


FOCUS

The monthly magazine of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

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Mentors Can Impart Skills and Build Esteem

I have never bought the notion that single women can't raise healthy, productive children, especially boys. My father died when I was four, and my mother successfully raised me as a single parent while working as a maid. Mentors—both men and women—played key roles in my life. So, I place as much faith and emphasis on mentors or role models as I do on fellowships and internships which, are, in my experience, surrogate mentorships.

Why am I sharing my personal experience? First, we are living in an era when an increasing number of children are growing up in homes with a single parent. Second, the national image of an idealized "Ozzie and Harriet" family is rapidly fading. But these two facts don't necessarily add up to a cataclysmic future for children who are nurtured by adults inside and outside of their homes.

In addition to a favorite aunt or uncle, a special teacher, little league coach or church member, mentors are becoming an important and growing group of adults who are establishing positive caring relationships with young people. Those most in need are the millions of at-risk American children in poor rural and urban communities. Sadly, many of them are growing up in areas where drug and alcohol abuse and teen pregnancy are common among their peers. Moreover, these at-risk children are disproportionately African American and Hispanic.

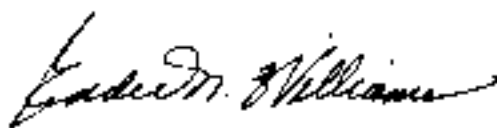
Through mentoring, many youngsters can be helped to overcome disadvantaged backgrounds. Mentors can involve themselves in a child's development in a variety of ways—helping them with math, teaching them the aerodynamics of throwing a curve ball, taking them to the re-enactment of a Civil War battle, or showing them the moons of Jupiter through a telescope. Some mentor programs are built around rites of passage and manhood training. For young people living in high-crime areas where peer pressure to shun school and participate in criminal behavior is strong, mentors can provide a place in a child's life where it is cool to be smart.

Mentors also can be advocates. A mentor might intervene to make sure that a bright but underachieving homeless child is not shunted to the back of the class by a teacher who isn't aware of his potential. Early intervention can make an enormous difference in how a child is tracked as he progresses through later grades. Even more important than teaching tangible skills or meeting with teachers, mentors can help young people develop self-esteem, confidence, and emotional stability, which are all essential if they are to become self-sufficient adults and productive members of society.

The traditional model for mentoring is the one-on-one Big Brother or Big Sister model. In this model, the relationship is the primary focus. But according to *Mentoring School-Age Children*, a study released this year by Public/Private Ventures, mentoring today is becoming more goal oriented, focusing on academic achievement, life skills, or career counseling. Mentoring is also becoming site-based,

an approach in which a number of youngsters meet together with one or more mentors. In the most successful programs, mentors undergo a training regime before working with young people and, since this is a position of trust, agree to a police background check.

Whether it operates in partnership with local schools or independently, or whether its focus is sports or African American heritage, mentoring is based on the fundamental belief that our children are the hope for our future—they are the future. We must not leave even one behind. ■



PRESIDENT



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Racial Discrimination/Racial Privilege

Many Whites Are Unaware of the Unearned Privilege Their Skin Color Affords Them in the Workplace and When Confronted by Police

by Michael R. Wenger

More than two years ago, former United States senator and current presidential candidate Bill Bradley wrote in *FOCUS* that “the flip side of racial discrimination is racial privilege, which consists of all those things that come to white Americans in the normal course of living—all the things they take for granted that a black person must never take for granted.”

Bradley acquired this insight, uncommon among white Americans, from his experiences as a member of integrated basketball teams, in both the college and the professional ranks. On and off the court, the Princeton University and New York Knicks star perceived realities that most Americans rarely see. He observed more than discrimination against his African American teammates. He witnessed, as well, the advantages that came his way simply because of his skin color.

During the year I served as a deputy director for President Clinton’s Initiative on Race, we met with white Americans who claimed allegiance to the ideal of equal opportunity and fairness for all, but lacked any conscious awareness of the unearned privileges their skin color confers on them every day. Comfortably ensconced in their social cocoons, few have the opportunity to communicate and interact in meaningful ways with people of color and, thereby, to comprehend different perspectives on race. For equal opportunity and racial justice to truly permeate our society, more white Americans must understand Bradley’s perspective.

Band-aids and Billboards

As a white man who was married to an African American woman and has three children as a result of that marriage, I have had more than a passing acquaintance with both racial discrimination and unearned racial privilege. My perspective has been informed by being able to contrast the treatment I have received as a white person with the discrimination my family and I have encountered because of our mixed composition.

One of the most chilling experiences of my life occurred in the early 1970s when I was driving in North Carolina late one night with my former wife. We came upon a huge billboard, illuminated with red spotlights, that read: “This is Klan Country. Fight integration and communism. Impeach

Earl Warren. Welcome to Smithville.” (Then Chief Justice Warren of the U.S. Supreme Court presided over the Court’s *Brown v Board of Education* decision in 1954.)

The terror we experienced during the remaining 40 miles of our journey that night was palpable. My wife immediately slid down under the dashboard in front of the passenger seat so she couldn’t be seen from outside the car. To reduce the chance of being stopped by the police, I eased up on the accelerator so I would not exceed the speed limit by a single digit. As we stopped for a red light in town, we saw a group of white teenage boys congregated on the corner across the street. As a white man apparently alone, I was in no danger. If they discovered my wife huddled under the dashboard, we feared we might never make it out of town.

Twenty-five years later, the scars of that experience remain. I have never again driven in that part of North Carolina without a knot in the pit of my stomach and a wariness about whom I might encounter. I often think about the freedom from such torment that my white skin usually affords me and the enduring pain that my then wife must still feel from her segregated rural North Carolina childhood—and young adulthood—seared with terrifying and humiliating experiences based solely on her skin color.

My education about race began in earnest a decade earlier. In the early 1960s I’d become conscious of white privilege for the first time. I was among 17 students from Queens College in New York City, all but one white, spending the summer of 1963 in Prince Edward County, Virginia. We were teaching the basics of reading and writing to young black children who had been shut out of the public schools for four years because of Virginia’s “massive resistance” to school integration.

One Saturday, six of us, all white, had driven to Richmond for a change in scenery and were returning to the county seat of Farmville. A girl in the car had to use the rest room, so we stopped at a gas station. She got out of the car and went around to the back, but returned immediately, considerably paler than when she left. When we asked what was wrong, she replied that there was a “Whites Only” sign on the door, and she just couldn’t make herself go in. Of course, we all knew about “Whites Only” signs, but we’d never had to confront the practical consequences of not being able to use a public facility. While our friend made it back to Farmville uncomfortable but intact, the experience left an indelible imprint concerning

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Mr. Wenger is the Project Director for the National Diversity Network at the Joint Center. Formerly, he was Deputy Director for Outreach and Program Development for the President’s Initiative on Race.

Racial Discrimination

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the privileges of our skin color that, until then, we had taken for granted.

This privilege was reinforced the next evening when I was watching television in the home of a black family in Farmville. A commercial for “flesh colored” band-aids flashed on the screen. I’d seen it countless times previously, but had never given any thought to whose flesh the band-aids matched. For the first time that evening I confronted feelings of loneliness and powerlessness that were strangers to me but constant companions of people made to feel like outsiders in their own country.

Whites Learn the Game

Conditions have changed. That North Carolina billboard has crumbled. The “Whites Only” signs are gone from rest rooms, soda fountains, and other public facilities. One only infrequently sees the kind of blatant insensitivity characterized by that advertisement for “flesh-colored” band-aids. But scars from the long nightmare of overt discrimination endure and are passed on.

Even as blatant racial discrimination has diminished, subtle differential behavior based on skin color remains widespread. Such behavior not only creates persistent barriers to equal opportunity for people of color, it clearly benefits white people and helps to perpetuate our unearned privilege in education, economic opportunity, and other aspects of our daily lives.

Lawrence Otis Graham, a young black man, in his book entitled *Member of the Club*, describes how racial privilege worked in the Wall Street law firm he joined following his graduation from Harvard Law School. He tells of the advantage enjoyed by young white attorneys who lived in the same communities as and socialized with the firm’s partners, almost all of whom were white. Not surprisingly, these young white attorneys became proteges of these partners, learned how to “play the corporate game,” received the choice assignments, and advanced quickly. Black attorneys, however, rarely receive this kind of corporate nurturing. Such differential behavior may not be conscious, but it nonetheless gave young white attorneys a powerful advantage.

During its meeting on Race and Employment in Phoenix in January, 1998, the President’s Advisory Board heard racial privilege described by Jose Roberto Juarez, a St. Mary’s Law School Professor: “When we talk about an employer who says, ‘Well, the reason that I hired this particular person is because they had better people skills,’ quite often that means, gee, the white guy got along a whole lot better with all the other white guys and if we had hired this Chicana, she was going to make us all uncomfortable and so that’s why we didn’t hire her.”

Both Graham and Juarez portray the racial privilege that permeates virtually every aspect of our daily lives. It begins at an early age. For example, for me, a middle-class white boy growing up in the New York City area, high expecta-

tions in school were a given. Virtually from the day I arrived in kindergarten, teachers began to prepare me for college and a professional career. Like most children, I unconsciously responded to those expectations. When I responded inadequately, my parents got a call from the teacher, and I was quickly set straight. It would have taken real effort for me to fail.

My three children, now grown, college educated, and professionally successful, had a different experience. My two daughters, both of whom went to public schools, constantly confronted low teacher expectations simply because of their darker skin hues. Their mother and I faced an annual struggle to prevent teachers from seating them in the back of the room and ignoring them if they didn’t cause trouble. I cannot remember ever receiving a call from a teacher if they weren’t doing well. As they got older, we had to fight the effort to “track” them into vocational education classes “so they will have a better chance to succeed.” At home we had to compensate for damage inflicted on the girls’ self-esteem by the school’s lower expectations.

My son spent several years in private schools in the Washington, D.C., area, where expectations for him were high. Yet, when he transferred to a public school, he had to confront the same problems as his sisters despite having a good academic record in the private schools. As an adult, he has spoken often about the deflating impact of low teacher expectations on the aspirations of many of his public school classmates.

Not only are white students often better prepared for economic success because of higher teacher expectations, the objective reality remains that schools with a predominantly white student body have more highly qualified teachers, more advanced materials, and more modern facilities. In truth, while many white Americans criticize affirmative action for students of color, their children are enjoying the fruits of unearned privilege, an unconscious kind of affirmative action for white students.

Whites Aren’t Followed in Stores

The advantage continues into the job market. Law professor Juarez’s testimony reminded me of an experience in which I was one of four people interviewing candidates for a high-level executive position. An African American woman emerged as clearly the best qualified candidate, but she had to be hired over the objection of one of the interviewers—another white male—who contended that “although she’s clearly the best qualified, she just won’t fit in here.” She was hired and she “fit in” just fine. But she had to overcome the hurdle of subtle racist perceptions that white Americans rarely encounter.

That white Americans rarely have to confront these experiences is the essence of racial privilege. Everyday situations that intensify stress for Americans of color are foreign to most white Americans. If you are white in America, you don’t worry about whether you’ll be able to catch a cab, cash a check, or shop without being followed

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1969: The Year of Empowerment in Alabama

Even After the Voting Rights Act Was Passed, the Struggle for Political Rights Continued as White Officials Defied the Law and the Courts

by David C. Ruffin

July 29, 1969, was a watershed for black political empowerment in Alabama. On that date, an electoral victory by the National Democratic Party of Alabama swept blacks into political control of Greene County. In a court-ordered special election, black candidates won majorities on the county commission and school board. The episode, unprecedented in Alabama, struck a blow to the underpinnings of white rule throughout the South.

Alabama is a state where some of the most historic struggles of the civil rights era were played out. In the mid-1950s, it was the scene of the Montgomery bus boycott. In 1963, thousands were beaten, assaulted by fire hoses, and jailed as they marched for equal employment opportunities and integrated public accommodations in Birmingham. In March 1965, during the final push to win passage of the Voting Rights Act, participants in marches from Selma to Montgomery were savaged by police and the Ku Klux Klan.

When the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was enacted, many who fought for its passage looked forward to its fruits—the election of thousands of local, state, and national officials by black voters. But some local civil rights leaders, like Dr. John L. Cashin, a black dentist and political activist who lived in Huntsville, Alabama, knew that more work had to be done before that vision could become a reality. Activism was part of Cashin's heritage. His grandfather, Herschel V. Cashin, was the first black lawyer in Alabama and practiced in the state during Reconstruction in the 19th century.

With the passage of the 1965 Act, "literacy tests," whites-only primaries, poll taxes, and many other barriers to black voter participation were abolished. Almost overnight, between 250,000 and 300,000 African Americans became eligible to vote. But local civil rights leaders realized that the right to vote meant little unless black citizens had the choice of electing candidates who were sympathetic to their concerns. In a state that was 30 percent black in 1965, there were no more than 20 black elected officials statewide, and most of them held low-level posts.

If that number was ever to increase, the names of African American candidates for a variety of posts would have to be placed on the ballots of both primary and general elections. But three years after the Voting Rights Act passed, the all-white leadership of the Alabama Democratic Party refused to honor the petition of a coalition of civil rights activists to include African Americans on the ballot for the 1968 primary election.

To counter this stonewalling, Cashin and other black activists formed the National Democratic Party of Alabama (NDPA), registering it on December 15, 1967. The new party submitted its own slate of candidates to be placed on the ballot. The movement for black empowerment drew fire from another source in the white power structure. As head of the state agency in control of the election process, Secretary of State Mabel Amos refused to certify the NDPA for the 1968 election. In March that year, the U.S. Supreme Court, which at the time had a majority committed to enforcing civil rights laws, overturned Amos's decision. However, when the NDPA was not recognized by the Democratic National Committee at its national convention in Chicago that summer, Amos used the nonrecognition as an excuse to exclude the party's candidates from the ballot for the November general election.

But the NDPA was persistent and filed another lawsuit in federal court. On October 19, 1968, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in NDPA's favor and ordered Amos to place the party's candidates on the ballot. The NDPA only had two weeks and two days to conduct a statewide political campaign. When the ballots were tallied, about 22 NDPA candidates were elected across the state. Although these victories were for minor county posts, the number of black elected officials had doubled—it was a beginning.

Despite the High Court's order, many of the whites in positions of authority remained staunchly resistant to sharing power with blacks. In Greene County, which was 81 percent black, white probate judge James D. Herndon declared that six NDPA candidates, four for county commission and two for the school board, were unqualified and removed their names from the general election ballot that same November. The NDPA challenged the decision as a violation of the Supreme Court ruling and won again.

On July 29, 1969, a special election was held in which all six candidates were victorious. That election stands out in a series of events that, taken together, ended the lock on political power that whites had held since Alabama first became a state. In the 1970 elections, the NDPA ran 225 candidates statewide, including Cashin, who led the party ticket, opposing George Wallace for governor. While Cashin failed in his gubernatorial bid, more than 90 other black candidates were elected. Since that time, the number of black elected officials in Alabama has grown steadily. Today there are 726 black elected officials in Alabama. ■

Racial Discrimination

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around the store. You feel little anxiety that your skin color will get in the way of finding a job, being promoted, or buying a house you desire. Fear of police harassment is a largely unknown emotion.

Today I am married to a white woman, and it often occurs to me how comfortable it can be to be white and unobtrusive. In a fancy restaurant or social gathering we are, more often than not, surrounded by people who look like us. When we're driving our late model car, we are never stopped by police who consider us to fit a profile of drug dealers. But even in situations when we are in the minority, as my wife and I are in the predominantly African American residential community where we live just outside of Washington, D.C., we have the instinctive security of knowing that we are part of the majority in the larger community and that our whiteness confers advantage in most situations.

Challenge to a Multiracial Democracy

That circumstance, however, is changing. Demographers project that by the middle of the 21st century, white Americans will comprise barely more than 50 percent of this country's population. Rather than being threatened, as many white Americans are, by the nation's emerging multi-racial and multi-cultural complexion, we should embrace these changes and recognize how sharing the benefits of this society will strengthen us as we compete in the global economy, enjoy the fruits of each other's cultures, and build a more stable democracy.

Recognizing the dramatic changes that are occurring, the Advisory Board to the President's Initiative on Race, chaired by Dr. John Hope Franklin, declared in its final report that "the greatest challenge facing Americans is to accept and take pride in defining ourselves as a multi-racial democracy."

The Advisory Board understood that meeting this challenge requires a greater awareness of today's racial realities. Thus, it called for a sustained and penetrating public awareness campaign to disseminate factual information about such things as our changing demographics and persistent disparities in educational attainment and economic advancement, to confront stereotypes, and to promote greater racial understanding and mutual respect.

The Board proposed, as well, an idea that can help us, in a small way, relate to Senator Bradley's perspective and raise our consciousness about the role of skin color in our society. The Board asked that each of us commit at least one day per month to thinking about how issues of racial discrimination and racial privilege might be affecting people with whom we come in contact during the day. In other words, for just one out of every 30 days, try to get beyond our skin color and imagine what it might feel like to be of a different racial background.

For white people, this means trying the following: Observe who attracts the first empty cab that passes. Take note of who is asked for identification to cash a check. Notice whom the sales clerks follow in the clothing store. Sense the feeling when you observe a stereotyped character on television, read of a racial incident in the newspaper, hear a "shock jock's" racist joke, or are in the minority at a social gathering.

Heeding these suggestions will not eliminate racial discrimination or racial privilege. Nor is it a substitute for meaningful and sustained interracial communication and interaction. But simply being more observant and more sensitive can help us to recognize the realities of everyday life that others must face. And because the first step toward solving a problem is to recognize it, that recognition can establish a foundation for constructive and necessary action to narrow racial divisions and successfully meet the challenge set before us by the President's Advisory Board. ■

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JULY 1999

TRENDLETTER

POLITICAL REPORT

by *Ninette Philips*

Baltimore's Race to Replace Mayor Schmoke

Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke, Baltimore's first elected black mayor, is leaving office in December after three terms to join a Washington law firm. Seventeen Democrats and seven Republicans will be vying to fill the vacant mayoral seat in the September 14 primary election.

Baltimore has come a long way over the last 12 years under Schmoke's administration. Schmoke presided over the investment of \$1 billion in the downtown area, which included the construction of the Camden Yards baseball stadium, the home of the Baltimore Orioles, and enhancing the Inner Harbor, the city's premier tourist destination. Both venues are important revenue generating attractions. He also supported a program to renovate abandoned dwellings and established an award-winning citywide literacy program called "Baltimore Reads."

As mayor, Schmoke gained national notoriety by advocating the legalization of narcotics to make better use of the money spent fighting the drug war. Schmoke contends that drug addiction is a medical issue rather than a criminal one and should be treated with

rehabilitation rather than punished with incarceration. He was able to apply this philosophy indirectly in his own city by implementing one of the nation's first needle-exchange programs designed to slow the spread of infectious diseases among drug users.

Despite these accomplishments, the city's next mayor will have to address a number of ongoing concerns. Little improvement has been seen in Baltimore's impoverished black neighborhoods, and despite a 30 percent reduction in crime since 1994, the crime rate in the city is still high. Homicides have consistently topped 300 annually for the past 10 years. The city is also plagued by substandard public schools and a declining tax base due to the loss of 300,000 city residents to the suburbs since 1950.

Earlier this year, some of Baltimore's black political leaders made a concerted effort to recruit Kweisi Mfume, president of the NAACP, former city council member and former member of Congress, to run for the mayoral seat Schmoke will vacate. In May, Mfume declined to throw his hat in the ring, leaving his political supporters in a quandary over whom else to back. Maryland's elder statesman and state comptroller William Donald Schaefer also decided not to run. Schaefer had been mayor for a record four terms and governor for two.

Leading the pack of declared candidates are two black Democrats:

Lawrence A. Bell II, who is city council president, the city's second-highest elected official; and Carl Stokes, a vice-president at Mid-Atlantic Health Care, Inc., and former member of the city council and school board. Bell has raised approximately \$500,000 for his campaign and currently leads all candidates in the opinion polls, followed by Stokes, who has raised approximately \$250,000.

Through a plan he calls "Operation Rotten Apple," Bell is calling for coordination between neighborhood residents, businesses, and institutions to target concerns that the affected community identifies as problems. Rotten Apple would address issues such as fire prevention, health and sanitation violations, and mortgage foreclosures.

In the area of crime, Bell supports the 'zero tolerance policy' employed by the New York City Police Department, which is based on the premise that the strict enforcement of minor laws is crucial to catching repeat offenders before they commit serious acts of violence. In the area of education, Bell supports an initiative to enhance before-and-after school programs, promote smaller classroom sizes, and develop alternative education sites for disruptive children.

Although Stokes lost his campaigns for council president in 1995 and for a Maryland General Assembly seat in 1994, his persistent efforts at fundraising and campaigning have

made him a viable candidate for this year's mayor's race.

Stokes, who has strong ties with Baltimore's downtown business community and among educators, plans to dramatically increase school funding and to create more youth recreation centers. His three-point plan to reduce crime in the city by 50 percent includes prevention and intervention to provide treatment for drug addicts, a beefed-up criminal justice task force of police officers, judges, defense attorneys and prosecutors, and community policing that targets repeat offenders and those who commit crimes with handguns.

Mary W. Conaway, who is presently the city's Register of Wills and a United Methodist pastor, ranks third in the polls. She plans to restore police foot patrols in neighborhoods, placing officers at four-block intervals, and wants to bring back Baltimore's volunteer auxiliary police force. The candidate also calls for taking back local control of schools.

Councilman Martin O'Malley, the most prominent white Democratic candidate, has focused on ridding the city of its open-air drug trade. In a city that is 60 percent black, some local observers believe that if O'Malley garners the majority of votes among a strong white turnout in the election, even with scant black support, the 36-year-old attorney could prove a major contender if the black vote is splintered among the black candidates.

The rest of the Democrats in the race show only single-digit support in the polls and are given negligible chances of victory in the primary. Since Baltimore's Democrats outnumber Republicans 9 to 1, GOP contenders like David F. Tufaro, vice president of Summit Property Development Company, and Roberto Marsili, president of the Little Italy

Community Organization, also have little chance of success.

Clinton's Last Round of Judicial Appointments

President Clinton has stood by his commitment to appoint a government that looks like America and has consciously attempted to improve minority representation in federal courts. Out of a total of 314 federal judicial appointments to date, Clinton has named 55 African Americans, 17 Latinos, five Asian Americans, a Native American, and 90 women.

Twenty-five percent of the nominees have been minorities (18 percent African American) and 29 percent women. In their racial and ethnic diversity, these appointments exceed those of any previous president, including Jimmy Carter, who named 38 black judges to the federal bench. By contrast, African Americans made up less than two percent of Ronald Reagan's federal judicial appointments (7 of 385) and only 6 percent of George Bush's (13 of 195).

The record of the Senate in confirming Clinton's minority nominees has been uneven. At the end of the 105th Congress, the Senate sent 21 judicial nominees back to the White House, half of whom were minorities and women. In the 103rd Congress (the last time the Democrats were in control on Capitol Hill), the Senate confirmed 129 judges. The Republican-controlled 104th Congress only confirmed 75, but in the 105th, in which the GOP was also in the majority, 102 judges were confirmed.

As of July 20, there were 67 judicial vacancies with 41 White House nominations pending in the Senate for confirmation. The following four African Americans are among those nominees.

Charles R. Wilson, nominated to the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals, has

served as U.S. attorney for the Middle District of Florida since 1994. Wilson received his law degree from the University of Notre Dame in 1979. In November 1986, Florida Governor Bob Graham (D) appointed him to serve as a state county judge.

Ronnie L. White was one of the black nominees the Senate failed to confirm in the 105th Congress. President Clinton renominated him to be a Missouri district court judge. White, who earned his law degree from Kansas City School of Law in 1983, served in the Missouri House of Representatives from 1989 to 1993. He then served as city counselor for the City of St. Louis and went on to become a judge on the Eastern District Missouri Court of Appeals. White is currently a Missouri Supreme Court judge.

Legrome Derek Davis was also renominated to be a district court judge in Pennsylvania. Davis received his law degree from the Rutgers-Camden School of Law. He served as assistant district attorney in Philadelphia for three years and currently teaches at the Temple University School of Law's Trial Advocacy Program. Davis also serves on the board of several community-based Philadelphia organizations.

William Joseph Haynes, Jr., a first-time nominee, was named by Clinton to be a district judge for the Middle District of Tennessee. Haynes received his law degree from Vanderbilt University School of Law in 1973. In the same year, Haynes was hired as Tennessee's assistant attorney general. By 1978, he was deputy attorney general, a post he kept until 1984. Haynes now serves as magistrate judge for the Middle District of Tennessee. ■

Correction: In the graph that appeared in the June 1999 Economic Report, the labels for the trend lines for the black and white groups were reversed.

ECONOMIC REPORT

by Margaret C. Simms

What's Next for the U.S. Economy?

With six months to go before the new millennium arrives, there is increasing speculation on the outlook for the current economic expansion. Some of the speculation in recent months was fueled by the prospect of Federal Reserve Board chairman Alan Greenspan recommending an interest rate increase. Indeed, Greenspan did raise the rate at the Board's June 29 meeting.

On the first of June, the unemployment rate was 4.2 percent, marking the 23rd straight month when unemployment was below 5.0 percent and inflation remained very low, at 2.6 percent on an annual basis. But economic forecasters are watching for clouds on the horizon. In one camp are those who think inflation will pick up, in another camp are those who worry that the economy is already slowing down on its own.

Inflationary Pressures

This is not the first time in the economic expansion that Chairman Greenspan has worried about inflation (see FOCUS, May 1997). With unemployment staying close to 4.0 percent, a level once thought to be "full employment," Greenspan is not the only one who is worried. In early May, concern grew among a broad group of economic forecasters when the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) issued its monthly report on the Producers' Price Index, which measures the average change in the

selling prices domestic producers receive for their output. After an increase of only 0.2 percent in March, the index for finished goods shot up 0.5 percent in April. The fact that the index increased only 0.2 percent in May did little to allay fears when this information was released in early June.

While some experts noted that the increase in March had been driven by energy prices and their moderation in April was evidence that inflation was "likely to remain tame," others pointed to several short- and long-term pressures on prices. In a market report issued in early June, analysts at Wells Fargo Bank took note of several factors that they believe will contribute to price hikes over the next year. Recent increases in the price of energy will "slowly creep into the economy," they wrote. In addition, these analysts suspect that labor costs will increase over the next year because both the tight labor market and higher consumer prices will lead workers to press for higher wages in their negotiations.

In the short term, forecasters point to increases in import goods prices and retail sales as signs of looming inflation. The import prices were affected by changes in the prices for oil products, but the numbers also showed the first increase in five months even when oil prices were excluded from consideration. Retail sales were up 1.0 percent in May, higher than expected, and that promoted further speculation that demand will drive up prices in the near future.

Slowdown in Job Growth

The other side of the economic picture was articulated by outgoing Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin. In a speech to finance ministers and central bankers gathering in Frank-

furt, Germany, for a G-7 meeting in early June, Rubin worried aloud that the global economic expansion could not be sustained by the U.S. alone but would need to be bolstered by economic expansion in Germany and Japan. (The G-7 nations are major western European countries together with the U.S., Canada, and Japan.) The Secretary declined to comment on the impact that increasing U.S. interest rates would have on the global expansion or on the effect that sluggish growth in other developed countries would have on the U.S. economy. But other forecasters point to several signs that might indicate a slowdown.

One trend that suggests a slowdown to some is the minimal growth in employment in May. Although the unemployment rate dropped one tenth of one percent, the BLS reported that only 11,000 new jobs were created that month, compared to the 200,000 jobs many had expected. Employment in several key sectors, including construction and manufacturing, declined on a seasonally adjusted basis in May, and the BLS noted that the 71,000 jobs added in the service-producing sector did not match the average monthly gains of 125,000 for the prior year. Added to the slowdown in economic growth is the increase in mortgage interest rates and coincident slowdown in housing construction.

How Does It Balance Out?

Forecasters who use the various indicators to make an overall assessment of the economy suggest that the expansion will keep going for the rest of this century. The Conference Board, in New York City, is fairly representative of these forecasters. In its June analysis of economic indicators, The Conference Board anticipated a continued expansion

through 1999. The organization examined three types of indicators: leading indicators, those that move ahead of the economy; coincident indicators, those that move with the economy; and lagging indicators, those that move behind changes in economic output. Although the index of leading indicators was fairly flat in April (down 0.1 percent), analysts at the Conference Board pointed to stock prices and the average factory work-week as signs of continued expansion. The coincident indicators available in April—employees on nonagricultural payrolls, industrial production, and personal income (less transfer payments such as welfare and social security)—all increased. The overall index was up 1.6 percent in the six-month period covering November through April. Most of the lagging indicators increased as well.

Regardless of the reassurances that have come from a number of private forecasters, investors and others who follow short-term shifts in indicators are fairly nervous. FOCUS readers should be on the lookout for the revised forecasts that will be issued in the wake of the Federal Reserve's decision to increase interest rates.

The Rust Belt Has New Polish

One of the remarkable outcomes of this decade's economic expansion is the recovery in the region of the United States that became known as the "Rust Belt," the former heavy-industry states of the Midwest. While unemployment and joblessness soared in the 1980s, by the mid-1990s many midwestern states began to see unemployment rates that were lower than in other regions of the country (See *FOCUS*, April 1997). (The region's general recovery is documented in a recent Census Bureau publication, *State and Metropolitan*

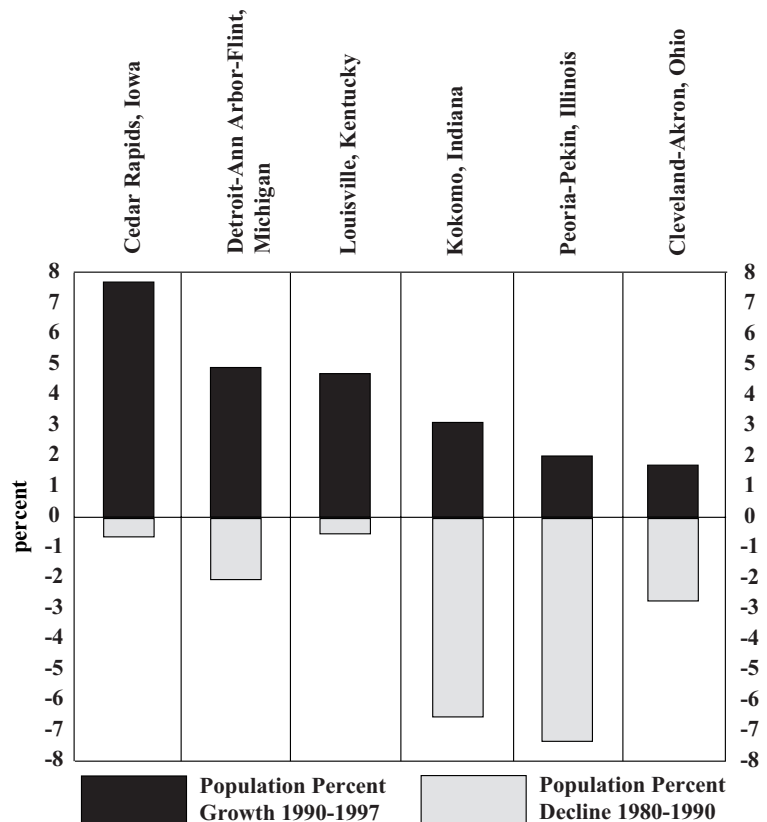
Area Data Book, 1997-98.) Contributing to these states' recovery have been a shift from a goods-producing to a service-producing economy and movements into the global marketplace. New jobs have been created, welfare rolls and crime rates have dropped, and people are returning to the region. Population increased 4.9 percent between 1990 and 1997 and there was a 6.2 percent growth in the number of businesses in the region. (See the graph below.)

This Midwest resurgence has put the region right in the center of the inflation watch. The Federal Reserve's "Beige Book" report for May (which summarizes economic conditions in the 12 Federal Reserve Bank regions) indicates that labor markets in the system's Seventh District, centered in Chicago, are tighter than in other regions of the country. One example of the

shortage of skilled labor and its impact on the economy discussed in the report is the lack of qualified truck drivers and the way this has affected the delivery of construction materials. The Beige Book reports that companies are coping with labor market shortages by out-sourcing some needs and altering production processes. While there were few reports of overall wage increases, one of the Federal Reserve's information sources suggested that employers were conducting more frequent performance reviews to generate pay raises for individual workers. Overall wage pressure in this region, as in the nation as a whole, is likely to increase as businesses compete for workers who will enable them to achieve their full potential. ■

For more information on this subject, visit our website at www.jointcenter.org.

Rebounding Rust Belt Cities: Population Changes



Source: U.S. Census Bureau