Has America Arrived at a Racial Tipping Point?

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For decades, social scientists in America have witnessed something they refer to as a racial tipping point. Such a tipping point occurs as the numbers of nonwhites relative to those of whites increases in a neighborhood, a school, a workplace or some other social context.

In these scenarios, things seem to go along rather uneventfully until nonwhites comprise approximately 30 percent of the population. But once this magical percentage is reached, whites react. In social situations, for instance, they have been observed to exit en masse, which suggests that some sort of psychological tipping point has been triggered.

In society at large we have seen such flight responses — the white exodus from the cities in the 1960s and ’70s, for example — and sometimes “fight” responses, in the form of racial assaults and altercations.

When I initially became interested in this phenomenon during the 1970s, the country’s white nonwhite racial balance was 80 percent to 20 percent. The most recent Census figures indicate it now is approximately 70 percent to 30 percent.

So perhaps it is no coincidence that we have begun to see some whites act in a way that suggests the country may have reached a racial tipping point. Since the 2008 election of our first African-American president, Barack Obama, we have seen a rise in the number of hate groups, political manifestations of racism and even tens of thousands of individuals, primarily living in parts of the former Confederacy, proposing that their states secede from the union.

We should examine the psychology behind such tipping points and the potential long-term consequences for America.

Even though whites are still in the numerical majority, the new racial configuration brings a sense for some that they are outnumbered and that today’s 30-percent collection of minorities is more powerful than its actual numbers would suggest. Minorities in effect have become a “psychological” majority.

As a consequence, we’re witnessing a variety of efforts by some members of the majority to restore a sense of majority-ness, either by seeking an exit from the situation or by trying to diminish either the size and/or the social and political power of the minority. Secession movements and voter suppression efforts seem obvious examples.

Aside from the election of President Obama, which was perhaps for some the arrival of a nonwhite “psychological majority,” at least two other major factors have been contributing significantly to our present-day racial tipping point.
First, the civil rights movement and changes in immigration laws of the 1960s have resulted in white Americans coming into contact with more and more nonwhites.

Second, the achievements of the Great Society, specifically affirmative action, have been kicking in, generating a sizable and increasingly well-positioned cadre of highly educated and talented nonwhite political leaders, business tycoons and high-profile celebrities.

In short, relative to whites the number of nonwhite minorities has grown rapidly and so have their human and social capital. Their historical “invisibility” has faded away.

Most of these effects also have taken hold over a relatively brief period of time, roughly since the 1980s. I have little doubt that the presence of so many nonwhites playing major roles on the American stage has taken place too abruptly for many whites — they simply have not yet acclimated themselves to America’s new racial configuration. This seems to be the case despite the fact that for years the Census has been projecting a majority nonwhite America by the year 2050 — and just this past week moved up the date to 2043.

So, where do we go from here?

The good news is that people can adapt to being in a psychologically imbalanced state. They eventually re-calibrate their perceptions as to what is a comfortable or “normal” racial configuration.

Whites who have lived for years in places like Miami, New York City or Washington, D.C., where nonwhites have long held political and economic power and have long exceeded 30 percent of the population, have grown accustomed to life on the far side of the tipping point. Certainly kids who grow up in integrated neighborhoods and go to school or play on sports teams that are highly diverse are likely to have a different notion of what racial mix is “normal” than those who don’t.

In the long run, time is on our country’s side. We may, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. suggested, have tough days ahead, but we as a nation will get to the Promised Land. We will adapt as a people, alter our notions of what our society’s racial configuration should be and move on, much as we did following the Civil War and the Jim Crow era. Memories of what once was will be replaced with memories of how things are. And how things are will come to be the way things ought to be.

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