

When Black Becomes White

By Clarence N. Wood and Bruce Hatton Boyer

Over the past few years, we as a country have turned our attention to people who abuse drugs. We now refer to those people as "victims" while not too many years ago, we called them "criminals" and locked them up. We also now have movements across the country to raise the minimum wage because we have seen that many people who work two full-time jobs at minimum wage yet still must rely on food stamps. Most recently, we swiftly enacted financial aid programs to help people hurt by the Covid recession.

But before we congratulate ourselves on our enlightenment, we must acknowledge that we are finally facing these problems because we now understand that white people are suffering from them.

My, how things have changed! Go back to Ronald Reagan's infamous "welfare queens" driving Cadillacs in their mink coats to pick up assistance checks. The image was a complete fabrication because three-quarters of welfare recipients were – and remain --white but as long as we saw welfare recipients as African-American, we could blithely slash their benefits. During the 2008 recession, when we empathized with white Americans who had lost their homes and their retirement savings during the Great Recession, we overlooked the minorities who never had a home or retirement savings to begin with. Today, with even the state of Vermont -- as homogeneously white as any state in the union -- suffering an epidemic of drug abuse, we suddenly understand that drug users need compassion. Perhaps most dramatically of all, now that we have videos showing highly questionable -- we're being charitable here -- treatment of African-Americans by police officers instead of mere verbal reports, we are beginning to question our "tough on crime" stances.

The simple fact is that when the people have a different skin color, we see their problems as moral failures, and when their skins are white, we rush to offer them help.

While there are many pieces to fixing this problem of perception, let us suggest a crucial first step. There will be little awareness of the social problems facing minorities until our legislatures, corporate and not-for profits have enough African-Americans, Latinos, women, gays and lesbians in leadership positions. How serious is this imbalance? According to the *New York Times*, minorities represent 40% of the population but only 22% of Congress and just 12.5% of corporate and not-for-profit directors. The cause of such disparities is not hard to spot, either. Money. It costs over two million dollars to run a typical Congressional race while board members are invariably chosen for their "social position," *i.e.* their net worth. In a country where Black and Latino households hold 5.7% and 7% respectively of wealth for white households, the

candidate pool is thus skewed long before qualifications such as education or experience can even be considered. The result is that whites are massively overrepresented and the few selected minorities are often the same tired faces whose “social position” has somehow been deemed acceptable. The result is that, because “white privilege” is an unconscious bias, even well-intentioned whites are often simply unaware of the needs of minorities.

Don't get us wrong. We applaud these new efforts to diversify our governing organizations but they remain woefully inadequate. Without fresh Black, Latino, gay or transgender voices from unexpected corners of American life, we will remain stuck in old paradigms, *e.g.* expanding the social safety net is too expensive, people are poor because they are lazy, drug addicts are moral failures. Yet we already know that it is more expensive to send someone to prison rather than to keep them in school, that it is far more expensive both financially and socially to send sick people to emergency rooms rather than give them regular medical care, and that the best cure for drug and alcohol problems is to build strong social networks rather than to simply chastise the sufferers from some self-appointed moral pulpit.

If the hallmark of insanity is repeating the same thing over and over again while hoping for a different outcome, we remain out of our collective minds.

We are all in this together, and our nation cannot prosper so long as we refuse to see “them” as “us.” And oh, by the way, strengthening social programs will help white people, too. Just in case you were wondering.

Clarence N. Wood and Bruce Hatton Boyer are President and Senior Fellow, respectively, of Urban Strategies Global