments, according to students in all grades, concerned spelling, punctuation, and grammar. The fewest comments related to content.

But the NAEP report does not blame lazy teachers alone. Parents neglect their children's schoolwork. Over 80 percent of the 4th graders showed parents their papers, but just 50 percent of the 11th graders shared their work.