

# BOOK REVIEW

## THE PROMISED LAND: THE GREAT BLACK MIGRATION AND HOW IT CHANGED AMERICA

By Nicholas Lemann.

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(cloth).

*Reviewed by Robert A. Robertson\**

The controversy surrounding the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1991 makes it clear that race relations in the United States continue to be a contentious subject.<sup>1</sup> At times like this, we, as individuals and as a country, should refresh our understanding of how we got to this point so that we might continue to formulate national policies and goals that are progressive and fair. Any collection of readings for this purpose should include the recently published book *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*, by Nicholas Lemann, a national correspondent for *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine. In his book, Lemann documents the migration of African Americans, from their perspective, from the rural South to the urban North during the early 1940's to the late 1960's. He discusses how and why this migration resulted in the creation of America's black urban ghettos.<sup>2</sup> Lemann also examines Washington's response to the particu-

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<sup>1</sup> See generally, Ann Devroy, *President Signs Civil Rights Bill*, WASH. POST, Nov. 22, 1991, at 1, col. 2; and Ann Devroy and Sharon LaFraniere, *U.S. Moves to End Hiring Preferences*, Nov. 21, 1991 at 1, col. 5. For an overview of the current racial tensions in the United States, see Mark Whitaker, *A Crisis of Shattered Dreams*, NEWSWEEK, May 6, 1991, at 28; and Thomas D. Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *When the official subject is presidential politics, taxes, welfare, crime, rights, or values . . . the real subject is race*, THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY, May 1991, at 53.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Lemann, in a two-part article, has previously described the flight of middle class blacks from ghettos that left a disastrously isolated underclass — one formed less by welfare or a lack of

lar problems created by this migration and to racial tensions in general, which included the Johnson administration's war on poverty, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Finally, he offers what he believes is the best approach to addressing the continuing problems that face the black slums in America's big cities.

Lemann notes that sharecropping began in the immediate aftermath of slavery, and he tells the story of the subsequent black migration through the lives of several individuals who migrated from Clarksdale, Mississippi to Chicago, Illinois. One such person was Ruby Lee Daniels. "When Ruby was growing up, she was taught to look up to white people, not to hate them. . . . Rebellion against segregation was fruitless, so it was for Ruby a subject dealt with in whispers and private feelings."<sup>3</sup>

By the time Ruby reached her late twenties, in the early 1940's, she was a field hand who picked up to 200 pounds of cotton per day on the Hopson plantation near Clarksdale. "Picking was hard work. The cotton bolls were at waist height, so you had to work either stooped over or crawling on your knees."<sup>4</sup> Blacks who picked cotton in Mississippi in the 1940's knew, from the country's leading black newspaper, that they could make more money in Chicago working in a laundry, factory, restaurant, hotel or a big mail order house. Anyone in Ruby's situation could not avoid at least toying with the idea of moving to the North.

Lemann indicates that there were "push" and "pull" factors that drove the migrants to Chicago from Clarksdale. As the mechanical cotton picker came into general use, the plantations did not need hundreds of field workers, a handful would do. During the 1940's, the black population of Chicago increased by 77 percent, from 278,000 to 492,000. In the 1950's, it grew by another 65 percent, to 813,000; at one point 2,200 black people were moving to Chicago every week.<sup>5</sup>

In 1946, Ruby moved to Chicago with one of her children, and temporarily entrusted her other child to a friend. Once in Chicago, Ruby did janitorial work for Montgomery Ward, then switched to a job

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jobs than by its rural-South heritage. He also explained why the black urban ghettos are poorer and more isolated than they have ever been. Nicholas Lemann, *The Origins of the Underclass*, (pts. 1 & 2), *THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY*, June 1986, at 31 and July 1986, at 54.

<sup>3</sup> NICHOLAS LEMANN, *THE PROMISED LAND* 34 (1991).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 70.

with a laundry that paid “seventy-five cents an hour, a sum that in Mississippi had been closer to a day’s pay than an hour’s.”<sup>6</sup> However, she eventually had to quit her laundry job to take care of her children. Public aid was now her only means of support. During the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, Chicago built massive new public housing projects to accommodate the influx of blacks from the South and to keep the new migrants away from white neighborhoods. On October 12, 1962, Ruby, her children and her new husband Luther Haynes moved into the largest public housing project: the Robert Taylor Homes. The building was impressive — everything was new and clean. It was a great day for Ruby and her family. Ruby’s son, who was twelve years old at the time, said he thought it “was the beautifullest place in the world.”<sup>7</sup>

The living conditions in the Taylor Homes, as well as the other projects in Chicago, began to deteriorate with a downturn in the economy, a rise in unemployment, and neglect by the city. According to Lemann, those who controlled city politics allowed the public schools in black neighborhoods to deteriorate badly and crime to go unpunished. In addition, there was an increase in the street gang activity, and the gangs soon controlled the projects. Now, for Ruby, and the other people living in the projects, the “conditions were a miserable fact of life for which there was no good explanation.”<sup>8</sup> The plight of Ruby and others in the projects led some observers to conclude that public housing became home to the “underclass.”

Lemann explores the development of the term “underclass” and explains that during the 1980’s the term became “a standard part of the national language” and was “generally understood as a synonym for the population of the black slums.”<sup>9</sup> The term implied that poverty seemingly had become a permanent condition for the poorest of the black migrants to the cities. The term was put into general use by Ken Auletta, a journalist, who in 1982 published a book called *The Underclass*, which was in part a review of the debate about ghetto poverty. Lemann also notes that now the term is not necessarily confined to poor African Americans, and that “underclass is not a precise, scientific concept: there is no sure way of determining whether a particular person is

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<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 67.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 107.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 266.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 281.

a member of it or not. For this reason estimates of its size vary widely, from two million people up to more than ten million."<sup>10</sup> Although some consider the term to be harsh, it does convey the gravity of the situation for the black urban poor — virtual isolation from mainstream America.<sup>11</sup>

The author does a thorough job of describing, from the policy makers' perspective, Washington's response to the problems created by the black urban slums and to race problems in general. By using interviews and internal White House memoranda, he is able to document the thinking process of the White House planners who developed the war on poverty, the Great Society programs and civil rights legislation. He also provides a realistic assessment of the effectiveness of these efforts, which assisted many blacks in becoming part of the middle class, left the lives of others untouched, and, in some cases, worsened the problem.

Lemann succeeds in giving the underclass a "human face" through Ruby and the other individuals he describes in his book. He hopes to formulate the issue in a way that touches "the deep disquiet about race in the national conscience," as Harriet Beecher Stowe did with respect to slavery and as Martin Luther King, Jr. did with respect to segregation.<sup>12</sup> He believes that "[p]olitical support for a concerted effort to help the underclass is not likely to materialize until it is understood as

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<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 282.

<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that the meanings that are assigned to the term underclass vary widely. For example, Paul E. Peterson of Harvard University recently commented that, [U]nderclass is a word that can be used by conservatives, liberals, and radicals alike. It is a fitting term for conservatives who wish to identify those people who are unable to care for themselves or their families or are prone to antisocial behavior. But underclass, like lumpen proletariat, is also a suitable concept for those who, like Karl Marx, want to identify a group shaped and dominated by a society's economic and political forces but who have no productive role. And underclass is acceptable to some liberals who somewhat ambiguously refuse to choose between these contrasting images but who nonetheless wish to distinguish the mainstream of working-class and middle-class America and those who seem separate from or marginal to that society.

Paul E. Peterson, *The Urban Underclass and the Poverty Paradox*, 106 POL. SCI. Q. No. 4, 617, 617-18 (1991-92). For other discussions of the underclass, see Nicholas Lemann, *The Origins of the Underclass*, THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY, June 1986 at 31, and July 1986 at 54; and William Julius Wilson, THE TRULY DISADVANTAGED: THE INNER CITY, THE UNDERCLASS, AND PUBLIC POLICY (1987).

<sup>12</sup> Lemann, *supra* note 3, at 291. For other books that succeed in showing the "human face" of African Americans who resided in the South during the period covered in THE PROMISED LAND, see Martin Luther King, Jr., WHY WE CAN'T WAIT (1963), Richard Wright, BLACK BOY: A RECORD OF CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH (1937), and W.E.B. DuBois, THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK (1903).

a moral cause."<sup>13</sup> Lemann correctly states that the problem of the black slums of the big cities "is the most significant remaining piece of unfinished business in our country's long struggle to overcome its original sin of slavery."<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately for Lemann, and more unfortunately for the urban ghettos, his book was published while the United States was experiencing economic hard times, and when it is understandably difficult for many Americans to put aside selfish concerns and consider moral imperatives. The one shortcoming of *The Promised Land* is that it shies away from the fact that it is in every American's moral, economic and social *self-interest* for the federal government to bring the ghetto poor closer to the social and economic mainstream of American society.

The moral imperative of the nation to address the plight of Ruby and others in her circumstances gives this country an opportunity to lift its level of moral standing and for all of us to stand as brothers and sisters. As Martin Luther King wrote in 1963,

One aspect of the civil-rights struggle that receives little attention is the contribution it makes to the whole society. The Negro in winning rights for himself produces substantial benefits to the nation. . . . Eventually the civil-rights movement will have contributed infinitely more to the nation than the eradication of racial injustice. It will have enlarged the concept of brotherhood to a vision of total interrelatedness.<sup>15</sup>

Many times, however, the moral cries of Lemann, King and others fall on deaf ears, as some can be heard to say, "I am not responsible for the sins of my father." Nevertheless, economic and social cries continue to be heard in the distance.

As the United States faces greater economic challenges from Europe and Asia, we cannot afford to have a large segment of our population not contributing to our economic well-being. Michael Boskin, the Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors, recently stated that in developing an economic strategy for the future, the level and composition of Federal spending must be considered. For example, an ill-designed entitlement program would have a negative long-term impact on our economy; whereas, programs that strengthen our nation's infra-

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<sup>13</sup> Lemann, *supra* note 3, at 291.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 344.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., WHY WE CAN'T WAIT 151-152 (1963).

structure would have a positive long-term impact.<sup>16</sup> The infrastructure includes such items as roads and airports, research and development, and human capital. This country needs all of its citizens, including those currently out of the mainstream, to be well-educated and highly-trained to form the requisite human capital base for our future economic success.

At the other extreme, America's social order continues to be threatened by the most desperate elements of our urban slums. Increasingly, the only personal contact many Americans have with the ghetto poor is as the victim of street crime.<sup>17</sup> In addition, as Lemann notes, the "old threat has not quite died out that riots will occur unless there are new programs."<sup>18</sup> Hopefully, more Americans will come to realize that simply the imposition of more jail time, especially in communities with few options, will not create more productive members of society. The only permanent solution lies in breaking the cycle of poverty.

Lemann argues that discussions of the ghettos in any terms other than as a moral imperative results in "fuzzing up the true nature of the tragedy in the ghettos" and that "all causes need moral urgency if they are to be fulfilled."<sup>19</sup> Without decreasing the moral urgency of the problem, we should not lose sight of the other benefits that will accrue in improving life in the ghettos and bringing the ghetto poor closer to the mainstream of American society. While policy makers may be motivated to sit down at the policy table marked "urban ghettos" for a variety of reasons — what is important is that we move forward. Nonetheless, *The Promised Land* is a must read for those who desire to understand the origins of this country's African American urban ghettos, and the conditions that led to the civil rights legislation of the 1960's, and, ultimately, to the Civil Rights Act of 1991.

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Boskin, Remarks at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C. on the United States' Economy (Dec. 4, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> See generally, Donald W. Riegle, United States Senator from Michigan, Remarks during the Senate Finance Committee's hearings on tax issues (Dec. 13, 1991) (where he discussed the growing underclass and the corresponding social unraveling, which he believes is being caused by this country not facing the human problems in our society).

<sup>18</sup> Lemann, *supra* note 3, at 353.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 353.