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RACE IN AMERICA: THE ULTIMATE TEST OF LIBERALISM

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No issue has more severely challenged the liberal tradition in America than that of race. Whatever else liberalism has meant at different points in time—more or less equitable distribution of wealth, larger or smaller programs of social welfare, a stronger or weaker role for the federal government—there has always been at the heart of liberalism a belief in the goal of equal opportunity, a conviction that *individuals*, whatever their background or starting point in life, should be able to compete with each other and maximize their *individual* talents. Within such a framework, group identity ultimately does not count. The norm is one of assimilation, each man or woman developing his or her abilities within a social and economic system presumably capable of, and committed to, individual rights. Within such a paradigm, every person enjoys equal protection and similar chances to make it, or not make it, in the competition for success.

The critical question, of course, is whether a viable opportunity to achieve equal opportunity can ever exist in a society that from its inception has made race a dividing line separating people with black skin from those with white skin—with blacks having almost no rights, and whites having lesser or greater rights depending on their class, gender, and ethnicity. From Martin Delaney to Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington to W. E. B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey to Walter White, African Americans have differed profoundly on how to answer that question. Only in the years since the 1930s, however, have changes occurred that put the issue to a test.