



Browse Africana

Search:

GO

Welcome Guest

Home > Blackworld > Carol Swain

## blackworld



Carol Swain

[Email](#)   [Letter to the Editor](#)

In her new book, *The New White Nationalism in America* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), Carol Swain, professor of law and political science at Vanderbilt University, issues an ominous warning that America is "increasingly at risk of [a] large-scale racial conflict unprecedented in our nation's history." A convergence of demographic and societal factors, Swain argues, is driving mounting racial tension and a growing new movement: white nationalism.

Swain is the author of a previous book, *Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African-Americans in Congress* (1994), which showed that there was more political agreement between blacks and whites than most people thought, and that white voters would support black candidates who reflected their interests. In the new book, Swain says, "I have gone from a Pollyanna on race matters to a Cassandra, who warns of an impending and unprecedented level of racial conflict." Swain has been studying new white nationalist movements, which she distinguishes from the older racist groups such as the KKK and neo-Nazis. The new white nationalists, Swain notes, are educated, politically astute and particularly well versed in the discourse of multiculturalism and minority rights. As a group, these Americans of European descent are distressed by liberal immigration polices, affirmative action, and what they see as creeping chaos in the new, multicultural America.

Swain says the attacks of September 11 have fed the white nationalist movement and further increased the threat of racial unrest and violence in America. "My book is a wake up call," says Swain. "We're at a point in

history with an opportunity to avert disaster. I believe that unless we take action today, we will have unprecedented levels of racial and ethnic conflict." She calls for an open dialogue on issues of race to address the concerns of white Americans, and to roll back the growing threat of white nationalism. Class, not race, should be the basis of social policy, and new black leadership is needed as well, Swain says. "As a result of lack of leadership, African Americans are seen as less desirable people to have around because of their rates of dysfunction in the community," she states. "We've got to start addressing the real problems in the African American community like illegitimate births, AIDS and violent crime. These aren't problems that white Americans can solve for us."

Needless to say, statements such as this have attracted criticism from African Americans, progressives and conservatives alike. I recently spoke to Swain about her controversial new book.

**Ten years ago you wrote an optimistic book on race relations, arguing that black politicians can represent white voters, that white voters will support black candidates — now you are warning of unprecedented racial conflict in our future. What led to your change of heart?**

I guess what caused my more pessimistic tone was that I looked out on the horizon, and I saw demographic changes and a lot of white anger and resentment about certain conditions in America, and then I discovered the white nationalists. The Ku Klux Klan, the skinheads, the neo-Nazis could never gain a wide following because most Americans would be repulsed by their ideas. But there are new white leaders out there that have different agendas and different approaches. They have skillfully put together a case for racial separatism and white identity politics by using the language of multiculturalism, which advocates group politics, to argue that "white people ought to organize to defend their interests just as blacks and Hispanics have done." The new white nationalists point to demographic changes in America, black crime rates, and dysfunctional behaviors in the black communities, and they argue that whites need to protect themselves from all of that. I think that we have a devil's brew for racial unrest looming on the horizon.

There are conditions coming together at this point in history that spell trouble ahead for American race relations. These conditions include, one, the growing presence of non-white immigrants, both legal and illegal, resulting in the prospect that white Americans may soon become a racial minority; two, the structural changes in the global economy which have led to a decline in high wage production jobs for unskilled workers, who now compete with immigrants for a dwindling share of low paying jobs; three, the continuing white resentment and hostility over the perceived unfairness of race-based affirmative action policies; four, the continued existence of high black crime rates; five, the growing acceptance of multiculturalism with its emphasis on promoting identity politics; and, six, the growth in the households connected to the Internet, which provides a means for like-minded people to consolidate their strength and resources. When the above conditions combine with the rising expectations on the part of racial and ethnic minorities for a larger share of power and influence in American society, the stage is set for increased political turmoil.

**Liberals think America is becoming less racially polarized, with increasing rates of intermarriage and integration. Why do you think there is a racial conflict on the horizon?**

Liberals are looking at the wrong indicators. The white nationalists have

noticed the intermarriage rates too. Most of the marriages are not between blacks and whites. I see African Americans as being in a special category, they are the group most marginalized, and while you often see whites and Asians mixing, and whites and Hispanics — there's not much intermarriage with blacks and other groups.

Racial conflict is on the horizon because tribalism is a part of human nature. When Americans say that we are a multiethnic society and we have avoided that kind of bloodshed that occurred in other countries, they are right — we have successfully avoided much bloodshed, but at the same time, we are human beings and under certain circumstances, people are capable of committing unimaginable atrocities. Human nature has been the same since time immemorial.

### **So has the melting pot has failed?**

I'd say that Americans gave up on the idea of the melting pot much too soon. And that multiculturalism's salad bowl is giving people indigestion. The identity politics of multiculturalism divides Americans, and it takes us too far from an American national identity.

### **Would you call yourself a conservative?**

No, I am a moderate. It really bothers me when blacks call me an Uncle Tom, Aunt Jane, or other derogatory names. I've often turned down opportunities to align myself with conservatives interested in just half of what I say and stand for. I see myself as a truth-speaker, and it's not without enormous cost — I believe that what I argue closes as many doors as it opens, and I have chosen not to walk through some of the newly opened doors. I believe that what I'm doing by speaking uncomfortable truths is a public service; it has to be done by someone. I see myself as an outsider, a voice in the wilderness crying, "Wake up, wake up, wake up, America!"

**In arguing against reparations, you seem to agree with Keith Richburg, the author of *Out of America*, which argues that African Americans are better off here than in Africa, that slavery has actually turned out to be a blessing — and you go further, saying that black Americans can serve as a "chosen people" to uplift our brothers and sisters in Africa. Could you elaborate on this?**

Slavery is an ancient wrong that I believe we can never rectify. Some whites have been trying to make amends since the mid-1960s. I believe there are areas where some type of compensation is due African Americans, and that there are areas where blacks can and should push for racial justice, and some of these are tied to the Jim Crow era and its aftermath. But you shouldn't label what's being demanded as reparations, and you certainly shouldn't call it slave reparations. And that's a big strategic mistake that reparations advocates are making.

As a Christian, I believe in divine providence. Whatever happens, God allows. Many Americans throughout history have believed in divine providence as well. I think that African Americans are better off in this country than they would have been had they remained in Africa, and because blacks in America are so much better off than blacks in other places, they are positioned where they can offer assistance to their African brethren. I see parallels with the Biblical story of Joseph being sold into slavery, the redemption that occurred that brought the Israelites out of Egypt. So for me, I'm proud to be an American and that's where I stand. But

there are certainly past and continuing injustices against African Americans, and some of them involve discrimination, but I think there are better ways to address discrimination than through reparations demand and demands for racial preferences. I don't believe affirmative action helps people that are truly poor.... We are in a time warp, our black leadership is in a time warp — if we want to help black people, we need creative solutions, and more than one strategy.

**In your book, you talk a lot about "black criminality," but most liberals say the overrepresentation of blacks in prison is due to a racial disparity in sentencing and punishment, and the unfairness of the criminal justice system. Do you buy that argument?**

No. Victimization reports — that is, eyewitness reports of victims describing their assailants — offer plenty of hard evidence that blacks are committing more crimes than other racial groups, and that many of those crimes are blacks harming other blacks. I really don't care if it's black-on-black or black-on-white crimes; black crime rates are far out of proportion to the rates of other groups. Lowering black crime is something that African Americans must continually address. Now, there are black leaders who speak out about this, and there are blacks leaders we never hear about, who are laboring in the vineyards that never make the media. But leading black spokespeople too often excuse black criminality rather than confront it. I think that this is a time for tough love. No more excuses.

Some of the crimes blacks commit are petty — drug dealing, prostitution — crimes related to poverty, and we should address poverty by working towards guaranteeing a living wage. But the bottom line is that blacks are over-represented in jails and prisons, because they commit more crimes, and because they lack the money to afford good attorneys. A person with money can purchase "reasonable doubt" from a jury. Criminals who can afford good lawyers are less likely to languish in jail.

**One way to promote racial harmony in America, you contend, is by dramatically reducing the scale of current immigration and enforcing laws against hiring illegal immigrants. How do you respond to the conventional wisdom that immigrants take jobs that Americans don't want — like working as domestics?**

I disagree with the conventional wisdom. There's a McDonalds in downtown Nashville — I was in there recently, and everyone behind the counter was Hispanic. They were speaking Spanish, calling out the orders in Spanish and conversing in Spanish. The customers were blacks and whites. I don't think an African American could have worked there unless they understood the Spanish language and culture. Hispanics seem to be the nannies and maids of choice for many white elites. I think that a lot of new immigrants are taking jobs in the inner city that black Americans with low skills cannot get because of racism. I think that new immigrants are often preferred over black workers. Some employers see blacks as too demanding, wanting a certain wage, while the new immigrants are easier to get along with, willing to work harder for less pay. The greatest negative impact of current immigration policy is on poor Americans who have low skills and low levels of education. Although it might make good business sense for employers [to hire legal and illegal immigrants], it doesn't make good business sense for American public policy to support it.

**You say religion has for the most part been a positive social force in the black community, leading believers to lead lives of decency and dignity, but then you speak about high rates of illegitimacy, AIDS and**

**crime — to what do you attribute those? You imply it's the fault of bad black religious leadership...**

Look at some of our moral leaders in the black community! Because of a lack of opportunity in the black community, "preacher" was just one of the few occupations that some people with political ambitions gravitated towards. I think that there's a lot of exploitation by religious leaders, and at the same time there are many honest religious leaders that work hard to change conditions in their communities. I believe that the unhealthy behaviors of black people in many communities are one of the worst testimonies for the power of the Christian religion to transform lives. Here I'm referring to high rates of drug abuse, illegitimacy, rates of HIV infections, and black crime. Blacks are considered the most religious people in the world. Ninety-six percent of blacks claim to be Christians, but if you look at the conditions affecting their communities, it raises the question of, "How can the most religious people in the world be over-represented among its most dysfunctional?" I think that it shouldn't be that way. The Christian Bible provides moral principles to live by. I think that the moral decline in the black community is part of the moral decline that has taken place across America. Too many people profess religion, but it has little power over their lives.

**You call for a greater role of religion in America, saying that faith can combat racism. Where does that leave atheists, secularists, Hindus, homosexuals — all those who are either excluded or condemned by the monotheistic framework?**

I'm not leaving out the secularists, the atheists, the Hindus, when I talk about religion. What I'm saying is that at the root of American national identity is the Judeo-Christian tradition that believes in one creator, a common humanity and a brotherhood of man, and if you believe in those principles, there are common values that can be appealed to. We can appeal to the lofty goals of the American Creed, even though we've always deviated from it. I believe that religion can have a positive, transforming effect on peoples' lives and that it can help them shed racial hatred and embrace others of different races and creeds.

**In your introduction, you mention that some university publishers found your book too "hot to handle"-do you think America does not want to hear what you have to say, or was that just liberal publishers' political biases?**

Most liberals believe that there's something new about the white racism — so they're aware of white nationalism — but they seem to believe that it's like a fire and if you give it oxygen it will blaze out of control. So they seem to reason that if I present the ideas of white nationalists in a book, it could make white nationalism grow. My answer to all that is that white nationalist ideas are already growing — the new white nationalists have money, they're well educated, and they have a recruitment strategy that just might work. I think that it is crucial to expose what they're doing and how they're doing it. It is important to bring them out into the open. White nationalists exploit issues of concern to many Americans. To slow the growth of the white nationalist movement, we must be willing to re-examine public policies put into place 30 years ago, and to revamp them as necessary.

[Email](#)   [Letter to the Editor](#)

[About Us](#) | [Your Privacy](#) | [Careers](#) | [Newsletter](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Help](#)

Africana.com web site © Copyright 1999-2003 Africana.com Inc.  
Microsoft® Encarta® Africana content © Copyright 1999-2003 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved to media owners