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When will America end racial bias?

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By **NAT HENTOFF**

I remember when the civil rights movement was cresting in the late 1950s -- not only in the South -- sitting at jazz concerts and other public events, linking hands with blacks and whites in the same row, some of whom I didn't know, as we were singing "We Shall Overcome."

We haven't overcome. I was a friend of Dr. Kenneth Clark, a psychologist and professor whose research contributed significantly to the Supreme Court's unanimous 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that racial segregation in the public schools was unconstitutional. Clark was jubilant that day. Young blacks, he told me, could "now be proud that they are Americans."

The high court, however, kept weakening the impact of that ruling until Clark, a strong integrationist, said to me toward the end of his life: "I feel my life has been wasted." Here we are, entering a presidential election year, when Sam Dillon reports ("Districts Pay Less in Poor Schools, Report Says," *The New York Times*, Nov. 30): "Tens of thousands of schools serving (mostly black and Hispanic) low-income students are being shortchanged because districts (due to lawful residential segregation) spend fewer state and local dollars on teacher salaries in those schools than on salaries in schools serving higher-income students."

In most big cities, the public schools are very markedly racially segregated -- including where I live, New York City, whose self-anointed "education mayor," Michael Bloomberg, has said nary a word about this segregation that results in an increasing deep racial gap in students' achievements.

All too obviously, along with education, future prospects are dark -- not only for black citizens but also for so many others with grimly limited means and painfully few present and foreseeable resources.

Blacks lead the list of Americans feeling at a dead end. Reports the Nov. 28 *New York Times*: "Jobless rates among blacks have consistently been about double those of whites. In October, the black unemployment rate was 15.1 percent, compared with 8 percent for whites. Last summer, the black unemployment rate hit 16.7 percent, its highest level since 1984."

In the same Nov. 28 report, "As Public Sector Sheds Jobs, Blacks Are Hit Hardest," Timothy Williams focuses on a substantial reason for black unemployment that I have not been aware of. The *New York Times* should have put this hard-edged news on the front page that concerns "tens of thousands of once solidly middle-class African-American government workers -- bus drivers in Chicago, police officers and firefighters in Cleveland, nurses and doctors in Florida -- who have been laid off since the recession ended in June 2009."

For millions of Americans of various classes, including, for another example, government post office workers, the festering recession has not ended. The largely overlooked point that Williams makes is:

"Such (black) job losses have ... undermined the stability of neighborhoods where there

are now fewer black professionals who own homes or who get up every morning to go to work."

This made me remember a conversation I had with Duke Ellington in the 1950s. The already internationally known composer and orchestra leader, whose music was often about his people's continuing history here, said to me:

"There are blacks working in the post offices who could have been Ph.D.s -- if the way there was possible for them. But most importantly now, they do have these jobs."

Williams quotes Robert H. Zieger, emeritus professor of history at the University of Florida and a scholar on race and labor:

"The reliance on these (government) jobs has provided African-Americans a path upward. But it is also a vulnerability."

In the past, a Dec. 4 New York Times editorial ("Pain in the Public Sector") emphasizes, "millions of African-Americans -- one in five who are employed -- have entered the middle class through government employment."

Further illustrating this vulnerability that Zieger describes is the rising number of government workers around the country, including blacks, who are being dismissed as local, state and federal governments strive to reduce their deficits.

Williams puts a human face on how blacks are hit hard by disappearing public sector jobs: "Pamela Sparks, 49, a 25-year Postal Service veteran in Baltimore, has a brother who is a letter carrier and a sister who is a sales associate at the Postal Service. Her father is a retired station manager."

"With our whole family working for the Post Office," she tells the Times, "it would be hard to help each other out because we'd all be out of work" in view of the acute financial crisis affecting the Postal Service.

And Don Buckley, the Times reports, is an unemployed Chicago Transit Authority bus driver who now lives in his mother's basement and "his mother, a Postal Service employee, (has) grown tired of him 'eating up all her food. She's ready for me to get up out of here.'"

When he was earning \$23.76 an hour, says Buckley, "I was living the American dream. ... Then it crumbled."

On Sept. 12, on blackvoiceneeds.com, Marjorie Valbrun reports bitinglly: "Recent public opinion polls show that more whites than African-Americans believe that the United States has entered a 'post-racial' era in which racial bias doesn't exist."

I haven't heard anyone sing "We Shall Overcome" for a long time.

How will our next president end the crumbling of the American dream for members of all of our races?

Nat Hentoff is a nationally renowned authority on the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights. He is a member of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, and the Cato Institute, where he is a senior fellow.